

Dorset Council Fostering and Permanence Panel

Overview Report – Panel Chair

April 2018 to March 2019

For the period of this report, Dorset's Fostering and Permanence Panel has continued to meet every other week on Tuesdays and Wednesdays to consider applications brought before them.

To ensure consistency across the panels, there is one Dorset Council Professional Panel Adviser and a Medical Adviser who, although does not attend Panel in person, provides a written report in each case. Legal advice where required is provided by the team of Dorset Council Solicitors.

Sadly, our Panel Adviser, Ann Craft, died in service in August 2018 following a short illness. Teresa Millard, one of Dorset Council's fostering social workers, was recruited to the Panel Adviser post and started in October 2018.

This report considers the period from 1st April 2018 to 31st March 2019 in terms of statistics and content.

1. Panel Membership and Quoracy

I, Fran Thompson, have chaired Dorset Council's Fostering Panel since January 2008. I am independent of Dorset Council – a requirement of the Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011 (as amended).

My background is as a lawyer with additional experience of chairing several Multi-Agency Group environments, as a Chairman in the Family Proceedings Court and other LA Adoption and Fostering Panels for 11 years previously. During the period of this report I have been the Independent Chair of the Joint Adoption Panel of Central Bedfordshire and Bedford Borough Councils, and Bracknell Forest Council Fostering Panel, By The Bridge, a national Independent Fostering Agency, Southampton City Council Authority Adoption Panel and Isle of Wight Authority Adoption Panel, now both part of the RAA Adopt South.

The Fostering and Permanence Panel holds a central list of Panel members that each Panel could call upon to be quorate. As the Fostering Panel is a single panel, under Reg 24(1) quoracy consists of:

1. The person appointed to Chair the panel or one of the Vice-Chairs; and
2. A Social Worker with at least three years relevant post-qualifying experience; and
3. Three other members at least one of whom must be independent if the chair is not present.

Panel's central list of 11 members has remained stable in the last 12 months and it remains that up to 7 members are invited to every panel on a rota system. A core group attend the majority of panels and this allows for consistency, particularly when cases are returning to panel, sometimes more than once. Panel value the consistency of its membership and the good working relationship that has developed as a result. The importance of this stability was highlighted during Dorset Council's Modernising Fostering review in 2017.

The members of Dorset's Fostering and Permanence Panel bring a wealth of experience and knowledge from their backgrounds in health, education psychology, housing, mental health, education, law, social work, fostering and experience as looked after children.

Councillor Susan Jefferies retired from the Fostering and Permanence Panel in May 2019. We would like to thank her for commitment and excellent work on behalf of the Panel, Fostering Service, foster carers and children in care.

Panel are delighted that Councillor Cathy Lugg and Councillor David Taylor have now been appointed to the central list. Two further social workers have also been recently appointed which will bring the central list to 14 members.

All new panel members are required to attend and observe a panel as part of the induction process before joining the Central List.

All panel members have shown very high commitment to attending panels and it is obvious from their contributions that they put a great deal of time, thought and dedication into their roles on panel.

The Fostering Panel became paperless during 2018 and the transition has proved very successful. Savings to staff time and postage costs to the Authority is estimated to be in the region of £37,000. Panel members now receive their papers at least 7 working days in advance of Panel. Reading the papers supplied in preparation for discussion is a considerable undertaking as the papers may involve up to a full day of close reading for each panel. All members devote a great deal of time and personal commitment to the work of the panel and invariably come well prepared.

Getting the balance of Panel members right on any Panel is a constant process of review. Despite appointments to Panel in the previous period there is still an identified lack of members representing minority religious and ethnic backgrounds which will be a focus when further recruitment is undertaken. There remains a good gender balance and balance of experience and expertise however and panel is reflective of the demographics of its users.

The appraisal of all members takes place annually. All involved value this opportunity to consider Panel functioning outside the day to day work of panel. The appraisals, conducted by the Panel Chair and the Panel Adviser, reflect on the Panel member's contribution during the previous the year, and note any comments they have on improving processes as well as any training they wish to undertake in the coming year. These were completed between October 2018 and January 2019 with some still awaiting approval.

The Panel Chair is appraised by the Agency Decision Maker and this was completed in March 2019.

Panel Support.

As in previous years, Panel continues to be supported by two excellent Panel Administrators. They had been working for the Panel for many years and I cannot speak highly enough of their effort, efficiency, organisational skills and good humour throughout.

2. Panel Roles / Tasks.

Regulation 25 lists the functions of the Fostering Panel as:

1. To make a recommendation as to whether the applicant is suitable to be a foster carer and the terms of the approval.
2. To consider the first annual review for newly approved foster carers, as well as reviews following the managing allegations process, and where foster carers are seeking a change in the terms of their registration status.
3. To recommend whether or not a person remains suitable to be a foster parent, and whether the terms of their approval (if any) remain appropriate.

4. To give advice or make recommendations, on other matters or cases referred to it by the fostering service provider, including terminations of approval.
5. The fostering panel must also advise, where appropriate, on the procedures under which reviews in accordance with Reg. 28 are carried out by the fostering service provider, and periodically monitor their effectiveness.

In addition the National Minimum Standards 2011 requires that:

1. Panels provide a quality assurance feedback to the fostering service provider on the quality of reports being presented and the timeliness of assessments and decisions.

Following Dorset Council's Modernising Fostering review 2017, in 2018 the Fostering Panel took on the role of recommending matches for those children in care who need permanence by way of a long-term foster placement and recommends changes of approval for the matched foster carers to long-term. Panel appreciate the significant role they have within the matching process, and foster carers have been proactive in sharing their feelings and views surrounding their wishes to provide a long-term placement for the children in their care. Most importantly this provides assurance to children in the future that the consideration given to their permanence through fostering was akin to those achieving permanence through either Adoption or Special Guardianship. There are newly implemented certificates sent to the children confirming that they will be with their foster carers on a permanent basis; this is their 'forever' home.

In addition, since October 2018, three yearly reviews which coincide with when foster carers have their DBS' and medicals updated, have also been presented at panel.

All recommendations of the Panel are sent to the Agency Decision Maker (ADM), Tim Wells, who then either ratifies or rejects the recommendation. Applicants have the right of review through the Independent Review Mechanism (IRM) or a return to Panel for the case to be re-heard.

Over the period of this report, the Fostering Panel heard a total of 167 cases. They recommended 21 mainstream foster carers and 19 connected persons for approval between April 2018 and March 2019. This represents a significant increase in mainstream foster carer approvals in this period.

There continues to be an increase in connected person assessments being started and presented at panel who have needed 8-week extensions due to difficulties in getting checks, references and medicals completed within the 16-week period. If the total of 24 weeks for assessment in these cases is not achieved, then the placement becomes unregulated. There was also an increase in applications before the Court for a Special Guardianship Order which were granted before the Connected Person fostering assessment was completed.

Overall the mainstream assessments were of a high standard and involved a range of people with different backgrounds. There remains a lack of prospective foster carers coming forward who are same sex couples and from diverse backgrounds.

The connected person assessments varied more in standard and were often complex and more challenging for Panel to reach a decision to recommend approval. In one case Panel did not make a positive recommendation and this was upheld by the ADM's decision. There have been no cases taken to the IRM.

There has been a steady increase in reviews following from the management of allegations procedures being presented to the Fostering Panel with 3 resulting in de-registration. Panel heard a total of 12 other de-registrations which included; 8 who retired, 3 who resigned for a variety of reasons, 1 due to not engaging with the service or taking placements over a long period of time.

The management of the Annual Household Review process has improved enormously in the period of this report, assisted by the appointment of two Reviewing Officers following the Modernising Fostering review in 2017.

3. Transparency and Openness

Applicants attending Panel

It continues to be the usually accepted practise that Applicants attend Panel for most of the time their case is heard. The main exception to this is the time during which Panel reaches its recommendation but also a short time at the end of each case when any third party confidential information is discussed. Although Applicants are often nervous at the prospect of coming to Panel, many of them find the experience much less daunting than they feared, and feel included in the process by the wider Fostering Team right from the start. Applicants always have a social worker with them, and some (often single applicants) chose to bring a friend or family member with them for support.

Observers

17 observers arranged to attend and observe panels during the period April 2018 to March 2019 including student social workers, members of staff on induction, members of Senior Management and prospective panel members. Observers are limited to two at any panel in order to minimise the impact on the applicants of a large room full of people. Panel welcomes observing at meetings, it is an excellent way to see how Panel works and helps to demystify the process, particularly for those who will, in the future, present cases to Panel for the first time.

Panel Feedback

Applicants attending panel are asked to complete and return an evaluation form - this information is fed back to the next Panel and helps to shape panel's direction moving forward. Honest feedback is encouraged and has had a significant effect on how Panels are run. A sample of feedback received during this period is as follows:

- We feel that Panel were very professional in their approach. Each panel member asked us questions and allowed ample time for discussion. We were given the opportunity to raise our own concerns and discuss them with the Panel. We very much appreciated this approach.
- I felt comfortable and put at ease to answer or clarify anything that the panel requested further information about. A smooth and positive experience this time.
- Having pictures and descriptions of the panel beforehand was really good. It was nice to be greeted by the Chair before and her explanation of the process was good. The way the panel was chaired and organised was good. All of the questions were very relevant and we felt able to ask questions and give full answers. Thank you!

4. Quality Assurance role.

Panel covers its Quality Assurance roles at a number of levels:

1. Individual Issues

A Quality Assurance questionnaire is used for completion by the Panel at the end of each case. Matters which relate to a specific case are picked up at the time and will be fed back to the Fostering and Assessment Teams by the Panel Adviser. This also provides the opportunity for recognition of particularly thorough and well prepared pieces of work.

2. Practice Issues

At every meeting, the Panel considers whether matters have emerged which may be affecting more than one carer / worker which need to be followed through. These issues are taken back by the

Panel Adviser to the relevant Team Manager and the Panel Adviser will feed back to Panel any outcomes.

3. Panel Chairs Meetings

An arrangement has been reinstated that throughout the year the Panel Chair meets on an approximately three monthly basis with the Panel Adviser, Operational Manager, Senior Managers, and the Agency Decision Maker. This is an invaluable opportunity to develop a strong working relationship in the light of the appointment of new key positions within the authority.

Summary

The year has seen us continue in our journey to modernise and embed good practice within the Fostering and Permanence Panel and that from within the Fostering Service. There has been indication from the Fostering Service that further work on modernising the Panel is planned during the 2019-2020 year, but have been assured that this will involve the panel members and Chair in consultation.

Fran Thompson

15 August 2019

Independent Panel Chair, Fostering and Permanence Panel