

Fostering Panel Annual Report:

1st June 2022 – 31st March 2023

Introduction	Page 1
Panel Activity	Page 1
Panel Membership	Page 4
Panel Administration	Page 4
Practice Standards and Quality Assurance	Page 4
Communication	Page 5
Panel Training and Development	Page 5
Conclusion	Page 6

1. Introduction

- 1.1 The Annual Fostering Panel Report has historically been completed using data from 1st June to 31st May each year (a 10 month period). It has been agreed that future reports will be completed using the data gathered during each financial year, to coincide with the fostering annual review reporting year. This report will therefore be completed using data gathered between 1st June 2022 and 31st March 2023, allowing further reports to be completed using data gathered between 1st April to 31st March. Comparisons to last year's activity will therefore not be like for like.
- 1.2 The Fostering Panel continues to meet virtually on the first and third Wednesday of each month. Panel is no longer separated into East and West Panels. This change was made to ensure that assessments and reviews do not need to wait and can slot into the next available Panel. The change has worked well, and the virtual nature of the meetings means venues and travel are not an issue.
- 1.3 Consideration has been given to reinstating face to face Panels. However, virtual panels continue to be cost effective, environmentally positive, and save social work time in travel. Most applicants and carers continue to prefer virtual panels. There is therefore no current plan to change from virtual Panels. However, it is agreed that it is important for members to meet throughout the year in person for panel development and training days.

2. Panel Activity

- 2.1 It has been another very busy year for the Panel with 26 meetings held between 1st June 2022 and 31st March 2023, including 6 additional Panels. Most of the additional Panels resulted from recommendations being deferred. There were 12

deferred recommendations, usually due to insufficient information provided in the assessment, including absent DBS and medical checks, as well as gaps in analysis of identified vulnerabilities. This is a significant increase on last year. As a result, an independent review of 7 deferred cases has been completed. The report is currently in draft but indicates that Panel made the correct decisions to defer.

- 2.2 Panel have considered 48 assessments of prospective foster carers. Panel recommended that the applicants not be approved in only 3 cases. Of the 48 assessments considered, 14 were mainstream foster carers, and 34 connected persons carers. The number of connected persons assessments is significantly higher than the 23 considered last year, and especially taking into account the 10 month reporting period.
- 2.3 Panel has also considered and made a positive recommendations for 2 Stepping-Stones providers: the same number as last year.
- 2.4 There has been a further increase in the number of Regulation 25 requests (extensions from 16 to up to 24 weeks for the assessment of connected carers) with 30 coming to panel against the 28 of last year. There have been a variety of reasons for the extension requests, ranging from late allocation, lack of engagement by the applicants, and ill health of the carers or assessor.
- 2.5 Somerset Foster Panel continues to consider carers first reviews, reviews where a change in the terms of approval is recommended and reviews following an investigation or standards of care enquiry. Although many Local Authorities now ask their Foster Panel to look at the first and then every third review, this is not thought to be necessary in Somerset currently as reviews are completed by Reviewing Officers independently of the Fostering Service.
- 2.6 There have been 17 first reviews, a reduction of 6 from last year. It is likely this reduction is due to a delay in some reviews being completed due to staffing absences/vacancies. The first reviews that have come to panel have generally been positive with new carers offering good quality care and being satisfied with the support offered to them.
- 2.7 Schedule 7 of the Children Act 1989 sets a limit of three on the number of children that a foster carer may foster at any one time. This may only be exceeded if the children are all siblings of each other, or (if not siblings) if an exemption is granted by the Local Authority where the foster carer resides. The exemption names the specific children that the foster carer may foster and sets out any conditions which apply to the exemption. If the placement of a further child or children with a foster carer would mean making a placement outside a foster carer's terms of approval, the placement may be made in an emergency with any carer outside their terms of approval for a maximum of six working days under Reg 23(1) of the Care Planning, Placement and Case Review (England)

Regulations 2010. After six working days the placement must be terminated unless the terms of approval are changed.

- 2.8 In order to change a foster carer's approval, the requirement is to carry out a review where possible, and for the Decision Maker to issue a qualifying determination setting out the proposed change, with or without a recommendation from Panel (it is good practice to seek a Panel recommendation, but not a legal requirement unless it is the first annual review). Where the ADM makes a decision outside of Panel, these decisions come to Panel for information, or a recommendation if requested by the ADM.
- 2.9 Panel sees information when foster carers are asked to care for children outside of their approval for 6 working days or less. Panel will comment on this notification if felt necessary.
- 2.10 There has been a significant increase in the number of Out of Approval notifications to Panel this year, with 30 being noted, an increase on the 15 of last year. There has positively been a significant reduction number of Out of Approvals that have exceeded the maximum of six working days seen by Panel that have not been presented to the ADM for a decision.
- 2.11 There has been a reduction in the number of reviews recommending a change of approval. This year's panel have considered 20 recommendations for a change of approval, where last year there were 30. Most cases recommend a 0 - 18 range at the time the applicants are first presented, with a preferred age range attached to the recommendation to support matching consideration. Therefore, changes in approval are usually for an increase in the number of children that can be placed, or to include long term care for carers approved for short and intermediate term. This is usually when a named child has been in the foster carers care for some time and the plan is they remain until they leave care at 18 or move to a Staying Put arrangement.
- 2.12 Panel has considered 3 reviews this year that have taken place after an investigation or standards of care enquiry. Of these three cases, panel recommended continued approval for two and deregistration for one. The ADM agreed with Panel's recommendation in respect of the continued approval, but after considerable thought and discussion with other senior managers, decided that the carers in case three should continue to be approved. This decision was based on the outcome of an independent risk assessment.
- 2.13 There has been a slight decrease in the number of fostering households deregistered this year, dropping from 65 last year to 62 this year. Of the 62 deregistrations, 28 were connected persons carers. The majority of these followed family members being successful in obtaining Special Guardianship Orders, or children turning 18 and moving into Staying Put arrangements. These are positive reasons for deregistration. The average time a connected person carer is approved is 1 year and 3 months.

- 2.14 There have been 34 deregistrations of mainstream foster carers. Panel have seen a variety of deregistration reasons including retirement due to age or health, change in family circumstances, dissatisfaction with the service, or following allegation and investigation. The average time a mainstream carer is approved in Somerset is 7 years.
- 2.15 The ADM usually agrees with Panel recommendations and considers Panel has examined the arguments robustly and fairly. However, in 4 cases this year, the ADM has disagreed with the Panel recommendation. Each of these cases were complex and balanced recommendations and decisions. Although there was a difference between the recommendation and decision, in each case Panel and the ADM agreed on the complexities.

3. Panel Membership

- 3.1 There are currently 13 panel members registered on the Central List, including the Panel Chair and Social Work representatives. A Vice Chair has now been appointed and a care experienced person has been interviewed. We await a DBS before finalising an appointment. This will take the central list to 14.
- 3.2 Diversity of Panel has historically been an issue with most of the independent members having professional backgrounds in either social work or education. Although this remains the case to some degree, the appointment of the care experienced person who has also been a connected persons carer, and the appointment of the Vice Chair who is an experienced social worker but also has experience of foster care in her home country of Zimbabwe has positively added to the diversity of the Panel. Diversity of Panel remains on the agenda.
- 3.3 Panel members commitment to their work continues to be evident at each meeting and is impressive. Members are always well prepared, having read the papers thoroughly, are respectful in their questioning and thoughtful in their recommendations. They are keen to develop their skills further and often seek feedback on their performance.

4. Panel Administration

- 4.1 The effective running of the Foster Panel, as in previous years, is in no small part due to the hard work and excellent organisation skills of the two Panel Administrators who support panel members with any technology issues, ensure papers are available for panel members, and minute the meetings. Panel are very grateful to the administrators for all their hard work. Panel were sad to learn that the most long-standing Panel Administrator will be retiring this year, but wish her all the best in her retirement.

5. Practice Standards and Quality Assurance

- 5.1 There has been a decline in the quality of some of the assessments presented to Panel in recent months, with missing information, insufficient analysis of vulnerabilities and incomplete statutory checks, such as DBS and medical. This is by no means with all assessments, some of which continue to show improved analysis and more concise information. This should be resolved with more robust management oversight and Panel is aware that there is work underway to improve this.
- 5.2 Panel have not had the benefit of a consistent Panel Advisor for much of this year. We have been grateful for the support of managers who have stepped in to cover gaps. However, it is not best practice for the advisor to be closely linked to or to have quality assured the assessments coming to Panel as more independence is required. Further, managers have often stepped in with limited time to prepare. The department is currently considering how to ensure consistency and independence, and provide a single dedicated advisor who can commit to reading paperwork in advance, liaise with the Chair before Panel and attend without distractions.

6. Communication

- 6.1 Communication between Panel, the Fostering Service and Agency Decision Maker continues to be positive. Quarterly meetings take place between the Fostering and Kinship Operations Managers, the Agency Decision Maker and the Panel Chair. The meetings provide updates and considers challenges. They are solution focussed meetings that are supportive of the work of the Panel. Terms of Reference are to be drawn up to ensure the meetings remain focussed on Panel related issues.
- 6.2 Communication between the panel and social work teams continues to be positive. The Chair meets virtually with Managers and Practice Supervisors as requested to discuss any issues and to provide feedback. These meetings are intended to, where possible, to resolve queries prior to panel and avoid deferring recommendations unnecessarily.
- 6.3 The Chair provides an update on Panel to all Foster Carers throughout the year through the Foster Carer Newsletters.

7. Panel Training and Development

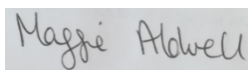
- 7.1 The Panel Chair met with all Panel Members in January 2023 to complete their annual review and areas for development were identified. The information from this will be used throughout the year to build on Panel development.
- 7.2 A face to face Panel training morning was held on the 25th January 2023. Attendance was good with almost all panel members attending. The morning began with service updates from Jane Sprague, Agency Decision Maker, Matt Randles, Operations Manager Fostering, Lisa Walker Operations Manager Kinship Service, and Maggie Aldwell, Panel Chair. Theresa Windsor provided a very helpful overview of the FA&ST Service. Panel were provided with updating

information in respect of DBS checks in fostering households, and Suzanne Weller updated Panel on the 'Learning Loop' in respect of Panel feedback to social work teams.

- 7.3 The remainder of the morning focussed on Panel Members development. Small group discussions identified what information would be helpful to Panel over the coming months and how the information could best be provided. Panel felt that hearing directly from Foster Carers, Kinship Foster Carers and young people in care would be of great benefit to them.
- 7.4 A full Panel Training Day is planned for the 12th September. Safeguarding updates will be provided on this day.

8. Conclusion

- 8.1 It has been another busy year for Panel. Panel Members and Panel Administrators continue to work incredibly hard to ensure Panel runs smoothly and that well informed recommendations are made to the Agency Decision Maker. Communication between the Panel (through the Panel Chair) and the Service is excellent. If issues are raised, these are taken seriously and acted on swiftly.
- 8.2 We have continued to keep diversity at the forefront of our thinking when recruitment opportunities arise and there has been positive recruitment of new Panel Members adding to the diversity of Panel. This year has seen the appointment of one Vice Chair after two years of not having one. A second Vice Chair is still required to ensure that panels do not need to be cancelled if the Chair is unexpectedly unavailable. We are also looking forward to welcoming an independent Panel Member who has experience of being in care and has been successfully assessed as a Kinship Carer.
- 8.3 The chair would like to thank all Panel Members, the Panel Administrators, the Fostering and Kinship Team members, and lastly, but by no means least our Foster Carers for their ongoing dedication, hard work and commitment to the children and young people who need care in Somerset.



Maggie Aldwell

Independent Foster Panel Chair

11th July 2023