**Fostering Panel Annual Report:**

**1st June 2020 – 31st May 2021**

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| --- | --- |
| **Panel Activity** | **Page 1** |
| **Panel Membership** | **Page 4** |
| **Panel Administration** | **Page 5**  |
| **Feedback from attendees**  | **Page 5** |
| **Practice Standards and Quality Assurance** | **Page 5** |
| **Panel Training Day** | **Page 6**  |
| **Panel Issues** | **Page 7**  |
| **Conclusion** | **Page 7**  |

1. **Panel Activity**
	1. East and West panels have continued to meet on the first and third Thursday of each month. These meetings have been held virtually over Microsoft Teams since 19th March 2020 due to the pandemic restrictions. There were initially some technical issues, but these have now been resolved and the virtual meetings have worked well in general. Feedback from social workers, applicants/carers and panel members has been positive and often the virtual panel is preferred to face to face meetings.
	2. It has been another very busy year for the panel with 27 meetings held between 1st June 2020 and 31st May 2021, including 4 additional panels. This is an increase of one panel meeting against the same period last year. One panel was cancelled because there was no assessment ready for presentation.
	3. There have been 57 new foster carers (fostering households) approved during the period covered in this report, 30 mainstream, an increase of 8 against the previous period and 27 connected persons; an increase of 2. However, 9 of these approvals were made in October 2020, following Ofsted serving notice to an Independent Fostering Agency (IFA) under section 20B of the Care Standards Act 2000, that their registration was suspended with immediate effect. The IFA carers living in Somerset, and those with Somerset children placed with them became the responsibility of Somerset for the duration of the suspension. The 9 were registered and then deregistered when the suspension was lifted in December 2020. There were a further 7 households approved under the emergency Covid legislation. Of the 7, 5 were subsequently deregistered, and 2 continued to be fully assessed as mainstream carers. Therefore, in real terms there has been a decrease of 14 approvals in this period.
	4. There has been 1 short breaks carer approved, which although disappointing, is an increase with none being approved in the last period. Panel has also considered and made a positive recommendation for 1 Stepping-Stones provider. This is a drop on the last period when 3 were approved.
	5. Panel has seen documentation in respect of 21 Out of Approvals and noted this in the minutes. This is a drop from the 33 Out of Approvals in the previous period.
	6. Panel has also considered 15 Regulation 25 requests (extensions for up to 24 weeks on the Form C Assessment). An improved system is now in place where the panel advisor will record the reasons for the extensions as requests have not always been appropriate, i.e., to manage late allocation, carers not engaging, or no panel time available. This recording system will allow panel to notify the department of the themes.
	7. Discontinued assessments are presented to panel where the assessment ceases before completion. There has been 1 discontinued assessment during this period. This related to a connected person’s assessment and was ceased because the child returned to his mother’s care as part of the care planning.
	8. Currently the Somerset panel only considers carers first reviews, reviews where a change in the terms of approval is recommended and reviews following an investigation or standards of care enquiry. Many Local Authorities now ask their foster panel to look at the first and then every third review.
	9. There have been 28 first reviews. This is a significant increase on the same period last year where there were just 16 first reviews. Most have been very positive.
	10. There have been 20 reviews recommending a change of approval. In most cases these have been to increase the number of children a carer is approved to care for or a change in the age range. When cases come to panel for a change of approval, most now move to the 0 - 18 range, if not already, to allow more flexibility and to prevent the need to return to panel if an upper age limit is reached by way of a child placed becoming older. A preferred age range is generally attached to the recommendation to ensure matching consideration is given. In most cases, the panel have supported the recommended change in terms of approval.
	11. Panel has in this period considered 2 reviews that have taken place following an investigation or standards of care enquiry. The first review followed an investigation into allegations that were in part substantiated. Panel supported the recommendation for continued approval with no change to the terms of approval recognising the concerns but acknowledging the impact of a lack of support provided to the children placed and the carer. The second review related to a standards of care enquiry. Panel supported the recommended change of approval from 3 children to 1 child, two if siblings, recognising the concerns and pressures on the carers.
	12. There have been 52 fostering households deregistered this year. This is significantly more than the 30 in the previous year. However, the deregistration total includes the 9 IFA carers and 5 of the Covid approved carers. In real terms there has been a less significant increase in carers being deregistered of 3 during this period.
	13. In one case during this period, a carer has disagreed with the recommendation and subsequent ADM decision to deregister. This was referred by the carer to the IRM, however, the decision to deregister was upheld.
	14. In all cases, the ADM has agreed with the process and approach of the panel, considered that they had examined the arguments fairly and accepted the panel recommendations.
	15. In conclusion, the fostering service continues to work hard to recruit, assess and support foster carers. Applicants and carers often comment at panel on the positive support they have received from the assessing social worker or supervising social workers.
	16. Panel members commitment to their work is evident at each meeting. They are always very 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 seek feedback on their performance often.
	17. The use of Microsoft Teams to conduct meetings has continued. Panel members have become more comfortable with this over the year and do not believe virtual meetings have a negative impact on their work.
	18. Applicants and carers usually attend panel and feedback through the social workers is that overall, they prefer the virtual nature of the meeting, feeling comfortable in their own homes, and avoiding the pressures of traffic and finding parking.
	19. Social workers have also adapted well to attending panel virtually and many have commented that virtual meetings suit them better in terms of time management. If a carer is particularly anxious about attending, the social worker will often attend with them at the carers home.
2. **Panel Membership**
	1. A new Panel Chairperson was appointed in September 2020. She has a background as a senior social care manager for another Local Authority before retiring in August 2020. She has significant experience in safeguarding and was an Agency Decision Maker for a time before her retirement, as well as being the social work representative on a foster panel for 8 years in the past. There are currently no Vicechairs, but it is hoped this will be rectified in the next few months.
	2. There have been no resignations from panel this year. Diversity of Panel Members has been a long-standing issue with most of the independent members having past professional backgrounds in either social work or education. Progress has been made this year through the recruitment of 6 new panel members from a wider background experience, including a police officer, ex-foster carer, and most significantly a person with care experience as a child. This has provided more diversity across panel.

**3. Panel Administration**

3.1 The effective running of the foster panel is in no small part due to the hard work and excellent organisation skills of the Panel Administrator. She has for much of the year been managing with reduced support but has continued to ensure papers are available for panel members and take and send minutes to the chair and then ADM in good time. She also supports panel members with any technology issues, has coordinated the recruitment process, undertaken the arrangements for the panel training day and is generally available to complete any tasks necessary to keep panel running smoothly.

**4.** **Feedback from attendees**

4.1 The brief questionnaire offered to applicants, carers and social workers for completion after panel is not widely completed and it is disappointing that panel receives very little feedback from applicants. Discussions are now taking place about how there can be an improved feedback system developed.

**5. Practice Standards and Quality Assurance**

* 1. Panel has continued to provide written feedback to social workers on the quality of their written reports and their verbal presentations. This has not always been considered as helpful and social workers have said that the comments from the panel are not specific enough. To ensure better quality feedback, the panel advisor now records the feedback and sends this directly to the social worker and their manager, paying attention to the need to highlight the positive aspects of the work as well as making sure the less positive comment is constructive. Themes are identified and shared.
	2. There has been an improvement in the quality of the assessments presented overall with more concise information and better analysis of the information gathered. Although there is still work to do to ensure this is consistent, the panel is pleased to note the progress.
	3. Communication between the panel and social work teams has improved. The panel chair attends team meetings when invited to do so and communicates with social workers and managers regularly to, where possible, resolve queries prior to panel and avoid deferring decisions unnecessarily. Quarterly meetings between the chair, managers, advisers, and ADM are used to discuss updates and any emerging issues.
	4. In December 2020 all panel members met with the panel chair for their annual review and areas for development were identified. This was also an opportunity for the chair to get to know the panel members better and identify strengths and training needs and informed the agenda for the panel training day held in March 2021.

**6. Panel Training Day**

6.1 The training day was held virtually due to the Covid restrictions. Attendance was excellent with almost all panel members making themselves available for the full day. The day began with an introduction and Fostering Service update from Matthew Randles, Operations Manager Fostering. Trevor Goss, Recruitment and Assessment Team Manager then provided an overview of assessments and current themes, followed by an exercise and Q&A session. Richard Scott, Deputy Operations Manager, Kinship Service, presented a service overview and update, followed by a presentation on the impact of connected person’s assessments and outcomes for children placed with extended family and friends.

6.2 Matthew Randles and Maggie Aldwell, Panel Chair, presented a session on the importance of and impact of language and working towards a uniformed approach. They followed this with a session on the role of panel members and effective questioning, again concluded with an exercise and Q&A session.

6.3 The day concluded with a service overview and update and presentation on the support available for carers, therapeutic parenting, trauma informed practice, and identifying strengths, resilience, and difficulties in assessments by Carley Davies (Team Manager Fostering, ARC Team) and Katharine Griffin (Team Manager, Emotional Health and Wellbeing Team).

6.4 Feedback from attendees was very positive. All found the day informative and enjoyable. However, all hope that next year, the training day will be held face to face as the virtual nature of the day limited the ability to catch up and speak more informally about panel attendance.

**7. Panel Issues**

7.1 Statutory guidance expects panel minutes to be ratified within 7 days of receipt. Although there has been some improvement in the time it takes for the ADM to ratify panel minutes, this continues to be an issue.

7.2 There has been an issue with reviews being presented to panel where the supervising social worker and/or team manager and reviewing officer has made a different recommendation. This is often because further discussions during the review meeting have led to a change in the recommendation recorded on the Family Placement Officer Report, which is completed in advance of the meeting. This has caused confusion for the panel and discussions are taking place to ensure that there is a shared recommendation presented at panel in future.

7.4 There continues to be a lack of clarity in respect of the Out of Approvals and Exemptions coming to panel, the majority being retrospectively presented with little information to clarify the circumstances. This needs to be clarified and panel made clear on their role.

7.5 Assessments and reviews do not always clearly present the voice of the child, either the child placed or birth children of carers. The social worker and IRO do not always provide feedback. More consistency in this area would be beneficial.

**8. Conclusion**

8.1 Despite the challenges, this has been a positive period where we have seen an improvement in the quality of assessments, better communication and more positive feedback from social workers and carers about their attendance at panel. There continues to be work required to improve consistency in the quality of the work presented at panel and to resolve the issues identified above. Panel members will continue to work on effective questioning and welcome constructive feedback from applicants, carers and attending social workers. The chair would like to thank all panel members, administrators and fostering staff for their dedication, hard work and commitment to the children and young people who need the care in Somerset.

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Maggie Aldwell

Independent Panel Chair

October 2021

Matthew Randles

Operations Manager, Resources – Fostering

October 2021