

Fostering Panel Annual Report:

1st June 2019 to 31st May 2020

1. Panel Activity

East and West panels have continued to meet over the year in Taunton, Shepton Mallet and Yeovil, although from March 19th these were conducted virtually owing to the Coronavirus.

There have been 26 panels in the last twelve months; none were cancelled and two were additional due to the level of work.

Newly approved carers: 22 new approvals have been made which is an increase from last year.

Connected persons approvals: 25 approvals have been made for kinship carers which is again an increase from last year.

Stepping Stones providers: 3 Stepping Stones providers have been agreed which is up from 1 being approved last year. This is very pleasing as there is still a real need for carers to offer this kind of accommodation for the 16/18 age group. Young people are prepared for independent living in a safe and supportive environment and many more carers in this category are needed. Only 1 Stepping Stones provider has been deregistered following resignation.

Unfortunately, no Short Break Care providers have been approved this year. This type of fostering offers support to children with disabilities and their families. Children may visit weekly for tea, stay weekends or for longer during school holidays. The intention is that a relationship is established over many years between the children and their families with the carer to ensure that there is consistency of support.

Out of approvals and exemptions: 33 of these were presented to panel which were noted. This is a welcome reduction from last year due to the introduction and exploration widening the approval age range where possible and agreed. Many Carers are approved for 0-18 years, where it is assessed, and carers can state a preference but there is now far more flexibility resulting in fewer requests when a child or young person is out of the carer's approval age range. Requests still come when carers are looking after more children than their approval stipulates but this is only ever for a short time unless a change of approval is being sought.

Regulation 25 extension requests: 14 of these have come to panel and all but 2 have been agreed. Social workers from the Kinship Team who are assessing connected persons carers are expected to complete assessments within a 16-week period from the point temporary

approval is given by a manager. However, it is often the case that an additional 8 weeks extension is requested so that information can be collected: eg references, medicals, DBS checks etc. In the case of the 2 which were not agreed, grandparents had decided that they no longer wished to be assessed and the extension was requested to give time for the LA to find foster carers for the children or to make other arrangements. This is not in the spirit of the guidance. Indeed, the extension request process is still somewhat blurred, although discussions are being held about the way forward.

Form C brief reports: 5 of these have been presented outlining the reasons why an assessment is not going to continue. All of these have been agreed by panel.

First annual reviews: Panel considered 16 of these – exactly the same number as last year. They were largely very positive.

Deregistration's: 30 households were deregistered this year – slightly fewer than the previous 12 months. Many were retirements after long and loyal service, and some were resignations. These are due to a range of reasons: carers may adopt the children they are caring for, the young person stays on once they reach 18 into a Staying Put arrangement and, of course, connected persons carers may be granted an SGO by the court. The troubling resignations are those where the carer has only recently been approved and has found that fostering is not what was expected and not what is wanted. Many hours are spent preparing, assessing and supporting people who then find the challenge is too great.

Changes of approval: 17 changes were made in this period predominantly to widen the age range or increase the numbers of children who can be cared for. Older teenagers and sibling groups continue to be hard to place so changing the approval range for carers is proving to be helpful.

Reviews after investigations: 6 reviews after investigations have been presented to panel all of which included positive recommendations that carers continue fostering. Panel agreed all of them.

Contested deregistrations and referrals to the IRM: there have been no examples of this during this period.

Panel recommendations amended by the Agency Decision Maker: there has been one change made by the decision maker to a panel recommendation this year. This was in the case of an existing carer and a slight amendment was made to her change of approval.

Emergency Carer approval (Covid-19): 5 households have been approved on this scheme since April as the result of a vigorous recruitment campaign for people to help during the

pandemic. Managers have worked hard to draw up a new slimmed down and concise assessment process to facilitate the speedy but safe presentation of applicants to panel. All recommendations so far have been supported for a period of 24 weeks with reviews at 8 and 16 weeks to ensure close monitoring, support and oversight. It is hoped that some of these carers may wish to continue after 24 weeks and become mainstream foster carers for the future. As lockdown eases, however, some may need to return to full time work outside the home or may feel that fostering for any length of time is not for them. It is a very positive initiative in which panel has every confidence.

Comments:

All teams have worked hard to recruit, assess and support carers. This continues to be the case during lockdown through Microsoft Teams and phone calls. It is particularly impressive that the Skills to Foster training has continued virtually with great success. It is also worth noting that many social workers have worked many hours to ensure that assessments are completed. Homes have been visited to complete household risk assessments; it has not been possible to do everything virtually.

It is also worth noting that panel members adapted to the use of Teams with ease. It was recommended at first that cameras were not used as they disrupted signal but due to applicants/carers' feedback, individual members now use them when questions are being asked.

2. Panel membership

Three resignations from independent members have been received over the last twelve months and therefore three appointments made. However, diversity is still an issue for panel: there are no members from ethnic minority backgrounds, only a quarter of panel are men and the majority are women over 60 with a background in education. There is still only one foster carer from another local authority and the care leaver invited to join was only able to sit once. Because of the demands of the role recruitment is very difficult. Two panel members are police officers, one of whom was appointed this year, but she hasn't been able to sit as yet, and the other police officer hasn't sat since November due to the unpredictability of shift patterns at the moment.

More positively panel has been fortunate to have 6 social workers from a variety of teams who sit as the mandatory social worker representative. This is on a rota basis. Their contributions are invaluable, and their attendance very much appreciated.

3. Administrators

Panel's main administrator is always of assistance to panel but deserves particular mention as she has worked extremely hard during lockdown and the busy period that has been experienced. She ensured that panel members were able to access the necessary technology to take part in virtual panels and has had to manage additional paperwork and panels. Mention must also be made of the other administrator who supports her. Without them both, panel would not function as smoothly as it does.

4. Feedback from attendees at panel

The brief questionnaire offered to applicants, carers and social workers for completion after panel continue to be reasonably well used. Not all attendees choose to complete them but those who do are largely positive. Answers are invariably brief but still mention the difficulties of car parking, reception and meeting rooms. All feedback forms are discussed at the start of panel so that any improvements can be made. Social workers are also asked to comment on the chair's management on the day and no negative comments have been received. All forms will be collated for the twelve month period ending in October to establish whether there are any emerging patterns other than those things mentioned above. Any conclusions may be used for discussion at the training day next January.

5. Practice Standards and Quality Assurance

Panel has continued to give written feedback to social workers which focuses on both the quality of their written work and their verbal presentations. This is led by the chair and the good quality of both deserves mention. However, it has been noted that the Kinship Team's assessments have not always contained all the expected documentation. As a result, the Recruitment Team Manager and the Kinship Team Manager have recently met to ensure a consistency of approach.

There has been a huge improvement in the use of respectful language based on the research document "Language That Cares". Panel has consistently commented on this in feedback to social workers and the fostering manager has supported this with written guidance to staff. Terms describing young people and children as "placements", occasional care rather than "respite" and family time rather than "contact" are now being used widely.

In November 2019 the chair met with the ADM for her appraisal and targets were set. In December all panel members met with one of the panel advisers and the panel chair for their annual appraisal and areas for development were identified. This was also an opportunity for strengths and training needs to be highlighted. It was pleasing that panel members are now using the thinkpads without issue, although password changes do sometimes cause problems. The IT desk has, however, been of assistance.

Panel's training day in January was useful, although feedback indicated that there were too many updates meaning that panel members were required to listen for long periods rather than being actively involved for much of the day.

The first hour was spent listening to a member of staff from the health and safety unit. This had been a particular request from panel as several assessments over the last year have been from families with ponds, streams and rivers in their gardens.

The Kinship Team then gave a presentation about carers' experience of panel attendance and issues raised by social workers. There were plenty of positives as well as some practice which needed amendment. For example, panel's view about reg 25 extensions being sought and the Kinship Team assessing social workers remaining in the panel room once prospective carers have left. Past practice has been for the social worker to wait with the carers but this has now changed so that the assessing social worker can hear the discussion. This should assist in their future supervision of the carers.

The fostering manager gave an update about initiatives and developments in the service as well as the improvement plan and this was followed by a short activity run by the panel chair.

Arguably the most helpful parts of the day were the Recruitment Team's very active exercises drawn from their Skills to Foster training and the input made by a foster carer. However, it was interesting to hear from the staff development officer that panel members are able to attend any training offered to foster carers and to hear from the Emotional Health and Wellbeing Team about their work to ensure that the whole service is more trauma informed. Finally, the fostering manager ran an activity around functions of fostering panels.

In order to learn from other fostering panels and develop practice further, the chair attended the Hampshire fostering panel, held in Winchester, in March. She produced a report for managers, panel advisers and panel members and this was discussed at the quarterly meeting in April. It is worth noting that Somerset practice compared very well with Hampshire's and no major changes will be made as a result of the observation.

6. Panel Issues

a) The ratification of panel minutes is still taking far too long. The statutory guidance indicates that minutes must be ratified within 7 days of receipt of the minutes. This is rarely the case with the exception of Emergency (Covid-19) carer applications. These have been done within 24 hours in order to ensure that there is capacity for children/young people to be placed at short notice during lockdown. It is clear that the ADM has a huge workload, but it would be good to understand what plans the service has to address this issue.

b) The fostering manager has made representations to the authority about panel members' fees and has yet to have a response. Payments by local authorities and private agencies vary enormously. Additionally, the chair receives no travel costs and this is highly unusual when compared with other fostering panel chairs' remuneration.

c) Connected persons applications to panel continue to be problematic. Balancing the needs of children to be with family (and in some cases friends) and the suitability of those households is sometimes difficult. Panel finds it hard to understand how, when serious issues have been identified in the initial viability assessment, a child or young person is placed. This means that when the applicants come to panel, they have been looking after that child for several months even though it's not entirely satisfactory. Panel then needs to balance the distress caused to the child by disrupting the placement with a move outside the family against concerns about the suitability of the applicants.

d) It is good to see that most connected persons attend panel for their initial approval and for their first year review. However, not all of them do and it is hoped that social workers will continue to encourage them to do so. The deregistration of connected persons carers when SGOs have been granted is always positive but when extension requests have been agreed, there are times when panel is not informed about the progress of the assessment and a full application is not presented. This is something which needs addressing.

e) Communication continues to be of concern. Quarterly meetings between the chair, managers, advisers and at times the ADM, are very helpful indeed, but time is very limited. This means that while urgent agenda items are considered, updates, initiatives and developments are not addressed. The fostering manager did intend to attend panel for the first 15 minutes of the meeting from time to time to keep members fully informed, but this has not happened. Communication was more effective before the new structure was introduced in April 2019.

f) The impact of a prolonged lockdown on children and young people and their carers has yet to be evaluated. Panel will need to be updated about this in future reviews and it is hoped that plans are being considered to address this.

g) Now that virtual panels have proved to be very successful, it is hoped that the fostering service has plans to arrange for applicants and carers to attend panel virtually when appropriate rather than travel long distances. It is important that successful new ways of working are embedded into practice. This includes the speedier preparation of assessments without losing quality and depth.

h) The training and induction of new panel members remains an issue and has not been addressed at all this year.

i) Training and support groups for connected persons households are still being developed. However, there are many carers in this category who do not consider themselves to be part of fostering; they are family looking after grandchildren, nieces and nephews and cousins. Therefore, there is a reluctance from some to take part. Panel has noted at first year reviews that little or no training has been undertaken and fostering standards not started.

7. Conclusion

The chair would like to thank all panel members, administrators and fostering staff for their commitment to the children and young people who are in the care of the local authority. All work hard to ensure that the safety and welfare of children and young people are at the forefront of their thinking. There is still much to do going forward to be certain that fostering panel is the best it can be.

Judy Watson

Independent Panel Chair

June 2020

Matthew Randles

Operations Manager

July 2020