

AGENDA ITEM

**REPORT TO CORPORATE
PARENTING BOARD**

6 AUGUST 2021

**REPORT OF DIRECTOR OF
CHILDREN'S SERVICES**

**ANNUAL REPORT OF THE FOSTERING PANEL AND FOSTERING SERVICE REPORT -
1 April 2020 – 31 March 2021**

1. PURPOSE OF REPORT

- 1.1 This report is intended to give an overview of the work of the Fostering Panel and Stockton Borough Council Fostering Service.

2. BACKGROUND

- 2.1 The Fostering Panel considers matters referred to it under the Fostering Services Regulations 2011 and the Care Planning and Case Review Regulations 2010.
- 2.2 Panel considers assessments of applicants' suitability to foster for both unrelated and connected foster carers. Panel reaches a recommendation in respect of suitability and terms of approval, identifying type of fostering, numbers and characteristics of the children the carer should foster.
- 2.3 Panel also considers and makes recommendations in respect of matches of children with long term foster carers.
- 2.4 The Panel receives some foster carer annual reviews and recommends whether the foster carers continue to be suitable to foster or whether they should be deregistered. Panel considers foster care reviews in the following circumstances only:
- First annual foster care review.
 - Following a safeguarding allegation or serious complaint against the foster carer or a member of their household.
 - Where a foster carer is making a serious complaint against Stockton Borough Council.
 - Following a disruption to a long-term foster placement.
 - Following a significant change in circumstances (eg health, new partner).
 - Where a change of terms of approval is recommended.
 - Where an IRO recommends that the foster carer is no longer suitable to foster.
- 2.5 Other foster care reviews are considered directly by the Agency Decision Maker.
- 2.6 Panel also consider requests in respect of the extension of temporary approval of connected person foster carers (family and friends). Regulation 24 of the Care Planning, Placement and Case Review (England) Regulations 2010 gives the local

authority power to temporarily approve, as a foster carer, a person connected to the child, where a looked after child has been placed with them in an emergency. This temporary approval lasts for 16 weeks and during this period, a full suitability to foster assessment should be undertaken. Regulation 25 allows for this 16-week period to be extended for a further 8 weeks, where the assessment has not been completed within the timescale. Before extending the approval, the local authority must consider whether the placement remains the most suitable for the child and seek the views of the Fostering Panel. In these situations, therefore, Panel provide a view, rather than a recommendation, to the Agency Decision Maker, who is the Assistant Director of Children's Services.

- 2.7 Panel has a role in the quality assurance of fostering work undertaken by the Department. This quality assurance involves scrutiny of the written reports, timescales and whether the Department and the workers are following regulatory requirements.
- 2.8 Panel recommendations are forwarded to the Agency Decision Maker who makes a decision about whether a person is suitable and/or continues to be suitable to foster, whether a child should be placed for long term foster carer with a specific foster carer and whether the temporary approval of a connected person should be extended for up to 8 weeks.

3. CORONAVIRUS AND THE IMPACT ON FOSTERING PANEL AND THE FOSTERING SERVICE

- 3.1 Prior to the Coronavirus pandemic the Fostering Service and its employees were office based and Fostering Panel was held face to face on alternative Tuesdays.
- 3.2 In line with Government guidance and the national lockdown, Fostering Service staff began working from home on 23 March 2020. The final Fostering Panel for 2019-2020 was scheduled to be held on that day and was, as a result, cancelled.
- 3.3 Work immediately commenced to identify a means to continue Fostering Business and Fostering Panels were set up remotely commencing on 9 April 2020.
- 3.4 Due to the cancellation of the previous Panel and the volume of Panel business additional panels were scheduled to ensure that any delays to consideration of work was minimised. Due to the nature of virtual panels and the potential of long periods of time using screens, it was agreed with the ADM and Independent Panel Chair that Panels should be increased to twice fortnightly, being held on Monday afternoon and Tuesday morning.
- 3.5 The adjustment to virtual panels and the use of different IT platforms was a steep learning curve for all involved. Panel members were extremely flexible and committed during this period, which allowed for business to be considered in a timely manner.
- 3.6 The Adoption and Children (Coronavirus)(Amendment) Regulations 2020 were laid on 24 April, which allowed some flexibility to the Fostering Regulations 2011 and Care Planning and Case Review Regulations 2010. The temporary flexibilities relevant to the work of the Fostering Service were:
 - The extension in the permissible length of an emergency placement with a foster carer outside of their terms of approval from 6 working days to 24 weeks.

- Temporary approval of connected foster carers under Regulation 24 increased from 16 weeks to 24 weeks. The possibility of an extension under Regulation 25 for a further 8 weeks remained in place.
- The removal of the requirement that a person temporarily approved to care for a child must be a relative, friend or other person connected with the child so long as the local authority is satisfied that it is the most appropriate placement.
- The removal of the obligation to constitute a Fostering Panel and, where Panels continue to be held, a reduction in quoracy requirements to three (Chair/Vice Chair, social worker and one other independent person).
- The time limit for notifying a prospective foster carer that the Fostering Service does not intend to proceed to Stage 2 of the assessment process changed from 10 working days to as soon as is reasonably practicable.
- The requirement to review a foster carer's approval changed from not more than a year after approval and thereafter at intervals of not more than a year to *where reasonably practicable...not more than a year after approval and thereafter whenever the fostering service provider considers it necessary*.
- The requirement when assessing suitability to foster for health details to be supported by a medical report was removed.

- 3.7 The Adoption and Children (Coronavirus)(Amendment) Regulations 2020 were reviewed on 25 September 2020, with many of the flexibilities removed. The only flexibility remaining in respect of the work of the Fostering Service was:

A fostering service is allowed to begin Stage 2 of an assessment, whilst still awaiting the foster carer medical report (however, the amendment that removed the requirement for health information to be supported by a medical report expired on 25 September 20).

- 3.8 The Adoption and Children (Coronavirus)(Amendment) Regulations 2020 included 'savings provisions' which made provision for certain of the original amendments to continue to apply beyond 25 September but **only** to work that had begun **before** 25 September. These 'savings provisions' meant that assessments started before 25 September could be completed without a medical report, could be considered outside of Panel or, where Panel continued to be held, reduced quoracy and, where a decision is made not to approve an applicant as suitable, the fostering service must notify of the decision as soon as is reasonably practicable. Additionally, where temporary approval of a foster carer had been agreed, this could continue for 24 weeks.
- 3.9 The Adoption and Children (Coronavirus)(Amendment) Regulations 2020 have been subsequently reviewed in March 2021 and all amendments are now in place until 30 September 2021.
- 3.10 Covid-19 risk assessments were undertaken on all fostering households at the beginning of the pandemic and have been subject to regular review.
- 3.11 A hybrid model of face to face and remote working has been adopted since March 2020, with support, supervision and assessment being completed via home/garden visits, video link and telephone and visiting requirements have been reviewed in line with changes in guidance and risk. Subsequent to the Government lifting the first lockdown restrictions all statutory annual unannounced visits have been completed face to face.

3.12 The main areas of note as a result of the Coronavirus Pandemic between 1 April 2020 and 31 March 21 are as follows:

- Foster carers demonstrated a significant commitment and determination to offer children in their care a period of stability and security during a period of high risk and change.
- Most children were home-schooled during the first series of school closures and foster carers were creative in ensuring children had the opportunity to continue to learn and develop.
- Children were encouraged to return to school during the second period of school closures; where the decision was made for children to continue to be home schooled, this was made in conjunction with social workers, school and the carer.
- Foster carers adapted quickly to offer creative ways of supporting children to maintain regular contact with their birth families including the use of video links, videos, photographs and regular written updates.
- Availability of placements has been restricted throughout the year both in-house and via the Independent Fostering Agencies. This is primarily because of foster carers shielding or taking a break as well carers self-isolating for periods because of Covid-19.
- Whilst fostering enquiries initially increased, the number of people requesting information packs has been significantly reduced in comparison to previous years.

4. CONSTITUTION AND MEMBERSHIP OF THE PANEL

4.1 The Fostering Regulations require the Local Authority to maintain a 'Central List' of people considered to be suitable to be a Panel member. The Agency Advisor must ensure that there are sufficient members and that each individual member has the experience and expertise necessary to effectively discharge the functions of the Panel. The Panel must have an Independent Chair, one or two Vice Chairs and one or more social workers who have at least 3 years relevant post qualifying experience. The Central List must be made up of independent members as well as those who are employed by, or carry out functions of, the Council.

4.2 The Panel needs to have 5 members present to be quorate, including the Chair or Vice Chair and at least 4 other members, one of whom must be Independent (not including the Chair) and one a social worker.

4.3 As at 31 March 2021 there were 12 members on the Central List, an increase of one from the previous year. A further 3 Panel members are going through the recruitment process and it is anticipated that they will have joined the Central List by June 2021. During the year 2020/2021 the Vice Chair resigned as a result of ill health and the transition to virtual panels. Recruitment activity has continued during the year which has resulted in the appointment of a replacement Vice Chair and two male panel members, with a third to join in May 21. Recruitment has increased the diversity of the Central List. Current membership comprises an independent Chair and Vice Chair, an adoptive parent, a person who was fostered and adopted, 1 foster carer from a neighbouring local authority, 1 local authority councillor, 1 youth worker, 1 housing officer and 5 social workers. Achieving quoracy has been generally achievable over the past year, despite Panel sessions having been twice as frequent. The move to a virtual Panel using Microsoft Teams has been beneficial in respect of Panel member attendance. Panel Chair/Vice Chair and members have been extremely flexible over the past year accommodating not only the increase in Panels but embracing a totally

different way of preparing for Panel and its different way of functioning. All paperwork is now provided securely online via Microsoft Teams.

- 3.4 Access to legal and medical advice for Panel is provided by the Legal Advisor and Medical Advisor. The Legal Advisor has not routinely attended Panel in recent years, and the Medical Advisor ceased attendance following the transition of adoption services to Adoption Tees Valley in 2019. A process is in place, whereby Panel members can request legal and medical advice prior to Panel via the Agency Advisor. Should advice be needed on the day of Panel, attempts would be made to gain this information at that time to avoid a potential deferment. To date, this has not caused any difficulties. The Legal Advisor attended Panel in December 2020 to provide an update to members on the current processes and expectations of local courts. She also attended one Panel to give advice in respect of extension to temporary approval for a particularly complex connected care assessment.
- 4.5 There have been three Panels cancelled during this reporting period because of no business. These were both during the second half of the reporting period, when Panels were noted to be slightly less busy than during the first half of the year. It should, however, be noted that the increase to two Panels fortnightly has allowed for greater capacity overall.
- 4.6 There have been 49 Panels held during 2020-21, a significant increase from the 24 during the previous reporting period. As highlighted earlier in the report, this is a result of shorter Panels being held over two days fortnightly, rather than one longer meeting. Panel was chaired by the Independent Chair on 43 occasions, with a new Vice Chair being appointed during the latter part of the year, who chaired 5 Panel meetings. The increase in Panels has placed additional demands on all Panel members and support staff, who have continued to be extremely committed and flexible to accommodate the high level of work.
- 4.7 The National Minimum Standards for Fostering identify that Panel members should be allowed 5 working days to read Panel papers. The Agency has consistently met this requirement throughout the reporting period. This helps Panel members to ensure they have thoroughly read and considered the information prior to Panel. Panel paperwork has been provided electronically via a secure platform since December 2020 and this has been well-received by Panel members.

5. QUALITY ASSURANCE

- 5.1 Panel has a role in quality assuring the fostering business of the local authority.

Suitability to Foster Applications

- 5.2 There were 48 suitability to foster assessments presented to Panel during the reporting period, a significant increase from 27 during the previous reporting period. 12 of these were mainstream applicants and 36 connected carers. In addition, two previously approved foster carers were reapproved having been approached to return to fostering to support during the period of the Coronavirus pandemic, making a total of 50 approvals for Panel to consider during the year. 47 applicant households were recommended as suitable to foster on first presentation and three were deferred. All but one recommendation was unanimous; one was by majority. All recommendations were agreed by the Agency Decision Maker.

- 5.3 Regulation 26 (3) of The Fostering Service (England) Regulations 2011 provides that if, before the full fostering assessment is complete, information comes to light indicating that the applicant is unlikely to be suitable to foster, a brief report can be compiled to set out reasons for considering the applicant is unsuitable. There have been 3 brief reports presented to Fostering Panel during this period – all were in respect of connected foster carers. Where, during the period of temporary approval and prior to completion of the full assessment, the assessing social worker or Panel identify that the carer does not meet the requirements for approval, a recommendation has been made not to extend temporary approval and approval lapses after 16 weeks (24 weeks during the period of the Adoption and Children (Coronavirus)(Amendment) Regulations 2020 Coronavirus).
- 5.4 In respect of mainstream suitability to foster, Panel was satisfied with the quality of all the assessments.
- 5.5 Fostering applications should be presented to Panel within 8 months of the registration of interest, or 4 months for fast-track assessments. Of the 14 approved (including two reapprovals), 5 were completed within timescale and 9 outside. In 4 of these cases, there was delay at the request of the applicants who required more time for personal reasons or because of the Coronavirus pandemic. For the remaining 5, delay was due to a combination of factors, including delay in medicals, DBS checks and sickness. Of the 5 completed within timescale, 1 was completed within 8 months, 1 within 3 months, 1 within 2 months and 2 within 1 month.
- 5.6 The Adoption and Children (Coronavirus)(Amendment) Regulations 2020 allowed temporary flexibility to approve a non-connected person as a foster carer for a named child. This flexibility was used twice to allow children to be placed in an emergency with in-house foster carers who were assessed as meeting their needs. Both prospective foster carers had previous fostering experience. On one occasion, the full fostering assessment had been completed and was to be presented to the next Panel and on the second the assessment had been presented to and recommended by Fostering Panel but the Agency Decision was awaited.
- 5.7 Panel was generally satisfied with the quality of Connected Persons applications, however, was not satisfied with the information provided in two cases. In one case further clarification was needed of the reason for the child's placement and in the second (an assessment completed by an independent social worker) no information was included in respect of the child's needs.
- 5.8 Connected carer applications should be completed within 16 weeks of the child being placed or, if there has been an extension, within 24 weeks. If the child is not in placement, then the timescale is the same as for mainstream applications, 8 months. 11 of the applications presented were completed within timescales, two were completed only 2 days outside of the 24-week timescale and 23 were outside of timescales. The most frequently cited reason for delay was lack of capacity within the team, which led to a significant delay in allocation, however, other reasons included:
- Illness of worker or applicant
 - Complexity of case requiring detailed assessment
 - Holidays
 - Covid-19
- 5.9 Three connected foster carer households were recommended as not suitable to foster during this reporting period. If, after taking into account the recommendation of the

Panel, the Agency Decision Maker is satisfied that the foster carer or the household is not suitable to foster, the Agency Decision Maker will make a 'qualifying determination' decision and will;

- Give written notice to the applicant that she proposes to agree with Panel's recommendation.
- The written notice will include the reasons for doing so and the recommendation of the Panel.
- The written notification will include advice to the applicants that they have 28 calendar days from the date of the decision in which to consider the following 3 options;
 - a) Accept the qualifying determination and inform the Manager of the Fostering Service in writing of this acceptance.
 - b) Make written representation to the Manager of the Fostering Service. OR
 - c) Apply to the Secretary of State to have the qualifying determination decision reviewed via the Independent Review Mechanism (IRM) .

5.10 The applicants in these cases accepted the qualifying determination.

Foster Care Reviews

5.11 There have been 56 foster care reviews considered.

- Panel was satisfied with the quality of information in all cases.
- In 53 cases continued suitability to foster was unanimously recommended.
- In 3 cases deregistration was unanimously recommended.

5.12 Fostering regulations require that the foster care review takes into account the views of any child placed and the views of the responsible authority for any child who has been in placement during the previous year. In practice, the latter means obtaining the views of the social worker for any child in placement since the last review. It is Stockton Fostering Service's policy to seek the views of the children cared for by the foster carer via their own social worker. This is in order that the children can give their views openly to the social worker who does not have direct responsibility for the foster carer. During this reporting period, Panel has continued to monitor the availability of the views of children and placing social workers in the foster care review.

5.13 In 4 cases, there were no children's views available, where Panel considered it would be possible to obtain those views. This diminishes the quality of the review process. This is, however, a significant improvement on the previous reporting period, where no views were recorded in 21 (out of 110) cases. In 8 reviews there were no views provided by the placing social worker. This gap in information also lessens the value of the review. This is also a significant improvement on the previous reporting period, where no views were recorded in 29 (out of 110) cases. A process had been put in place during the previous year, whereby the IRO chairing the review was also requesting the feedback from the placing social worker, where this has not been provided to the supervising social worker. This has certainly helped but this continues to be an area for improvement.

5.14 There were 3 deregistrations heard during this period, 2 concerned a couple who had separated and 1 the male carer, who had left the family home, was deregistered and the female carer continued to be suitable to foster. All three deregistrations were due to safeguarding concerns. If, after taking into account the outcome of the review and

the recommendation of the Panel, the Agency Decision Maker is no longer satisfied that the foster carer or the household continues to be suitable, or that the terms of approval are appropriate the Agency Decision Maker will make a 'qualifying determination' decision and will:

- Give written notice to the foster carers that they propose to terminate the foster carers' approval or revise the terms of the foster carers' approval.
- The written notice will include the reasons for doing so and the recommendation of the panel.
- The written notification will include advice to the foster carer that they have 28 calendar days from the date of the decision in which to consider the following 3 options:
 - a) Accept the qualifying determination and inform the Manager of the Fostering Service in writing of this acceptance.
 - b) Make written representation to the Manager of the Fostering Service. OR
 - c) Apply to the Secretary of State to have the qualifying determination decision reviewed via the Independent Review Mechanism (IRM).

In all three cases the foster carers accepted the qualifying determination.

5.15 Foster carer reviews should happen annually unless brought forward for any reason. Prior to the current reporting period, it was the Fostering Service policy to present all reviews to Panel, however, this was changed and Panel only now considers:

- First foster care reviews
- Changes to terms of approval
- Significant changes in circumstances
- Allegations/complaints
- Disruptions of long-term placement
- Deregistration

5.16 Of the 56 reviews presented to Panel:

- 25 were first reviews
- 20 were changes to terms of approval
- 3 were significant changes in circumstances
- 2 were following allegations/complaints
- 2 were due to disruptions of long-term placement
- 3 were deregistrations

One foster care review did not meet the above criteria and was brought to Panel for consideration due to foster carers not being able to entirely fulfil the child's care plan (carers were not willing/able to support children attending school during the Covid-19 pandemic due to shielding, though they fully supported learning from home). A decision was made to seek Panel's recommendation in this case prior to the Agency Decision given the unusual nature of the issue.

5.17 Panel noted that 21 of the foster care reviews were completed out of the usual annual timescale, however, the flexibilities from April to September 20 under the Adoption and Children (Coronavirus)(Amendment) Regulations 2020 allowed them to be undertaken *where reasonably practicable...not more than a year after approval and thereafter whenever the fostering service provider considers it necessary*. Delays in reviews were attributed to:

- The IRO was redeployed for a period at the beginning of the Coronavirus pandemic.
- Sickness of carer, social worker or IRO.
- Meetings being cancelled due to an unexpected event

- 5.18 Foster carers are invited and encouraged to attend the Panel meeting where their review is being considered, however, this is not a requirement. During this reporting period 17 (30%) of foster carers chose to attend, which was an increase of 9% on the previous reporting period.
- 5.19 There have been 57 requests for extensions of temporary approval of connected persons. Of these, Panel's view was that 2 should be deferred for further information and that all but 6 should be given an extension.
- 5.20 Panel were satisfied with the papers submitted in all but 1 case, which was deferred for further information.
- 5.21 Extensions for a further 8-week temporary approval under Regulation 25 of the Care Planning and Case Review Regulations should be presented to Panel before the 16-week temporary approval under Regulation 24. The Adoption and Children (Coronavirus)(Amendment) Regulations 2020 amended the initial temporary approval from 16 weeks to 24 weeks for children placed subject to Reg 24 between April and September 2020. Over the first half of the reporting period, 17 of the 32 cases were presented out of timescale but this was improved during the second half, with only 3 out of the 25 presented out of timescale. The reason for delay was due to a lack of capacity to allocate the work.
- 5.22 Panel noted an increase in attendance of the child's social worker when an extension to temporary approval was being considered, with the child's social worker being in attendance for 41 of the 57 cases. The increase in attendance has been attributed to Panel being held remotely over Microsoft Teams as well as the impact of Covid restrictions on social workers visiting, meaning they were more frequently available to attend. Panel has found the increased attendance of children's social workers helpful in enabling them to come to a view about extending temporary approval.

6 LONG TERM FOSTERING MATCHES

- 6.1 12 long-term fostering matches were considered by Panel over the year. Panel was satisfied with the quality of the reports in all but one case, which was deferred for further information and successfully represented at a later Panel.
- 6.2 There is not a prescribed timescale for long-term fostering matches to be presented to Panel, however, over a year might seem delayed and within 6 months of a placement start, a little too quick. Panel's view of the matches presented was that 7 were presented at an appropriate point, three were slightly delayed and two a little too quickly.
- 6.3 It is important that timescales for a match are considered and agreed on an individual basis according to the individual needs and circumstances of each case.

7. FEEDBACK IN RESPECT OF PANEL FUNCTIONING

7.1 The following feedback has been gained through completion of questionnaires from staff and applicants attending Panel during the reporting period. Only 26 feedback questionnaires were received from fostering applicants/approved foster carers which was a significant reduction on the previous reporting period. The reduction appears to be linked to the feedback being sent electronically alongside the Panel invitation now that the Panel is held remotely. Previously, paper feedback questionnaires would often be completed whilst applicants/foster carers and social workers were waiting to hear Panel recommendations or directly following the Panel meeting.

7.2 Feedback from Prospective and Current Foster Carers:

- A fostering social worker said, "This was my first time attending this panel and it was a good experience".
- All but one felt the questions put by Panel were 'Very fair'. (One was 'quite fair'.)
- A fostering applicant said about the questions, "It helped to have them beforehand".
- Wait times were mostly 'No wait'. The maximum wait was 30 mins, but if participants waited at all it was otherwise for 15 mins or less.
- Most participants when asked during the first half of the reporting period if they would prefer face to face or video conferencing Panels in the future, said they would prefer face to face! Applicants and foster carers and children's social workers though, were just as likely to say video conferencing. During the second half, however, all were very positive about video conferencing which may reflect everyone's increased confidence with technology by that stage
- One child's social worker said. "The technology worked quite well during both attendances at Panel - it does present some communication issues in respect of cues to discuss issues."
- Another said. 'I thought Panel worked very well on Teams. I had no issues on the day.'
- Foster carer/applicants' comments about their Panel experience were all complimentary.
- One said." It went really well. I was completely at ease with the Panel and felt I didn't have to rush my answers."
- About the Panel members, one said, "All had good knowledge of fostering requirements and at no time did we feel uncomfortable or under pressure."
- Finally, about Panel in general one said, "We think it is a very important and much needed requirement."

7.3 One of the significant improvements for applicants/foster carers attending a virtual Panel is the reduction in waiting times. During face-to-face Panels, a small number of people attending had a wait time of between 30-60 minutes due to a delay with a previous item. This has not been the case with virtual Panels and, where there has been delay anticipated during an earlier item, the Agency Advisor has been able to contact social workers to inform them and ask them to notify applicants/foster carers.

7.4 Having experienced a year of virtual Panels, Panel chair sought the views of Central List members about the functioning of Panel. A short anonymous questionnaire was sent to all central list members; 4 members returned the questionnaire. Feedback given was:

- Members were happy with current arrangements for virtual Panels.
- Accessing Panel paperwork via Microsoft Teams was easier and more secure.
- The quality of information provided is good.
- It would be helpful to have documents in a consistent order.

- Members were happy with the format of Panel and questions being collated and shared in advance.

7.5 On the provision of advice to Panel by Agency Adviser, Legal Adviser and Medical Adviser, members were happy with the advice provided though, in respect of Medical advice, the following comments were made:

- Medical advice is often too brief.
- It was helpful previously to have the Medical Adviser in attendance when there were difficult medical issues to discuss.

7.6 All members felt virtual Panel worked very well and considerably cut down on travel times. Whilst members acknowledged that some face-to-face Panels may be required in the future, none felt that a complete return was the way forward.

7.7 General Functioning of the Agency and Child Placement Panel:

- The unprecedented situation facing the whole country in dealing with the Covid-19 pandemic over the last year, has naturally had an impact on the Panel and of course on the staff trying to maintain a good service for children and carers, but new ways of working have been enthusiastically embraced by all. There has been no lessening in applicants/carers' appreciation of the staff in Children's Fostering and Carers' Team which is a testament to their commitment.
- The commitment and perseverance Panel members and the staff supporting Panel over this period has been very impressive.
- The overall quality of the documentation presented to Panel has remained high, despite the difficult and stressful times, virtual working and shortage of team members in the fostering service.
- As the year has progressed and the administration of virtual panels have 'bedded in', attending virtually has become preferable to some Panel members, attendees and social workers.
- Attempts to recruit new Panel members and increase diversity have been successful.
- The vice chair has now been chairing Panels successfully. This is a considerable asset to the service and makes the system more robust. The recruitment of a further vice chair, which is under consideration, will be a further strengthening of the resilience of the process.
- To value and encourage young people's participation in fostering processes, it is suggested that the agency consider 'thankyou' cards to young people who have contributed.

8. TRAINING FOR PANEL

8.1 One specific training event has been held for Panel members during this reporting period.

8.2 A full day training was provided by Family Action in respect of Understanding Gender Diversity, Transgender Equality and Sexual Orientation in Fostering Services. The training was held jointly with Darlington's Fostering Panel. The course was facilitated via Microsoft Teams due to the Covid-19 restrictions. The course was well received

by Panel members but opportunities for networking with colleagues from Darlington were somewhat limited.

- 8.3 Panel members were also invited to attend Workforce Development training in respect of Valuing Care. Those who attended found the training useful and it gave them an understanding of the model currently being integrated within Children's Services.
- 8.4 The Agency Legal Adviser provided a session to update Panel members on current legal issues in care proceedings, which was well received.

9. APPROVED FOSTER CARERS

Year	Approved foster carers
2016/17	22
2017/18	23
2018/19	26
2019/20	24
2020/21	43

9.1 Of the 43 foster carers approved:

- 30 are connected carers (compared to 21 last year)
- 13 are new foster families (compared to 3 last year)

10. QUALIFYING DETERMINATION DECISIONS (A DECISION NOT TO APPROVE SOMEONE AS SUITABLE TO ADOPT OR AS SUITABLE TO FOSTER OR DEREGISTRATION OF A FOSTER CARER AS THEY ARE NO LONGER SUITABLE TO FOSTER.)

- This year there were 3 applications where the recommendation was that prospective foster carers were not suitable to foster. The Agency Decision Maker agreed with Panel recommendation and the applicants accepted the Qualifying Determination. There was 1 during the previous reporting period.
- This year there were 3 recommendations by Panel to deregister foster carers (compared to 0 in the previous year.)
- 0 applicants have applied to the IRM for a review of the disqualifying determination decision.
- The ADM agreed with the recommendation of Panel in all cases.

11. SCHEDULE 6 AND SCHEDULE 7

11.1 Schedule 6 of the Fostering Service (England) Regulations 2011 require certain matters to be monitored by the registered person and Schedule 7 identifies events to be notified. Within this reporting period there have been the following matters and notifications recorded:

- There have been 6 accidents or illnesses requiring treatment for children in foster care. Two were for the same child who sustained sports injuries in school. Two more were for diagnosed medical issues requiring hospital treatment. One was due to an injury sustained in the foster home, which required hospital treatment and the

last for a child who had self-harmed. All incidents were appropriately managed by foster carers and social workers.

- There have been 2 allegations of neglect and abuse. 1 allegation was in respect of an allegation of sexual abuse by another family member, which resulted in a police enquiry and conviction. The foster carer left the home immediately after the allegation was made and was subsequently deregistered. The second was an anonymous allegation of emotional abuse and neglect which was followed up by the child and supervising social workers and was deemed to be unfounded.
- There have been 3 incidents of a child missing from placement. These involved a sibling pair placed with a temporary approved foster carer. The children subsequently moved to an alternative placement.
- There have been 0 allegations that a child placed in foster care has committed a serious offence.
- There had been 0 incidents of police being called to the foster carers' address. There has been 1 incident of a foster carer being assaulted by a child in her care.
- There have been no incidents of carers not complying with care plans.

A training session will be arranged for foster carers, co-facilitated by the police, to support carers to take the appropriate action should children go missing from placements.

Exemptions of Usual Fostering Limit and Variations to Terms of Approval

- 11.2 There have been 5 Exemptions during the reporting period and 9 Variations to Terms of Approval.

12. CURRENT STATUS

- At 31 March 2021 there were 177 approved fostering households, an increase of 22 from the previous reporting period (155).
- There were 103 mainstream approved foster carers (which has remained static from the previous year).
- There were 74 approved connected carers (this compares to 52 in the previous year).
- Between 1 April 2020 and 31 March 2021, 15 mainstream foster carers resigned (compared to 7 during the previous year). 5 of these carers retired from fostering due to age/ill health, 1 resigned due to being granted an SGO for the children in their care, and 8 for personal reasons. 1 carer continued to care for a child under a staying put arrangement.