

STOCKTON ON TEES BOROUGH COUNCIL
ANNUAL REPORT OF THE FOSTERING PANEL

Date: 1 April 2022 – 31 March 2023

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1. PURPOSE OF REPORT

1.1 This report is intended to give an overview of the work of the Fostering Panel during the year April 22 to March 23.

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 (e.g. 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 Social Care.

- 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.
- 2.9 The Agency Decision Maker in Stockton is the Assistant Director, Children's Social Care. During this reporting period, Rhona Bolland acted as ADM for the first 6 month period and the role transferred to Adele Moore in November 2022.

3. CONSTITUTION AND MEMBERSHIP OF THE PANEL

- 3.1 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.
- 3.2 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.
- 3.3 At 31 March 2023 there were 19 members on the Central List, an increase of three from the previous year. There were two resignations of Panel members during the year 2021/22; these were social work members who left their SBC social work roles. Recruitment has increased the diversity of the Central List and given a greater robustness, reducing the risk of lack of quoracy. Current membership comprises an independent Chair and two Vice Chairs (all registered social workers), an adoptive parent, a person who was fostered and adopted, 1 foster carer from a neighbouring local authority and one SBC retired foster carer, 1 local authority councillor, 1 youth worker, 1 housing officer and 4 SBC social workers, 3 independent social workers and 2 panel members who were previously registered as fostering and adoption social workers. Achieving quoracy has been generally achievable over the past year. Only 2 Panels were cancelled due to not being quorate, both happening through the first six months of the reporting period. The business from these Panels were fitted into another Panel and/or a replacement Panel was held. Panel Chair/Vice Chairs and members have continued to be extremely flexible over the past year and are now confident in accessing Panel paperwork via Microsoft Teams and attending remotely.

- 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.
- 3.5 There have been only 2 Panels cancelled during this reporting period because of no business in comparison to 11 during the previous year. Panels have been significantly busier over the past year with a number of Panels considering more than 5 items. Five further Panels were cancelled due to bank holidays and consideration is being given to changing the Monday Panel to Wednesday in order to minimise this disruption.
- 3.6 There have been 44 Panels held during 2022-23, a significant increase from 35 during the previous reporting period. Panel was chaired by the Independent Chair on 20 occasions, and by one of the Vice Chairs for the remaining 24. This is the first year that Vice Chairs have chaired more frequently than the Chair and is reflective of having three people sharing the chairing as well as some Panel cancellations due to a lack of quoracy and/or business. Typically, Vice Chairs share the chairing of the Monday Panels and Chair facilitates the Tuesday panels.
- 3.7 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.

4. QUALITY ASSURANCE

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

Suitability to Foster Applications

- 4.2 There were 29 suitability to foster assessments presented to Panel during the reporting period; 6 of these were mainstream applicants and 23 connected carers. 26 were unanimous recommendations and 3 majority. 1 recommendation was that the applicant (connected carer) was not suitable and 1 was deferred for further information. All recommendations of suitability were agreed by the Agency Decision Maker. The majority recommendation of not suitable to foster was not agreed by the Agency Decision Maker, who approved the connected carer.
- 4.3 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 were no brief reports presented to Fostering Panel during this period. 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 can be 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).

- 4.4 In respect of mainstream suitability to foster, Panel was satisfied with the quality of all the assessments.
- 4.5 Fostering applications should be presented to Panel within 8 months of the registration of interest, or 4 months for fast-track assessments. Of the 6 approved, 4 were completed within timescale but 2 were outside of timescale (9 months and 11 months). In one case delay was as a result of the carers initially being assessed as connected carers for a named child, however, this placement ended, and further assessment was needed of the prospective carers' capacity to care for other children. In the second, delay was due to the prospective carers having to address some home safety concerns before the assessment could conclude.
- 4.6 Panel was satisfied with the quality of all but 2 Connected Persons assessments. In one case there was a small quality issue with one item and in the second, the recommendation in the approval document was positive but an addendum changed that to not suitable. It was confusing when reading the first document.
- 4.7 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. Of the 23 applications presented, 14 were completed within timescale, 9 were completed outside of timescales. During the second half of the reporting period, only one assessment was completed outside of the 24 week timescale; that case had been presented within timescale but had been deferred for further information. During the first half of the year, the most frequently cited reason for delay was lack of capacity within the team, holidays, sickness and complexity of the cases. It is notable that as capacity in the team increased following the Children's Services Review and recruitment for additional staff, timescales for completion significantly improved.
- 4.8 1 connected foster carer household was 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).
- 4.9 In this case, however, a qualifying determination was not issued, as the Agency Decision Maker did not agree with Panel's recommendation and approved the foster carer.

Foster Care Reviews

- 4.10 There have been 74 foster care reviews considered for the following reasons:
- 19 first reviews
 - 41 recommended a change to terms of approval
 - 3 changes of circumstances
 - 11 were due to allegations or a complaint
- 4.11 Panel was generally satisfied with the quality of information in all cases but noted that, in three cases, the information at panel was six months or more old which was confusing. These were due to a delay in the IRO returning the completed review. In a further case, which had a not suitable recommendation, panel members would have liked the information presented to be more analytical.
- 4.12 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 the child's 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. Formal recording of views in Panel minutes started in January 2022.
- 4.13 In 9 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 a slight improvement on the previous reporting period where no views were recorded in 11 (out of 62) cases. In 13 reviews there were no views provided by the placing social worker. This gap in information also lessens the value of the review. This is similar to the previous reporting period, when there were 9 reviews (out of 62) without social worker views and is likely to be reflective of a significant number of social workers leaving Children's Services during the latter half of the reporting period. The IRO chairing the review is now also requesting the feedback from the placing social worker, where this has not been provided to the supervising social worker. This has helped but this continues to be an area for improvement.
- 4.14 There was 1 deregistration heard during this period, in comparison to 0 during the previous reporting period. The foster carers appealed the qualifying determination to deregister them, however, a second Panel made a further recommendation to deregister and this was agreed by the Agency Decision Maker.
- 4.15 Panel noted that during the first 6 months of the reporting period 15 (of 35) foster care reviews were completed out of the usual annual timescale, however, during the second half of the year, only 2 (out of 39) were held late. This represents a significant improvement over the latter part of the year.
- 4.16 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 32 (43%) of foster carers chose to attend, which has continued the higher trend in attendance from the previous year (31% attended during 2021-22).

Extension to Temporary Approval of Connected Carers

- 4.17 There have been 34 requests for extensions of temporary approval of connected persons. Of these, Panel's view was that all but 1 should be extended. 1 further request for an extension was deferred for further information.
- 4.18 Panel were satisfied with the papers submitted in all but 1 case, where no Regulation 24 report had been completed by the child's social worker.
- 4.19 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. Four of the 34 requests were submitted outside of timescale (1 had been submitted for an earlier panel but had been deferred) which was a further improvement on the last reporting period (9 out of 41).
- 4.20 Panel noted a decrease in extensions coming to Panel during the first half of the reporting period, but this increased again slightly during the second half. In 10 cases, the child's social worker (or their manager) was not able to attend Panel which is unfortunate and the quality of discussion is inevitably diminished.

5. LONG TERM FOSTERING MATCHES

- 5.1 Eight long-term fostering matches were considered by Panel over the year. Panel was satisfied with the quality of the reports in 6 of the cases. One match was deferred for further information and a further did lead to a positive recommendation, however, was deemed to lack detailed information about the needs of the child.
- 5.2 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 3 were presented at an appropriate point and five were delayed longer than ideal. Reasons identified in one case was in respect of housing alterations and in another due to working with another fostering agency.
- 5.3 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.

6. FEEDBACK IN RESPECT OF PANEL FUNCTIONING

- 6.1 The following feedback has been gained through completion of questionnaires from staff and applicants attending Panel during the reporting period. Unfortunately, it has continued to be challenging to gather feedback as applicants and social workers rarely complete feedback sheets, despite these now being sent twice; once electronically with the invitation to Panel and again as a paper copy, when the Agency Decision Letter is sent by post. Similar to the previous reporting period, only 8 feedback questionnaires were received. Of these, 6 were from carers/prospective carers and 2 from fostering social workers. There was no feedback from children's social workers.
- 6.2 Information gathered from feedback questionnaires:
- In all cases, the process had been explained to attendees.
 - Attendees felt welcomed and had had introductions.

- All said they had been given guidance on attending a remote Panel.
- With respect to questions, all the suitability applicants had the questions in advance, and one said, "it was very helpful". With respect to fairness of questions, all said the questions asked of them were "very fair"
- All respondents said they had the process of decision making explained.

General comments made:

- *We were made to feel very welcome and at ease".*
- *"Everyone was friendly".*
- *"It was a very positive experience".*

6.3 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. In response to a question about waiting times, 2 attendees commented they had no wait, 1 waited 10 minutes and 1, 15 minutes. Others did not comment. The Panel adviser always keeps in touch with workers about any likely wait while the Panel is happening, so attenders do get up to date information, if there are delays.

6.4 The feedback questionnaires asks if applicants would prefer to attend Panel remotely or in person; of those that answered four preferred remote and one ticked either.

6.5 General Functioning of the Agency and Child Placement Panel noted by Panel Chair:

- All except two Panels held were quorate. For one of those the business was accommodated in an extra Panel.
- Panel members have again shown a high commitment, as the business has increased in volume again.
- Attendance of children's social workers during the first half of the year remained high but declined a little in the second half, which is disappointing. Children's social workers bring an important perspective when considering connected carers, as the suitability of carers is inevitably linked to needs of the children.
- The overall quality of the documentation presented to Panel has remained high.
- The Panels are still being held remotely but this appears to be meeting the needs of all involved
- All the Panels' membership, except one, held in the period were diverse in gender (ie at least one man)
- The two vice chairs continue to chair Panels successfully. The agency adviser is holding regular chair/vice chair meetings for support and to discuss issues arising. The chair and one vice chair are attenders at the Foster Care Network quarterly chairs meeting on most occasions. The other vice-chair will begin attending.
- The commitment and perseverance of the staff supporting Panel over this period has again been very impressive.

7. TRAINING FOR PANEL

- 7.1 One specific training event has been held for Panel members during this reporting period. It was held face to face over a full day in October 2022. The training was in relation to Attachment Issues in Fostering and was held with Darlington Panel.
- 7.2 A Fostering Panel business meeting was held in person on 7 July 2022.
- 7.3 Annual appraisals of central list members required in this period, have been carried out virtually, mostly following the Panel meetings. These focus on individual development and give a pointer to future training needs.

8. APPROVED FOSTER CARERS

Year	Approved foster carers
2018/19	26
2019/20	24
2020/21	43
2021/22	21
2022/23	27

- 8.1 Of the 27 foster carers approved:

- 21 are connected carers (compared to 18 last year)
- 6 are new foster families (compared to 3 last year)

9. 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 5 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 were 6 during the previous reporting period.
- This year there was 1 recommendation 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 qualifying determination decision. 1 foster carer asked for a review via the Agency.
- The ADM agreed with the recommendation of Panel in all, but one case.

10. CURRENT STATUS

- At 31 March 2023 there were 162 approved fostering households, a decrease of 4 from the previous reporting period (166).
- There were 88 mainstream approved foster carers (which has reduced by 3 from the previous year).
- There were 74 approved connected carers (which has decreased by 1 from the previous year).
- Between 1 April 2022 and 31 March 2023, 10 mainstream foster carers resigned (compared to 14 during the previous year). 4 of these carers retired from fostering

due to age/ill health, 4 due to work commitments, 1 following an allegation and 1 transferred to their own local authority.