



Fostering Panel Annual Report

1 April 2021- 31 March 2022

Foreword

I am pleased to present the Annual Report of Cheshire East Council's Fostering Panel for 2021/22 on behalf of our new Independent Fostering Panel Chair, Reshma Kodampur who joined us just before the final quarter of this year, on 17/12/21 and after observing the Panel on 17/12/21 and 07/01/22, chaired her 1st Panel on 24/01/22. On behalf of the panel I offer her a warm welcome

Reshma is a qualified social worker with significant experience as a Panel Advisor and Senior Manager in Fostering and detailed knowledge and understanding of the Fostering Regulations. She brings with her a fresh approach and leadership, to quality assurance and challenge function of the Panel to ensure that those children and young people who require a foster placement are provided with the highest quality of service.

This has been a challenging year for the Fostering Panel, as Children's Services have continued face the pressures arising from the impact of Covid Pandemic on the delivery of services, raise in the numbers of children and young people needing safe homes, falling numbers of applications nationally from people who wish to foster and on public finances.

There have been several changes in the structure and leadership of the Fostering Service and in some of the paperwork presented to Panel. The number of Panels held across the year has continued to increase to manage the increased volume of business generated across the service.

This year we also said goodbye to Independent Panel Chair, Audrey Williamson in July 2021. Audrey provided experienced leadership through a period of significant change and turbulence. I take the opportunity acknowledge the contribution Audrey made, to thank her for her tenure as Panel Chair and to wish her well in her future endeavours.

During the recruitment to a new Panel Chair, we were fortunate that Vice Chair, Pauline Barber stepped up to cover the gap left by Audrey, providing much needed continuity and a steady hand to ensure that Panel business was unaffected by the ongoing turbulence. Pauline has been an Independent Panel Member since July 2018. She has a wealth of experience in education and special needs, a keen focus on the voice of the child and sits on several other Local Authority and Independent Fostering Panels.

We have benefitted from dedicated, stable, and experienced Panel Members throughout this period, who also bring a wealth of experience, skills, and knowledge to enable them to continue to scrutinise the service and to make safe recommendations.

Dr Pari Sreekumar, Panel Medical Advisor has sat on the Panel since 02/09/13. Independent Member, Gill Merry, who previously sat as an Elected Member has been a member of the Panel since 27/10/14. Independent Member and Social Worker, Dianne Grant, joined the Panel on 24/09/18.

Independent Member, Lindsay Henretty has sat on Panel since 15/07/19. Independent Member and Social Worker, Tim Hancock, who is also an experienced foster carer, has sat on the Panel since 05/08/19. Independent Member Tina Powell joined on 28/08/19

The Panel was joined by Councillor Carol Bulman on 22/02/21, a committed and knowledgeable Elected Member, who is helpful both for her contribution to the Panel's deliberations and for providing a link with the local authority's wider corporate parenting agenda.

The Panel have welcomed and supported some new independent Panel Members this year to include, Eoanna Stathopoulos as Independent Member with a Social Work qualification on 21/05/21 and Tracy Weaver as an Independent Member, who is an experienced Foster Carer with CW&C on 02/07/21

The Panel has continued to receive reliable support from Panel Advisor, Richard Watts throughout this period alongside the Panel Administrators, all of which has been critical to maintain Panel's smooth running and the timeliness of recommendations to the Service following meetings.

The Fostering Panel has a crucial role and is very well placed to have a positive influence on practice for children and young people. The Fostering Service has evidenced a willingness to be receptive to advice and constructive challenge and welcomes this in our commitment to ensuring that we provide a quality service.

1.Introduction

Although there is no statutory or regulatory requirement for an annual report of the Fostering Panel to be produced, this report is intended to contribute to the *Fostering Services: National Minimum Standards – Standard 14*:

- Panel/s provide quality assurance feedback to the fostering service provider on the quality of reports being presented to Panel.

It will also follow good practice guidelines which suggest that the annual report should have a wider remit, commenting on the work of the Fostering Panel, its constitution, and arrangements with the service.

1.1 Constitution of Cheshire East Fostering Panel

Cheshire East Council is a local authority fostering service. Its Fostering Panel has several regulatory functions which are listed under the *Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011 - regulation 25*. They are to:

- Make safe recommendations about the approval of foster carers.
- Recommend foster carers terms of approval.
- Consider the first fostering annual review of foster carers and any other review if requested by the fostering service provider, and to recommend the continuing approval of carers.
- Advise, where appropriate, on the procedure for reviews of carers and periodically to monitor their quality and effectiveness.
- Oversee the conduct and quality of assessments carried out by the fostering service provider.
- Give advice and make recommendations on other matters or cases referred to it by the fostering service provider.

In addition to the functions listed in the Fostering Regulations, the Cheshire East Council Fostering Panel considers and makes recommendations concerning proposed permanent matches of children with foster carers for all children.

1.2. The relevant Legislation, Guidance and Standards for the Fostering Panel are:

- The Children Act 1989
- The Children Act 1989 Guidance and Regulations Volume 4: Fostering Services
- Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011.
- Family and Friends Care: Statutory Guidance for Local Authorities 2011.
- Fostering Services: National Minimum Standards
- Care Planning, Placement and Case Review (England) Regulations 2010

- Care Planning, Placement and Case Review and Fostering Services (Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations 2013
- Adoption and Care Planning (Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations 2014
- Care Planning and Fostering (Miscellaneous Amendments) (England) Regulations 2015
- Assessment and Approval of Foster Carers: Amendments to the Children Act 1989 Guidance and Regulations, Volume 4: Fostering Services, 2013
- The Adoption and Children (Coronavirus) (Amendment) Regulations 2020; The Adoption and Children (Coronavirus) (Amendment) (No.2) Regulations 2020, as amended by The Adoption and Children (Coronavirus) (Amendment) Regulations 2021 (up to 30.09.21).

The composition of Fostering Panels, terms of reference and functions are set out in the [Fostering Services \(England\) Regulations 2011](#).

All fostering service providers are legally required to have a Fostering Panel. The Regulations ensure that Fostering Panels have an independent role separate from the fostering service provider.

2.Meetings and Venue

Throughout 2021/22 the Cheshire East Council Fostering Panel have continued to meet virtually using Microsoft Teams.

The usual frequency of Panel meetings has increased in 2020-21 from an average of 1.5 per month to 3 per month, held on Mondays and Fridays. This increase better reflects service demand.

3.Number and frequency of Fostering Panels

Year	April	May	June	July	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	March	Total
2019/20													
2020/21													28
2021/22	3	2	3	3	2	3	2	4	2	3	1	3	31

The Fostering Panel meets on Mondays and Fridays. The above chart highlights the continued increase in the number of Panels over the past 3 years from an average of 1.5 Panels a month to an average of 3 x a month.

4.Development

Fostering Panel development is an ongoing process. New Panel Members should have an induction which will include an opportunity to observe a Panel.

Panel members should each have an annual appraisal. Individual Panel Members' appraisals take place with the Panel Chair and Panel Advisor. Members will fill in a self evaluation form ahead of the appraisal meeting.

Panel appraisals took place on 29/07/21 with Dr Sreekumar, Pauline Barber, Diane Grant, Gill Merry, Lindsay Henretty and Tina Powell and on 11/08/21 with Tim Hancock. All of the Panel Members had undertaken relevant training and development with Cheshire East Panel on the development of Mockingbird Constellation and outside of this either independently or through their other roles and work experience.

Members highlighted the following general points as part of the annual appraisal process:

What is working well

- Induction was good.
- Covid has impacted on everyone involved in Panel and we have all adapted well to the new ways of working
- SharePoint as a way to securely access Panel Paperwork is working well
- Having an additional member of Panel avoids the last minute rush to find someone in order to remain quorate if Panel member is ill etc
- Panel members have a good mix of knowledge, skills and backgrounds
- All Panel members are very professional
- It is very useful to have a medical person on the Panel
- Minutes are produced in a timely way
- Papers are distributed so Panel Members have 5 days to read them
- Individual Panel Member are comfortable in expressing views and opinions
- The chair has evolved an ethos where everyone's views and opinions are valid regardless of whether they differ
- Every Panel member's views are listened to and are mutually respected

Areas for improvement

- Virtual Panels miss some of the more nuanced messages
- Panel could be more reflective.
- Need to improve diversity of the Panel / Central List requires ongoing refresh
- Need to improve links with Service

- Sourcing a young person’s voice when they want to speak to us, not when we need to speak to them
- There should be more joint SSW/FC training events
- Advice Tracker process has been slow in developing by CEC
- Papers need to be distributed so Panel Members have 5 days to read them
- Training on SCR’s
- Panel Members would like to hear about more national developments, and projects for fostering, comparing other models and innovative practice experiences from a national and/or global level
- Members would like training on attachment

A Panel development session was held on 17/01/22. This was led by the New Panel Chair, Reshma Kodampur and Service Advisor, and focused on areas of development for Panel and their quality assurance function.

5. Quality of Applications to Panel

There is a quality assurance framework in place to ensure that the paperwork for Fostering Panel is quality assured by the fostering team managers before submitting this to the Panel Advisor for gatekeeping two weeks prior to a case being heard at the Panel.

Upon receipt of the Panel papers the Panel Chair will review the papers and check with the Panel Advisor that all the necessary paperwork is present to enable the Panel to hear the case. When reading the assessment reports, all Panel Members routinely check that all required basic components of an assessment have been completed, for example:

- that checks, medicals and references have been completed.
- the applicant’s history, relevant experience, motivation and understanding of the fostering task explored.
- that applicants have participated in the Skills to Foster training (where appropriate) and have expressed a commitment to further training and development.
- that any children or relevant ex-partners have been consulted.
- that any health and safety issues have been addressed.

When introducing each item, the Chair seeks confirmation from the Panel Members that the reports provide enough information on which to base the discussion, on the understanding that any specific gaps could be filled by the presenting social workers or foster carers.

The opportunity to comment on matters of practice, including timeliness, is available when issues for discussion are identified. The Panel will prepare individual feedback on each case.

6. Panel Advice and Impact

The Fostering Panel continues to comment on the quality of applications made but it also makes comment and offers advice on practice to the service. This is done with the intention of helping to improve fostering practice and care planning for children, which happens by way of a written tracker to record any Panel issues or queries, and the service then responds to those queries in writing.

On occasion there are also discussions between the service and the service advisor on practice matters. Any issues which are of concern and are not responded to, or it is believed escalation is required, are escalated further up the hierarchy. This adds as an effective safeguard for both the service and Panel and is not intended to undermine anyone in the service.

7. Voice of the Child

Panel is clear that the voices of children and young people who are looked after should be heard at Panel to ensure the recommendations it makes are well informed. This remains a significant aspect of Panel's work and requires improvement.

8. Experience of Attendees at Panel

All Panel users are routinely sent feedback forms alongside the invite to Panel however this year there has been a very low return rate from Panel Users.

Key areas for 2021-23

- Increase the diversity of Fostering Panel membership.
- Improve information sharing between the fostering service and Fostering Panel and ensure all workers understand Panel and that there is open communication through to other parts of the service. Operating virtually can be isolating if this is not worked upon.
- Ensure that there is a clear training programme in place for all Panel members and that they continue to be offered annual appraisals.
- That further work is undertaken to ensure the Panel advice tracker is completed and the outcomes returned to Panel.
- During 2020-21, a Panel information leaflet was not available to give to prospective foster carers who are undergoing the assessment process. This needs to be developed and shared with Panel attendees.
- That the Panel and the service continue to seek the voice of children to contribute to Panel items.