

Fostering Panel Annual Report

1 April 2020 - 31 March 2021



Foreword



As Independent Chair I am pleased to present the Annual Report of Cheshire East Council's Fostering Panel. The report contains an overview of the work of the Fostering Panel across the last twelve months and intends to give the reader both an understanding of how Panel has managed the business presented to it and the changes within the wider Council that have impacted on it.

This has been an unusual year for Panel, the whole year being set within the Covid pandemic and the impact this has had on the delivery of services. This has meant that Panels have been held two and sometimes three times per month virtually rather than in the local authority's offices and has been at times challenging but it is noteworthy that most foster carers attended Panel and gave positive feedback about this way of meeting. The number of Panels held across the year has also increased to manage the increased volume of business generated across the service. The commitment and flexibility of all staff including the Panel administrators and Panel members has ensured Panel has continued unabated.

Panel continues to receive good administrative support and this has been critical to maintain Panel's smooth running throughout the Pandemic and the timeliness of recommendations to the Service following meetings.

As a Panel we recognise that applicants may feel apprehensive when attending and try and keep our meetings as small as possible. It is important to recognise though that the Panel's priority is to ensure that those children and young people who require a foster placement are provided with the highest quality of service and this aim is central to our work at all times.

It is rewarding to see when Panel has a positive influence on practice. The service has evidenced a willingness to be receptive to advice and constructive challenge and, with regular support from the Service Manager, advice is acknowledged and accepted by the service.

Finally I would like to take this opportunity thank all Panel members and those who work for the Panel for their support this year. Most importantly I would like to thank the foster carers and children and young people who have shared their stories with us, either in person or within the papers that informed our work .

Audrey Williamson
Chair

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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 fostering panel, its constitution, and arrangements with the service.

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 recommendations about the approval of foster carers.
- recommend any terms of approval.
- consider the first review of 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 effectiveness.
- oversee the conduct 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.

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.

Meetings and Venue

The Cheshire East Council fostering panel usually meets at Cledford House, which has adequate meeting rooms and waiting facilities. The proximity of the fostering team and some children's social work services proves helpful to panel. 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.

During the Coronavirus pandemic however, lockdowns and restrictions on face-to-face meetings have meant that all panels in the last year have been held virtually, using Microsoft Teams.

Number of Fostering Panels

There were 28 fostering panels during 2020-21. The vast majority were chaired by the Independent Chair, but the Vice-Chair covered when the Chair was absent.

Standing Members of Panel

Panel Chair

The Fostering Panel chair is Audrey Williamson.

Panel Vice Chair

The Fostering Panel Vice Chair is Pauline Barber.

Central List Members

Central List Member	Representation
Audrey Williamson	Independent Panel Chair
Pauline Barber	Independent Vice Chair
Dr Pari Sreekumar	Medical Adviser
Gill Merry	Independent
Cllr Carol Bulman	Elected Member
Tina Powell	Independent
Lindsay Henretty	Independent
Tim Hancock	Independent/ Foster Carer/Social Worker
Sophie Steventon	CE Therapeutic Social Worker
Dianne Grant	Independent/ Social Worker
Gary Pickles	Service Adviser

Panel Administrator

The Fostering Administrators are Marion Mordecai and Ella Foley.

Panel Adviser

Gary Pickles is the Independent Service Adviser.

The quorum for panel business is a minimum of five central list members, to include:

- The Chair or Vice Chair;
- A social worker with at least three years relevant post-qualifying experience;
- Three other members, of which, in the absence of the independent Chair, at least one must be independent of the fostering service.

The previous practice of using fostering team social workers to ensure quoracy has been challenged on grounds of conflict and as a result, they were withdrawn from the central list. Recruitment is ongoing to strengthen the central list.

Observers to Panel

The Fostering Panel welcomes observers as a part of their learning and development. During this period there have been several observers including social workers and new panel members.

Fostering Panel Development

Fostering panel development is an ongoing process. To contribute to this, members of the central list each have an annual appraisal and two development sessions were organised and held in May

and December 2020. On the agenda were the Coronavirus pandemic, learning from Serious Case Reviews, and an exploration as to how the panel might improve its practice.

Ofsted

Cheshire East Council inclusive of its fostering service was judged as 'Requires Improvement' in 2019. Fostering panel noted that the report said that:

"Sufficiency of in-house foster carers is a known service challenge. The number of approved fostering households has reduced and recent attempts to improve recruitment has not had the impact the local authority had hoped for. The quality of foster carer assessment is good. The IRO for fostering is providing an effective level of challenge to ensure that carers continue to meet the fostering standards. Foster carers reported that they have access to a range of good training, which supports them in caring for the children in their care. A significant group of foster carers have raised a series of concerns over a period of time and during the inspection about the support they receive from the local authority. Inspectors found that foster carers were not always well supported and that, in some cases, working relationships were at risk of breaking down. Senior leaders are aware of the issues, and a much-needed independent review of the fostering service planned prior to the inspection is underway".

As a result, panel has continued its focus on the business required but with an eye on these areas.

Panel Activity

The following items were presented to fostering panel for consideration:

- **Connected Approvals** – 37 Family and Friends (Connected People) Households were presented to panel for approval. This is an increasing area of business and reflects the trend to maintain a child's place within their family. Of these applications, 25 were presented with the child in placement – regulation 24 applications, and eight were presented as prospective placements.
- **Mainstream Approvals** – 15 Mainstream Fostering Households have been presented and approved, with five of these being transfers from Independent Providers. This is an increase in mainstream approvals of 11 in the previous year and is potentially as a result of Cheshire East's withdrawal from Foster4 to go it alone.
 - This recruitment enabled the provision of 23 homes for children, plus another six homes if siblings were able to share a bedroom. Within these figures, five Cheshire East children were living with foster carers at the point of transfer, with a further six additional homes being available for children with these carers.
 - The maximum statutory timeframe for completion of mainstream fostering assessments is eight months; all assessments considered by panel were completed within these timescales. Cheshire East has its own 16 weeks/4-month target for the completion of such assessments. Achievement of this has been seen to be more difficult, and mitigating

factors that have inhibited this have included applicants having building work completed to better enable them to foster, experiencing family bereavements and others who decided to go on holiday during the assessment period.

- **Consideration of Approval** – one application was received by panel with a service request to consider de-registration. Panel concurred with the service.
- **Resignations** – 31 resignations have been noted at panel, 16 of which were mainstream and 15 were connected carers. The reasons for resignations include changes in personal circumstances or most frequently, the granting of a Special Guardianship Order (SGO).
- **Requests for Extensions** - 13 requests for Extension to Temporary Approval have been made. This figure suggests that most family and friends applications that the service is involved in are completed without the need for an extension.
- **First Reviews** – 11 First Reviews have been presented to panel. All these were recommended for approval by panel.
- **Other Reviews:**
 - Seven reviews following allegations/serious issues of concern were heard. All were recommended as suitable to be foster carers.
 - Seven reviews requested a change of registration were heard.
 - One review notifying of a change of circumstance was heard.
 - Two reviews were heard as an Early Review at the request of Agency Decision Maker (ADM).

Agency Decision Maker

The ADM has provided welcome challenge to panel recommendations, providing an opportunity for panel to reflect and learn from the decisions made. The ADM decision, although making comment, did not depart from panel's recommendation this year.

Quality of Applications to Panel

There is general agreement between panel members that they have observed a steady improvement over the last year in the quality of reports that have been presented to panel. It has been noted that documentation presented to panel in 2020-21 has been quality assured, and recommendations have been authorised by the relevant team manager. Panel papers are more cohesive, analytical and, in the main, follow an agreed format.

Panel's judgement of the quality of an assessment tends to be indistinguishable from its judgement of the quality of the report. It will deem a report to be of sufficient quality when it is seen to provide comprehensive knowledge and understanding of the applicant/s and makes clear and persuasive the reasons for the recommendation or matching considerations, thus reflecting

a sound assessment. It is welcome practice for assessing social workers to identify the applicant's vulnerabilities as well as their strengths.

When reading the assessment reports, 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.

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.

Virtual Panels and Covid-19

During the Coronavirus pandemic, lockdowns and restrictions on face-to-face meetings have meant that all panels in the last year have been held virtually, using Microsoft Teams. Part 8 of The Adoption and Children (Coronavirus) (Amendment) 2020 introduced transitional arrangements for dealing with fostering assessments that started between 24 April 2020 until 25 September 2020. The guidance stated that the service provider could choose whether to refer a case to the fostering panel for a recommendation on suitability and allowed panels to go ahead with a reduced quoracy of three members including the Chair, an appropriately qualified and experienced social worker, and one other independent member. The guidance was clear that these "flexibilities" should only be used where necessary. From 25 September onwards,

the flexibilities came to an end. Cheshire East Children's Services continued to refer all assessments to the fostering panel during this period and decided to maintain the normal quoracy of at least five members per panel.

The pandemic restrictions have led to significant changes in the way that fostering panels are now delivered in Cheshire East and in the rest of England and Wales. Video conferencing has needed technological solutions, attention to data protection requirements, and big changes in the way panel takes place, with all members participating in virtual panels from their home environments. Some of the challenges have been:

- High degree of concentration necessary to work via computer screens, necessitating shorter agendas, regular breaks and increased time allowed per item in recognition of technical issues.
- Availability of suitable equipment and internet connections.
- Some panel members have not met each other in person.
- Increased pre-panel preparation, requiring preparation of strengths, vulnerabilities, and potential questions in advance to make use of the constraints of having free flowing conversation before items are heard.
- Foster carers being notified of the outcome of panel some hours after the application was heard and also via telephone as oppose to face-to-face.

However, there have been distinct advantages in working remotely which has seen:

- An increase in attendance and participation from all parties but particularly children's social workers.
- A reduction in time and cost of travel, maximising the time that can be spent on considering items.
- The undoubted preference by some participants, particularly foster carers, of meeting virtually, bringing with it the reduction in pressure and anxiety sometimes brought about by attendance at a face-to-face meeting.

What has become clear is Cheshire East's planning and preparation in running a Teams conference for a number of hours, with people coming and going to attend the panel. Much of the credit for this must go to the administrative team which has supported the panel throughout.

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 we always question how we can continue to ensure that the child

remains central to our work. Further, where a child's views are not referenced, the presenting social worker will always be questioned as to why it is absent.

Experience of Attendees at Panel

It is pleasing to note that almost all attendees at panel give positive feedback, making comment about being made to feel comfortable and relaxed. A considerable number of feedback forms were sampled, and all spoke positively about that experience at panel. This is valuable feedback for panel members.

Key areas for 2021-22

- 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.