

# Portsmouth City Council Fostering Panel

## Chair's Report April 2022 – March 2023

### What is the fostering panel?

- The fostering panel is an integral part of Portsmouth City Council's service to children looked after by the authority.
- All fostering services, whether local authority or independent fostering agencies are required by statute to establish a fostering panel to provide independent recommendations and guidance to the authority regarding the approval and review of foster carers.
- The panel contributes towards the safeguarding responsibilities of the authority in evaluating the capacity of foster carers to provide safe and nurturing care to the children and young people for whom the local authority has responsibility as corporate parent.

### What does the fostering panel do?

- The Portsmouth panel meets approximately twice each month and in 2022/23 the panel met on 21 occasions.
- Although prior to the pandemic all panel meetings were held in person, since March 2020 all meetings have been held remotely.
- The panel considers a number of interrelated aspects of the work of the fostering service:
  - applications for the approval of individuals or couples as foster carers and to recommend any terms on which the approval is to be given
  - the review of the approval of foster carers following their first year's approval
  - following a complaint or serious allegation, to consider whether the carer's continued approval is appropriate and if so on what terms
  - advising as to the suitability of connected carers' temporary approval under section 25 of the Care Planning Regulations 2010
  - The panel also considers a number of other applications that form part of its promotion of good practise or monitoring of the functioning of the fostering service. This includes the consideration of the long term match between a child and their foster carers, the consideration of the approval of supported lodgings carers, the monitoring of activity through considering 'Staying Put' arrangements for young adults who wish to remain with their foster carers after the age of 18years, noting the resignations of foster carers and recommending carers' de-registration when they have ceased to foster but have not formally resigned.

## **What decisions does the panel make?**

- The fostering panel is in essence an advisory body which makes recommendations to the authority regarding the matters listed above.
- The actual decisions are made by the head of Looked After Children's Services who is designated as the Agency Decision Maker (the ADM) as it is the local authority's legal duty to provide services to children for whom it has a corporate parenting responsibility.

## **Who sits on the fostering panel?**

- Although it is the responsibility of all fostering agencies to establish a fostering panel, the panel is functionally independent of the local authority.
- The panel is required by the Fostering Services Regulations (England) 2011 to be configured in such a way to ensure its independence. The Central List of panel members must comprise:
  - an independent chair
  - additional independent members, one of whom must be present at every panel
  - social work members who may be a members of the local authority's staff but equally could be independent of the local authority, one of whom must be present at every panel
  - other members who are able to contribute to the work of panel having relevant knowledge or skills such as in health care, education, are care experienced, are foster carers or local councillors.
  - the authority may also appoint up to two members from the Central List to act as vice chairs who can chair in the absence of the panel chair.
- The panel is supported by two professional advisors (fostering service team leaders) and a minute taker.
- Each panel meeting must include the independent chair or vice chair, an independent member, a social work member and at least two other panel members from the Central List to be quorate.

## **How are standards ensured?**

- The duties and responsibilities of the fostering panel are spelled out in the Fostering Services Regulations and National Minimum Standards.
- The contribution of each panel member is annually appraised by the panel chair and professional advisor to the panel.
- The panel chair's contribution is appraised annually by the ADM and service lead for the fostering service.

- The fostering service is inspected as part of Children’s Services by OFSTED and was inspected in May 2023.
- The work of the panel was included in that inspection and in addition to the inspection panel minutes and related ADM decisions the panel chair was interviewed by a member of the Ofsted team.
- The official outcome of that inspection is awaited at the time of writing this report although the informal feedback was positive.
- In addition to the external oversight, the panel itself collects and provides feedback on the quality of the applications presented to panel and each professional or carer is invited to provide feedback through the submission of evaluation forms.

### **Who can be a foster carer?**

- Foster carers considered by panel can be ‘mainstream’ foster carers who are recruited by the authority to care for children looked after and to whom they are not related.
- Foster carers may also be specifically approved as a ‘connected person’ to care for a child with whom they have a family connection or with whom they have an established relationship.
- Although not registered foster carers, the authority also assesses and approves a number of individuals and families who are able to provide a supportive and safe home to a care leaver who is not yet ready for independent living. These placements are known as supported lodgings and are supervised and financially supported by the local authority.

### **Activity of the panel**

- During the period April 2022 to March 2023 panel considered 132 cases in total which is 6 fewer than 2021/22. Of the matters brought to panel:
  - Mainstream applicants: 20 new foster carers recommended approval as unrelated carers for short or long term, respite and family link. (2021/2 the number was 11)
  - Connected carers: 16 applicants recommended for approval. (2021/2 the number was 17)
  - Supported Lodgings: 3 applicants recommended for approval, of which 2 were additional to existing foster carer approval. (2021/2 the number was 3)
  - Staying Put: 20 arrangements noted (2021/2 the number was 17)
  - Regulation 25: 8 considered and recommendations made. (2021/22 the number was 7)
  - Long term linking: 9 recommended approval all but one with PCC carers. (2021/2 the number was 12)

- Household reviews: 17 recommended approval and continued fostering and supported lodgings following the first year of fostering or lodgings provision. (2021/22 the number was 24)
- Allegations/concerns: 7 reviews following a complaint/allegation. Of these, two carers were recommended for de-registration one of whom applied for a review under the IRM mechanism. (2021/22 the number was 10), those recommendations being upheld by the ADM.
- Other: 32 including considering changes in approval, noting resignations, deregistration of carers who have ceased to offer care but who haven't formally resigned. (2021/22 the number was 35)

### How did social workers and foster carers experience panel?

- Since April 2020 all panels have been held remotely and possibly as a possible consequence the number of feedback forms returned has diminished considerably. In an attempt to increase the returns the feedback forms and scoring have been simplified with the number of questions asked reduced and scoring range changed to 1 (poor) to 4 (excellent).
- **Social workers** were asked four questions regarding their attendance at panel. Over recent years feedback from social workers and carers has been consistently positive and the year 2022/23 is no exception. The number of feedback forms returned was around 27% (9 of 33 forms sent out) of those sent out and the aggregated scores were as follows:

<i>Questions</i>	<i>Panel points &amp; questions appropriate to matters raised</i>	<i>Sufficient time for discussion</i>	<i>Felt listened to</i>	<i>Panel professionally &amp; fairly conducted</i>
<b>Score out of 4</b>	4	3.98	3.86	3.86

- **Foster carers'** feedback was similarly positive and although some carers reported feeling anxious about on-line meetings the percentage of evaluation forms returned was around 33% (16 of 49 forms sent out) and the feedback received was consistently positive:

<i>Questions</i>	<i>Welcome and comfort</i>	<i>Reasonable time frame for the assessment</i>	<i>Adequately prepared</i>	<i>Sufficient panel time allowed</i>	<i>Appropriate points raised by panel members</i>	<i>Panel fair and professionally conducted</i>
<b>Score out of 4</b>	4	3.91	3.98	4	4	4

- Although of relevance to panel in terms of monitoring, two of the questions relate to the assessment and preparation of carers for panel and this feedback is also positive.
- Given the sample size, it has to be acknowledged that the above data has limitations but equally, the feedback is consistent with the past five years.

## **Discussion**

- Despite the numerous challenges faced by the service over the past year, panel meetings have been maintained at a consistent level of almost twice each month.
- The pandemic and its associated sickness and recruitment implications have inevitably had an impact on the assessment and support of foster carers. However, whilst there has been some variation in the number and type of cases presented this year, this has been with a relatively small variations on previous years.
- One exception to this is that during 2022/3 twenty new mainstream carers were approved which indicated a degree of recovery from a low of eleven in 2021/2.
- The number of allegations and standards of care concerns presented to panel was slightly reduced over the 2021/2 figure (7 as opposed to 10) although the numbers of such cases has shown a small but sustained increase over the past five years. These are all individual circumstances and with such small numbers it is difficult to detect a particular pattern. It seems likely that the pandemic had an impact as face to face support was much reduced and stresses on family life were amplified thus the return to face to face supervision may have resulted in a higher rate of detection of concerns. Nevertheless, there may be important learning to be acquired in relation to matching, support, placement choice and sufficiency.
- Panel's recommendations are routinely made on a unanimous basis and these recommendations have all been accepted by the ADM. On a small number of occasions there has been a divergence of opinion within panel resulting in a majority recommendation. Of note, on one occasion when panel's majority recommendation was that a carer should be de-registered following an allegation but the ADM concluded that the carer's approval should be maintained and reviewed in three months. On one other occasion panel's majority recommendation was that a carer's approval should be maintained subject to certain conditions the ADM decided that the approval should be terminated. The ADM's decision on this occasion was validated through the IRM process.

## **Strengths**

- Recruitment levels in 2022/3 increased significantly over the previous year. Although the recruitment and retention of foster carers is a nationwide issue, Portsmouth has recovered somewhat from the previous year's low in numbers of foster carers recruited.

- Although an imprecise measure, each year the service records the number of 'beds' gained and lost during the year. In the year 2022/3 there was a net gain of 10 'beds' through new recruitment against resignations and de-registrations.
- Of the 20 new mainstream applicants 5 transferred from other fostering agencies during this period. The consistently stated reason for the wish to transfer was the motivation to care for Portsmouth children and believing that the support they would receive from Portsmouth would be of a more consistent quality than they had been receiving from their agency.
- First year reviews are consistently being presented to panel in a timely way and with very few exceptions, foster carers report a positive experience of being foster carers and speak highly of the training they have received and the support and guidance provided by their supervising social workers.
- It is particularly of note how positive foster carers are of their involvement in and the support they have received from being part of a Mockingbird constellation. It is also of note that the possibility of joining a Mockingbird constellation is cited by carers wishing to transfer from other agencies.
- Panel has a stable membership and recruitment undertaken over the past year has enabled additional expertise and diversity to be introduced.
- The panel takes its safeguarding responsibilities seriously, focusing on the welfare of the children without compromise and in considering the suitability of carers and maintaining standards, panel members consistently retain their independent focus on the needs and safety of looked after children.
- There have been three ADMs in the past eighteen months and they have consistently shown confidence in the recommendations of panel in accepting all but two recommendations over the 2020/23 period. On the two occasions the ADM did not accept the recommendation of panel these were circumstances in which panel was itself divided in its opinion. Not all decisions are straightforward and these two cases suggest a considered approach made by both panel and the ADM.
- The long term linking of a child with foster carers is not a statutory duty of fostering panels although is viewed as good practise and forms part of Portsmouth panel's work. Long term linking plays a significant role in the authority's permanence planning and provides a degree of security for young people who can see their foster home as permanent and a home from which they can enter adult life in a supported and timely way.
- The panel continues to be well supported by the two panel advisors, the fostering service in general and its administrative team.
- Panel papers are prepared and presented to panel members in a timely way and panel business is processed smoothly.
- Social workers from the local authority present their work professionally and with integrity. The panel has confidence in the assessment work, the review process and

the linking of children with their foster carers and a productive working relationship continues to be maintained between the service and panel.

- The feedback to panel from both professionals and carers continues to be positive with no repeated suggestions as to improvement.

### **Areas for development`**

- Although there has been a significant improvement in new foster carers joining Portsmouth Fostering Service over the past twelve months it is clear that the authority struggles to fully meet the needs of Portsmouth children in placing them with Portsmouth foster carers. This is far from a unique problem and sufficiency is an issue nationwide. However, there have been years in which more carers have been recruited and further in-house review of recruitment activities and past successes could further inform this going forward.
- Through considering the first year reviews and review of allegations and complaints, the panel has heard some concerns raised by carers regarding children's social workers. Carers frequently cite positively the support and guidance they receive from their supervising social worker, but at times have raised concern about issues such as lack of action or clarity in care planning, managing contact, feelings of not being fully supported when a young person's behaviour is extremely challenging. The panel has heard that this can be impacted by changes in allocated social workers. . It is unlikely there are to be quick and easy remedies given the pressures on social workers' time and staff recruitment difficulties, however the panel has noted this. Any issues that the panel do hear are always raised in panel with the social worker(s) for onward transmission or action, and / or the panel adviser takes the matter up with the fostering service leader or other relevant colleague for further action. Issues that relate to the service are highlighted in the minutes of that agenda item in which the issue has been a feature in the section 'issues for the service' which therefore brings the matter directly to the attention of the ADM. When raised, concerns have always been heard and responded to in an open and considered way.
- On occasion the head of looked after children has attended panel as an observer and participated in training events when any issues can be aired. In terms of improving professional practice and for children's social workers to be better informed of the pressures foster carers are on occasion under it may be helpful that training be arranged to bring together children's social workers, foster carers, supervising social workers and other relevant professionals to explore how various pressure points could be eased.
- Supporting and supervising connected carers can be a challenge for the service. This is particularly the case when the carers are dealing with complex problems of which they have little previous experience or supportive training. Most connected carers see themselves as a relation – aunt, uncle, grandparent and so on and struggle with seeing their role as a foster carer and all the responsibilities and support that

accompanies it such as meeting the TDS, training, recording and on occasion, decision making. Further bespoke training or generic foster carer training also being attuned to connected carers may pay dividends in increasing placement stability.

- For nearly twelve years the fostering panel has had the services of one chair and for the most of that period no vice chair. No panels have been cancelled because of the availability of the chair and despite the vagaries of internet connections no significant disruptions have been caused by internet connection issues.
- Nevertheless, relying on the health and availability of one person does present a risk to the authority that should be addressed through the appointment of a vice chair(s).

Peter Crawhurst

Panel Chair

01.06.23