

Portsmouth City Council Fostering Panel

Chair's Report April 2023 – March 2024

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 are required by statute to establish a fostering panel to provide independent recommendations and guidance to the service 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 2023/24 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 service regarding the matters listed above.
- The actual decisions are made by the head of children we care for 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 services 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 Portsmouth Panel membership comprises social work members with extensive and varied experience including fostering, adoption, IRO and safeguarding, foster carers, a care experienced research student, a looked after children's nurse and an educational professional and former head teacher.
- The panel is supported by two professional advisors (both 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 was positive. Under the five headings, Portsmouth Children's Service was rated 'Good' in three categories, 'Outstanding' in one category and 'Requires improvement to be good' for care experience young people with overall judgement of good.
- 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 to the panel 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 2023 to March 2024 panel considered 134 cases in total which is 2 more than 2022/23. Of the matters brought to panel:
 - Mainstream applicants: 16 new foster carers recommended approval as unrelated carers for short or long term, respite and family link. (2022/3 the number was 20). Of the new foster carers 3 were experienced carers who transferred from an independent fostering agency.
 - Connected carers: 9 applicants recommended for approval. (2023/3 the number was 16).
 - Supported Lodgings: 0 applicants recommended for approval (2022/23 the number was 3).
 - Staying Put: 19 arrangements noted (2022/23 the number was 20).
 - Regulation 25: 13 considered and recommendations made. (2022/23 the number was 8).
 - Long term linking: 6 recommended approval. (2022/23 the number was 9).
 - Household reviews: 18 recommended approval and continued fostering or change of approval (2022/23 the number was 17).
 - Allegations/concerns: 6 reviews following a complaint/allegation. Of these, two carers were recommended for de-registration, the complaint relating to one carer concerning historical matters and who had resigned prior to panel hearing and one carer who has applied for a review under the IRM mechanism. (2022/23 the number was 7), all recommendations being upheld by the ADM.
 - Other: 41 including considering changes in approval, noting resignations, deregistration of carers who have ceased to offer care but who haven't formally resigned. (2022/3 the number was 32).

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 were simplified from 2022/23 with the number of questions asked reduced and scoring range changed to 1 (poor) to 4 (excellent). The 2022/23 scores are recorded below for comparative purposes.
- **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 2023/24 is no exception. The number of feedback forms returned was around 35% (18 of 52 forms sent out although some forms only included comments rather than scores) of those sent out and the aggregated scores were as follows:

Questions Score out of 4 – 1 (poor) 4 (excellent)	Panel points & questions appropriate to matters raised	Sufficient time for discussion	Felt listened to	Panel professionally & fairly conducted
2022/23	4	3.98	3.86	3.86
2023/24	3.7	3.91	3.9	3.83

- **Foster carers'** feedback was similarly positive and although some carers reported feeling anxious about on-line meetings some also highlighted the positives in terms of being less stressful and saving time. The percentage of evaluation forms returned was around 33% (16 of 49 forms sent out) and the feedback received was consistently positive:

Questions Score out of 4 – 1 (poor) 4 (excellent)	Welcome and comfort	Reasonable time frame for the assessment	Adequately prepared	Sufficient panel time allowed	Appropriate points raised by panel members	Panel fair and professionally conducted
2022/23	4	3.91	3.98	4	4	4
2023/24	3.94	3.94	3.75	3.93	3.93	3.93

NB: 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.

Conclusions on feedback

- Given the sample size, it has to be acknowledged that the above data has limitations but equally, the feedback is consistent over the past five years. On first glance it might appear that satisfaction has diminished but given the size of each sample one or two scores of 3 rather than 4 will be reflected in scores in each category.
- The narrative feedback also included in the evaluation forms from both social workers and foster carers reinforces the view expressed by foster carers that their experience of attending fostering panel is a positive one and that social workers take their attendance at panel as having importance, feel their work is valued and take the comments and any advice given by panel as helpful.

- As above, the rate of return of feedback forms is somewhat limited and an increase in the percentage may provide a more detailed evaluation of the functioning of panel.

Discussion

- Despite the numerous challenges faced by the service over the past year, panel meetings have been maintained at a consistent level meeting on 21 occasions.
- The pandemic and its associated complications inevitably had an impact on the assessment and support of foster carers. However, we are now some time on from that period and business has returned to a familiar pattern. There has been some variation in the number and type of cases presented in this past year with modest variations on previous years.
- During 2022/3 there appeared to be something of a recovery in new mainstream carers with 20 new carers approved which was nearly double that of the previous year. For the year 2023/24 the number of newly recruited mainstream carers is down by 4 from the previous year and the number of connected carers is down by 7 on 2022/23. It is of note that there was an almost doubling of regulation 25 applications to panel in 2023/4 which reflects the number of connected carers approved on a temporary basis which possibly reflects the number of SGO made and may also be reflected in the number of connected carers approved in 2024/25 given that a significant number were considered in the last quarter of the year.
- Although an imprecise measure, each year the service records the number of 'beds' gained and lost during the year. In the year 2023/24 there was a net loss of 4 'beds' through new recruitment against resignations and de-registrations.
- The number of allegations and standards of care concerns presented to panel was slightly reduced over the 2022/23 figure (6 as opposed to 7). These are all individual circumstances and with such small numbers it is difficult to detect a particular pattern.
- No new supported lodgings placements were approved in 2023/24. This reflects the move away from any child under eighteen being placed in lodgings as opposed to foster care. However, the role is still of relevance in the support provided through Staying Put arrangements so that a young person can remain with their long term carers beyond eighteen years. I understand that there is work underway in the service to regulate the supported lodgings provision to support the sufficiency and options available for 16 and 17 year olds where this is considered an appropriate plan.
- Panel's recommendations are almost always made on a unanimous basis. Panel's recommendations have on all but one occasion been accepted by the

ADM and indeed on that particular occasion panel members were divided on their opinion.

Strengths

- Recruitment levels in 2023/24 showed a small decrease over the previous year although this remains broadly consistent with the historical pattern. It is the case that the recruitment and retention of foster carers is a nationwide issue and Portsmouth has recovered somewhat from the low in 2021/22 in the numbers of foster carers recruited. That said, the staff from the service articulate a very positive view as to what Portsmouth offers foster carers and the carers they bring to panel for approval show a consistent enthusiasm for fostering for Portsmouth.
- Of the 16 new mainstream applicants 3 transferred from other fostering agencies during this period. As in earlier years the consistently stated reason for the 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. In annual reviews held in respect of those carers who did transfer in 2022/23 this message has been reinforced by carers feedback, consistently carers stating that they wished that they had transferred sooner.
- First year reviews are presented to panel in a timely way and foster carers consistently 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.
- As in previous years, foster carers are extremely positive about their involvement in and the support they have received from being part of a Mockingbird constellation. The possibility of joining a Mockingbird constellation is cited by carers wishing to transfer from other agencies.
- Foster carers report that the advantages of Mockingbird are not just enjoyed by them but also the children whom they care for who gain significant benefits in enjoying time with other looked after children and being able to enjoy relationships and 'sleep overs' with other foster carers.
- When such an initiative as Mockingbird is launched and received so positively there is a concern that those not involved may feel less valued and less well supported. Although there remains this risk, the service has used support groups and mentoring to minimise any negativity in this regard and panel has not been alerted to any level of dissatisfaction from carers not involved in a Mockingbird constellation.

- Panel continues to have sufficient members with a wide range of experience and skills. Over the past year further recruitment has taken place to replace members who have left for various reasons and all new panel members have integrated successfully, providing panel with additional expertise and diversity without any perceptible change in the tone and ethos of panel.
- I have confidence that panel membership has a good blend of experience and training which ensures its safeguarding responsibilities are discharged in a sensitive but robust manner. Panel members retain their independent focus on the needs and safety of looked after children.
- There have been changes to senior managers in the authority which has resulted in a change in ADMs over the past two years. However, the ADMs have consistently shown confidence in the recommendations of panel in accepting all but one recommendation over the 2023/24 period. On a small number of occasions there has been a divergence of opinion within panel resulting in a majority recommendation and on one occasion when there was a split recommendation the ADM took a different approach to the majority of panel members. Rather than viewing this as problematic I consider it demonstrates both a healthy debate amongst panel members and considered oversight of the ADM.
- As stated in previous reports, although the long term linking of a child with foster carers is not a statutory duty of fostering panels it 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 and the fostering service in general.
- The administration and support of the fostering panel by the administrative team continues to be efficient and minute taking is of a high standard.
- 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 was a significant improvement in the number of new foster carers joining Portsmouth over the 2022/23 year, fewer carers were recruited in 2023/24. It is noted in the Ofsted report of 2023 that sufficiency in fostering provision had improved but it is also clear that the shortage of foster carers can result in a lack of choice and availability for children. Additionally the cost of using profit making IFAs or residential care is a nationwide issue which inevitably has an impact on the budget of services. There are now government initiated plans to implement a common recruitment hub for services within the southern region. Whilst this is simply intended as a 'front door' to fostering services it will be important that Portsmouth is able to highlight the positives of not just joining a local authority but also one that emphasises the added value of joining the authority from which the children originate. This is sometimes a simple matter of geography and proximity but given the compact nature of the city it is of necessity that the authority recruits from outside the city boundaries which inevitably means competition with IFAs and other local authorities.
- There have been occasions that the work of the service and therefore panel has been impeded by the hold up of DBS checks or medical reports. This has on occasion resulted in cases being withdrawn from panel at short notice or panel being in the position to being able to only offer advice rather than fully consider the matter and make a recommendation. I understand the delay in medicals is being progressed through the corporate parenting board sub health group.
- The first year reviews and review of allegations and complaints does give panel insight into the overall functioning of the services to looked after children. Carers frequently cite the support and guidance of their supervising social workers as being excellent. However, the role of children's social workers on occasion is raised by foster carers in lacking in continuity caused by changes in social workers. This can cause a lack of action or clarity in care planning, managing contact, feelings of being left with difficult decisions when a young person's behaviour is extremely challenging. Recruitment of social workers is another nationwide challenge recognised by panel but any issues that appear to be part of pattern or require action 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 'Recommendations to the Service' which therefore brings the matter directly to the attention of the ADM.
- One issue that is highlighted by panel too frequently is the lack of direct input by children and young people into the review of foster carer approval or long

term linking. Panel is often advised that the child or young person is happy with the care they receive or it is their wish that a long term linking goes ahead. It is the case that older children sometimes attend panel in person, but too often this vital information is simply conveyed by their social worker or supervising social worker when it could be more powerfully conveyed in writing, pictorially or through an in person contribution from the child or young person.

- Considering the suitability of connected carers on occasion presents panel with significant dilemmas. This in part often relates to the recommendation of panel being pre-empted as the recommendation being placed before the court is one of the making of a care order with SGO to be supported after an interim period. This presents the panel with a something of a *fait accompli* which can be unhelpful if panel members have reservations regarding the approval. Furthermore, whilst panel members are aware of the pressures on the authority to place children with connected carers and indeed of the many potential benefits in terms of identity and durability if this arrangement can be successful, the information presented may suggest that such a placement may not appear to be realistic due to limited resilience or the potential duration of the arrangement being limited by the age or health of the prospective carer. On occasion such concerns can be mitigated by training, support or contingency planning but this has not always been present in the information before panel.
- Supporting and supervising connected carers can be a particular challenge for the service. This is in part due to matching the complex needs of the children concerned with those who have put themselves forward to care for them. Most connected carers are birth relations of the children – aunt, uncle, brother, sister, grandparent or sometimes someone who is slightly more removed such as a former step parent. These potential carers often struggle with seeing their role as that of a foster carer rather than a relative. This causes a tension and some only reluctantly take on the responsibilities that accompany being foster carers such as meeting the TSD, training, recording and on occasion, decision making. It is of note that Ofsted highlighted the lack of recording on the part of foster carers and a frequent observation brought to panel at both approval and review is that connected carers struggle with the recording requirement.
- Given the government's published plans (Championing Kinship Care) relating to connected carers (now definitively be termed Kinship Carers) the authority is currently reviewing its approach to connected carers as on occasion concerns about ongoing support is an issue for connected carers. As I understand it the review includes enhancing the provision of the team with an extra support worker and additional social work hours being allocated and working with the virtual school head as to their new extended duties. One consideration for connected carers is financial support and the question of how they will be supported financially if they become special guardians. The current financial support regulations allow for financial support throughout a child's minority. The

Portsmouth policy of offering two years' protected support at the same rate as foster carers with a review for ongoing support until the child's 18th birthday subject to a financial assessment may need to be reinforced as on occasion the potential lack of financial support is cited by connected carers as a reason for not wishing to become special guardians.

- Although Microsoft Teams has mostly provided a reliable medium for the fostering panel throughout and now beyond the pandemic, whether this is the best way of conducting panels is open to debate. There have been clear advantages in terms of being able to recruit panel members from outside the area, cost saving to the authority in travel expenses for panel members and travel and waiting time for panel members, social workers and foster carers. However there are also benefits derived from human contact through in-person meetings particularly when very sensitive issues are being discussed.
- For nearly thirteen 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

July 2024

MARK JOWETT

Head of Children We Care For

August 2024