

Thurrock Adoption and Fostering Panel Annual Report 2018/19

1. Introduction and overview

This extended report contains details of the work undertaken by the Thurrock Council Adoption and Fostering Panel during the years 1st January 2018 to 31st March 2019. This has been done to bring our annual report in to line with the financial year and so our reporting is consistent. The Panel is constituted to consider both fostering and adoption cases which allows us to respond to the changing needs of local children.

Thurrock Council is responsible for the Panel financing, administrative support and overall good functioning. However, the Panel is entirely independent as regards its recommendations. The Panel can only make **recommendations** to Thurrock; it is the authority that has the legal duty to take the actual decision, having taken full account of the Panel's recommendations and the reasons for them.

The Panel is available to meet on a fortnightly basis and to hold an extra meeting if there is a need to consider any matter on an urgent basis. In 2019/20 the Panel will continue meeting twice per month to accommodate the increasing panel business covering both fostering and adoption. Panel members need to undertake hours of careful reading prior to the meeting making the timely dispatch of agenda papers well in advance of each meeting vital.

The Panel holds business and training sessions to update knowledge on relevant professional and legal developments in fostering and adoption. During the year the Agency Advisor/Fostering Manager provided a briefing to all panel members on the development of the service. We will continue to keep under review and strengthen as necessary the central list of those available for Panel membership. The panel member appraisals will help the fostering service identify the additional perspectives that could help develop Panel effectiveness.

1.2 Fostering Service:

Thurrock Council is a Fostering Agency that provides a foster care service for children and young people who are 'looked after' by the Council. There are also looked after children and young people placed with relatives or friends of their family. These carers are known as Family and Friends Carers.

Thurrock also provides a service for children and young people who are not 'looked after' but, usually because they have disabilities, can benefit from short period of care by what are known as Shared or Short Break Carers.

In all these situations, the carers legally must be assessed and approved by the Council for whatever role they wish to undertake. Each role involves the care of children who are away from their parents and carries considerable day to day responsibility for vulnerable children who are sometimes going through very difficult times in their lives. Thurrock Council has invested in recruiting and supporting Foster Carers and the Recruitment Strategy is seeing the work of panel increase over time.

Whilst Thurrock needs to recruit foster carers to give such vulnerable children the

security and skilled care they need, fostering is a challenging task that has a major impact on the family life of those involved and is not for everyone. Care needs to be taken to ensure that the right people are approved, properly supported and provided with ongoing training and that there are regular reviews of their continued suitability. Thurrock is fortunate to have some very experienced and skilled carers who undertake excellent work with children.

During the above period, the Panel acted in accordance with the Fostering Services Regulations 2011. In summary, the primary duties require the Panel to:

- *Consider applications for approval and recommend whether or not a person is suitable to act as a foster carer and if so the terms on which they should be approved (e.g., number and age of children to be placed).*
- *Consider all first annual reviews of newly foster carers and any subsequent reviews referred to it by the fostering service and recommend whether or not the foster carers remain suitable to act as such, and if the terms of approval remain appropriate.* The Thurrock Panel invites carers to attend the first review consideration. Whilst the authority carries out an internal review each subsequent year, the Panel invites carers to attend a Panel review consideration every three years.
- *Consider Family and Friends Carer cases.* The above duties apply in these situations because when a child who is looked after by Thurrock and placed by the authority with such people, the approval must be under Fostering Regulations.
- *Oversee the conduct of assessments carried out by the fostering service. Advise on and monitor the effectiveness of the procedures for undertaking reviews of foster carers.* The Panel takes these duties very seriously. Whilst there is no legal requirement (unlike Adoption Panels) for there to be an Agency Adviser, the Panel strongly supports Thurrock's decision to have one.
- *Give advice and make recommendations on any other matters or cases referred by the fostering service.* This general quality assurance role is an important aspect of the Panel's functioning. Panel has no role in the operational management of the service, but it does have access to information about the complex issues the service is dealing with and at times it is useful to comment on specific cases or on themes that have emerged during Panel discussions.
- As part of this latter function, the Panel also considers and makes recommendations on the following.
 - *Consider reports following allegations made against carers.*
 - *Consider all proposals by the authority that a carer's approval be terminated.*
 - *Consider exemptions to the terms of approval, normally when it is proposed that the usual maximum of three children be exceeded.* This can take place when, for example, to keep a group of siblings together in addition to other children already in placement. This duty relates to any carer living in Thurrock irrespective of who holds their registration as a carer. This could be another local authority or an Independent

Fostering Agency.

1.3 Adoption Services:

Thurrock Council is also a registered Adoption Agency providing the full suite of adoption services. There has been a change in how Thurrock Council delivers these services during the reporting period. From January 2018 – August 2018 Adoption Services were delivered through a partnership with Coram and since then Thurrock Council has begun to deliver all adoption services directly through the establishment of a new Adoption Team.

This presents an experienced panel with some new or returning challenges: whilst the panel has been considering matching for adoption, the approval of adopters is a function which has, again, become part of practice. The panel is supported in this by the panel advisor who is distinct from the fostering advisor.

The composition of the Panel is in accordance with the Adoption Agencies Regulations 2005 and 2014. Thurrock Council has a “central list” of people with a wide range of experience and diverse backgrounds and a good mix to ensure equal opportunity and anti-discriminatory practices. The number and background of Panel members is under continual review to reflect the makeup of the local community and bring additional experience to the Panel. During this last year individuals with a professional background in education, health and adoption have been appointed to the central list. An individual previously in care will shortly be joining the central list. There are monthly meetings with additional meetings arranged as and when it is necessary to do so to ensure continuity of panel core business and functions.

Although not Panel members, the Agency Advisor and Panel Administrator provide vital specialist support to the work of the Panel and attend all meetings. Panel members greatly value the very professional service provided by these colleagues.

The Panel made recommendations on the following issues:

- Recommend the approval of a match between a child/ren and approved adopters
- Change of approval from adoption to long term fostering
- Since 1st November 2018 the Panel also considers applications from individuals and couples to become approved adopters.
- The Panel also considers applications for individuals and couples to adopt children from overseas.

2. PANEL MEMBERSHIP

The Adoption and Fostering Panel consists of people with a wide range of relevant personal and professional experience. Current and former foster carers (not for Thurrock), people who were placed in foster care themselves when children and others with experience of working in and managing children's and fostering services, including children with disabilities, voluntary and community organisations. We have panel members who were adopted as children and who have adopted children

bringing the appropriate lived experience to our deliberations. The number of panel members is under continual review to reflect the make-up of the diverse and changing local community in Thurrock and bring additional experience to the Panel. A number of new panel members have been recruited.

An overview of the panel membership is as follows:

Role	Background
Panel Chair	Previous Service Manager of children services in Essex.
Panel Vice Chair	Fostered and then adopted as a child, within her family. Also an ex-teacher.
Panel Member	Adoption Social Worker, has previously fostered and then adopted two children.
Panel Vice Chair	Adoption Social Worker, previously Team Manager for the adoption Team at Barking and Dagenham.
Panel Member	Ex Teacher and Ex Foster Carer
Panel Member	Previous Team Manager for CAFCAS Social Worker.
Panel Member	Ex Midwife
Panel Member	Ex Midwife
Panel Member	Elected Member

Panel members are appraised annually by the Chair and the relevant panel advisor (see section 3). These are designed to help each member reflect on their work and identify areas for further training. The reviews were helpful in discussing issues that often cannot be pursued in similar depth during Panel consideration of specific agenda items, as we need to focus on the issue at hand. The reviews also provided an opportunity for reflection on how the Panel approaches the task. There was a clear view that team working continued to be good and that each member felt able to express his or her views freely before an agreed recommendation was reached. The Panel Chair and Agency Adviser feel that the Thurrock Fostering Panel has a strong and experienced membership with a good range of personal and professional perspectives.

The Chair also receives an appraisal with the relevant advisor and the Service Manager for Fostering, Adoption, Placements and Contact

Although not Panel members, the Agency Advisers and the Panel Administrator provide vital specialist support to the work of the Panel and attend all meetings. Panel members greatly value the very professional service provided by these colleagues.

The agency advisors are as follows:

Name	Role	Background
Julia Sutton	Panel Advisor for Fostering	Fostering Assessment Team Manager
Sally Medbury	Panel Advisor for Adoption	Adoption Team Manager

3. Panel Practice

Thurrock Council tries to ensure that the confidential agenda papers are sent out in good time (ideally more than 5 working days in advance of the meeting) for members to carefully read the material. At the meeting, the Panel firstly considers the documentation relating to each proposal, ensuring that the legally necessary statutory checks, references and documentation are in place to allow the matter to proceed. There is then a preliminary but focused discussion about the key aspects of the application or review, drawing on the range of perspectives available within the Panel membership. After identifying areas for further discussion, we then meet with the relevant social worker and the individuals involved. As indicated, we always invite those applying to become carers, with approved carers at their annual review and then every three years.

The Panel then recommends a course of action. As indicated, the Panel makes recommendations, it does not take decisions. The minutes of panel are passed on to the relevant Agency Decision Maker for them to consider. The Agency Decision Makers are separate for Fostering and Adoption cases:

Name	Role	Background
Janet Simon	ADM - Fostering	Strategic Lead – Looked After Children
Sheila Murphy	ADM - Adoption	Assistant Director – Children’s Services

4. Foster Carer Approvals

During the dates considered in this report, the Thurrock Panel received twenty recommendations relating to applications for approval; thirteen households for general fostering able to provide placements for twenty seven children in total. There were seven Connected Persons Carer households for twelve children during the year. All wished to be considered as foster carers. Thurrock welcomes and encourages applications from all sections of the community and the Panel met with applicants of differing ethnicities, ages and sexual orientation. Some nine foster carer applications are currently being assessed so it is anticipated that we shall see a rise in applications to panel in 2019.

Prospective carers are usually asked questions about their experience of the preparation and assessment process and their views about the age and number of children they see joining their family. An important area is that of considering the impact of fostering on any existing children in the home. This can sometimes turn out to be a challenging issue for carers to manage, as the placement of a child with complex needs into a family group will inevitably have an impact on everyone in the family. The impact can be very positive in nature, but the reality is that it can at times be less positive for some birth children and lead to placement breakdown or a withdrawal from fostering. Panel members have a responsibility to ensure that the best decisions possible regarding timing of approval, the appropriate age range and the type of support that the carers will need are reached.

Fostering is a demanding and challenging task and whilst we need more carers, the assessment has to identify potential strengths and weakness so that the right decisions are taken and that carers have identified areas for further training and development. As indicated, fostering is not for everyone and Panel has a duty to explore any areas of concern directly with applicants and occasionally will ask for further reflection or information before a final recommendation is made.

Occasionally the Panel may need to recommend that an application should not be successful. This was not necessary during the last 12 months. If the Decision Maker agrees with such a recommendation, the applicant has a right to appeal internally or access a national Independent Review Mechanism Panel. The final decision rests with Thurrock. To date the Thurrock Panel has not had any decisions about approval matters referred to the IRM.

All applicants will have been through preparation group sessions where they will have heard at first hand (including from experienced Thurrock carers) about the task and then completed an individual assessment process. There is clear evidence from reports presented to Panel that the Thurrock introductory preparation groups are carefully planned and delivered, providing a good basis for the detailed assessment.

There is good dialogue between the Panel and the agency concerning issues that need to be covered in the assessment reports. This has contributed to the high standard of analysis by the assessing social workers. We continue to encourage the fostering service in its efforts to improve the standards of assessment and the consistent maintenance of good standards, particularly in relation to analysis. Over the year the panel has found all assessment reports to be of a high standard.

All applicants are asked to complete an evaluation form reflecting their experience of the preparation/assessment process and attendance at panel. During the last year there was a 100% return rate and all the feedback was extremely positive. In relation to Panel all applicants considered they were treated respectfully, their application considered objectively and they were given an opportunity to discuss their experience to date in some depth.

5. Foster Carer Reviews

The Panel considered thirty two foster carer annual reviews during the period. With one exception the carers concerned attended all the reviews. In all cases the Panel was legally required to consider if the foster carer continued to be suitable for approval.

First annual reviews continue to be presented on time and it is clear from the reports that carers have an allocated supervising social worker, receive regular supervision

and have access to ongoing training provided by Thurrock. This first review provides a focused opportunity for Panel to see how potential has developed into reality. The review material and discussion with the carers can provide a picture of what life is like for a looked after child in the foster household and help Panel identify areas for development in practice standards and areas for further training. Panel members encourage the fostering service to obtain and consider the views of foster children and birth children of the foster children. We feel that this is vital, as we need to hear the voices of looked after children and of birth children who share their home and lives with foster children who are often going through a confusing and unsettled period in their young lives. The Panel were particularly keen to ensure that newly approved carers are well supported.

The three yearly reviews will provide an opportunity for a longer term reflection on how carers are developing and gaining experience in different areas of fostering. This process can lead to a reflection on changes of approval terms as the review can provide the necessary evidence for an increase in numbers or change to age range. The overall standard of review material was excellent. All reviews presented to panel were completed within statutory timescales and there is a significant improvement in gaining feedback from fostering household members, children's social workers and the children and young people themselves.

6. Approval of Prospective Adopters

The Panel has considered three agency applications to be approved as prospective adopters since January. These have been largely applications from Foster Carers wishing to adopt a looked after child in their care. As a Panel we have been satisfied with the quality of the assessment work done and the rationale for recommendation is clear.

The panel has also considered the suitability of three applicants for intercountry adoption. This presents with a range of matters that panel needs to consider and has generated much discussion. One case was deferred by the Agency Decision Maker for further work, favouring a minority position on that panel. Although, by majority, panel had recommended approval a helpful discussion took place with the ADM and the Chair which clarified matters. The deferment was agreed.

7. Adoption Matches

Since January 2018, thirteen children were presented to panel, four of which were made up of two sibling pairs. It is notable that despite the diverse make up of Thurrock; all of the children considered were white British. Two children were placed soon after birth with their existing foster cares and adoption would provide them with consistency of care. These were concurrent placements.

With Thurrock Council regaining its adoption services we anticipate changes in our work as an adoption panel

8. Other Panel Duties

The Panel has often considered the formal resignation of carers via a full hearing; as the Fostering Regulations 2011 do not require a formal Panel consideration and recommendation, Panel is now notified of resignations and the reasons. Foster carers are free to resign and after 28 days, it takes full legal effect. In cases where

there are matters of care concern, the Foster Carer's registration is brought to panel for a formal recommendation. All the de-registrations during the last 12 months were at the request or agreement of the carers except in two cases where there were concerns about standards of care. Panel was able to give a recommendation in both these matters and in one case our view was accepted, the other is following a right of appeal via the IRM.

It is inevitable that each year a number of carers will retire after lengthy service, move to another area, or decide after a period of service that changed family circumstances such as the birth of a child or health difficulties mean that fostering is no longer viable. Some de-registrations are due to very positive child centred reasons such as the carers adopting the child in their care or being granted a Court Order such as Special Guardianship that removes the child from public care and gives the carers direct legal responsibility for the care of the child within their family.

As indicated above, the Panel is occasionally asked to recommend an exemption to the usual maximum of three children in placement. Although it is not a legal requirement for the Panel to be directly involved, Thurrock rightly regards this as good practice.

The Panel will occasionally be asked to consider whether a foster child's placement with carers should become permanent, the intention being that the carers commit to looking after the child until independence.

The Panel also has an important quality assurance role. From reports and discussions and feedback from foster carers the Panel have identified some practice issues and recommended policy and practice reviews. In previous years, the panel highlighted the importance of ensuring that the children looked after savings scheme was fully monitored. This year it recommended that the foster carer's Welcome Pack was reviewed and updated; this is being done.

9. Panel Development

Thurrock's Fostering and Adoption Panel is experienced in all relevant matters of its work and has an appropriate level of stability. We are continually working to improve the operation of the panel and the following represents the next steps in our development

9.1 Development Plan

Outcome	Means	Responsible Individual(s)	Target date
1) Panel is able to learn from the experience of those attending	Feedback forms to be reviewed and to include all attendees and there is some systemic collection and review of feedback	Chair and Service Manager	August 2019
2) Good Practice is identified and shared	A good practice bank, accessible to the social work teams, will be created. Where the panel has identified work of a very high standard the chair shall direct the Panel Administrator to add it to the good practice bank.	Chair and Service Manager	August 2019
3) Panel has an active input in to the development and improvement of the service	Panel & Business meetings will be re-convened to be quarterly and include the relevant managers. The purpose of the meeting shall be to ensure thematic issues can be addressed and relevant policies agreed	Chair, Service Manager, Panel Advisors and ADMs	November 2019
	QA – written feedback on each case will be shared with the TM and SM responsible	Chair	September 2019
4) Panel membership reflects the community and current practice	Our panel is in a good position in terms of the experience of its membership but we recognise that development of membership is key. The central list will be opened up to encourage further applications	Chair	September 2019
5) The panel standing agenda and minutes reflect the full function of panel and the work done	Our panel agenda and minutes accurately reflect the cases considered but we do not always capture the wider work of panel. The agenda and minutes will be updated to reflect this	Chair and Service manager	July 2019

