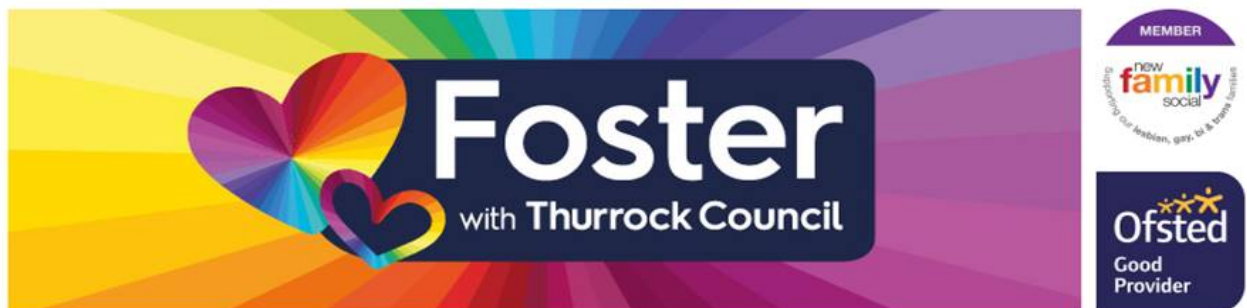


THURROCK ADOPTION AND FOSTERING PANEL ANNUAL REPORT

April 2023 – March 2024



Thurrock Adoption and Fostering Annual Report

2023/2024

1. Introduction and overview

1.1. General overview

This report contains details of the work undertaken by the Thurrock Council Adoption and Fostering Panel during the year 01 April 2023 to 31 March 2024. The Panel is constituted to consider both adoption and fostering 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 Local Authority that has the legal duty to make 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 2024/2025 the Panel will continue meeting fortnightly to accommodate the increasing panel business covering both adoption and fostering. 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 adoption and fostering. During the year the Adoption, Fostering Managers, and the Agency Advisor provided briefings to all panel members on the development of the service. In 2023/2024 a full day training and workshops were held around Preparation for Adoption, Managing Allegations for foster carers, Reflective Practice. Another training session was provided by Adopt East around Modernizing Adoption and Safe contacts. All panel members have up to date GDPR training. Panel members also had access to a wide range of online training opportunities.

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 and adoption service identify the additional perspectives that could help develop Panel effectiveness.

1.2. Adoption Services – Panel's roles and considerations

Thurrock Council is a registered Adoption Agency providing the full range of adoption services. Thurrock Council is also part of the Adopt East region and the Panel Chair and Agency Advisor attend regular meetings held with fellow representative within the Adopt East, with the view of comparing, aligning and keep practice up to date.

The panel acknowledges and conducts its business in line with the national drive towards more open and modernised adoption. We prepare adoption applicants to support and facilitate contact between child and important birth family members where it is safe and, in their interests, to do so. More open adoption provides the child with a more positive understanding of their background and why they were placed in a new family. An open and honest narrative for the child will provide them with a greater understanding of their life journey whilst they are growing up. It is envisaged that in the future the majority of adoption applicants will be assessed as early permanence carers fostering the child soon after birth and ahead of any decision-making process. Although there will be a greater sense of uncertainty for the carers until the child's future is resolved this will reduce the number of moves for the child

The composition of the Panel is in accordance with the Adoption 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. The central list is continuously kept under monitoring and recruitment process remains open, in light with the movements that occur on the central list with the aim enhancing the panel's diversity and expanding further on the skills and expertise of the panel.

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.

In respect of adoption, the Panel makes recommendations on the following issues:

- The Panel considers applications from individuals and couples to become approved adopters.
- The Panel also considers applications for individuals and couples to adopt children from overseas.
- Consider the approval of a match between children and approved adopters.
- Change of approval from adoption to long term fostering.
- Annual review of prospective adoptive carers.
- The panel considers the case of every child referred to it and make recommendation to the agency as to whether the child should be placed for adoption.

The panel met the Adoption Team Manager in April 2023, being provided with general updates and data of the service, as well the positive outcomes that some children had achieved over the last year.

1.3. Fostering Services – Panel's Roles and considerations

Thurrock Council is a Fostering Agency that provides a foster care service for children and young people that 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 a short period of

care by what are known as Shared or Short Break Carers. In 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 Council 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 and young people.

During the year, the Panel carried out the following functions. 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 approved 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 local 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 cases. The above duties apply in these situations because when a child who is looked after by Thurrock and placed by the local authority with such people, the approval must be under the 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 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 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.

The Panel has regularly met the team managers of the two Fostering Service, Fostering Recruitment Team, and Fostering Support Team, with the view of being kept informed on practice and the services in general.

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 makeup of the diverse and changing local community in Thurrock and bring additional experience to the Panel.

An overview of the panel membership is as follows:

- Panel Chair - Previous Service Manager of children's services in neighbouring local authority
- Panel Vice-Chair - approved Foster carer and also panel member for another authority, with extensive experience in education, managing 9 London Prison's education provisions, teaching across a range of setting and working in education welfare.
- Panel Vice-Chair - Adoption social worker, previously Team manager of neighbouring local authority adoption service.
- Panel member- Independent Panel member, retired Social Worker, previous Team Manager for CAF/CASS and social worker in adult social care
- Panel member - Ex mid-wife, including manager of labour ward.
- Panel member - Ex mid-wife, nurse, family planning and sexual health advisor.
- Panel member - Elected member, who has been on a break from panel activity, due to other work commitments.
- Panel Member - Birth mother, with experience in education and Chair of Trustees for Homestart.
- Panel member – adoptive parent
- Panel member - Independent Social Worker with experience in Fostering, Management in Social Work and previously being an Independent Reviewing Officer in a neighbouring local authority. Also experience in previously working in CAMHS.
- Panel member - previously been in foster care as a child, now a trainer for Social Workers, and multi-agency partners about familial sexual abuse. Also

- author of two books on the same subject.
- Panel Member – Independent Social Worker, extensive experience in Adoption and Fostering, as practitioner and panel member in other Local Authorities. Also, with experience as Independent Reviewing Officer specialising in Children with Disabilities and Leaving and Aftercare and management in Social Work.
 - Panel Member – Independent Social Worker, with experience of Probation and Youth Offending Team, as well as social worker in Children with Disabilities and Fostering services.

Panel members are appraised annually by the Chair and the relevant panel adviser. 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 review also provides 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 her or his views freely before an agreed recommendation was reached. The Panel Chair and Agency Adviser feel that Thurrock Adoption and 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 Agency Adviser, the Service Manager for Adoption and Fostering and the Head of Service for Children in Care.

Although not Panel members, the Agency Adviser 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 offered by these colleagues.

The Agency Adviser is Andra Marc and Panel Administrator is Sara Johnston.

3. Panel Practice

Thurrock Council tries to ensure that confidential agenda papers are sent out in good time (ideally more than five 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 legally necessary statutory checks, references and documentation are in place to allow the matter to proceed. A preparation form is being completed by panel members, in advance of the panel meeting. This practice has been introduced in January 2024. There is 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, the Panel then meets with the relevant social worker and individuals involved. As indicated, the Panel always invites those applying to become carers, with approved carers at their first annual review and then every three years.

The Panel then recommends a course of action. As indicated, the Panel makes recommendations, it does not make decisions. The minutes of panel are passed to the

relevant Agency Decision Maker for them to consider. The Agency Decision Makers are separate for adoption and fostering cases.

The ADM for fostering role sits with the Head of Service for Looked after Children. A newly appointed Head of Service is due to start in the role in May 2024.

Janet Simon, the ADM for adoption, is the Assistant Director for Children's Services.

4. Adoption Services

4.1. Consideration of applications by prospective adopters

Between April 2023 and March 2024, the panel considered 7 applications to be approved as prospective adopters, for 7 possibly 8 children. These applications were from 5 heterosexual couples, one of them being recommended for approval as early permanency carers, 1 same sex couple and 1 single female prospective adopter. This financial year a drop in the number of application was noticed, compared to last financial year (2022-2023) when the panel considered 12 applicants, including 10 couples (1 of same sex and 9 heterosexual) and 2 single female applicants.

It is clear from reports and feedback received that prospective adopters are well treated and prepared during the assessment process. The quality of assessment reports was of an excellent standard and there was evidence of good working relationships between applicants and social workers.

4.2. Review of prospective adopters

This financial year, the panel considered 3 reviews of prospective adopters, one of which was for a change of terms of approval with a request for the couple to be approved as early permanence carers and who then returned to panel for recommendation for matching.

On the other two cases there was evidence of work being undertaken and the prospective adopters having considered several potential matches, but none being fruitful within the 1 year of approval.

4.3. Consideration of Matching

During the year 2023-2024 the panel has considered 7 proposals for matching, for 7 children placed individually Noticeably, this year, out of the 7 children, 5 had already been placed with the prospective adopters, under early permanency arrangements, or under Reg 25A auspices. One of these cases was for a child who had been placed with foster carers following birth, who later became adopters.

Compared to last financial year – 2022/2023, there has been a decrease in the proposed matches to panel. Last financial year the panel considered 11 proposed matches for 14 children (3 sibling groups of 2 and 8 children individually placed).

The quality of the reports was very comprehensive, and it was pleasing to note that prospective carers were fully informed and aware of all the risk factors. The Panel were also pleased to see that, where needed, comprehensive support packages had been developed.

5. Fostering Services

5.1. Foster carers' approval

Between April 2023 and March 2024, the panel considered 7 applications of general fostering, including 4 female single carers and 3 heterosexual couples, for 8 possibly 9 children. Each of these applicants had a different range of approvals, such as: 1 for children aged 4-16, 1 for age 0-18, 1 for age 0-2, 1 for age 0-6, 1 for age 5-13, 1 for age 0-13 and 1 for age 9-14. There has been a slight increase compared to last financial year when the panel considered 6 households for general fostering, including 4 couples and 2 single applicants, for 6 or up to 10 children.

This year, the panel has also considered 7 applications for Family and Friends carers, for 6 families, as one of them returned to panel following an incident, for 8 children in total. The panel has also considered 12 notifications of extension of temporary approval (Reg 24 of Fostering regulations), 5 of which returned to panel for full approval in 2023/2024. This included 2 household for children aged 0-10, 2 household for children aged 15-18, 1 for age 0-18 and 1 for children aged 5-18. Similar data was provided for the financial year 2022-2023, when the panel considered 8 Family and Friends applications, for 8 children.

Thurrock welcomes and encourages applications from all sections of the community and the Panel met with differing ethnicities, ages and sexual orientation.

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 within 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 disruption 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 type of support that 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 vulnerabilities so that the right decisions are taken and that carers have identified areas for further development and training. As indicated, fostering is not for everyone, and Panel has a duty to explore any areas of concern directly with the 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 year. If the Agency Decision Maker agrees with such a recommendation, the applicant(s) have the right to appeal internally or access the national Independent Review Mechanism Panel. The final decision rests with Thurrock.

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 that the Thurrock introductory preparation groups are carefully planned and delivered, providing a good basis for the detailed assessment.

There is a good dialogue between the Panel and the agency concerning issues that need to be covered in the assessment reports. This has contributed to the good standard of analysis by the assessing social workers. The Panel continues to encourage the fostering service in its efforts to improve the standard of assessments and the consistent maintenance of good standards, particularly in relation to analysis.

5.2. Foster carers' reviews

The panel considered 41 reviews, as follows:

- 9 household reviews following their 1st year of fostering.
- 19 household reviews that occur every 3 years.
- 5 reviews that were triggered by standard of care concerns, for 4 fostering households. Two of them were for foster carers who had been asked to return to panel after 6 months, as a way of monitoring their progress and learning. One of them was de-registered.
- 3 notifications of change of terms of approvals

Compared to last financial year, there has been an increase in the number of reviews. Last financial year, the Panel considered 27 foster carers' annual reviews including 7 first year reviews, 17 third year reviews and 3 reviews triggered by standard of care concerns.

It was clear from the reports that all carers have an allocated supervising social worker, receive regular supervision, and support and have access to ongoing training provided by Thurrock. The first review provides a focused opportunity for Panel to see how potential has developed into reality. The review reports and discussion with 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 further training. Panel is encouraging the fostering service to obtain and consider the views of foster children and birth children consistently. The Panel feels that this is vital, as they need to hear the voice of the looked after children and birth children who share their home. The Panel were particularly keen to ensure that newly approved carers are well supported and experience a well-structured induction programme.

The three yearly reviews provide an opportunity for 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 or decrease in numbers or change to age range. The overall standard of review material was good and many carers provided a comprehensive written contribution. But, there is still scope for improvement in gaining feedback from fostering household members, children's social workers and the children and young people themselves.

6. Other Panel Duties

The resignation of foster carers does not require Panel's formal consideration. However, Panel is notified of resignations and the reasons. The panel was notified of 5 resignations within this financial year. Foster carers are free to resign and after 28 days it takes full effect. In cases where there are matters of care concern, the foster carer's registration is brought to panel for a formal recommendation.

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 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.

It is also good practice that Panel is kept informed and updated in terms of changes that happened in foster carers' terms of approval. As such, as from February 2023, the panel has started to be notified of all changes of approvals that have taken place, either through reviews in those cases that are not due to attend panel for review, or where the Agency Decision Maker agreed the change of approval, outside of panel's remit.

7. User Feedback

All panel visitors that have experienced the preparation and assessment process and/or are now approved adoption or foster carers are asked to complete a written evaluation of their experience with Thurrock including their visit to Panel. 70% (44 out of 63) of the applicants completed their feedback forms. 90% of the respondents graded their overall experience of attending panel as being 5 out of 5, the rest scoring as 4 out of 5 (6%) and 2 out of 5 (4%). General feedback from applicants is that they feel the panel members are welcoming and friendly, they have a good understanding of their situations and their experience of attending panel was positive.

Feedback forms have also been sent to practitioners (Assessing Social Worker, Reviewing Officer, Supervising Social Workers). Only 16% (16 out of 97) of the feedback forms was completed. Whilst it is acknowledged that this is a very low response rate, we note that some practitioners attend the panel several times on a day but might only complete one form rather than for each case presented. We will

endeavour to encourage a better rate of response this year, as feedback from practitioners is crucial in practice development of the panel. 87.5% of practitioners rated their experience of attending panel as 5 out of 5. 6% rated the experiences of attending panel as 4 out of 5 and 6% as 3 out of 5.

All feedback from participants and practitioners is regularly shared with panel members and used within reflective discussions.

In relation to attendance at Panel all individuals considered they were treated respectfully, their application considered objectively, and they were given an opportunity to discuss their experience to date in some depth.

8. Panel Development

Thurrock's Adoption and Fostering Panel is experienced in all relevant matters of its work and has an appropriate level of stability. There is an ongoing commitment to continue to improve the operation of the Panel and the following represents the next steps in our development:

- Panel is able to learn from the experience of those attending. Feedback forms are being reviewed and include all attendees and also professionals attending panel. Some systematic collection and review of feedback is presented regularly to the Panel. Quarterly meetings with the ADM decision makers and the panel Chair have been implemented with the view of having regular reviews of practice.
- Good practice is identified and shared, through the systematically gathered feedback forms, completed by the panel members and shared by the Agency Advisor with the respective teams. The panel will consider a good practice bank that should include work that is identified by the panel to be of very high standard. Where the panel has identified work of a very high standard the Panel Chair in consultation with the Agency Adviser shall ask the Panel
- Panel has an active input in to the development and improvement of the service. Panel and Business meetings have been re-convened on a quarterly basis and includes the relevant adoption and fostering managers. Panel Chair and Agency Advisor also attend regular meetings with fellow colleagues within the regional Adopt East, which also contributes to improving practice and development.
- Panel membership reflects the community and current practice. Membership is reviewed annually and there are ongoing efforts to keep the central list up to date.
- The Panel standing agenda and minutes reflect the full function of the panel and the work done. The Panel agenda and minutes now more accurately reflect the cases considered and capture the wider work of the Panel.

A development plan has been put in place, outlining areas of practice that require improvement and an action plan to this effect.

9. Conclusions

On behalf of panel members, I want to thank Andra Marc Panel Advisor and Sara Johnston Panel Administrator for the excellent support they provide to the Panel. It has proved to be another busy but rewarding year.

The Panel has a key focus on quality assurance, which means in practice it is a critical friend of the authority. There is much good work that passes through the panel, for example the high quality of assessment and preparation of prospective applicants for both adoption and fostering, the detailed planning of adoption placements and the diversity and richness of individuals and couples that are keen to be carers. Like all local authorities, Thurrock struggles with the retention and recruitment of good social care staff. It is concerning when we hear of looked after children experiencing continual change of allocated social workers. For children and young people that may struggle in forging meaningful relationships this experience can only do further harm.

A key challenge for the Panel is to listen more effectively to the voice of the child. We would not want to burden them with form filling which can only reinforce their feeling of difference. We do need to find ways of ensuring that they are well cared for in their adoptive or foster home. We often receive feedback from a range of professionals, but we must find more creative ways of listening to the voice of the child.

A further challenge is to ensure that the Panel membership is more representative of the community that we serve. In the last year, we had two new panel members joining the central list, but also, we had 3 panel members resigning. Our new colleagues have brought a range of skills and life experiences. We must continue to build on that.

Author: Peter Turner, Panel Chair

Date: April 2024