

Report for: Corporate Parenting Advisory Committee

Item number: To be added by the Committee Section

Title: **Fostering Panel annual report 2022-23**

Report authorised by : Beverley Hendricks, Assistant Director, Children's Safeguarding & Social Care

Lead Officer: Keith Warren, Head of Service

Ward(s) affected: N/A

1. Describe the issue under consideration

- 1.1 This report covers the year from 1st April 2022 to 31st March 2023, providing details of the Fostering Panel activity and the range of assessments on which panel members were asked to make a recommendation.
- 1.2 The Fostering Panel provides a quality assurance role that enables it to challenge the quality of reports and feedback information on good practice, as well as that which falls short of the National Minimum Standards (NMS) or is not in the interest of children.
- 1.3 In England and Wales, there are currently estimated to be over 162,400 children in local authority care (*Department for Education (2021) Children looked after in England including adoptions: 2020 to 2021*). These are some of the most vulnerable children in the country, with the majority placed in the care of local authority foster carers.
- 1.4 Haringey's Fostering Panel functions under Regulation 25 of the Fostering Service Regulations (England) 2011.

2. Recommendations

- 2.1. For Members to note content

3. Reasons for decision

N/A

4. Background information

4.1 The Fostering Panel

4.1.1 Fostering Panels continue to be held virtually and may remain so for the foreseeable future. Panel members have fully adapted to the virtual meetings and make good use of the reflection period at the end of the meeting to discuss any issues or feelings about the cases. Applicants and foster carers present as more relaxed and confident as log into virtual meetings from home. Social Workers save travelling time as they can access the meeting from their office. There are still occasional delays waiting for people to join, however, the benefits continue to outweigh the difficulties.

4.1.2 Panel members have remained diligent in their task of holding Haringey children in mind when considering the suitability of those wishing to care for them as Foster or Connected Carers. The generic term Carers will be used throughout this report when referring to both.

4.1.3 The Fostering Panel is held twice a month, on the first and third Tuesday of the month, with the possibility of adding or cancelling panels as necessary. The rota is arranged well in advance allowing for changes as necessary. The quorum for the panel is a minimum of 5 central list members, however, 6 members sit on each panel to ensure it remains in quorum if a panel member cannot attend on the day.

4.2 Fostering Panel Central List

4.2.1 The Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011 require the LA to maintain a 'Central List' of Panel members with a range of relevant skills, knowledge and experience, from which the membership of any panel meeting can be drawn. Haringey's Central List also remains diverse and reflects the wider community.

4.2.2 The central list consist of:

Role	Background
Independent Panel Chair	Chair of two fostering panels and a RAA Social work background
Independent Vice Chair	Care experienced - fostered and adopted, Vice Chair
Independent Panel Member	Former Manager for Family Link, disability team
Independent Panel Member	Adopter - Children's Centre Officer
Independent Panel Member	Registered Foster Carer, 0-18 - specialising in teenagers and remand fostering
Independent Panel Member	Qualified Social Worker - Placements, Foster Carer Recruitment & Assessment Officer for IFA
Independent Panel Member	Care experienced - Previously advised the Who Cares Trust and Coran Voice working with children in care

Independent Panel Member	Care experienced – Senior Youth Support Development Worker
Departmental Panel Member	Health representative - Looked After Children Nurse
Departmental Panel Member	Life Story Work Lead
Departmental Panel Member	Haringey Councillor - Corporate Parenting Board
Departmental Panel Member	Social Work Team Manager – Social Work in Schools Project lead
Departmental Panel Member	Independent Reviewing Officer - Qualified Social Worker
Departmental Panel Member	Supervising Social Worker
Departmental Panel Member	Qualified Social Worker - Member of a fostering household
Departmental Panel Member	Independent Reviewing Officer - Qualified Social Worker
Non-voting roles	
Panel Adviser	Fostering Service Manager
Minute Taker	Fostering Panel Admin Manager

4.2.3 Two agency social work representatives have recently resigned as panel members as they will be leaving the local authority (LA) therefore, new members will be recruited.

4.3 Panel Advisor and Panel Administration

4.3.1 The Fostering Service Manager sat as the Panel Advisor until January 2023 when an experienced and dedicated Panel Advisor was recruited on a temporary basis.

4.3.2 Panel members greatly appreciate the knowledge and experience offered and the quality assurance role in gatekeeping reports to ensure they are fit for purpose.

4.3.3 The Panel Administration Manager ensures the effective functioning of the Panel, including the distribution of reports, minuting the meeting, and supporting the central list. The efficient functioning of the panel is largely due to the efficiency of the Panel Administration Manager.

4.4 Panel members' Appraisals

4.4.1 Panel Member appraisals were completed in January 2023, with all panel members confirming their wish to continue with their role. Panel members have commented positively on the general functioning and effectiveness of the Panel, as well as the way they are chaired. Panel No significant concerns were raised about any panel members' performance, and it is clear that they remain committed, knowledgeable, and child-focused in their practice.

4.4.2 Panel members had previously commented on the challenges of Connected Carer cases, particularly when placing additional children leads to overcrowding. Many felt training on the assessment process and legislation would increase their understanding.

4.4.3 Panel members provided separate feedback to inform the chairs appraisal, which was conducted by the Agency Decision Maker and Panel Advisor in March 2023.

4.5 Panel training

4.5.1 New panel members receive induction on the current legislative framework, research and Case Law and observe two panels before their first sitting. Learning material is shared with panel members as part of their ongoing development. Panel members attended training consisting of a workshop on Connected Carers and Special Guardianship assessments, which they found particularly helpful. In addition, three young people from the Aspire Programme accompanied by the Participation Officer delivered a presentation on the programme and their own journey in care.

4.6 Panel activity throughout the year

4.6.1 The Fostering Panel met on 21 occasions out of a possible 23, between April 2022 and March 2023. One panel was cancelled due to quality assurance issues and awaiting DBS or Medical returns. The other was used to host mandatory training for Panel members.

4.6.2 The tables below provide data on Panel activity over the year. Where available, data over the two previous years is included to allow some comparison.

Type and number of cases presented	2020/2021	2021/2022	2022/2023
General Fostering Household approvals	5	10	3
Connected Carers approvals	4	6	5
Return to panel following 1 st Year Annual Review	8	5	10
Long Term Matches	18	10	6
Return to panel following 3 year Review	0	3	0
Return to panel at panel's request	0	1	4

Change of approval	7	1	2
Regulation 25 Extension	5	4	14
Deregistration	0	2	0
Deregistration of Connected Carer			10
Resignations acknowledgement	7	5	6
Review following Standards of Care	0	2	1
Return to panel following an allegation	3	3	3
Deferrals	1	0	1
Foster carer not approved by ADM	0	0	2
Total number of cases presented	58	52	67

4.7 Fostering approvals

Fostering Approvals	2020/21	2021/22	2022/2023
General Fostering Households	5	10	3
Connected Carer Households	4	6	5

4.7.1 There was a significant decrease in the number of general fostering household assessments compared to the previous year. Panel deferred making a recommendation on one case in order for a second opinion visit to be undertaken, which was ratified by the Agency Decision Maker (ADM). The panel recommended approval of the two other fostering households, one of which was ratified by the ADM, while The ADM decided more information was needed regarding the other, which was later approved.

4.7.2 Connected Carers who are already known to children may receive temporary approval to care for them, pending a full assessment. Once completed, they are presented to the panel. All five Connected Carer households were recommended for approval and ratified by the ADM. An increasing number of these Carers will seek a Special Guardianship Order, which if granted will lead to the child's automatic discharge from care.

Regulation 25, Extension Request	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23
Connected Carer households	5	4	14

4.7.3 Connected Carer assessments must be completed and ratified within 16 weeks, otherwise their temporary approval ends and the placement becomes unlawful. In exceptional circumstances, an additional 8 weeks extension can be granted (Regulation 25 of the Care Planning & Placement Review (2010) in order to complete the assessment.

4.7.4 These requests are usually made when there is a delay in the return of a DBS or medical due to late submissions. They are also made when there is a delay in SGO hearings and an extension is required to prevent the placement becoming unlawful.

Fourteen extension requests were made during this period. This is a 71% increase compared to 2021/22.

4.8 Fostering Matches

Fostering Matches	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23
Total number of children matched with permanent Foster Carers	18	10	6
Children matched with Haringey Foster Carers	8	5	5
Children matched with Independent Fostering Agency Foster Carers	10	5	1

4.8.1 There was a 60% overall decrease in children permanently matched with their Foster Carers, though the same number of children were matched with Haringey carers as 2021/22. This decrease in overall approvals is likely to be due to changes in social workers leading to delays in completing assessments. It is always positive to see Haringey children matched with Haringey carers, as enables them to remain within the borough and their community.

4.8.2 Children aged 15 and over continue to be matched with their carers through their Statutory Review process, and reports presented to the ADM for ratification. Permanency is also achieved when children are placed with family members approved as Connected Carers and through Special Guardianship Orders (SGO) both of which are on the increase across the UK.

4.8.3 The child's voice is crucial at all stages of their journey in care and is particularly important during matching cases. Virtual panels have often provide the opportunity to hear directly from the child during matching meetings. Panel members have had the pleasure of observing the attachment between young children and their carers during virtual panel meetings. Direct feedback from children using any of the many tools available is very much encouraged.

4.9 Fostering/Connected households 1st and 3 Year Reviews

Fostering/Connected 1st Year Reviews	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23
General/Connected Carer households	8	5	10

4.9.1 It is a regulatory requirement that Foster/Connected Carers return to the Fostering Panel following their first year of practice and after their 1st-year Annual Review. Panel members take note and comment on the Reviewing Officer's recommendations concerning the Foster Carer's ability to meet the NMS and continued approval in relation to the number of children, age range and type of placement.

4.9.2 Sixteen general and Connected Carer approvals were ratified by the ADM during 2021/22. These Carers should have returned to the panel following their first Annual Review during this reporting period. However as only ten Annual reviews were conducted it is likely that the LA continue to hold a backlog. A dedicated Reviewing Officer has been appointed supported by two Independent Reviewing Officers to help reduce the outstanding reviews.

4.9.3 Panel recommended continued approval of all ten Carers which was ratified by the ADM.

4.9.4 Panel members have been pleased to note the increase in Children's Social Workers attending panel. Their contribution is highly valued and key to understanding the Carer's ability to meet the needs of the child in their care and ability to work in partnership with professionals. It would be helpful if more CSWs could contribute to the Carers Annual Review itself by completing the feedback forms sent to them in advance.

Three Yearly Reviews	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23
General fostering/Connected households	0	3	0

4.9.5 Carers return to panel following their third annual review provides the opportunity to acknowledge their positive work, as well as discuss any gaps in their practice and/or local authority support.

No three -yearly reviews were presented to Panel during this period.

4.10 Standards of Care and Allegations

Return to panel following Standards of Care or Allegations	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23
Standards of Care	0	3	1
Allegations	3	3	3

4.10.1 Panel heard one Standard of Care case following an investigation during this period. involving a data breach which was investigated and training recommended by the LA and panel, which was ratified by the ADM.

4.10.2 There have been three allegations against Foster Carers during this period involving allegations of physical harm or threat of physical harm. These were all jointly investigated with the police and one was unfounded as another young person in the placement was present and could confirm the child was not harmed by the carer. The second made by the child's father several months after the child had been transitioned into another family members care. The allegation was unclear and could not be substantiated. The third involved a baby found to have serious injuries three months after returning to the parents' care. The foster carer was included in the investigation

until a medical timeline of the fractures could be established, after which they were deemed unfounded. The ADM ratified panel's recommendation of continued approval for all three carers.

4.10.3 Although there is no formal role for panel once a Carer has resigned during an investigation, it is deemed to be good practice to notify the panel of such resignations. Panel was notified of such a case involving a substantiated safeguarding allegation.

4.10.4 Panel was satisfied that all investigations had been correctly conducted and the reasons for the recommendations evidenced. There is however concern about the lengthy delays in returning Carers to panel following completion of investigations. Carers are placed on hold during investigations which is very stressful. Panel has recommended these cases are promptly reviewed after investigation and returned to panel within two months.

4.11 Resignations and De-registrations

Resignations and De--Registrations	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23
Resignations	7	5	6
Connected Carers de-registration	0	0	10
De-Registrations	0	2	0

4.11.1 Although Fostering Panels do not need to be notified of resignations under Fostering Regulations it is deemed good practice as provides an opportunity to discuss whether anything could have been done differently to prevent the resignation. This is important given the current shortage of Foster Carers, the resources that go into assessing and approving Foster Carers and most importantly, the possibility that a resignation could disrupt a child's placement.

4.11.2 There were six resignations during this reporting period and the majority were planned retirements. Ten Connected Carers were also de-registered after the child they cared for reached majority.

4.11.3 No de-registration recommendations were made during this period..

4.12 Fostering Panel's role in Quality Assurance Evaluation of work submitted to Panel

4.12.1 Panel recommendations are based on the quality of the assessments and other paperwork it receives. Panel will regard an assessment report as of sufficient quality when it provides comprehensive information about the applicant, their abilities and motivation. It should identify their strengths, any vulnerabilities and provide a clear analysis and reason for the recommendation that is made. This process also applies to Reviews for continued approval and long-term matches.

4.12.2 Fostering approvals: Fostering Assessments during this period were generally of a good quality, providing a clear understanding of applicants' history with sufficient detail and analysis to evidence both the assessor's and then panel's recommendation.

4.12.2.1 One case was deferred as Panel requested a second opinion visit for more information on the applicant's communication skills. This was positive and the Carer was later recommended for approval. The ADM also requested additional information before making a decision in relation to two assessments as insufficient information had been included.

4.12.3 Connected Carers approvals: Most applicants presented to panel for approval as Connected Carers are also applying to become Special Guardians. Panel have generally found these assessments to be well written, however, little attention is given to the applicant's understanding of the Connected Carer's role, as Carer's are often reluctant to complete written records or attend training. Panel now seek assurance that they understand the role.

4.12.4 Fostering matches: Permanency matching reports are often very detailed, outlining children's needs and the carer's ability to meet them. Support plans would be a helpful addition to these reports as can be added to as the child grows.

There has been some drift in matching cases being presented to panel following the long-term decision. The LA has introduced a Permanency Tracking Panel to address this.

4.12.5 Annual Review reports: Annual Reviews should provide an additional layer of independent scrutiny of Carers' practice and the local authority's monitoring and supporting role. The quality of Annual Review reports has been variable during this period. During the first part of this period, they contained minimal detailed information or challenge of Carers who had not maintained regular records of the child in their care or attended the required number of training. The quality of these reports has, however, improved as now outline the Carer's ability to meet the NMS using evidence of care provided and their understanding of their role. All reviews include a clear recommendation and action plan, however, not all Carers are compliant in attending training and submitting regular records.

4.12.6 Feedback from Children's Social Workers: Children's Social Workers do not routinely provide written feedback for Carers Annual Reviews. This is a gap in key information as children's social workers have regular contact with children and, therefore, are best placed to provide feedback on how well the carer is meeting the child's needs. This has been raised within the department and there has been some improvement.

4.12.6.1 Children's written feedback, including those of the Carer's own children living in the household, is another area needing attention. This feedback is more commonly

made available when the Carer returns to panel, but should be provided for the Annual Review meeting.

4.12.7 Promoting difference and diversity: there is evidence that a number of Carers proactively promote children's understanding of their heritage and identity. There is less understanding of gender identity or sexual orientation. Therefore, it would be helpful if a virtual workshop could be provided.

4.12.8 Training gaps: There are still some gaps in some Carers' core training and completion of the Training, Support and Development Standards that should be completed within the first year of approval. Carers' training profiles are not always presented to Annual Reviews or Panel, making it difficult to identify outstanding training needs.

4.13 Carers feedback on the Panel process

4.13.1 Carers attending Panel are asked to provide feedback on their panel experience. There were 15 responses ranging from new applicants, Connected Carers, Matches, Standards of Care and de-registration. Of those, 9 described their experience as 'Excellent' and 8 as "Good".

4.13.2 All Carers felt Panel was respectful and made them feel comfortable:

- *"The panel were all very nice and polite individuals, and treated me and my husband with curtesy and respect. The chairperson was extremely professional, and the panel meeting went very well."*
- *"It was good meeting clear, comfort and treated with full respect."*
- *"It was my first-time Reviewing. I think it went well as I was made to feel comfortable by the Chair."*
- *"Everyone inc. the chair was courteous and pleasant. They explained what to expect. They let me take it at my pace when it became difficult."*

4.13.3 However not all Carers were as positive about the process:

- *"The Chair stopped me from talking a few times and I felt was being a little rude and dismissive, but the CSW explained to me that the Chair had to make sure everybody get to speak within the time slot given and was just being conscious of the time. I think they should probably extend the time slot a bit as there is always a lot to talk about our young people."*
- *"The panel went well the chairperson did a good job except some members of panels ask irrelevant questions just for the sake of asking and to be noticed by the panel."*

4.13.4 Despite the above comment these Carers described their overall experience as 'Good'.

4.13.5 All Carers were called into panel within their time slots and 9 stated that they were notified if panel was running late.

4.13.6 Despite best efforts, panel can overrun for various reasons, including panel discussions and discussions with Carers occasionally taking longer, technical difficulties and waiting for Carers or Social Workers to join. This is an area that the panel will monitor during the next period.

4.13.7 All Carers felt they were prepared for panel, though notification of panel varied from 5 days for two Carers, 10 days for five Carers and 14 days for eight Carers.

4.13.8 Panel agreed that Supervising Social Workers and Managers supported the Carers during panel meetings.

4.14 Social Worker and Manager Feedback on the panel process

4.14.1 There were 14 feedback forms from Social Workers and Managers attending Panel. 7 described their experience as 'Excellent', 5 as 'Good', while 2 felt it was 'Satisfactory'. It was interesting to note that 2 described their Carers experience as 'Good' while their own as 'Excellent'. All confirmed that they and their Carers were warmly welcomed, and the majority felt Panel asked appropriate questions:

- "It was an extremely positive discussion which also included the CSW and TM."
- No (to further comments) only it was a very pleasant experience for my foster carers which they informed me they enjoyed attending."
- "This was a complex matter and due to the file not holding all the relevant information it was difficult for me as a new TM to fully consider all the issues the foster carer had shared with me and in writing to the Panel etc. The questions put to the SSW were very relevant. It was very apparent that the Panel wanted to gain a good insight into matters leading up to the carer resigning."

4.14.2 The reason for the two satisfactory responses included helpful feedback about questions and panel introductions:

- "Some of the questions asked were unnecessary as the information was provided in my report. I would rather questions should be more constructive."
- "I was called in as the children's social worker and this was my first time at the panel and I was not sure who all the people in the meeting were or the structure of the meeting."

4.14.3 Unfortunately, the above Children's Social Worker joined the meeting late, after introductions had been completed.

4.14.4 When responding to the question of how well the panel addressed '*issues of difference and diversity*', 7 felt issues were addressed '*Very well*', 6 '*Well*' and 1 '*Not very well*'. There was no further information provided to help understand the last response. The assessor was attending with an applicant seeking fostering approval

and had also stated they felt some questions were unnecessary, as answers had been provided in the report. They described their own and the applicant's overall experience of attending the panel as '*satisfactory*'.

4.14.5 This is important and helpful feedback and highlights the Chair's responsibility to confirm that the panel may seek further clarification to information in the report.

It is positive to note that both Managers from the Fostering and Children's Services also attend panel, which is greatly appreciated.

4.15 Quality Assurance Meetings

4.15.1 Quarterly Quality Assurance meetings are attended by the Fostering and Children's Care Heads of Service, Fostering Service Manager and Managers, the Panel Advisor, Panel and Vice Chair. The meeting provides the opportunity to discuss the quality of reports and highlight any departmental or panel issues. Quality assurance feedback themes highlighted by the panel are discussed and action is assigned and reviewed at the next meeting.

4.16 Conclusion

4.16.1 There is evidence that Haringey supports its Carers well to meet the needs of children placed in their care. The Fostering Panel has functioned very well during this period with the support of the Panel Administration Manager and Panel Advisor and there is evidence that Carers, Social Workers and their managers that panel members are welcoming and ask relevant questions. Panel members enjoy sitting on panel and feel supported by the Chair and Panel Advisor.

4.16.2 The Fostering Service continues to work hard to increase the quality of their reports, though many are already of a good standard. Despite capacity issues they are beginning to improve timescales and reduce the current backlog of annual reviews.

4.16.3 The appointment of a dedicated Panel Advisor is already making a difference to the quality of reports presented to panel and Supervising Social Workers understanding of processes.

4.17 Panel advice:

- Connected Carers assessments presented to Panel within the 16 week timescale rather than requiring an additional 8 week extension. Panel would like consideration given to DBS checks and medical's beginning earlier, before transfer to the Fostering Service to prevent delay.
- A workflow to ensure Carers' Annual Reviews are booked to take place within the twelve months' timescale and returned to Panel within two months of completion of their First Annual Review.
- Matching reports should include a support plan and information on the Carers' ability to prepare a young person for independence.

- An increase in direct feedback from children about the care they receive using any of the various tools available.
- All Children's Social Workers should provide written feedback for Carers' Annual reviews, including when children have left the placement within the reviewing period.
- All Carers are to provide regular records (logs) concerning the child in their care as a requirement.
- All Personal Development Plans should be presented to Carers' Annual Reviews, fully completed with details of learning outcomes.
The paperwork for DBS and GP medicals should be discussed with prospective Carers during the early stages of assessments to prevent delays in presenting cases to panel.

4.18 Areas for Panel development:

- The panel will ensure they seek information on Carers' ability to meet children's cultural and identity needs.
- The Panel Chair will endeavour to keep to time during the meeting, despite any delay.
- The panel Chair will ensure panel members explain the reasons why certain questions are asked.

5. Contribution to strategic outcomes

6. Use of Appendices

N/A

7. Local Government (Access to Information) Act 1985

N/A