

Thinking of joining a fostering panel?

Information for prospective new
fostering panel members in England

If you are thinking about joining, or are about to join, a fostering panel, then you may find this leaflet helpful. It provides an introduction to the role and remit of a fostering panel; it tells you about panel membership and practice and it gives advice on many of the things you need to consider when you join. Comments and advice are provided by new and experienced panel members.

Panels – what they are and what they do

1 What are the satisfactions of being a panel member?

Most people find membership of a fostering panel very worthwhile. It is an opportunity to use their relevant personal and professional experience to the benefit of others, and to develop their own knowledge and skills. The children who need foster care are amongst the most vulnerable in society, and their lives have often been characterised by abuse, risk and disadvantage. By ensuring that the needs of children are always the paramount consideration, the recommendations given by a panel can contribute significantly to their stability, recovery and security.

The satisfactions are about helping to maintain quality services for children and striving to act as their "voice" when making recommendations about foster carers.

(INDEPENDENT PANEL MEMBER)

2 Why join a panel?

Here's what some people had to say.

To make a difference to the lives of children and young people.

(MEMBER OF FOSTERING AND ADOPTION PANEL)

Joining a panel is a great way to keep up-to-date with practice changes and helps prevent you being "insular" in relation to the agency you work for by giving insight into how another organisation works, and so can feed back to improve practice in your own agency.

(INDEPENDENT PANEL MEMBER)

3 What does a panel do?

Fostering panels are either set up by local authorities, which provide fostering services, or independent fostering providers, which may be for-profit or not-for-profit organisations.

The main tasks for fostering panels involve making recommendations about:

- **Whether people applying to foster should be approved as foster carers, and the terms of their approval.** Panel members are provided with a

report which sets out the assessment of the applicant(s) with a recommendation as to whether they should be approved as foster carers. Most fostering services use the CoramBAAF Form F for this purpose. Panel members will consider whether the applicant(s) should be approved and whether the approval is in respect of a named child or children, the number and age range of children, or placements of a particular kind. As well as providing temporary and permanent (long-term) foster placements for a wide range of children and young people, some fostering services operate schemes which may include short break fostering, parent and child fostering, and remand fostering.

- **Whether foster carers, following an annual review of approval, should continue to be approved as foster carers.** Each foster carer is required by regulation to have their approval reviewed on an annual basis. The panel considers the first annual review and any other that the fostering service decides to bring to the panel. The panel will be presented with reports and comments from a range of sources, that might include the supervising social worker (the foster carer's worker); the foster carers; fostered children and young people; social workers for the children who have been in placement; other household members, including birth children of the foster carers; other professionals; and children's parents and birth family. There will also usually be a report from a person who has chaired the review, with a recommendation as to whether the foster carer should continue to be approved, and whether the approval status should remain the same or be changed. CoramBAAF Form FR is designed for fostering services that wish to undertake in-depth high quality foster carer reviews.

The panel may be asked to consider a review of approval following an allegation, complaint or serious concern about a foster carer. In some cases, the panel may recommend that the carer's approval is terminated.

Local authority fostering panels will also make recommendations about:

- **Whether family members or friends should be approved as foster carers for specific children.** Where a child can no longer continue to live with their parent(s), the local authority has a duty to

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consider placing the child with a family member or “connected person” before considering foster care with someone unknown to the child. If the placement is made with a family member or friend in an emergency, this is known as a “Regulation 24” placement. Panel members are provided with an assessment report and make a recommendation as to whether the family member or friend should be approved as a foster carer. This assessment report must be presented to the panel within 16 weeks of the placement (which can be extended to 24 weeks). Placement with family or friends is often referred to as kinship care, and CoramBAAF Form C is designed for reporting on family or friends assessments.

Some local authority panels may also consider permanent (long-term) fostering matches.

In these cases, panel members’ responsibilities will be to:

- consider and make recommendations as to whether a child should be placed in permanent foster care;
- consider and make recommendations about the matches of children with particular carers.

CoramBAAF is in the process of developing forms for matching in permanent foster care.

4 Who makes up a panel?

Panels are composed of people with a range of experiences and backgrounds who are recruited by the fostering service to be on a “central list”. To be quorate, a panel must have at least five people sitting, including:

- the Chair or Vice-chair;
- a social worker; and
- at least three other members.

Other members might include:

- elected members in a local authority;
- a foster carer from another fostering service;
- someone who was formerly fostered;
- someone with experience of the education or health of looked after children.

The Chair of the panel is someone who is independent of the fostering service and who has the skills and expertise to chair a fostering panel. The social worker must have at least three years of relevant post-qualification experience.

Panel membership should reflect the diversity of the children and families in their local area and ideally be made up of men and women.

5 What does the agency adviser to the panel do?

Although there is no legal requirement for the fostering panel to have an agency adviser, most panels will have one. This will be a senior social worker whose role is to offer advice to the panel and provide a link between the panel and fostering service. Theirs is an important role, although they do not participate in the recommendations made by the panel. They are likely to provide updated information on the fostering service, its foster carers and placement of children and young people, as well as other matters to do with the agency that may affect the panel. Much of the agency adviser’s role takes place outside the panel. It includes ensuring that the necessary documentation is completed and submitted at the appropriate time and that the panel will be quorate. After the panel, they also make sure that actions identified during the meeting are carried out. The agency adviser is most likely to be the first point of call for panel members. She or he will progress recruitment and induction of new panel members, address tasks such as organising training, reviewing panel members (with the Chair), and keeping members’ files up to date.

6 What about legal advice?

Fostering panels are unlikely to have a legal adviser present at their meetings, but should have access to legal advice where necessary.

7 Who attends the panel?

The social workers who prepare reports for the panel will attend, sometimes with their manager. When the panel is considering the approval of applicants to foster, this will be the assessing social worker; when considering a review, this will be the supervising social worker. Applicants and foster carers will also be invited to attend, and in some fostering services this will be a requirement. Practice will vary: in some cases, they will be present whenever the social worker is present; in other panels, they will only be present for a part of the discussion.

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Where the fostering panel considers plans for permanent fostering for children, the social worker for the child will also attend, sometimes accompanied by their manager. Other people who know the child well may also attend, for example, the child's foster carers. Where there are proposals to place a child with permanent foster carers, they, and social workers working with them, are also likely to be present. Occasionally, a child or young person may attend.

8 Does the panel always make a recommendation?

By the time the case reaches the panel, it should be at the stage where a recommendation can be made. However, there are exceptions and the panel may decide to defer. Examples would be when there are significant gaps in information or serious deficiencies in the documentation.

9 What happens if I do not agree, for example, that applicants should be approved as foster carers?

There will be times when either one panel member is not in support, or panels may be divided in relation to a recommendation. The crucial thing is that you have studied the documentation, listened to those presenting the case, asked your questions and reflected fully together with your colleagues on the panel. You will need to provide reasons for the position you take, and this applies to whether you are saying "yes" or "no" in respect of the recommendation.

10 Can I choose not to be part of the recommendation?

You will always be encouraged to state your views as far as possible, as only a quorate panel can make a recommendation. There is nothing in law to say that you can't abstain, although this would be highly unusual. If you are not confident that someone is suitable to foster, or continues to be suitable to foster, then it is reasonable to conclude that they should not be approved, or permitted to continue fostering. If you do wish to abstain, you would have to be clear as

to why you could not make any recommendation. Your views and your reasons would be recorded in the minutes.

11 What happens after the panel recommendation?

Every fostering service is required to have a decision maker, usually somebody at a senior level within the organisation who has particular knowledge and responsibility. The decision maker takes into account the panel's recommendation, reads the minutes of the panel meeting and proceeds to make his or her decision. He or she may require further information before reaching a decision. In these situations, he or she may talk to key staff and the agency adviser before making a decision. National Minimum Standards (14.91) require for the decision to be made within seven days, and key parties should be informed of the outcome both verbally and in writing.

12 Do people object to the decisions?

Yes, sometimes. Where the decision maker is minded not to approve applicants or to terminate approval of foster carers, or to change the terms of their approval, they have two options if they are dissatisfied with the outcome. They can choose either to make representations to the fostering service, meaning that the case will come back to the panel, or apply to the Independent Review Mechanism (see later in this pamphlet).

13 What should I consider before deciding to become a panel member?

Commitment. You will be expected to attend panels regularly and consistently. You will need to check how often, and for how long, the panel meets.

Availability. Whilst there is always the possibility that something, e.g. a sudden illness, may prevent a panel member attending, this should be the exception. Apologies from a member may mean the panel is not quorate and may need to be cancelled. This will affect the progress of the cases under

Making a recommendation

consideration, and may mean timescales are not met. Panel membership is therefore not suited to people whose work or personal circumstances would routinely result in them becoming unavailable at short notice.

Amount of work. In addition to panel meetings, you need to be able to set aside sufficient time to read the papers prepared for panel. The paperwork is considerable. You will also need to set aside time for appraisals, training days and other requirements.

Emotional impact. It is important to think carefully about whether you can cope with distressing information that may be contained in some panel papers. This may also arise in discussion and there may be issues that remind you of your own history and circumstances.

Facilities. The facilities that you need will vary. You will need to have a place that allows you to read papers with minimum disruption. In order to make an informed decision on this, you will need to know the specific arrangements in the fostering service for which you are considering being a panel member. Some panels send papers in hard copy, meaning that they need to be received by post (recorded delivery) and stored securely. Other panels are now paperless, and require suitable IT arrangements to be in place.

Commitment to equality and diversity. The fostering service should have an equality and diversity policy and this will underpin the work of the panel. It is important that you are aware of your own attitudes and prejudices and that you are prepared to learn and be challenged if necessary. You will come across many kinds of families including married or unmarried couples, whether heterosexual or lesbian or gay, and single people. Some people may be disabled. You will also consider children and families from a range of cultures, religions and ethnicities. Many of the children have complex needs. Training days on diversity are often provided for panel members and these are useful arenas for learning and reflecting on anti-discriminatory and child-centred practice.

are advertised widely (for example, see the vacancies service on www.corambaaf.org.uk), or local authority or independent fostering services can be contacted directly to see whether they are recruiting new panel members. Fostering services should have transparent and fair processes for deciding who to appoint to this role, and this may or may not include an interview.

There are regulations that state the requirements for a new panel member. You will be asked to supply references, and you will need an enhanced Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) check. You will also need to sign an agreement prepared by the fostering service setting out your obligations and those of the fostering service. This will be held on an individual file that the fostering service is required to keep whilst you are a panel member.

Most fostering services prepare a leaflet giving details of panel members, to be shared with those attending. You may be asked to submit some brief information about yourself, and a photograph.

Length of tenure on a fostering panel is not specified and will depend on the policy of the individual fostering service. If you wish to leave the panel, you are required to give one month's notice. This will usually be specified in your agreement.

14 What is the procedure for joining a panel?

The first step will be to identify a fostering service that is looking for new panel members. Sometimes these

15 How long do panels last and how often do they meet?

This varies, so you will need to establish this in relation to the panel you are intending to join. Some meet for a whole day, others meet for half a day, but may extend this depending on the number of items on the agenda. Frequency also varies, for example, the panel may meet monthly, fortnightly or three-weekly. They are usually held on the same day of the week, with dates being set well in advance. The exception to this is when additional meetings are necessary, often at short notice, where members will be contacted and asked about their availability.

16 Will I be paid?

Sometimes panel members are paid a fee; expenses are always reimbursed. Receipts may be required, for example, if you travel by public transport. It can be helpful to clarify at the outset whether you will be

Some things to think about

paid and how this will be calculated; the mileage rate you will be offered; how you will obtain claim forms; whether you will be paid for attending training and your review; and to whom claim forms should be submitted. The method for calculating panel payment varies. Some panels offer a fee per panel, which covers preparation time as well as attendance. Others calculate these separately, sometimes using an hourly rate. It is also advisable to consider your position regarding income tax.

17 How do I know what questions to ask at panel?

It takes time to know what should be asked and there is no easy or quick answer to this; however, the following may help.

- **Observe a panel before you join.** This gives you an indication of how the panel operates, the sorts of questions that are asked, and the framework for reaching a recommendation. Some of the best panel members begin cautiously, taking the time to fully understand how things work before achieving full participation.
- **Note anything you do not understand** or are wondering about as you read the papers. If, after reading the documents, you require further information or clarification, use this as a basis for your question. It is perfectly acceptable to ask very basic questions. Often, as a new panel member there will be times when you need this clarification, and this will be accepted by your colleagues on the panel.
- **Make a checklist** of the things you would expect to see in the reports and keep this by you. Your panel may provide a sheet on which there are a number of headings and where you can make notes of this kind, and one will be supplied for each case.
- **Refer to the headings** in each section of the report. They will indicate what is expected. Consider whether the work has addressed these in full. Is there a clear analysis of the reasons for their recommendation, and is it supported by evidence?
- **Undertake reading.** You can develop your knowledge by reading the key texts set out in the Useful Reading section at the end of this pamphlet.

18 What happens if I already know someone involved in a case or something about it?

If you discover that you know one of the applicants, or someone else closely connected with the case, this could be regarded as a conflict of interest. If a potential conflict of interest does arise, it should be made known to the panel Chair and the agency adviser as soon as possible. It may affect whether you can participate in that panel item and this, in turn, could have implications for quoracy. As well as relying on panel members to raise such issues in advance of the panel, the Chair will usually establish the position regarding conflicts of interest at the start of each panel. The Chair and agency adviser, sometimes with the help of the legal adviser, will establish whether the knowledge that you have is such that you should not participate.

19 Will I receive training?

Yes. National Minimum Standards (23) require that new panel members are given induction training, and that all members are offered at least one day's training per year. It is important that panel members attend. As well as developing their understanding and keeping panel members up to date with new research and developments, training can sometimes provide an opportunity to meet members of other panels and develop links with staff who present to the panel. Most panels try to identify dates for training well in advance, so panel members can be available. A record of the training that panel members attend is kept on their files.

20 Will my performance and membership of the panel be reviewed?

Guidance (5.15) requires that each panel member has their performance reviewed annually, usually called an appraisal. This provides an opportunity for you to reflect on your participation on the panel and to comment on the working of the panel with the Chair and the agency adviser. You will also be able to discuss the strengths you bring to the task and identify any further training or development needs.

Meetings, fees and other questions

that you feel you may have. A review form will be sent to you beforehand for you to complete and a record of your appraisal will be kept on your individual file. Arrangements to renew your membership of the panel will depend on the policy of the fostering service.

Advice panel members would give to others thinking of joining...

The satisfaction is in being able to contribute to making a difference to the lives of children and young people. (PANEL MEMBER)

Memories of people's first panel...

Tremendous satisfaction that I got through the first panel without making any glaring errors! How welcoming other panel members were. What an important and onerous role panel plays in the lives of children and young people. How much I enjoyed it! (PANEL MEMBER)

Some things to think about...

Do I have time to do the preparatory reading? Do I have time to attend the panel on a regular basis? Do I have time to attend panel training? Do I really have the commitment to be a panel member? Do I have the confidence to contribute to panel discussions? (PANEL MEMBER)

The main thing to think about is that it isn't just the panel meetings but the mountains of paperwork involved. Have you the time and stamina to read through them all and be properly prepared? (PANEL MEMBER)

And finally...

If you really care about children and young people and have an overwhelming interest in being a panel member – then go for it!

(PANEL MEMBER)

Some words and phrases you may hear

Family and friends/kinship care/connected persons

This refers to care provided by family members or friends for a child who cannot live with their parent(s). Some family and friends/kinship care arrangements are informal ones made between the family or friend and the parent(s). Others are arrangements made for children who are in care and would otherwise be placed with approved foster carers.

Form C

This CoramBAAF document is the report of the assessment for prospective family and friends foster carers.

Form F

This CoramBAAF document is the report of the assessment of prospective foster carers. It is a very important document, representing a comprehensive assessment of applicants' suitability to become foster carers. The Form F is circulated to panel members in advance of their consideration of approval.

Form FR

This is the set of forms that CoramBAAF has developed to undertake foster carer reviews.

Independent Review Mechanism for Fostering

This is a review process conducted by an independent review panel. It is open to foster care applicants or approved foster carers where a determination has been made that they are not suitable to foster or no longer suitable. The panel considers the case and gives a fresh recommendation to the service for consideration.

Long-term/permanent foster care

Some children and young people are unable to return to their families and require a long-term or permanent foster placement. In these cases, the foster carers become the young person's "family for life" even after they have ceased to be fostered.

Parent and child foster care

Where a child is subject to care proceedings, the court may request a residential parenting assessment and this can be undertaken in a foster home. Foster carers can provide an arrangement or placement for the parent and child (usually a baby), offer support and guidance to the parent, and are part of the assessment process. Carers should be specially trained and supported to carry out this work.

Quoracy

A fostering panel must have at least five members present in order to be quorate, but to comply with the regulations, there also has to be a particular combination of members. The Chair or Vice-chair must attend, together with at least one social worker.

Regulation 24

This is the regulation whereby a child who needs to be looked after in care can be placed immediately with a connected person.

Remand foster care

Where a young person is prosecuted for an offence, the court may decide to remand him or her to local authority care. In some cases, the young person's welfare needs are best met in foster care. Remand foster carers receive special training and support to provide placements to young people on remand.

Short break care

Short break care is a service designed to support children within their own families. Short break carers provide respite placements for children at regular intervals, for example, one weekend each month or a week at a time during school holidays. Some short break care services are designed specifically for disabled children. Others include providing respite for full-time foster carers. This service is sometimes referred to as respite fostering.

Short-term/task-centred foster care

Most children who come into care return to their parents or another permanent carer. Short-term or task-centred foster carers provide placements for children until their future is resolved. This can be anything from a couple of days to years.

Special guardianship

This is an order introduced by the Adoption and Children Act 2002 (England and Wales), offering an alternative legal status for children. It gives a special guardian parental responsibility for a child which he or she can exercise to the exclusion of others. The birth parent retains parental responsibility and the child is not looked after by the local authority. Support services, including financial support, are similar to those for adoptive families.

Notes

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Useful reading

Effective Fostering Panels: Guidance for local authorities, fostering agencies and panel members in England

Sarah Borthwick with Jenifer Lord

Fostering panels have a crucial role to play in the provision and monitoring of foster care. This guide brings together the key messages in regulations, standards and inspections about fostering panels for members of panels as well as foster carers, managers and workers in fostering agencies. It offers good practice points to agencies in the operation of effective panels and is applicable to all fostering service providers.

Thinking about fostering?

Henrietta Bond

This guide explains what fostering means and how to go about it, covering the kinds of children needing to be fostered and why; the reasons why people foster; what sort of people fostering agencies are looking for; and the legal aspects and remuneration.

Foster Carer Reviews

Helen Cosis Brown

This practice guide sets out the process and practicalities for foster carer reviews and makes recommendations for good practice. It covers the policy and legal framework, the social work knowledge required, and how to set up and administer reviews.

Effective Adoption and Fostering Panels in Scotland

Marjorie Morrison

This is the only comprehensive guide on adoption and fostering panels in Scotland, and a valuable resource for social workers and panel members. Covering the roles and responsibilities of panel members, the legislation involved and advice on how panels can improve their work, this book is ideal for all new and existing panel members.

Undertaking a Fostering Assessment – England

Roger Chapman

This guide is designed to help social workers to plan and carry out a comprehensive and evidence-based assessment of prospective foster carers, using the CoramBAAF Form F (for England). The guide provides assistance in collecting the information and considers best practice.

Undertaking a Foster Carer Review

Paul Adams

This guide is designed to help social workers to plan and carry out a comprehensive and evidence-based review of foster carers, using the CoramBAAF Form FR (England). The guide provides assistance in collecting the information and considers best practice.

Undertaking a Connected Person/Family and Friends Assessment

Paul Adams

This guide is designed to help social workers to plan and carry out a comprehensive and evidence-based assessment of connected people/family and friends who wish to foster or be special guardians to a known child/children. It is designed to be used with the CoramBAAF Form C (for England).

To order, contact CoramBAAF Publications on 020 7520 7517 or visit www.corambaaf.org.uk/bookshop

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