6.1.2 Fostering Panel

**SCOPE OF THIS CHAPTER**

This chapter explains the membership, purpose, functions and arrangements for meetings of the Fostering Panel.

**AMENDMENT**

This procedure was updated in December 2023 to reflect local practice.

**1. Purpose and Function**

The Fostering Panel monitors the range and type of foster carers available to the local authority in comparison with the needs of children and plays a key role in the improvement of standards within the fostering service.

As part of this function, the Panel oversees the conduct of assessments, annual reviews of approved foster carers, subsequent reviews where it considers standards of care concerns, allegations and termination of approval and also advises on any relevant matters in relation to the fostering service and makes recommendations to Children's Services about quality issues and performance standards.

In particular, the Panel makes recommendations as to the following:

1. The suitability of applicants to act as foster carers and terms of their approval (including Connected Persons);
2. The continued suitability of the foster carers and whether the terms of the approval remain appropriate for their first annual review of foster carers and any other review where significant changes or termination of approval is recommended - see[**Review and Termination of Approval of Foster Carers Procedure**](https://northamptonshirechildcare.proceduresonline.com/p_review_fos_care.html));
3. Any other special matters relevant to a foster carer which the Chair of the Panel considers appropriate to be referred;
4. Any representations challenging a decision not to approve an applicant as suitable, or to terminate or revise the terms of a foster carer's approval - see [**Assessment and Approvals of Foster Carers Procedure, Representations / Independent Review Procedure**](https://northamptonshirechildcare.proceduresonline.com/p_ass_app_fost.html#representations_review).

The Panel Chair provides 6 monthly reports to the agency which sets out details of panel business in the preceding 6 months. Alongside the statistical information, the panel chair provides analysis of the statistics and provides a focus for future development. This report is presented to the Corporate Parenting Board and is also circulated to the Fostering Service and panel members.

The Fostering Service Manager will observe Panel at least annually and take the opportunity to communicate with Panel members directly.

The Chair will communicate any issues of concern to the Fostering Service Manager and take part in quarterly meetings with him or her to review the Panel's functioning and report on the quality of work being presented to Panel, to ensure good standards are maintained. At the quarterly meetings, the Fostering Service Manager and Fostering Team Managers will provide updating information about developments in the fostering service. Additionally, they will provide statistical information on the numbers of foster carers used by the local authority and the number of children looked after by the local authority. This will enable an appraisal of the extent to which the fostering service is meeting the demand for placements and issues of sufficiency.

Common themes that emerge from the feedback provided by Panel to fostering staff are discussed to consolidate policy and strengthen practice.

**2. Membership**

There is no fixed panel membership, maximum number of members or maximum tenure of office.

The membership must be drawn from a Central List of persons with the appropriate qualifications and/or experience, including one or more social workers who have at least three years' relevant post-qualifying experience.

The Chair will be appointed by the senior manager with responsibility for the fostering service alongside the Panel Adviser. The Panel Adviser must also appoint up to two Vice Chairs, whose role is to chair the Panel when the Chair is unavailable. Additionally other independent panel members should be appointed to reflect the diversity of the population.

Reasonable expenses relating to reading and attendance can be met, including travelling expenses. An hourly rate plus travel expenses is paid for attending training sessions.

All Panel members must have been the subjects of a satisfactory Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) checks before taking up their appointment. Following the initial DBS check, panel members are required to sign a Self Disclosure Form annually at the point of their appraisal. Personal and work references will also be obtained in writing and must be satisfactory.

Each member will be asked to sign an agreement with the fostering service, in relation to his or her membership, covering the service expectations (including the requirement to report any involvement in criminal proceedings), confidentiality issues and commitment to anti-discriminatory practice.

All Panel members are required to undertake Induction Training before taking up their membership. This Induction includes observing at least one Panel meeting and attending a training session. Panel members should also have access to appropriate training and skills development and have the opportunity to attend joint training with fostering staff at least annually.

Annual appraisals of Panel Chairs and Panel Members must be undertaken. Panel Members are appraised by the Chair and the Panel Adviser. The Chair is appraised by the Agency Decision Maker and the Panel Adviser.

Where there are concerns about a Panel member's behaviour either inside or outside the meetings, and this cannot be dealt with by advice, training and/or information, this will be raised by the Chair with the Panel Adviser. Where it is considered that someone is unsuitable to be on the Central List, they must be given one months' notice in writing and reasons for the decision to end their inclusion on the list.

Panel members may resign by giving one month's notice to the Panel Adviser.

**3. Meetings**

The quorum is 5 provided that the following are present:

1. Either the Chair or one of the Vice Chairs (in the absence of the chair). If the meeting is conducted by the Vice Chair who is not independent, there must be at least one other member of the panel who is independent;
2. One of the social worker representatives with at least three years post qualifying experience;
3. Three (or in the case of a joint panel, four) other members.

Panel members may request any relevant information or assistance they require, including medical or legal advice, from the fostering agency and, if so requested, this must be provided by the fostering agency.

The Panel Administrator, with the Chair's authority, will arrange additional special meetings as necessary.

The Panel Adviser can seek written legal advice from the Local Authority's legal service.

The Panel's Medical Adviser will provide medical advice on matters to be brought to the Panel.

The Panel Administrator may arrange for observers to attend meetings, in consultation with the Chair, but no more than 2 observers may attend at any one time.

Prospective foster carers and foster carers are invited to attend panel meetings which consider their applications for approval and continued approval. Applicants and foster carers can attend with a supporter and 'be heard' at fostering panel meetings - see [**Assessment and Approvals of Foster Carers Procedure**](https://northamptonshirechildcare.proceduresonline.com/p_ass_app_fost.html).

The Panel Administrator, in consultation with the Chair, prepares the agenda for each meeting and sends out the agenda to Panel members five working days before the meeting.

Those presenting reports to the Panel must send their reports to the Panel Administrator at least 10 working days before the date of the Panel. The Panel Administrator will arrange for the documentation to be distributed to Panel members.

The Chair's role is to ensure that all members participate fully in the meetings (unless an interest has been declared - see below); that each member has an opportunity to raise questions or offer comments on each matter considered; that sensitive regard is paid to applicants and foster carers while keeping the child's welfare paramount; that consensus is achieved wherever possible and that the Panel has clear reasons for its recommendations.

The panel can recommend to approve; recommend not to approve or decide to defer making a recommendation pending further information, Each panel member must make their recommendation providing clear reasons for that recommendation which must be recorded in the panel minutes.

The panel's recommendation can be unanimous or by majority. In the event of a split recommendation the panel chair does not have the casting vote. The split recommendation is recorded in the minutes, with individual reasons recorded.

At the end of meetings, if held in person, the Panel Administrator will collect any printed reports and agenda from members (for shredding). The Panel Administrator will prepare the minutes in which reasons for recommendations and any disagreements or dissent will be fully recorded. S/he will send the minutes to the Chair and Panel Adviser for approval of their accuracy, the minutes will then be sent to all panel members and attending social workers for checking and the finalised minutes will then be submitted to the Agency Decision Maker to make the decision regarding approval.

The assessing social worker/supervising social worker will also ensure that applicants, foster carers and social workers are notified verbally of the Agency Decision Maker's decision within one working day. Applicants and foster carers will be notified in writing within 5 working days. The Panel Administrator will provide social workers with a copy of the relevant minute after a decision has been made by the Agency Decision Maker.

Conflicts of Interest

Panel members should consider any conflicts of interest in relation to Panel agenda items. A potential conflict arises if an interest may be seen to adversely affect a Panel member's capacity to act without prejudice or preference in a matter.

It is anticipated that in many circumstances there may be professional knowledge of a case which should be notified to the Chair, but which will not affect a member's capacity to participate in the Panel. In other circumstances there may be a personal interest or connection which would require the Panel member to refrain from participation. It may be less clear in some cases when advice should be sought.

In the case of a potential conflict of interest where advice is required, Panel members should consult the Chair or Panel Adviser, giving as much advance notice as possible particularly having regard to the implications for the quorum.

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