

CITY OF YORK ADOPTION PANEL
CHAIR'S REPORT: OCTOBER 2013 –MARCH 2014

1. Introduction

This report summarises the work of City of York Adoption Panel over the 6 month period from 1st October 2013 to 31st March 2014. It is intended to complement the 6 monthly reports provided to the council's executive under National Minimum Standard 25.

2. Composition of the Panels

The Adoption Agencies (Panel and consequential amendments) Regulations 2012 amend the Adoption Regulations 2005 and came into force on 1st September 2012.

The Agency is required to maintain a central list of persons who are considered to be suitable members of an adoption panel. This is essentially a pool of people with different skills, backgrounds and experiences. The central list is designed to reduce delay through postponement of panels due to lack of quoracy, (minimum five members) with at least one member who is social work qualified with a minimum of three years experience). Each panel also requires an independent chair (or vice chair) and three other members, at least one of whom must be independent if the Chair is not present and the Vice chair is not independent. Ideally a Medical Advisor would sit as a Panel member and this has been achieved. Current representatives include an adoptee, an adopter, an elected member, with a range of additional professional experiences including law, education and health.

This year, attendance at panel has been carefully monitored to ensure the number of members sitting on panel at any one time, does not exceed 6 or 7. This is to try and ensure that those adopters attending panel are not overwhelmed by the number of people in the room, or by the number of questions asked. Work is undertaken before each panel

to ensure there is sufficient representation and attendance to make the panel viable and functional in terms of independence and representation.

All panel members are CRB checked and reviewed on a regular basis.

They have received induction and annual training opportunities as well as annual appraisals relating to individual attendance and performance as panel member.

Each Adoption Panel has access to a minute taker and to a Panel Advisor. The Advisor has changed this year and is a senior member of staff involved in quality assurance across the service but who does not have direct line management responsibility for adoption social workers.

3. Panel Functions

The City of York Adoption Panel contributes to the running and quality assurance of the local authority's adoption service. In doing so, there is a responsibility to promote good practice, consistency of approach and fairness in all aspects of the adoption service, in accordance with its procedures and values. The Independent Chair ensures that Quality Assurance function is in place. Panel receives reports on the service and its performance at 6 monthly intervals enabling the panels to monitor the number of children with an adoption plan and family finding activity.

From 1st September 2012 the function of Adoption Panels with regard to children's cases (agreement to place for adoption) was removed from the panel's remit, except in cases where there is no court scrutiny of the plan because the child is accommodated and birthparents consent to adoption or there is a Care Order and the birth parents are agreeing to the plan for adoption. In York this represents one case in this period.

The Adoption Panel now has 2 key functions:

To make recommendations to the agency decision maker on the following:

1. The suitability of prospective adoptive applicants to adopt

2. Whether a child should be placed for adoption with particular prospective adopters.

The Adoption Panel also advises on the following issues:

Where prospective adoptive parents are recommended as suitable to adopt, the number of children the adoptive parents may be suitable to adopt, as well as their age range, gender. Likely needs and background may also be noted.

Where it is recommended that a child should be placed with particular prospective adopters, the panel are able to advise the agency on the proposed adoption support, future contact arrangements and whether/how the exercise of parental responsibility by birth parents and/or prospective adopters should be restricted

A Panel can alert the Agency Decision Maker to practice issues which may give concern although this is not part of the decision making process.

Business Support

Administrative tasks include the production of an annual schedule of panels, ensuring attendance, maintaining records and panel booking systems, responding to enquiries, receiving and distribution of reports and minutes, constructing agendas and liaising with the Advisor and the Chair. The agency is currently considering the electronic circulation of papers for some panel members, in the interests of security and efficiency. This may also help to avoid last minute withdrawal of cases and possible delay, due to the late circulation of paperwork as lead in time should reduce.

4. Quality Assurance Functions – Feedback

The following information reflects the overall quality of assessment reports and presentation of reports to adoption panel. Prospective Adopters Reports (PAR's) are written by adoption social workers, and

since January 2014 there have been changes to the timescales for approving adopters. Assessment and approval is now considered in two stages, with the aim of speeding up the overall process for prospective adopters and the Prospective adopters report follows a new and simplified format, which has successfully reduced paperwork. Panel members welcome this change and do not feel that there has been a lack of information as a result of these changes. However, panel members do rely on the analysis of the social worker in terms of information presented. Adoption Placement Reports (matching reports or APR's) are completed jointly with adoption social workers and the child's social workers. At this stage Panel will still see the Child Permanence Report and the Agency Decision maker's comments in respect of the Adoption plan for the child.

A Quality Assurance pro forma is used for each case presented to adoption panel, and completed by panel members, comments being collated by the Chair. The overall quality of the reports presented is given a score of 1-5 with 5 being excellent, 4 Very good, 3 good, 2 satisfactory and 1 poor.

The QA format also registers whether the reports have been prepared by a suitably qualified social worker, and whether appropriate timescales for approval of adopters and matching of children have been achieved. (In line with regulatory requirements.)

In addition the format enables panel members to feedback on any inaccuracies noted, any information missing, and any feedback for the Agency which may relate to practice issues or a concern for example.

5. Prospective Adopters Reports

York is in the unusual position of using voluntary or other local authority adopters for matching all children (due to the small size of the Local Authority.) The panel therefore has the opportunity to consider assessment reports prepared by other agencies (at the point of matching) and is able to make some comparisons in terms of quality.

Social workers presenting prospective adopters have been confident and have been seen to have good working relationships. Social workers have been able to predict possible areas of concern and have addressed issues well. The overall quality of report writing and presentation is very good.

For the purposes of comparison it is noted that In the 6 month period April 2013 to September 2013, 10 adopters were presented for approval. At this stage the timescale for approval was 8 months and this was met in 8 cases

Delay was for the following reasons:

1. A brief report was presented and further work required due to some complex assessment issues. The final outcome was a positive recommendation.
2. In 1 case there was a delay between group preparation work and allocation of an assessing social worker. Once allocated assessments progressed well.

From September 2013, quality assurance reflected a change in timescales for an assessment to be completed. From 1st July 2013, the process for approving prospective adopters was revised to a shorter two stage process, due to a change in regulation. The expectation is that the new application and assessment process will be completed within 6 months in total. In all but exceptional cases, it is expected that Stage 1 will take no longer than 2 months and Stage 2 will take no longer than 4 months. There is also a new fast track process for previous adopters and approved foster carers.

Panel has had the opportunity to consider 5 approvals in the period October 2013 to March 2014. All were recommended for approval and subsequently agreed by the agency decision maker. In one case, one panel member dissented on the basis of emotional capacity to understand the needs of an adopted child. All other cases were unanimously recommended. One case included foster carers who were then considered for a match for a child already in their care.

6. Matching reports

Again for comparison, the period April to September had 4 matches approved and from October to March 3 matches have been considered (7 in total).

Overall the work was assessed as good with positive feedback. Where issues arose in relation to information missing or inaccuracies it related to the child permanence report rather than the Prospective adopters report.

Timescales for matches were met in all cases apart from one where a sibling group required a longer period of time.

At this stage adopters attending panel have usually met the foster carer and have received additional information about the child through a life appreciation day or meeting the medical advisor for example. They come high with anticipation and have often prepared book or transition toys for the child. There is an expectation by panel that the proposed match will have been well prepared as the emotional investment for all concerned is considerable.

7. Other cases considered

Child's plan for adoption

Panel have considered one child's adoption plan in this period due to the child being relinquished for adoption.

Fostering to adopt

The panel have considered one case where a child was placed on a fostering to adopt basis, where the Agency Decision Maker has agreed a couple as temporary foster carers in order for a child to be placed without delay.

Disruption report

The panel receives Disruption Reports in relation to any breakdowns in adoptive placements. Lessons learnt from disruption meetings may be shared with panel members and social workers as part of on-going

development and learning. There have been two disruptions this year. One case has been considered in this period

8. Timescale for Agency decision

The revised guidance 1.57 indicates that the Agency Decision Maker must make a decision within 7 working days of receiving the Panel's recommendation and final set of minutes. Final minutes are usually achieved within 4 working days and a system for consulting panel members to see minutes once the Chair and Advisor have made amendments, is working well. York has achieved a quick turnaround for decision making and seems able to adhere to these requirements.

9. Qualified Social workers

Panels are required to feedback on whether the social worker preparing the reports was suitably qualified. 100% of cases presented were by a suitably qualified social worker. Where a worker has little experience of attending or presenting at panel, team managers attended in a supportive role.

10. Agency Feedback

Panels are able to feedback to the Agency any practice issues or areas of concern that might need to be addressed by the Agency rather than by individual social workers or team managers. This is rarely given as practice and process is generally seen to be a good standard.

A summary of issues arising are as follows:

The panel room is very formal and has been very cold. Sometimes members have difficulty gaining access if they arrive early. The waiting area for those visiting panel however is much improved with the new premises.

It is not necessary for a legal advisor to attend panel but York has regularly received written legal advice on all cases. Unfortunately this was arriving on the morning of panel, for reasons beyond the advisors control. This sometime caused delay especially if other papers arrive on the morning. The actual legal advice and views and opinions of the legal advisor in respect of the overall assessment or match have now been more clearly separated for the minutes, following discussion, and this is working well.

A number of panel's have been cancelled due to lack of cases to present. Since September, 6 panels have been held, out of a possible 13, with 7 approvals and 2 matches being considered in this period most of this reduction on cases being presented is due to fewer children coming into care

11. Feedback from adopters

Adopters are invited to Panel at the point of both approval and matching. In all cases Adopters have attended and have been well supported by their social workers. Most adopters find the process daunting but appreciate the opportunity to contribute to the decision making process. Their feedback is welcomed and panel members are able to learn from the feedback provided.

Adopters are asked the following questions and 13 Adopters responded.

Preparation for panel

yes no

Did you feel you knew enough about coming to panel?

Did your family placement worker show you the book about attending

Was the booklet helpful in helping you decide whether to attend?

Reasons for choosing to attend

‘Nothing can stop the nervousness it’s the enormity of the decision that makes it difficult’

‘It’s important to understand how panel works and to respond personally’

‘Panel had a celebratory feeling after all the hard work’

‘I was terrified but being able to answer the questions gave me confidence’

Generally the only thing that people would change was the room which was found to be intimidating, although the location is good and the waiting area was good. Adopters particularly welcomed being shown the room before hand, and members having their names on the table. Fewer panel members and less formality was welcomed.

12. Social work feedback

Social workers have not provided feedback in this period as a routine part of the business.

13. Other Quality Assurance functions

The Adoption Panel should monitor the progress of individual children for whom adoption is the plan up to the making of an Adoption Order, through progress reports as required under the placement for adoption procedure. York Adoption Panels receive this information as ‘Feedback’ at each Panel which is presented by the Panel Advisor and also receive a 6 monthly summary of children waiting to be placed.

Summary and conclusions

During this period adoption panels have continued to operate in a context of considerable government and resultant media interest in adoption. Local Authority adoption performance is under close scrutiny

with particular focus on the time taken to place children in adoptive families and the process by which adopters are prepared and assessed.

With the removal of children's plans from the panel, as a key area of business, York Adoption Panels reduced the frequency from 3 weekly to one panel per month but reverted to 3 weekly dates in order to accommodate reduced timescales for assessment etc. In the last 6 months, a number of panels have been cancelled. However, through using the central list, an additional panel can be held if required in order to avoid any delay.

The overall quality of adoption work has remained good in York and there has been evidence of excellent practice, knowledge and expertise, in a significant number of cases.

Sheila Barton

Independent Panel Chair

20.5.14