



WORCESTERSHIRE CHILDREN FIRST FOSTERING PANEL

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1. INTRODUCTION AND LEGAL FRAMEWORK

Worcestershire Children First Fostering (WCFF) seeks to provide foster carers who are able to meet the needs of children placed with them. It sees WCFF's panel as having an important role to play in assisting WCFF to ensure that foster carers have the skills and knowledge to meet the needs of children and it welcomes the independent scrutiny that the panel provides.

The Fostering Regulations 2011, 23 – 25, Statutory Guidance for Fostering 2011, Section 5 and the National Minimum Standards (NMS), Standard 14 set out the role and function of fostering panels.

Fostering panels are intended as multi-disciplinary bodies with a considerable element of independence from the fostering service. The panel does not make decisions but instead makes recommendations to the Agency Decision Maker (ADM) who reaches a decision having taken into account the panel's recommendations. Panels provide objectivity and have a quality assurance role having the ability to challenge practice which is felt to fall short of the Regulations or NMS, or not to be in the interests of children.

The legislation, guidance and NMS set out the framework for the constituting of panels, recruitment of panel members, experience of the panel chair and the running of panel meetings.

This policy sets out how WCFF's panel meets those requirements.

2. THE ROLE AND FUNCTION OF WCFF'S PANEL

WCFF's panel will consider:

- applications for approval and to recommend whether or not a person is suitable to act as a foster carer
- the terms on which foster carers should be approved (e.g. number and age of children to be placed)
- consider the first review of newly approved foster carers
- any subsequent reviews referred to it by WCFF, to recommend whether or not the foster carers remain suitable to foster and if the terms of their approval remain appropriate
- Any appeals made to WCFF by prospective foster carers\ foster carers with regards to a decision on their suitability to foster or terms of approval.

The panel also has responsibility to

- 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
- give advice and make recommendations on any matter or cases referred to it by WCFF.

In its role of quality assurance the panel will receive the Registered Manger's Annual Report. The Registered Manger will also meet quarterly with the panel chair and vice chairs to review the functioning and business of the panel, the quality of the assessments presented to panel and discuss any concerns that panel may have. This will also be an opportunity to share information on WCFF, the number of children in placement, number of fostering households, recruitment information and development of WCFF.

3. PANEL MEMBERSHIP

WCFF seeks to have 20 panel members in its central pool of panel members with a range of backgrounds and experiences which allows the panel to discharge its function effectively. This will be a mix of independent members and WCFF staff. There is a requirement for each panel meeting to have a social worker on panel who has at least three years' relevant post-qualifying experience and who is registered with the Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC) The need for this will be reflected in the central pool. Although there is no maximum time that a panel member can remain part of the central pool WCFF will seek to maintain a pool of 20 with new members joining as required to ensure it can facilitate the number of panels required.

3.1 RECRUITMENT AND INDUCTION OF PANEL MEMBERS

Following an expression of interest and an initial discussion with the Team Manager (Panel's Advisor) prospective panel members will be asked to complete an application form and provide 2 personal and a professional reference including a previous employer. Where the prospective panel member is a panel member with another fostering agency a reference will also be sought from the panel's advisor to that panel.

On receipt of the application the prospective panel member will be interviewed by the Panel's Advisor and if positive following the receipt of satisfactory references and DBS they will be added to the central pool.

If there is information on the DBS this should be referred to the Registered Manager who will make the decision on whether the prospective panel member is added to the pool. The information gathered during the recruitment process will be retained securely by WCFF and DBSs will be updated every 3 years.

Panel members will be expected to sign

- a confidentiality agreement
- a fostering panel membership agreement which covers WCFF's expectations of panel members, confidentiality of records and information submitted to panel, commitment to training issues and commitment to anti-discriminatory practice.

As part of their induction new panel members will be required to observe at least one panel before taking up their panel membership. They will also be required to complete the following e- learning

- Children's Safeguarding
- Safe guarding adults
- Data protection
- Faith and Belief
- Equality in the workplace
- Prevent

3.2 PANEL MEMBER'S PERFORMANCE.

The Membership Agreement sets out the performance objectives for new panel members. Panel members have an annual review with the Panel Chair and Panel's Advisor where their performance is measured against these objectives.

If there are any concerns about the performance of a panel member these will be addressed with them by the Panel Chair and \or Panel Advisor when they arise so that any learning and developmental needs are addressed promptly. If the panel member's performance remains of concern this will be referred to the Registered Manager who will consider whether they should be removed from the central pool. In the event of that decision being taken the panel member will be informed in writing and this will include the reasons for this decision. A record is kept of the panels members sit on, training they undertake and notes from their annual review.



3.3 PANEL MEMBERS' EXPENSES

WCFF pays a fixed rate to cover panel members expenses when they attend panel or attend training specifically for panel members or as identified as part of their develop at their annual review.

3.4 PANEL MEMBERS TRAINING

Following their induction panel members will be expected to attend the 2 business\training events organised annually by the Panel's Advisor. They are also able to access any of the training in the Foster Carers Training Programme including e- learning and classroom sessions alongside foster carers and supervising social workers. Panel members will also be invited to the annual Foster Carer Conference. WCFF will ensure that it puts on joint training for panel members and staff of WCFF at least once a year.

3.5 RESIGNATIONS

A panel member may resign at any time by giving one month's notice in writing.

4. PANEL CHAIR AND VICE CHAIRS

The Panel Chair who must be independent will be appointed by WCFF following a tendering process which will be undertaken every 3 years. The independence of the chair is important as they are required to ensure that panel fulfils its quality assurance role free of undue influence.

The following criteria was\will be used during the tendering process

- Applicant has a sound understanding of the fostering process
- Authority and competence to chair the panel
- The ability to analyse and explain complex issues
- The ability to identify key issues, problems and solution
- Excellent interpersonal, oral and written communication skills.

As with panel member the appointment of the chair is subject to a DBS check and references.

The Chair will have an annual review conducted by the Registered Manager. Panel members and those attending panel will be asked to contribute feedback on the Chair's performance to their review.

The Panel Chair's contract sets out terms for the contract ending either by WCFF or the panel chair.

WCFF has also appointed two Vice Chairs from its central pool, whose role is to chair the Panel when the Chair is unavailable.

WCFF pays a fixed fee for each panel chaired.

5. PANEL MEETINGS

5.1 FREQUENCY OF MEETINGS

WCFF normally meets 3 times a month. Panel members are drawn from the central pool and wherever possible have knowledge and experience that reflect the items to be presented to panel. WCFF's panel consist of 5 – 6 members including the chair balancing the need for panel having sufficient members to have a range of knowledge and experiences whilst not being so large as to intimidate those attending the meeting.

If required WCFF will put on additional panel meetings to ensure that matters are dealt with in a timely way.

5.2 REQUIREMENT FOR PANEL TO BE QUORATE

For a panel to be quorate it must have at least 5 members including the chair.

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 other members.

WCFF would normally aim to have 3 independent members at each meeting of panel (this may include the chair) but as a minimum 2.

WCFF's panel will be provided with medical advice by the Named Doctor for Looked after Children and legal advice by the principal solicitor for Children Services, Worcestershire County Council as part of WCF buy back of services. This will normally be provided in writing or to the Panel's Advisor prior to panel.

Panel members can request additional relevant information if they think they have insufficient information on which to base a recommendation.

The Panel Administrator may arrange in consultation with the Chair for observers to attend meetings, this may be new panel members or new members of staff as part of their induction. No more than 2 observers may attend at any one time.

5.3 ATTENDANCE OF PROSPECTIVE FOSTER CARERS\FOSTER CARERS

Prospective foster carers and foster carers whose approval is being considered are expected to attend panel. Panel will only consider items without the prospective carers or carers if there are good reasons why they cannot attend otherwise the matter will be deferred. Prospective foster carers and foster carers may bring a supporter with them.

Prospective foster carers\foster carers will be given the opportunity to be heard in person at a panel meeting which is considering or reviewing their approval. Subject to the need to protect children and deal sensitively with third party information they will be given a copy of the reports being presented to panel prior to the panel meeting and can make written submission to panel if they wish to.

5.4 REPORTS FOR PANEL

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. WCFF uses a secure portal to send reports and other information to panel members which they access through a tablet issued to them by WCFF. The Panel Administrator is able to send the information to those sitting on a particular panel and can also delete information from an individual's tablet if it is misplaced. All information is remotely deleted from members tablets one month after panel.

5.5 PANEL MEETINGS

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

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

Where there is a serious difference of opinion among members, the Chair may ask for more information to be made available to the Panel before a recommendation is made. Serious reservations expressed by individual Panel members about a particular recommendation will be recorded in the Panel minutes for consideration by the Agency Decision Maker.

Where prospective foster carers\ foster carers have attended panel, they will be asked to wait while panel discusses their decision. The Chair of the panel will then normally inform them verbally of the panel's recommendation to the ADM.

5.6 MINUTES OF PANEL

The Panel Administrator will prepare the minutes in which reasons for recommendations and any disagreements or dissent will be fully recorded.

The minutes of the panel will be sent to the Chair who then ensures that the minutes of the panel meeting are accurate and clearly cover the key issues and views expressed by panel members and record the reasons for its recommendation. These are then passed on to the Agency Decision Maker. Since no member of the fostering panel is permitted to take part in deciding to approve a person as a foster carer the panel chair will not be in a position to discuss the case with the Agency Decision Maker (ADM) the recommendations should be passed on by way of the written minutes.

5.7 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 who will decide whether this presents as a conflict of interest. In other circumstances there may be a personal interest or connection which would require the Panel member to refrain from participation. In cases where it is not clear advice should be sought from the Panel's advisor and if necessary, the legal advisor.

6. AGENCY DECISION MAKER

Following receipt of the panel minutes WCFF's decision-maker will make a considered decision that takes account of all the information available to them, including the recommendation of the fostering panel. The foster carer or prospective foster carer will be informed orally of the decision maker's decision within two working days and written confirmation including a copy of the panel minutes and the ADM decision will be sent to them within five working days. Information on how applicants can appeal the ADM decision is sent with this letter to prospective foster carers where the decision is not to approve, terminate a foster carer approval or change the terms of a foster carer's approval without their consent. More information on this process is available in the Recruitment, Assessment and Approval of Foster Carers and the Assessment of Connected People and the Approval of Family and Friends Foster Carers.



