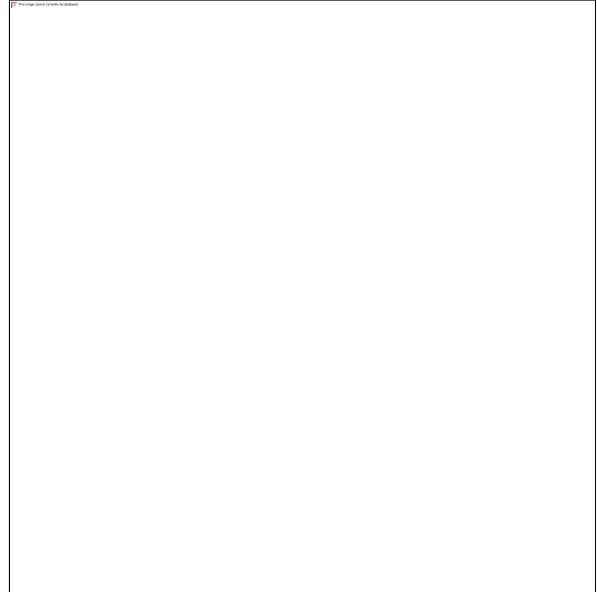




# **Fostering Panel Annual Report**

**1 April 2022 / 31 March 2023**

## ***Foreword***



As the independent co-chairs for Wirral Council Fostering Panel, we are pleased to present the Fostering Panel Annual Report 2022/2023. This report describes the business undertaken by the Panel this year which has increased from last year. It provides a picture of the Fostering Service, an analysis of the quality of the service, and the challenges faced. We hope you find the report informative and useful.

Last year a number of recommendations were agreed to further improve the service. We have looked at progress on these and set out recommendations for this coming year.

Children and young people cared for by Wirral Local Authority deserve the best opportunity to reach their full potential in the safety of positive and welcoming homes as they grow up. This can best be achieved through excellent foster carers supported by the fostering service. The panel, working closely with all those involved in supporting children and young people has a clear focus on these goals.

**Audrey Williamson / Gary Pickles**  
**Independent Co-Chairs**

## 1. Introduction

Although there is no statutory or regulatory requirement for an Annual Report of the Fostering Panel to be produced, this report is intended to contribute to the *Fostering Services: National Minimum Standards - standard 14*:

- *Panel/s provide quality assurance feedback to the fostering service provider on the quality of reports being presented to Panel.*

It will also follow good practice guidelines which suggest that the Annual Report should have a wider remit, commenting on the work of the Fostering Panel, its constitution, and arrangements with the Service.

This Annual Report has been written by the two Panel Chairs of Wirral Metropolitan Borough Council Fostering Panel. Both Panel chairs are experienced in social work and fostering, and Gary Pickles took up post with Wirral in July 2021 and Audrey Williamson in January 2022. Panel members have contributed to the report and their comments and suggestions have been welcomed. The report covers the period 1<sup>st</sup> April 2022 to 31<sup>st</sup> March 2023.

### Constitution of Wirral Metropolitan Borough Council Fostering Panel

Wirral Metropolitan Borough Council is a local authority Fostering Service. Its Fostering Panel has several regulatory functions which are listed under the *Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011 - regulation 25*. They are to:

- make recommendations about the approval of foster carers.
- recommend any terms of approval.
- consider the first review of carers and any other review if requested by the fostering service provider, and to recommend the continuing approval of carers.
- advise, where appropriate, on the procedure for reviews of carers and periodically to monitor their effectiveness.
- oversee the conduct of assessments carried out by the fostering service provider.
- give advice and make recommendations on other matters or cases referred to it by the fostering service provider.

The relevant Legislation, Guidance and Standards for the fostering panel are:

- The Children Act 1989
- The Children Act 1989 Guidance and Regulations Volume 4: Fostering Services
- Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011.
- Family and Friends Care: Statutory Guidance for Local Authorities 2011.
- Fostering Services: National Minimum Standards
- Care Planning, Placement and Case Review (England) Regulations 2010

- Care Planning, Placement and Case Review and Fostering Services (Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations 2013
- Adoption and Care Planning (Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations 2014
- Care Planning and Fostering (Miscellaneous Amendments) (England) Regulations 2015
- Assessment and Approval of Foster Carers: Amendments to the Children Act 1989 Guidance and Regulations, Volume 4: Fostering Services, 2013

The composition of Fostering Panels, terms of reference and functions are set out in The Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011.

All fostering service providers are legally required to have a Fostering Panel. The Regulations ensure that Fostering Panels have an independent role separate from the fostering service provider.

### **1. Panel Meetings**

The Wirral Metropolitan Borough Council Fostering Panel meetings usually take place on a Thursday and the frequency of panel meetings is 4 per month. This reflects Service demand and helps monitor quality across the fostering service.

Most Panels in the last year have been held virtually, using Microsoft Teams. The virtual meetings run smoothly and effectively and there are costs and benefits in continuing to hold virtual meetings. However, it is recognised that some business is best managed face-to-face, and the Panel Advisor supported by the Chairs has strived to hold as many as possible in this manner. However, the shortage of appropriate rooms in the borough has limited the number of Panels that could be held face-to-face.

### **2. Number of Fostering Panels**

There were 47 Fostering Panel's planned during 2022/2023 although 3 were cancelled; 2 because there were no cases ready and 1 because quoracy could not be achieved. The majority were chaired by an Independent Chair, but the Vice-Chairs covered when Chairs were absent. Only 3 were face-to-face.

### **3. Standing Members of Panel**

#### ***Panel Chair***

As previously noted, there are two Chairs who took up post during this period. Both Gary and Audrey are experienced Foster Panel Chairs and are registered social workers. They work closely together to ensure there is as much consistency as possible, both in the format of panel and in reaching Panel recommendations.

### ***Panel Vice Chairs***

There are two experienced Vice-Chairs who have chaired on occasion during the year. Terry Jones is a social worker and Dave Boddison was a foster carer for another Local Authority. When not chairing Terry and Dave also attend as independent panel members.

### ***Panel Adviser***

The Panel is very well supported by Lisa Greenhalgh-Young. Lisa is an experienced registered social worker with many years of experience in fostering services. Lisa undertakes quality assurance work prior to assessments and reviews of carers coming to Panel as the paperwork must include all the necessary checks and references. Advice is also provided on fostering regulations.

### ***Panel Administrator***

Jordan Gaier is the longstanding panel administrator. Jordan provides excellent support to panel; she administers panel papers and oversees the post panel process as well as drafting the panel minutes which provide an accurate record of the meeting. The Panel is well administered, and Jordan's role is highly valued.

## **4. Fostering Panel Central List**

The quorum for panel business is a minimum of 5 central list members, to include:

- The chair or vice chair.
- A social worker with at least 3 years relevant post-qualifying experience.
- 3 other members, of which, in the absence of the independent chair, at least one must be independent of the Fostering Service.

Panel members have a range of skills and backgrounds and can offer a wide perspective on assessments and reviews. Some panel members have attended Panel for a number of years while some have only recently joined. Of the membership 8 are Wirral employees. While these Panel members bring expertise there remains a need to ensure that independent panel members continue to be recruited in line with best practice.

There is always more that can be done to improve the diversity of the Panel membership and the Panel Adviser has retained a continued recruitment to strengthen Panel.

As with most Panels there is a turnover of members. Five panel members left during this period for a variety of reasons. There was no obvious pattern in why panel members left.

Panel Members are drawn from the following members of the Central List:

<b>Name</b>	<b>Role</b>	<b>Date enrolled</b>
Gary Pickles	Chair	26.07.2021
Audrey Williamson	Chair	18.01.2022
Dave Boddison	Vice Chair	2003
Terry Jones	Independent Member	11.12.2020
Paul Fillis	Independent Member	05.05.2018
Kevin Pearson	Independent Member	2020
Sheila Clarke MBE	Independent Member	2003
Emma Green	Independent Member	2020
Cherry Povall	Elected Member	03.11.2012
Sandra Williams	Social Worker	01.06.2021
Joanne Brown	Social Worker	08.05.2018

Liam Murphy	Social Worker	06.08.2021
Angela Holland	Social Worker	06.08.2021
Catherine Coyle	Social Worker	06.08.2021
Angela Churchill	Independent Member	18.01.2022
Ben Grinyer	Independent Member	14.02.2022

## **5. Observers to panel**

The Fostering Panel welcomes observers as a part of their learning and development. During this period there have been frequent observers including social workers and new Panel Members.

## **6. Fostering Panel Development**

All panel members who had been in position for one year or more received an appraisal. Appraisals were undertaken by the Chairs and supported by the Panel Adviser. Appraisals provide an opportunity to look at individual member's developments, feedback on Panel and identify areas for learning. Emerging themes from the appraisals were used to inform the agenda for the development sessions.

It is best practice to provide development sessions for Panels, ensuring Panel members are informed and supporting continuous improvement. Two full development sessions shared by Panel and the Fostering Service were held during this period. The agendas covered a range of subjects including Safeguarding and the work of the LADO, reflective practice, foster carer recruitment and Fostering Service and Service wide updates. Each session provided Panel Members to break-away from the wider group and consider the process of Panel and reflection on the work undertaken. Discussion was lively and these sessions provided Panel Members with an opportunity to be a part, yet separate and independent, of the full Service.

## **7. Panel Activity**

The following items were presented to the Fostering Panel for consideration.

## Connected Approvals

59 Family and Friends (Connected People) Households were presented to Panel requesting approval for foster carers to care for specific children. This is approximately the same number as last year and remains a significant area of panel business. These can often be complex assessments and must be completed within the court timetable for care proceedings. Of these 59 applications, 6 were not recommended by the panel as suitable to foster and the Agency Decision Maker concurred with Panel in all cases.

4 assessments were deferred for further information before panel felt sufficiently informed to make a clear recommendation.

## Mainstream Approvals

21 Mainstream Fostering Households were presented to Panel, and this is a pleasing increase of 10% on last year. It is recognised that there is a national shortage of mainstream foster carers and Wirral has worked hard to recruit more to support its children. All applicants presented to the Panel were recommended as suitable to foster by the Agency Decision Maker.

## Reviews

61 Reviews have been presented to the Panel. These Reviews breakdown as follows:

Reviews	
27	First Reviews, some were also early reviews, requests for a change of approval and reviews following an allegation.
9	Reviews following allegations
3	Reviews requesting a change of approval.
3	Early Reviews
21	5-yearly Reviews
Analysis	
0	Reviews were deferred at Panel.
3	Reviews recommended as not suitable to continue fostering
2	Households approved as not suitable to continue fostering by the ADM

The number of 5-year reviews has been welcomed by Panel. Often foster carers have not attended Panel for a number of years and such reviews provide an opportunity to clearly focus on their development, progress and the quality of the current placement. It is often a celebration of foster carers 'hard work and commitment to the children and young people

they care for. In addition, it provides additional safeguarding for children and young people.

**Other Items**

There were 101 other items presented to Panel itemized in the table below.

<b>Other Items</b>	
Exemptions	17
Resignations	48
Brief report	2
Appeals to panel	1
Reg: 25 Extension requests	33

**Resignations:**

Below follows an interesting breakdown of the reasons as to why foster carers resigned from the Service and their role as foster carers. This should prove useful for future recruitment activity but also for Panel.

Connected resignations	32 in total	%
Allegation or practice concern	2	6%
Child returned home	4	13%
Placement not needed	2	6%
Placement breakdown	6	19%
SGO granted	15	47%
YP turned 18	2	6%
Unhappy with service	1	3%

Mainstream resignations	13 in total	%
Retired	3	23%
Adopted child in care	1	8%
Allegation or practice concern	1	8%
Other	2 - 1 separated from partner/ wanted more family time.	15%
Unhappy with service	6	46%

## **8. Agency Decision Maker**

The Agency Decision Makers have as always provided welcome challenge to Panel recommendations, providing an opportunity for Panel to reflect and learn from the decisions made and making for informed decision making. The Agency Decision Maker's decision, although making comment, did not always agree with Panel's recommendation this year.

Of note is the increased number of Early ADM decisions requested by the Service which is an indication of the pressure resulting from the requests by Courts for more rapid conclusions to proceedings.

- Early ADMs from April 2021 to March 2022: 13
- Early ADMs from April 2022 to March 2023: 32

Wirral Council has three Agency Decision Makers overseeing the work of Fostering Panel. This is understandable looking at the volume of business managed by Panel and is not an issue for Panel. That said, the number of ADM's may open up a line of enquiry for Ofsted as they look at consistency in decision making, rigour and involvement with Panel. It may be a worthwhile exercise to compare, and contrast, the work of each ADM.

## **9. Quality of Applications to Panel**

There is general agreement between Panel Members that they have observed a steady improvement over the last year in the quality of reports that have been presented to Panel. It has been noted that documentation presented to panel in 2022 /2023 has been quality assured, and recommendations have been authorised by the relevant Team Manager. Panel papers are more cohesive, usually analytical and in the main follow an agreed format.

The panel's judgement of an assessment tends to be indistinguishable from its judgement of the quality of the report. It will deem a report to be of sufficient quality when it is seen to provide comprehensive knowledge and understanding of the applicant/s and makes clear and persuasive the reasons for the recommendation or matching considerations, thus reflecting a sound assessment. It is welcome practice for assessing social workers to identify the applicant's vulnerabilities as well as their strengths.

When reading the assessment reports, Panel members routinely check that all required basic components of an assessment have been completed, for example.

- that checks, medicals and references have been completed.

- the applicant’s history, relevant experience, motivation and understanding of the fostering task explored.
- that applicants have participated in the Skills to Foster training (where appropriate) and have expressed a commitment to further training and development.
- that any children or relevant ex-partners have been consulted.
- that any health and safety issues have been addressed.

When introducing each item, the chair seeks confirmation from the Panel members that the reports provide enough information on which to base the discussion, on the understanding that any specific gaps could be filled by the presenting social workers or foster carers. The opportunity to comment on matters of practice, including timeliness, is available when issues for discussion are identified.

## 10. Panel Advice and Impact

The Fostering Panel continues to comment on the quality of applications made but it also makes comments and offers advice on practice to the Service. This is done with the intention of helping to improve fostering practice and care planning for children. Any issues which are of concern and are not responded to, or it is believed urgent action is required, are escalated further up the hierarchy. This acts as an effective safeguard for both the Service and Panel and is not intended to undermine anyone in the Service.

Panel Advice is collated on the Panel Tracker, and this is managed by the Panel Adviser who chases up outstanding items and shares the Service response to Advice given with Panel Members. The following detail evidences the number and themes of advice, comment or concern raised and recorded on the Tracker – In 2022/223 Panel Members gave 63 pieces of advice to the Fostering Service / Children’s Teams which covered the following areas:

<b>Subject Area</b>	<b>Number</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Accommodation	2	3%
Carer needs information from the service	4	6%
Children’s wellbeing	8	13%
Health	3	5%
Process	10	16%
Support from service	28	44%
Training	8	13%

Of the 40 items detailed above, 63% have been resolved and closed.

As is clear, some of the regular themes relate to improving the process of assessing foster carers, the support of carers and training offer to foster carers. We are indebted to the Panel Adviser for ensuring the Service at least notes the advice given.

In addition, Panel occasionally escalates its concerns to senior managers when it believes an urgent action is required. This happened on one occasion this year, concerning an accommodation issue. It was pleasing to note that there was a positive and timely response leading to the carer and child successfully moving to more appropriate accommodation. The panel was pleased that such escalations are taken seriously and acted upon.

## **12. Experience of Attendees at Panel**

There has been regular feedback to Panel and feedback on the experience of attendees. Several examples are highlighted below. It is pleasing to note that almost all feedback was positive:

### **Attendees- carers/applicants**

42 carers / applicants responded to Panel's request for feedback. All were positive which is very positive and testament to Panel's focus on working to ensure Panel are always welcoming:

*I was really nervous before the meeting, but the panel members were really nice and friendly, and we got some really nice feedback about how we are doing with the children, thank you.*

*Very professional and very polite*

*Was really nervous to walk into the panel, but they quickly settled our nerves by being warm and welcoming. Everything was done quickly but without being rushed*

*Very friendly experience overall. Any nerves put at ease straight away by panel members*

### **Social Workers**

Social Workers too were positive about their Panel experience which is pleasing coming from fellow professionals:

*Questions for myself and the carer were well thought out and relevant to the issues raised.*

*Carer was pleased with how the panel was run and felt she was able to get her views across*

*Panel were very sensitive to the carer's recent bereavement. The carer was anxious about attending Panel on her own, however she was treated with respect and understanding of her situation. I would like to thank the panel members for this.*

*I found the panel members to be respectful of myself as a professional and my applicant. There was an appropriate length of time to listen to the answers of the applicant and respect shown to her dedication and care of her child looked after.*

### **13. Key Areas for Development for in 2022/2023:**

Panel's areas for development for last year were:

<b>Action</b>	<b>Outcome</b>
Continue to increase the diversity of fostering panel membership and explore the possibility of further recruiting independent social workers	While additional members have been recruited there remains a heavy reliance on social workers from the children's teams to attend as the social work Panel representative. This action therefore remains in place for next year.
Improve information sharing and increase the frequency of meetings between the Fostering Service and Fostering Panel and ensure all workers understand Panel and that there is open communication through to other parts of the service.	Regular meetings have been held between the managers of the service, the Panel chairs, and the Panel adviser. New dates have been set for this year. In addition, the most recent Development session was well represented by social workers in the fostering service, managers, including those at senior level, and panel members. Positive feedback was received on increased understanding of roles and responsibilities.
Ensure that there is a clear training programme in place for all panel members and that they continue to be offered annual Appraisals.	Training has been provided on the development days during the last 12 months. In addition, panel members have been able to access training provided for foster carers. Panel members are confident and increasingly skilled in their roles.
That further work is undertaken to ensure the Panel Advice Tracker is completed and outcomes addressed.	Whilst there has been over 50% of panel advice agreed and implemented by the service this remains an area Panel will wish to continue to scrutinise. It will be a continued recommendation for next year
That the Panel and the Service continue to	This has improved during the last 12

<p>seek the Voice of children to contribute to and inform Panel recommendations.</p>	<p>months but still requires a consistent approach. It will remain an action for this year. Understanding children views, their needs and wishes is critical in the provision of a high-quality service.</p>
<p>Support the Service in its Priorities for 2022-2023; particularly:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- To continue to increase the number of skilled foster carers.</li> <li>- Promote the Council as a Fostering Friendly organisation.</li> <li>- Ensure the Wirral Fostering brand is visible in and around Wirral.</li> <li>- Raise awareness of the need for more foster carers as well as educate people on the role of foster carers, what they can achieve, who can foster and the differing types of fostering.</li> </ul>	<p>Panel members have sought to support the service priorities. Members have attended social occasions with foster carers, worked with the service and Panel itself promotes a positive view of fostering and emphasise the value of foster carers when they present at Panel.</p>

#### **14. Key Areas for Development for in 2023/2024:**

- 1** Continue to increase the diversity of fostering panel membership and explore the possibility of further recruiting independent social workers.
- 2** That further work is undertaken to ensure the Panel Advice Tracker is completed and outcomes addressed.
- 3** That the Panel and the Service continue to seek the Voice of children to contribute to and inform Panel recommendations.
- 4** That the development sessions continue to be provided for all Panel members, particularly for new members.
- 5** Support the service and its priorities for 2023-2024.