

GUIDE to ATTENDING FOSTERING PANEL

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Document Summary

This guide acts as a reference document to support the attendance of new applicants and existing foster carers at Fostering Panel. It reflects relevant legislation, statutory guidance, and locally agreed policy. It is for:

- **Prospective and existing foster carers**
- **Practitioners and managers in the Fostering Service**
- **Fostering Panel Members**

It should be used as a resource to maintain good practice for the approval and review of all mainstream, connected persons and link foster carers and to ensure those attending Panel do so in an informed and supported way.

PLEASE NOTE: This is a **guide** to practice and, like all 'guides', good judgement should be exercised in its application. There may be times, and in individual cases, when following the guidance requires some flexibility or a level of discretion is needed.

In these instances, a discussion between the Service and Panel Adviser would be helpful to make sure that the Panel meeting will run smoothly, and everyone understands their role and any limitations, therein.

The term 'carer' is used to refer to new applicants, prospective and existing foster carers.

The acronym 'SSW' is used to refer to Assessing and Supervising / Supporting Social Workers.

Version	Change/Update	Responsible person
28.04.25	To include time for discussion with supporter / Virtual v. Face to Face Panels	Gill Davies

Introduction

Panel aims to maintain a collaborative relationship with fostering service colleagues to benefit all concerned, including and especially prospective and existing foster carers. However, it is a forum that operates independently of the service itself.

Panel works best when the carers are present to answer Panel's questions and ask any of their own. Whilst it is not a legal requirement, it is the service expectation that they will attend, and their attendance is highly valued by Panel as it assists them to reach a recommendation. It is therefore very important that they are encouraged and supported to attend, and this may be helped by knowing that someone familiar to them will be with them e.g. in their home.

In the event that the carers cannot attend themselves, then it is essential that their views on the written reports about them are provided to Panel. In the case of a Review at panel, the [Section C] Carers' report on their fostering involvement is required. If this is not provided, depending on the reason for this omission, Panel may be postponed until it is provided.

Process – prior to Panel Meeting

All prospective and existing carers will be invited to attend Panel with good notice, at least 5 working days before Panel meet. Panel fully expect that carers will have been made aware, by their SSW as early as the booking is made, of the date/proposed time their case is being heard already. Therefore, the email confirmation from Panel Admin is more of a formality.

All existing and prospective foster carers will be sent information about Fostering Panel that explains clearly what happens at panel and everything they might need to know to alleviate any anxiety about coming. This will also include profiles of the attending Panel Members.

Panel is held via the virtual medium of MS Teams, and it is an expectation that the SSW will ensure the carers are able to use this method competently. In most cases the SSW will be attending the carers' home to support them in person so can assist with any issues or use their own laptop. Where the SSW is unable to attend the carers' home e.g. they have two separate cases at Panel on the same day, then they must ensure the carers can access the meeting readily. Panel Admin can assist with this if asked.

Carers will be sent a link to their Teams 'Waiting Room' a week before attending.

In the event that the carer is unable to attend in person on Teams e.g. due to IT connectivity issues, then Panel is amenable to other mediums of communication such as a conference call on mobile. However, these are less efficient and agreeable than virtual attendance 'in person' so should only take place as a last resort.

There may be instances when carers prefer to attend a 'face to face' Panel. Examples may be when the case is particularly complex or sensitive such as for a review after an allegation or where the service recommendation is to change or terminate the carers' approval. Where carers have additional communication needs, a face-to-face Panel can also be offered.

Arranging a face-to-face Panel involves additional considerations such as availability of a suitable venue with at least two rooms, and sufficient Panel Members who can travel, to ensure quoracy. Therefore, we encourage the SSW to advise Panel Admin when booking their Panel slot, that a face-to-face Panel is preferred.

As noted above, it is a requirement that all prospective and existing carers are provided with all the papers being shared with Panel. They need to have time to read any assessment

report and consider any feedback e.g. from other professionals. Panel papers must include copies of any report provided, with confirmation that the carers have received them.

Statutory guidance (DfE July 2013: Vol.4) states *“the applicant must be notified that the full assessment report is to be sent to the panel, provided with a copy of the report and given 10 working days from the date of the notification to send their observations to the fostering service provider.”* This has been verified by legal advice from CoramBAAF.

Under no circumstances can Panel hear an item where the applicants/carers have not had enough time to read, reflect and respond to the content.

Process – At Panel

Attending Panel is not an interview scenario but an opportunity to ensure all the information needed is available to the ADM to make the final decision. So, it is important that the carers have the chance to contribute in person. The attending social worker is actively encouraged to support the carers in their responses to any questions that Panel put to them.

Carers attending Panel may have a support person of their choosing with them to provide emotional support during the meeting. However, this person:

- cannot intervene during the panel hearing (unless it is to ask for a break).
- cannot speak on the carers' behalf.
- cannot represent the carers if they choose not to attend.

This position follows the Independent Review Mechanism (responsible to Secretary of State for Education). Panel Admin should be advised in advance if a supporter will be attending.

In some circumstances, when advised in advance of the meeting, Panel may allow the support person to read out a statement written and signed by the carers e.g. in the event the carer feels unable to do so. This should be in the carers' own words and not someone's interpretation of their views. This written statement must be provided to Panel Admin promptly after the meeting to enable them to check key points made and ensure accuracy of the meeting minutes.

There will be time allowed within the Panel meeting, before and after the Panel ask their questions, for the carer to have a private discussion with their supporter if they wish e.g. to gain any advice.

If Panel is held virtually, and the supporter is not going to be present in the carers' home, they will also be sent a link to join the virtual panel. For face to face panels, the expectation is that any supporter will be present in person to provide any emotional support needed.

When held virtually, the Panel meeting will take place in the carers' 'Waiting Room' with all Panel members joining them there, as opposed to expecting the carers to 'move' from virtual room to room. It is hoped this approach is more relaxing and less onerous for the carers who can focus on the meeting content rather than practical considerations or tasks.

Summary

It is recognised that coming to Panel can be an anxiety provoking experience for carers, especially where the recommendation is not what they wish it to be. However, Panel do want the meeting to be as supportive as possible, for carers to feel comfortable with the process and that they have been heard. It is hoped that Panel can be a positive experience, regardless of the reason for attending or the eventual outcome.

References and Links

DfE July 2013: Vol.4 online at: [Fostering services: assessment and approval of foster carers - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/244811/20130704_Fostering_services_assessment_and_approval_of_foster_carers.pdf) Independent Review Mechanism [Independent Review Mechanism - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/244811/20130704_Fostering_services_assessment_and_approval_of_foster_carers.pdf)