

adoption counts

Supporting
families
through
adoption

Adoption Panels – Policy

(November 2017)



Salford City Council



Adoption Panels – Location and Frequency

Adoption Counts Adoption Panels take place in 4 of the 5 local authorities. Due to a decrease in the number of items being presented, it was not financially viable to continue holding Panels in Trafford. Panels take place in the following locations:

Unity House, Salford

Etrop Court, Wythenshawe

Fred Perry House, Stockport

Cledford House, Middlewich.

Panels take place fortnightly in Salford, three weekly in Wythenshawe and six weekly in Stockport and Middlewich. This provides a minimum of one Panel per week, with two Panels in one week (Wythenshawe and Salford) occurring at six weekly intervals.

Quoracy

In order to be quorate, there must be at least 5 Panel members present. These members must include the Independent Chair, a social worker with at least 3 years' relevant post-qualifying experience and three other members. If the Chair is not present and the Vice-chair who is chairing the meeting is not independent of the agency, at least one of these members must be an independent person.

Adoption Counts have made the decision that 6 Panel members (including the Chair) should be invited to attend each Panel to allow for any last-minute non attendance / apologies. It should be noted that, whilst medical advisors are included as voting Panel members, due to their workload they are often not available to attend for the whole Panel so they are excluded from the count of Panel members. This means that in practice, there are sometimes 7 Panel members.

Adoption Counts practice will be to have no more than two independent members (plus Chair) attending each Panel. This means that the other three Panel members need to be local authority employees.

Central List

Many of the existing local authority Panel members have transferred across to Adoption Counts, although there have inevitably been some withdrawals. Local authorities have continued to offer staff for the central list, although some authorities have provided more staff than others. It is hoped to increase the number of local authority staff on the list to avoid overuse of independent members, as this would have an impact on the budget.

Recruitment

New Panel members will be interviewed by an Operations Manager and/or an Adoption Team Manager, where they will be required to show proof of identity. Following a satisfactory interview, a DBS check will be carried out, 2 references will be obtained and the potential member will be invited to observe an Adoption Panel. The member will then be able to sit as a Panel member, although some further induction/training will be given within 10 weeks of being included on the central list. (NMS 23.13-16)

Panel Members

Panel members will be asked to complete a Panel Member's Agreement form (see Appendix 1) which details what is expected of them and what they can expect from the agency.

Each Panel member will receive an annual review of their performance, which will be carried out by a Panel Chair and an agency advisor. It is recognised that, in order for the review to be of value, it should be carried out by a Chair and an advisor who are familiar with the Panel member and his or her contribution to the Panel.

The signed Panel Member's Agreement and the annual reviews will be stored electronically on the Panel Member's file, along with any other relevant information.

There will be an annual training day for all members on the central list, along with members of the adoption team, however there will be ad hoc training opportunities throughout the year as and when different items are shared at Panel meetings for information and discussion.

Panel Member Attendance

The procedure for organising attendance will be as follows:

- Panel dates for the year will be circulated in October of the previous year.
- Panel members will be asked to indicate their availability, 4 months at a time. (It is not realistic to ask members to commit to attendance up to a year in advance.)
- Once this information is received, a named Panel Co-ordinator will send out invitations for all Panels within that 4 month period.
- 3 weeks prior to each Panel, the Co-ordinator for that Panel will send out a confirmation e-mail to the members who are due to attend.
- Panel members should only attend the Panels to which they have received a specific invite. Indicating that they are available for a Panel does not necessarily mean that they will be invited to attend.

Panel members' attendance is monitored via a centrally maintained spreadsheet. Wherever possible, invites to attend Panel will be shared equally amongst independent Panel members, although this is not always feasible as some Panel members are more willing to travel than others and thus are likely to receive more invites.

Panel Chairs

Adoption Counts will aim to have 4 independent Panel Chairs appointed, who will sit in rotation. This means that each Chair will attend at least one Panel per month, and every fourth month will Chair two Panels. The rota for the year will be sent out in October of the previous year and chairs will be expected to chair panels in the different locations across the region. If a Chair is unavailable for one of their specified Panels, he / she will be asked to negotiate a swap in line with agreed practice with one of their colleagues in the first instance. The Panel Team Leader must be kept advised of any changes made to the rota by the Panel Chairs.

Panel Chairs will receive an annual review of their performance which will be carried out by the Regional Adoption Agency Manager as Agency Decision Maker. Prior to the review, feedback will be sought from Panel members, social workers and prospective adopters who have attended Panel. The ADM will also attend a Panel as an observer prior to the review.

All Panel Chairs will be invited to attend the six monthly Panel business meetings. These will be held with the Operations Managers and the Regional Adoption Manager.

Agency Advisor Role

The agency advisor role will be carried out by the appointed panel advisor. Team managers will provide additional cover. Given it is not a statutory requirement for an agency advisor to be present the panel will still go ahead if an advisor is unable to attend in order to avoid delay for children and adopters. This will only be the case in exceptional circumstances and with the agreement of an operations manager and notification to the chair in advance where possible.

Panel Function / Remit

The adoption panel will make recommendations regarding:

- The suitability of prospective adopters to be approved
- Matching children with adopters
- Reviews of adopter approvals after 2 years approved or in other circumstances where necessary.
- Reviews of Salford children's care plans (SHOBPA). This will not apply to children looked after by the other four local authorities.
- Should be Placed for Adoption recommendation for relinquished children.
- Adopter resignations (will be heard as AOB unless there contentious or safeguarding issues in which case they will on the agenda as a separate item and full reports provided).

(Although permissible under regulatory guidelines it will not be common practice for approvals and matches for the same item to be heard at the same panel.)

Other cases (such as resignation of adopters or annual reviews) are not required to be heard at Panel, but may be presented to Panel if an Operations Manager deems this appropriate.

Any disruption of an adoptive placement will be dealt with separately, although any learning from a disruption meeting will be presented to the Panel to inform their future recommendations.

The Panel Day

Panels will start at 9.30 a.m, unless agreed otherwise with the Panel Chair and the Panel Team Leader. It is agreed that the optimum number of cases per Panel is 5. It may occasionally be necessary to hear 6 cases per Panel, but this should be a rare occurrence. It is expected that approvals should take 50 minutes and matches an hour, although for matches or sibling groups it may be necessary to extend this. When booking cases into Panel, social workers should inform the Panel Co-ordinator if they feel their case is particularly complex or may require extended discussion.

A Panel is classed as a half-day Panel if it runs for 4 hours or less. If the Panel runs for more than 4 hours, it is classed as a full day Panel.

Booking Cases onto Panel

Social workers should book their cases onto Panel at the earliest practical point. Generally this is the start of stage 2 for approvals, or at the point of holding a shortlisting meeting when considering a match. Social workers should use the Panel Referral form when booking cases, to ensure that Panel Co-ordinators have all the necessary information.

If Panels are over-subscribed priority will be given to matches in order to avoid delay for children. If necessary, an approval may be moved to accommodate a match, although this will be avoided if possible.

Documents Required For Panel

It is the responsibility of the adoption social worker (for approvals) or the family finder (for matches) to ensure that all necessary documentation is provided to the Panel Co-ordinators in a timely manner. Social workers will be advised of the deadline for receipt of documents (10 days prior to Panel) and provided with a list of required documents, if required, at the time of booking their Panel slot. The Panel Co-ordinator will send a confirmation/reminder e-mail to the worker 3 weeks prior to the Panel date.

Approvals	Matches	Review Approvals	of	Care Plan Reviews (Salford)
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		(2 years)	
Prospective Adopter Report (PAR)	Minutes / decision slip from SHOBPA	Up to date PAR (with updates in bold)	Report by social worker containing summary of family finding and views of Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO)
QA checklist	Updated Child Permanence Report (CPR) (within 3 months and must contain a picture) Adoption Placement Report (APR) Foster carer report PAR for adopters Minutes of approval panel Adoption Medical	Review report by social worker Minutes of approval panel	

When documents for Panel are submitted, Panel Co-ordinators will check that all required paperwork has been received. Panel Co-ordinators are not responsible for checking the content of documents, nor should they need to chase social workers for missing documents. Where panel administrators identify quality issues or documents are missing discussions will take place with Operations Managers.

Adoption Counts will operate a paperless Panel system and all Panel members, Chairs and medical advisors will be provided with electronic tablets and local authority employees will use existing tablets or laptops.) Panel Co-ordinators will upload Panel documents into a secure shared drive, and then e-mail the relevant Panel members to inform them that the documents are available. Once business for that Panel has concluded, the Panel members' access to that paperwork will be revoked. The paperless system will be agreed as compliant with information governance regulations by all 5 local authorities prior to implementation.

Quality Assurance Before Panel

A PAR audit will be completed by team managers when doing the quality assurance of the PAR for approvals. Child Permanence Reports are audited at the point of SHOBPA and again at match to monitor improvement. This will include a checklist for statutory and other required checks. See Appendix.

. It is the responsibility of the team manager for the assessing worker in respect of PARS, and for the family finder in the case of CPR,s to undertake these audits . The panel advisor will add an additional level of QA and ensure that all relevant documents are of an acceptable standard and identify / resolve any issues that are likely to result in panel not being able to hear the item. Where checks are outstanding or areas of the assessment raise concerns a management decision will be made about whether the item should proceed to panel or not.

The panel administrator will inform chair in advance who the agency advisor for the particular panel is so they can communicate to resolved issues / queries in advance. The chair and agency advisor will receive documents two working days in advance of the panel members. Where there are significant issues which could lead to an item being deferred by Panel the agency advisor and chair will between them work with the service with a view to filling gaps and enabling the item to be heard. In some situations, where this is not possible, they will reach the conclusion that the item should heard at a subsequent panel to enable the additional work to be done. In this situation the agency advisor will first of all discuss with an Operations Manager. Every effort will be made to avoid prospective adopters attending panel and experiencing a negative outcome if this can be avoided.

Panel members will receive documents five working days prior to panel. This two-day period will be used to resolve queries / missing information with the team manager who has done the quality assurance of the documents if required.

The agency advisor will read all documentation and review the checklist completed by team manager undertaking the quality assurance of the item.

All CPR's submitted to matching panel must have been updated (with the date of the updates clearly stated and updates made in bold to distinguish from previous version) within the previous three months.

Where there are quality issues with documents or other issues the chair and agency advisor will need to discuss and where necessary obtain agreement from an Operations Manager to delay an item going to panel. In the first instance every effort will be made to avoid this. Both the advisor and chair must assure themselves that all the required information is present. The chair will have the final / independent quality assurance role in the process.

Panel Attendance

For approval items the prospective adopter(s) will be invited to attend along with their social worker and where appropriate a supporter. Supporter's names will be given to the chair in advance and they will be informed by the chair and their social worker in advance that they are not able to contribute to the discussion in panel. Where the assessing social worker is unable to attend panel the item cannot be heard by panel unless specifically agreed with an operations manager and the chair in advance.

For matches the child's social worker, family finder and assessing social worker for adopters will attend. Where the social worker for the child is unable to attend their manager can do so on their behalf but only if they have an in depth knowledge of the child and the case. If there is no professional (with sufficient knowledge of the case) available to attend from the child's

agency the item cannot be heard. The family finder from Adoption Counts cannot take the place of the child's social worker at panel, even if employed by the same agency.

It will be not be Adoption Counts Practice to have children in panel but they may be in the waiting area with supporters or other suitable adults where appropriate and agreed in advance with their social worker.

Panel Process

The seating arrangements in panel will enable the chair to see and hear all panel members. The agency advisor will sit next to the chair and the applicants directly opposite. The minute taker will need to be sitting where they can see and clearly hear all panel members. Minute takers will ask for clarification from the chair when needed with a view to ensuring minutes are accurate and comprehensive.

All statements made in panel by panel members, the chair and agency advisor will be attributable to them in the minutes. The chair will be referred to as chair and applicants by first names.

Where adopters are in attendance the chair will introduce themselves outside the panel in the waiting area, and spend a few minutes with them and the social worker explaining the process. Where a supporter is present the chair will be notified in advance who this is and will explain to them their role in panel. The chair will also ask adopters if they would like to come back into panel to be told what the recommendation is or if they would prefer this to be done privately with the chair and their social worker.

The chair will open the item with a brief summary. For approvals this will include applicant's age, gender, where they live, other members of the household. In addition, how many children they wish to be considered for. The chair will also comment on whether the assessment was completed in timescales and if not the reasons for this and whether these were adopter or agency led.

The chair will confirm for the minutes whether all statutory and other checks are received and satisfactory.

The chair will clarify if there are any relevant convictions and if so provide overview of risk assessment and conclusion.

The Chair will clarify if there are any particular legal issues requiring legal advice. If so the advice will be provided to panel either by legal advisor who is present or more frequently via a written report.

The chair will follow the agreed format for the meeting as set out in the template for the minutes. It is important to adhere to this agreed structure so that attending workers know what to expect irrespective of who is chairing.

Approvals

The chair will ask panel members to state individually their views about the assessment / PAR identifying positives / strengths initially and then considering vulnerabilities. Panel members will then be asked to formulate questions for the social worker drawing from the significant issues already identified from discussion and any gaps from the QA process. It will be agreed who will ask each question. The chair will nominate if needed.

The social worker will be present in panel to respond to agreed questions without the applicants being present, in order to allow for professional debate. Whilst the social worker is in the room panel will agree questions to be asked of applicants and which panel member will ask them.

The chair will identify if there are any significant medical issues with the social worker present. If this is not the case the chair will refer to medical advice and confirm that there are no medical contraindications to adopting. If there are significant medical issues the medical advisor will have been asked to provide a written submission to panel and this will be referred to if they are not present.

The chair will bring the applicants into the room and panel will introduce themselves. Each panel member will ask their agreed questions. It isn't appropriate for Panel members to ask questions of the adopters that were not agreed with the chair beforehand. After questions the applicants will be asked if they have any questions of panel and if there is anything else they would like to say to panel. The applicants will then leave the room. The social worker will remain but only to observe. The adopters will wait by themselves or with supporter in the waiting room.

Where there are no significant or contentious issues or questions to be raised it will be acceptable for the social worker and the applicants to be invited in to panel at the same time. This will not be the norm however and will only apply to approval agenda items given it would be very unusual for panel not to have specific questions of professionals relating to a match.

Matching

For matching items a similar process will be followed. Panel will discuss issues and agree questions for professionals beforehand. The professionals will come into panel first without the adoptive parents to answer questions. The adopter will come into panel to answer agreed questions from panel. Before leaving panel adopters will be given opportunity to briefly share relevant items for preparing the child with panel.

Panel members will each give their recommendation and the reasons why individually. If there is any dissent by panel the name of the person dissenting and reasons why will be recorded in the minutes.

The recommendation will be shared with the adopters by the chair in the way they have agreed, either in panel or the waiting area. The agency decision process and timescale will

be explained to them. Where the recommendation is not unanimous, or in the case of a deferral or recommendation not to approve, a further explanation of the process following panel will be provided to the applicants.

Panel Feedback

Evaluation / feedback forms will be emailed to applicants and professionals from other agencies attending panel. (Appendix – Panel Feedback Form)

Panel will use an evaluation form for professionals attending panel on their performance in panel as well as quality of reports. The agency advisor and chair will use the PAR & CPR Audit / Checklist for grading PAR's and CPR's recording where areas of improvement are needed and giving the document an overall rating. Where there is a difference of view about whether a document may be rated "inadequate" a discussion will take place with an Operations Manager.

All of the panel feedback will be forwarded to the social workers attending panel and their managers by panel co-ordinators. (Appendix – CPR Audit / Checklist & PAR Audit / Checklist)

Copies of all feedback about panel and attendees to be retained by the panel manager in an agreed central location accessible by senior managers to inform service development and chair evaluations. These will be shared with panel chair and agency advisor routinely following panel. They will also be shared with chairs quarterly, although any specific issues regarding particular chairs highlighted in feedback will be shared at the time and escalated to operations managers.

Comments made by panel about the quality of reports will be redacted from panel minutes before these are shared with adopters.

Panel Minutes

Minutes for each Adoption Panel will be taken by either a Panel Co-ordinator or the Panel Team Leader. On some occasions, Panels may be split between Panel Co-ordinators. The agreed template / format for minutes will be followed (Appendix). This follows the format and structure of the meeting.

Panel Co-ordinators will ensure a timely turnaround of Panel minutes, normally by the close of the next working day unless the Panel has been particularly lengthy or complex. Once the initial draft of the minutes has been completed, these will be placed in the secure shared drive and an e-mail will be sent to Chair advising them of this. The chair will make initial amendments / corrections, following which the revised version will be sent to panel members and practitioners who will have the opportunity to make any further essential and factual corrections. The chair will then receive a further revised version for final approval.

Agency timescales for this process will be 8 days:

- Minute taker to write minutes – 2 working days

- Chair to make amendments and return to minute taker – 3 days
- Panel members & practitioner – 24 hours
- Minute taker for final version – 24 hours

The minutes will arrive with the agency decision maker at the latest on the eighth working day following the panel

Agency Decision Process

Agency Decisions are made by the Regional Adoption Manager for approvals, and the Agency Decision Maker of the child's local authority for matches. The Panel Co-ordinator will contact the relevant ADM's for each case 2 weeks prior to the Panel to arrange a decision date.

Once the final minutes are agreed, the Panel Co-ordinator will send the final minutes for each case to the correct ADM, along with the necessary documents if these have not already been sent. Panel Co-ordinators will await confirmation that the decision has been made, following this up as necessary. Once the decision has been made, the Panel Co-ordinator will send out a letter to the adopters from the Adoption Counts ADM confirming that the decision has been made. The Co-ordinator will also notify the family finder and/or the adoption social worker about the decision. The Co-ordinator will be responsible for updating any Adoption Counts systems with the decision.

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