**Rethinking fostering and adoption panels**

**Dr Arlene Weekes believes that the decisions that fostering and adoption panel members take are too often influenced by their own biases and backgrounds. She is calling for radical reform of how they are hired – and fired**

Fostering and adoption panel members should be more diverse and more well trained, according to Dr Arlene Weekes, a practising social worker, trainer and independent adoption and fostering panel chair.

Weekes has recently conducted PhD research into understanding how the lives, attitudes and values of adoption and fostering panel members influence their role and the recommendations they make.

The idea for Weekes’ research began many years ago, she says, when she was chairing a local authority adoption panel.

‘An older male panel member, who was an adoptee from Eastern Europe, considered himself assimilated into the UK, to the point that he did not believe that his, or anyone’s, cultural origin should play a significant role in recommendations,’ she says. The possible negative effects of this revealed themselves when he told a woman who was applying to adopt, who was of dual heritage and had been brought up by a white mother, that he didn’t think race had been an issue for her when she was growing up.

This incident caused Weekes to question how panel members’ personal experiences and beliefs influence their recommendations.

‘I continued to encounter professionals and panel members who acted as though their values and personal experiences had no bearing on their judgement, as though they were a blank sheet, completely impartial,’ she says. ‘I was amazed by this. I thought everyone would know their previous experiences impact the decisions they make.’

In addition to race, Weekes believes class has a large bearing on judgements, citing examples of middle class panel members looking down on working class candidates, while, conversely, some panel members showed ‘abhorrence to well-off candidates and questioned their motivations’.

**Power imbalance and scrutiny**

‘Panel members need to be supported to recognise the power they have and be guided not to abuse this power,’ explains Weekes. And this power imbalance can be both within the panel itself and between the panel members and candidates.

Weekes’ research reveals a lack of regular, structured support and guidance for panel members. She also highlights that many inexperienced panel members will defer to the panel chair or more experienced panel members rather than having the confidence to voice their own opinions.

‘Panel chairs can often go unchallenged,’ says Weekes. ‘People need to remember the chair facilitates panel but doesn’t have any more power than other panel members.’

Panel members are also seen by many as the decision makers, even though, in reality, this is someone in another role – the agency decision maker. ‘Panel members are there to verify the information provided in the paperwork, rather than interrogate the person on the day,’ says Weekes.

Weekes’ research also stresses the need to ensure good quality assurance and scrutiny is in place rather than a ‘conveyor belt/rubber-stamping of recommendations’.

**People who have experienced trauma**

Many people who have experienced trauma or suffering in their own childhood will be involved in caring for children as adults – and awareness needs to be raised about this, says Weekes. ‘An understanding is needed of the potential risks and benefits of early childhood adversity and adult life experiences, as these are still felt consciously or unconsciously,’ she says.

Weekes would like to see all panel members supported to use their life experiences in a relevant way. She explains: ‘These adverse experiences are valuable in providing unique insights which can be used empathically in the performance of an individual in their role, as long as the individual concerned is aware of, and can manage, their conscious and unconscious emotions.’

**Important findings**

There are several findings from her research which Weekes feels are particularly important. First and foremost, she says, is the need to recruit more diverse panel members in terms of their personal identities, experience and professional expertise.

Weekes urges fostering and adoption services to implement ‘rigorous recruitment processes to assess the characters and mindsets of potential members, alongside their ability to form and maintain appropriate relationships and personal boundaries with others, their emotional resilience in working with challenging behaviours and their use of authority and power’.

Further recommendations from her research call for improved inductions for new panel members which should include shadowing of, or mentoring by, an experienced panel member. What’s more, training for panel members should increase from once to twice a year – and one session should focus on the role and function of the panel, covering topics such as conformational bias, groupwork and anti-discriminatory practice.

‘By recognising, analysing and adapting personal values and preferences, individuals will become professionally proficient, particularly in relation to decisions about others, she says. ‘We all make stereotypes and generalisations, but need to guard against unconscious acting-out of our biases.’

**Calling time on panel**

Once recruited, Weekes recommends that panel members have appraisals rather than reviews to ‘constructively explore’ whether they are effectively contributing to the panel.

And if panel members are no longer suitable to remain in their role, fostering and adoption services should have transparent processes to terminate their employment, says Weekes.

Weekes also recommends a return to a fixed-term length of panel membership in place of the current indefinite term.