



Corporate Parenting Board

Date: Wednesday, 30 November 2022
Time: 3.00 pm
Venue: Committee Room 1, County Hall, Dorchester, DT1 1XJ

Members (Quorum)

Kate Wheller (Chairman), Richard Biggs (Vice-Chairman), Ryan Holloway, Carole Jones, Stella Jones, Andrew Kerby and Cathy Lugg

Chief Executive: Matt Prosser, County Hall, Dorchester, Dorset DT1 1XJ

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Agenda

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	Martha Sharp, Manager Quality Assurance and Partnerships, to report.	

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Corporate Parenting Board

30 November 2022

Virtual School Annual Report 2021 - 22

Choose an item.

Portfolio Holder: Cllr A Parry, Children, Education, Skills and Early Help

Local Councillor(s): Cllr

Executive Director: T Leavy, Executive Director of People - Children

Report Author: Lisa Linscott and Jo Smark-Richards
Title: Virtual School Annual Report 2021 - 22
Tel: 01305 228587
Email: lisa.linscott@dorsetcouncil.gov.uk

Report Status: Public

Brief Summary:

This report provides a detailed analysis and evaluation of the activity of the Virtual School in the academic year 2021 – 22. The report is provided as a separate document.

Recommendation:

For Corporate Parenting Board to recognise and support the activity of the Virtual School.

Reason for Recommendation:

The annual report from the Virtual School is provided to the Virtual School Governing Body and Corporate Parenting Board each year to highlight strengths, outcomes and areas for further development in the coming year. The Virtual School is thankful to councillors for their support and in particular to those on the governing body, who participate in regular monitoring activity.

1. **Financial Implications**

- 1.1 The Virtual School receives DfE funding each year to support children in care, those previously in care, and those with a social worker as per DfE guidance.

2. **Environmental Implications**

Not applicable

3. **Well-being and Health Implications**

- 3.1 Children's wellbeing is paramount to the work of the Virtual School and is evidenced throughout the report.

4. **Other Implications**

5. **Risk Assessment**

- 5.1 HAVING CONSIDERED: the risks associated with this decision; the level of risk has been identified as:

Current Risk: Low

Residual Risk: Low

6. **Equalities Impact Assessment**

7. **Appendices**

- 7.1 Appendix 1: DVS Annual Report 2021 - 2022

8. **Background Papers**



Dorset Council: Quality Assurance & Reviewing Officer (QARO) Annual Report 2021/2022

Jane MacLennan, Quality Assurance Manager

September 2022

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1. Executive Summary

- 1.1 This annual report provides evidence relating to the Quality Assurance Reviewing Officer (QARO) Service in Dorset Council. The QARO undertakes the statutory function of the IRO. It covers the period 1 April 2021 to 31 March 2022, as required by statutory guidance. Overall, the information and data describe a developing and quality service which continues to support good outcomes for children and young people in care in Dorset. The report includes key information outlining the work of the service with and for children in care and the report includes case examples of QARO work with children.
- 1.2 A collaborative approach to working enables the service to work alongside our Corporate Parenting Board, our Children in Care Youth Voice, and the Pan Dorset Safeguarding Children Partnership. The QARO service has a collaborative approach, based on an understanding that the Reviewing Officer challenge and function will add value to outcomes for children in care. The improvement journey continues to model a relational approach based upon “High Expectation, High Challenge and High Support” in our work with social work colleagues and agency partners and building upon the values and aims of Dorset Council.
- 1.3 We continue to believe that a person centred, relational approach is more effective in improving the experiences and outcomes for our children in care and that this can be achieved alongside robust escalations and challenge.
- 1.4 The QARO Service continues to contribute greatly towards Dorset’s strengthening services plan, ensuring that generally children and young people in care have timely and good quality care and permanence plans. The Quality Assurance Framework is supporting the Service and Children’s Services performance and improvement.
- 1.5 The report includes a profile of the service, which continues to see minimal staff changes throughout the year, this enables consistency for our children and young people. Sickness absence has been a challenge during some periods of 2021/2022. Despite this we have managed to maintain a consistent service of chairing statutory reviews and maintaining relationships with our children & young people. Average caseloads for QAROs are no higher than 60 for full time and 30 for part-time staff. The report identifies the importance of supervision and peer support, alongside training and reflective practice to maintain the professional development of the team.
- 1.6 This report considers in detail the profile of our children in care, including their age, gender and ethnic background, the length of time in care, legal status, and type of placement. In the period 1 April 2021 to 31 March 2022, the QARO service completed a total of 1,221 child in care reviews, with 96% completed

within timescales. 89% of children aged 4 and over participated fully in their reviews.

- 1.7 The report highlights the continued development of our escalation process and highlights that there is still some considerable work to undertake to enable this to become fully embedded in QARO practice. The service escalated 125 concerns over the last 12 months. 22% were concluded informally (through discussions with social workers and team managers), 35% reached level 1 (formal notification to team manager), 15% level 2 (service manager), 6% level 3 (Head of locality/Head of service) and 2% level 4 (corporate director). There were a total of 3 escalations which were raised with the Corporate Director and included the Executive director. One was due to lack of progress with a health appointment and two were as a direct result of children not having a suitable education provision. The escalations helped to progress regular meetings chaired by the Corporate Directors to facilitate partnership working and achieved successful outcomes for the two young people. Each quarter there are on average 5% of escalations which are not resolved in that quarter. As of 31.3.22 all escalations for the 2021/22 period had been successfully resolved. Learning, emerging themes and how we are starting to embed escalations within practice is detailed further in the report. The improvement journey continues to model a relational approach based upon “High Expectation, High Challenge, High Support” in our work with social work colleagues and agency partners and building upon the values already embedded in Dorset.
- 1.8 The quality-of-care planning within Dorset is informed by data and service audits. QAROs provide a level of stability and continuity for many children in care and this report provides examples of QAROs supporting children and young people through care planning and through the difficulties and uncertainties some of our children are faced with. There is increasing evidence of the ‘QARO footprint’ and oversight on our children’s records, alongside the audit outcomes which are used to inform and improve QARO practice, as well as support wider improvements across Dorset Council Children’s services. The report considers the quality-of-care planning informed by data and service audits. QAROs identified that in 98% of reviews the child had a suitable and clear plan for permanence, health, education and family and social relationships. QAROs identified that 43% of all children in care had achieved permanence.
- 1.9 The QAROs write a letter to the child following the child in care review detailing discussions and actions that were agreed at the review. This replaces minutes which is more meaningful for our children and something they tell us they prefer.

- 1.10 The QARO service, like the rest of the Council and its partners, has continued to adapt to the changing situation linked to the Covid-19 pandemic. This has resulted in a number of reviews being held remotely, alongside the QAROs visiting and seeing children and young people face to face. We are proud that despite the continued impact of Covid on our children, their families, and the service, we have been able to maintain ‘business as usual’ for our most vulnerable children and young people.
- 1.11 Throughout the report are key areas of practice and work with children and young people in their care planning that the QARO Service has identified, and these are communicated to the Extended Children’s Services Leadership Team (xCSLT) through the QA Framework reporting arrangements. Key issues identified and reported through the year include:
- Challenges in the stability and retention of social work practitioners in some teams has influenced delays in effective care planning for some children, as plans are not progressed in a timely manner and or plans continue to “start again”.
 - Concerns about the suitability and quality of pathway planning for young people aged 16 and 17 preparing for leaving care, where many young people have pathway plans which prove difficult to fully implement.
 - The need for more clarity and coherence as to permanence plans and how these will be achieved for some children.
 - The understanding of and progression of Deprivation of Liberty Safeguarding Orders (DoLS) for our most vulnerable young people who require a deprivation of liberty in order to protect and safeguard.
- 1.12 The report highlights a range of achievements and a summary of progress in 2021-22, which include:
- QAROs have been able to access a wide range of training and development opportunities throughout the last 12 months.
 - We are able to evidence progress of our practice standards in respect of engagement, and a strengths-based, approach to Child in Care Reviews.
 - We continue to facilitate the meaningful involvement of Children in Care in their Reviews: Regular reporting on participation (weekly) and discussions through peer supervision has shown an increase in participation over the last few months.
 - We have been able to remove the reliance for completion and distribution of recommendations and minutes from our business support colleagues, meaning that QAROs are now able to complete and send off recommendations and minutes as soon as they are completed.

- We have worked collaboratively with our business support to develop a reporting system to identify the level of contact a QARO has with a child or young person between formal reviews.
- Observation of practice has increased through the monthly audit framework; alongside this we held practice observation week (October) where a number of children in care reviews were observed.
- QAROs are now chairing MACE (Multi-agency child exploitation) meetings. This enables an independent overview and oversight of planning for those who are considered to be at significant risk.
- We have established links with the leaving care team, with two QAROs attending team meetings and the QARO manager attending the managers meeting on a monthly basis. Dip sample auditing alongside monthly audits have focussed on the quality of pathway plans and transitional arrangements.
- Senior managers meet regularly with CAFCASS (Child & Family Court Advisory Services). We have seen increased communication and consultation between the QARO, and court appointed Guardians with Guardians being invited (and attending) both children in care reviews and permanence planning meetings.

1.13 The report concludes with our service intentions for the forthcoming year (2022/23) and a summary of achievements & progress made over the last 12 months.

2. Purpose of Service & Legal Context including the Professional Profile of Dorset Quality Assurance Reviewing Officer (QARO)

2.1 The IRO Handbook sets out the requirement for the QARO team to produce an annual report, to include its legal context, and the purpose of the service. The QAROs carry out child in care reviews within the framework of the IRO Handbook (2010), linked to the Revised Care Planning Regulations and Guidance (April 2011).

2.2 The QARO has a key role in relation to the promotion and improvement of Care Planning for Children in Care and for challenging drift and delay in their care and permanence planning. A key task for the QARO is to build relationships with children, young people, family network and professionals to enhance effective decision making and care planning to establish positive outcomes.

2.3 The QARO role within Dorset is unique in that it has been developed to have responsibility for not only to independently review care planning for children in care but to strengthen the independent oversight and monitoring to support

the service in ensuring improved outcomes and our aspirations for all our children in care are met.

2.4 The functions and requirements of the QARO service are:

- All Children in Care should have a named QARO who, as far as possible, remains a consistent figure in the child's life, during their journey through care.
- There should be the same QARO for sibling groups where possible.
- The QARO should chair the child or young person's Child in Care Reviews
- Promote, and ensure that due regard is given to the voice of the child in their care plan, permanence plan and care arrangements.
- Ensure that plans for the child are based on a detailed and informed assessment, which is up to date, effective and provides a real and genuine response to each child's needs.
- Meet with the child and consult with him or her, making sure that the child understands what is happening to them, can make a genuine contribution to plans, fully understands the implications of any changes, and understands how an advocate could help, and his/her entitlement to this, and legal advice.
- Be aware of, and if necessary, take action to prevent any unnecessary delay in care and permanence planning for children in care and the delivery of services to them.
- Have an overview of the Local Authority as a corporate parent in ensuring that care plans have given proper consideration and weight to the child's wishes and feelings.
- To provide challenge and support to social workers and their managers to ensure the best life chances for children and young people.
- To have an effective means of challenging the Local Authority, including a Dispute Resolution (escalation) Procedure, with the ability to convey concerns to CAFCASS and access to independent legal advice.

2.5 The roles and responsibilities of the QARO are defined by:

- The Local Authority Social Services Act 1970 (ref section 7)
- The Children Act 1989
- The Human Rights Act 1998
- The Adoption and Children Act 2002
- The Children Act 2004
- The Children and Young People's Act 2008
- Care Planning, Placement and Case Review Regulations 2010
- QARO Handbook 2010 (implemented 1 April 2011)

- 2.6 The QARO team sits within the Quality Assurance & Partnerships' service area of Children's Services. It has core responsibility for reviewing care plans for children in care, alongside the monitoring and challenge of the Local Authority in respect of its corporate parenting and safeguarding responsibilities.
- 2.7 The QAROs are independent but remain managed within Children's Services. They hold no line management responsibility for any children in care. They are qualified experienced social workers with significant children's social work and team management experience. Each QARO has a link to a locality within Dorset, which enables relational practice and consistency for all our staff and partner agencies.
- 2.8 Some QAROs have responsibility for chairing both child protection and child in care reviews, where this is considered to be in the child/family best interest. This does enhance the independent challenge required and strengthen the skill set of QAROs to provide a service in line with the QARO handbook.
- 2.9 The child in care function of the QARO service has a staffing configuration of 8.6 FTE staff at Team Manager Level (Grade 13) with a QARO manager (Grade 14), overseen by Head of Service (Grade 17). On 31 March 2022 there were 10 QAROs of mixed gender (2 males, 8 females) and ethnicity. The diversity of the workforce potentially enables a better awareness and understanding of the potential discrimination that children in care may face. The QAROs consider and promote the different needs of children, to ensure that their care plan addresses their specific identity including ethnicity and diversity needs.
- 2.10 Since October 2020 the workforce has remained relatively stable, with all QAROs being permanent employees of Dorset Council. One QARO retired in April 2021 and was replaced immediately with a manager from another service within the Council.

3. National, Regional and Local Links

- 3.1 The Quality Assurance manager meets every 3 months with IRO & child protection managers from the Southwest region. We have maintained reflective supervision and peer support, as well as sharing good practice. Over the last 12 months there have been two training events which has enabled all the IROs and QAROs across the region to meet and consider how to increase participation with a focus on feedback.
- 3.2 The CAFCASS manager meets regularly with the Heads of Service. Alongside this there is direct communication and liaison between the QARO and CAFCASS officers for those children where there are care proceedings. Communication between CAFCASS and QARO managers is currently informal, this arrangement works well. Where appropriate, CAFCASS officers

(Guardians) are invited and do attend child in care reviews and permanency planning meetings (PPM).

- 3.3 The service has sought to maintain direct working relationships and links with the social work services over the last 12 months. The Director, Heads of Locality and Service Managers regularly attend relevant senior management meetings and events held by the Council. The QA managers attend a monthly service manager meeting which also includes meeting regularly with the service and team managers of the leaving care team. Each QARO has a direct link to a locality team across Dorset and attends a team meeting at least every quarter. This has enabled them all to develop professional working relationships & improve communication between the services. The QARO can share performance data, audit outcomes, and offer consultations to a range of professionals working within the localities.
- 3.4 Liaison with our partner agencies in Health and Education continues to be a priority for the service. We have a professional working relationship with the Children in Care virtual schools service and the Children in Care nurses. This includes meetings between managers & attendance at team meetings to promote partnership working.
- 3.5 The service has monthly Quality assurance meetings (QPAG) attended by the Corporate Director of Children's services, Heads of Service, Heads of Locality, Service managers and Locality Education Leads, alongside the QA managers. This has enabled a wider awareness and understanding of the QARO role and contributes to the discussions and analysis of the Council's performance and key priorities. QAROs continue to routinely contribute to the Council's practice evaluation and learning processes.

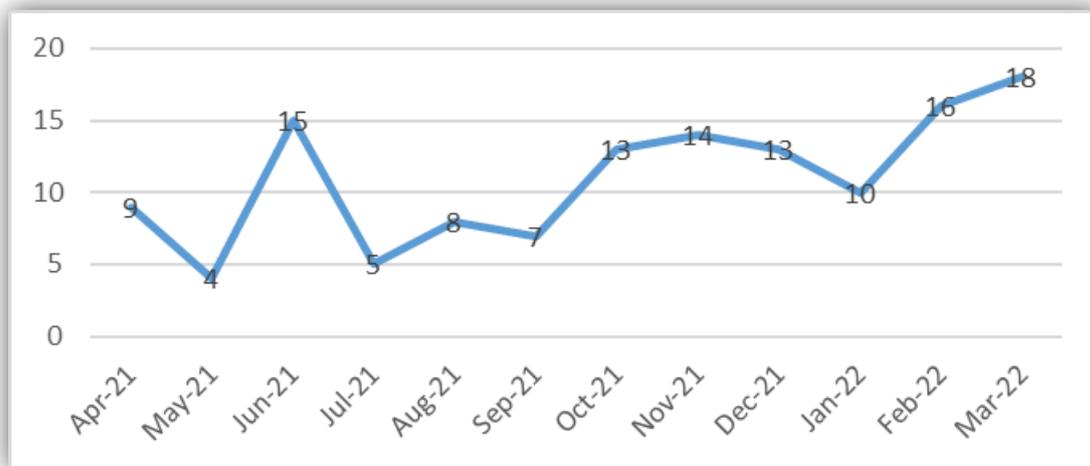
4. Quantitative information - Children in Care Population

- 4.1 As of 31 March 2022, the rate of Children in Care in Dorset was 66.18 per 10,000, which is only slightly higher than the previous year end rate at 66.16 per 10K. This keeps Dorset just under the national average for Good within England (67 per 10,000) and higher than our statistical neighbours (57.6 per 10,000). As of 31 March 2022, Dorset Council had corporate parenting responsibility for 448 children and young people. This number overall has been relatively consistent throughout the 2021/2022 period. We saw a peak in June 2021, a significant decrease in July 2021 and then a steady increase for the rest of the year. We are continuing to work hard to enable children and young people to return to their birth families, when it is safe to do so. On 31 March 2022, 5% of the total children in care population in Dorset, were living at home following a successful reunification plan.

4.2 National data as a comparison is only available for the previous year (2021). During this year, the number of Children in Care by Local Authorities in England rose to its highest level at 80,850, up 1% in 2020 and continuing the rise seen in recent years. The rate of 67 per 10,000 children is the same as the previous year and up from 64 per 10,000 children in 2018. The number of children coming into care was consistently lower than we may usually expect throughout 2021 but was seen to be particularly low during the national lockdown or when restrictions were in place. Other headlines of particular interest, suggesting an impact of the pandemic are the number of children who were adopted has fallen 18%, continuing a fall from a peak in 2015.

Number of children in care in Dorset at end of each Month 2021-22

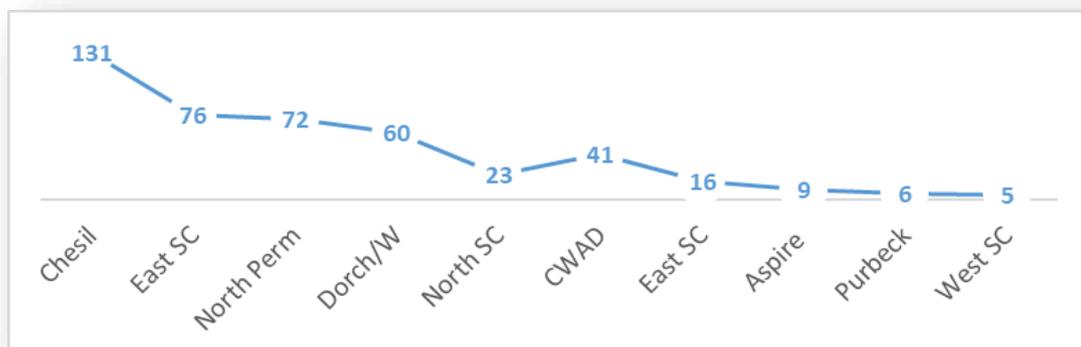
(Fig. 1)



4.3 Noting the comparisons for Dorset Council with national, regional, and statistical neighbour figures, there is also some considerable difference across the council's locality/areas.

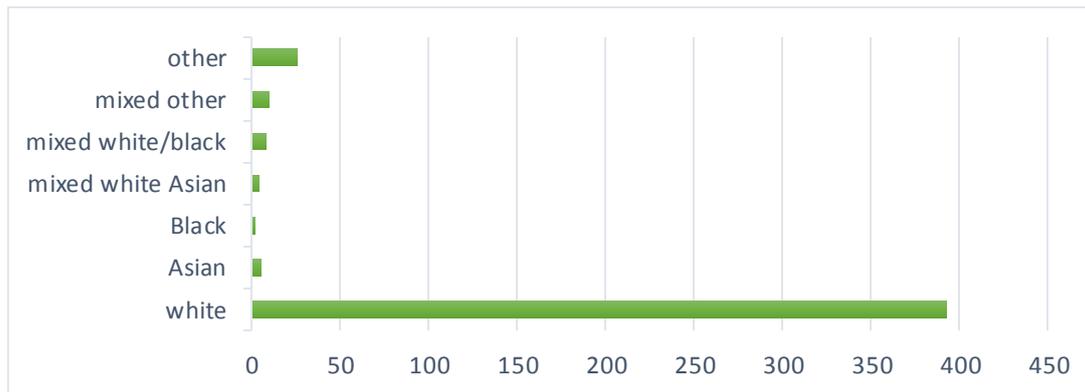
Numbers of children in care per locality area 31.3.22

(Fig. 2)



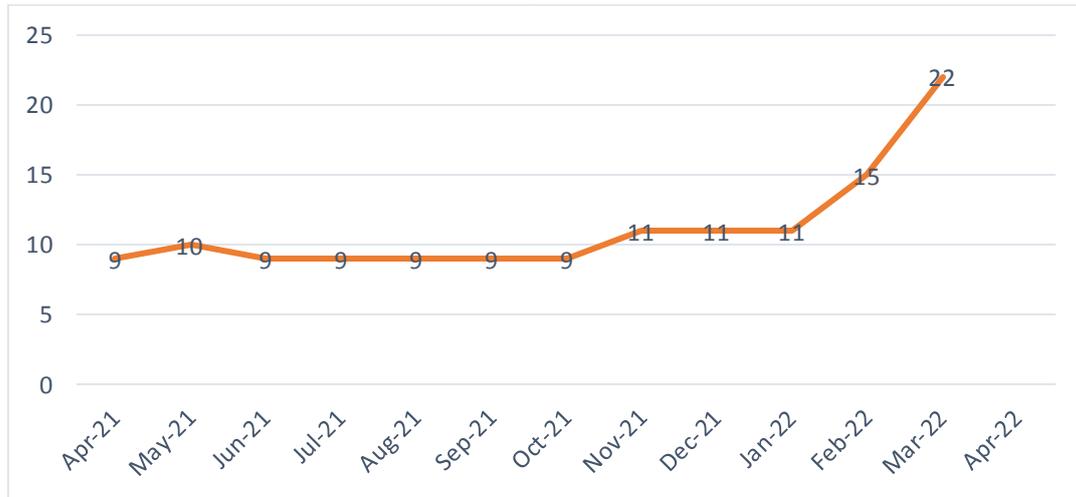
- 4.4 Children with a disability account for 8% (38) of our children in care population. Most are in our care through a series of short breaks or under the legal order S20 (voluntary accommodation). We continue to work in partnership with parents to provide specialist support and care packages to meet the complex and individual needs of the children.
- 4.5 We have a close working relationship with our colleagues in the Children with a Disabilities team and our residential home (The Cherries). A specific QARO is the link with the social work and residential team. This helps to maintain communication, the sharing of data and any legislative updates or changes. We have worked hard over the last 12 months to raise the importance of children with a disability who are in our care full time (rather than through a series of short breaks) achieving permanence, irrespective of their legal status. This has been supported by senior leaders and the parents of the children and we have seen an increase in the number of children in care through S20 that have a secure and permanent care arrangement.
- 4.6 30% of children and young people in our care have an Education Health Care Plan (EHCP) this is reviewed annually in line with statutory requirements alongside the personal education plan (PEP) which is in place for all our children in care. The QAROs work collaboratively with our colleagues in the virtual school, ensuring that children in our care receive the right education and support to achieve their full potential.
- 4.7 Children in Care Missing out on Education (CICMOE) meetings take place fortnightly and are attended by the QA manager and QARO where appropriate. This is a multi-agency meeting which helps to ensure a coordinated approach to providing children with appropriate support packages and identifying formal challenge where our children are not accessing the education they require.
- 4.8 17% of the children in care population are from black and minority ethnic groups. We have seen an increase of 3% in the last 12 months, this reflects the increase in diversity and number of unaccompanied children coming into our care over the last 12 months, particularly over the months of February and March 2022.

Ethnicity of our children in care population (Fig. 3)



- 4.9 Dorset has a small (but increasing) number of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children which makes up 5% of the Children in Care population. In the last 6 months we had 87 children coming into care, 20 (23%) were unaccompanied children. The data for 2020/21 shows that nationally, the number of unaccompanied children was down 20% (a total of 4,070) from the previous year (2020/21) which is likely due to travel restrictions during the pandemic in 2020/21.
- 4.10 Nationally, unaccompanied asylum-seeking children represent around 6% of all Children in Care and are usually male, with absent parenting identified as the main category of need. We are acutely aware that unaccompanied asylum-seeking children are amongst the most traumatised & vulnerable children our service works with. The QARO provides independent oversight and challenge (where needed) to ensure the children have the right support, at the right time, to help them adjust and start to rebuild their lives. This includes the need for any specific psychological or mental health support, giving regard to the young person's age and independent living skills when considering the intensity of support and intervention required.

The change in numbers of our (Dorset) unaccompanied asylum-seeking children over the last 12 months (Fig. 4)



4.11 Dorset has a higher number of males (57%) in care, compared to females (42%) this has remained consistent compared to last year. Over the last 12 months we have been able to capture the data for children and young people coming into care who do not identify as either male or female. This accounts for just 1% of our Children in care population.

4.12 Of the 448 children in care across Dorset, the highest proportion of children are within the 16 years+ age range, making up 25% of the overall Children in Care population. 30% of Children in Care are age 0-9 years with 50% of the population being between the ages of 10 to 15.

Ages & percentage of children in care in Dorset on 31.3.2022
(Fig. 5)



4.13 The table below (Diagram 6) and chart above (Diagram 5) show a snapshot of the Children in Care population on 31 March 2022 by legal status. This shows that most of Dorset’s children and young people in care are subject to a legal order, compared to a voluntary arrangement (Section 20). There has been a noticeable change in the legal status of children in care in recent years.

Both the number and proportion of CiC under care orders have increased, with those in care under voluntary arrangements having decreased. This reflects the family court ruling in 2015 with advice and guidance from the judiciary in respect of the use of Section 20 (S20), which is now firmly embedded in practice. We monitor closely any child under the age of 5 coming into care through a voluntary arrangement. Numbers have been low and for short periods of time. On 31.3.22 we had 15 children in care through S20, most were through a series of short breaks or a child with a disability in a specialist care provision. We had no children under the age of 5 years in care through S20.

Children in care legal orders; number, % and comparison with national average 2021 (Fig. 6)

Order Detail	March Number 2021	March Number 2022	% March 2022	National % March 2022
Interim Care Order	52	66	15%	20%
Care Order	293	297	66%	59%
Placement Order	40	30	7%	6%
Voluntary/S20	64	55	12%	15%

- 4.14 The total number of new admissions into care between 1 April 2021 to 31 March 2022 was 136, (30% of the total CiC population), this is a small increase of 2% from last year. A total of 135 ceased to be in care for the same period. This is a similar pattern to 2020/21 which saw 126 children coming into care and 134 ceasing. There is evidence of our figures remaining stable over the last 12 months despite the commitment for children to come into care only when it is considered the best and safest option and to work collaboratively with families, children, young people, and professionals for children to return to their families when it is safe and appropriate.

New into care by category and age

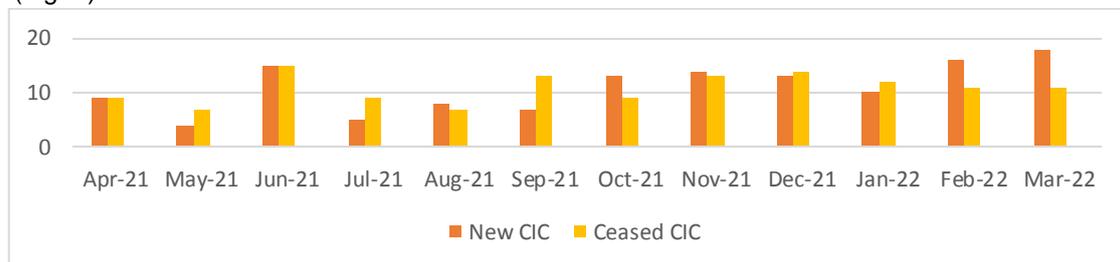
(Fig. 7)

Category	Male 0-12	Male 13-18	Male Total	Female 0-12	Female 13-18	Female Total	Total
N1- Abuse/Neglect	30	6	36	31	4	35	71
N2- Disability	1	0	1	0	0	0	1
N3- Parental illness	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
N4- Family in acute stress	4	1	5	3	3	6	11
N5- Family dysfunction	7	6	13	9	5	14	27
N6- Socially unacceptable behaviour	0	3	3	0	0	0	3
N7- Low income	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
N8- Absent parenting	0	17	17	0	0	0	17
N9-Adoption	0	0	0	0	3	3	3
SP	0	3	3	0	0	0	3
Total	42	36	78	43	15	58	136

4.15 It is evident that neglect continues to be the highest category for children coming into care (52%) with family dysfunction being the next highest reason (20%). In the last 12 months, 57% of children coming into our care were male 43% female. This is similar to number of males and females coming into our care over the 2021/22 period. The general characteristics of children in care are similar to previous years, both locally and nationally. Males continue to account for 66% of children in care nationally with 39% being between the ages of 10-15 years.

The numbers of children coming into and leaving care

(Fig. 8)



4.16 It is interesting to note that the numbers of males and females leaving care remain similar to those entering care. There are equal numbers of male and females being adopted as well as achieving permanence through special guardianship. Diagram 9 highlights that a higher number of males aged 0-12

years (total of 17) returned home to birth family compared to only seven females.

The number of children and category for Leaving Care

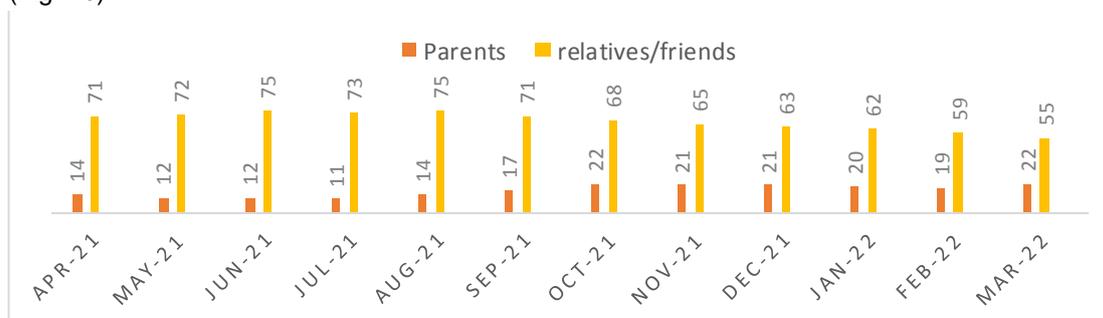
(Fig. 9)

Category	Male 0-12	Male 13-18	Male total	Female 0-12	Female 13-18	Female total	Total
E11- Adoption unopposed	1	0	1	1	0	1	2
E12- Adopted	6	0	6	6	0	6	12
E13- Left care to live with parents	2	2	4	1	2	3	7
E17- Age 18	0	25	25	0	23	23	48
E41 - Residence Order	1	0	1	0	0	0	1
E45- SGO to foster carer who were relative or friend	8	2	10	9	0	9	19
E46- SGO to foster carer	2	1	3	0	1	1	4
E47- SGO to relative/friend	1	0	1	2	0	2	3
E4a- Return home	11	6	17	5	2	7	24
E4b- Return home not part of care plan	0	1	1	0	1	1	2
E5- Moved to independent living	0	1	1	0	2	2	3
E6- Moved to independent living with no formalised support	0	1	1	0	0	0	1
E7- Transferred to residential care funded by adults	0	2	2	0	1	1	3
E8 -CIC ceased for another reason	1	2	3	3	0	3	6
Total	33	43	76	27	32	59	135

4.17 When considering the impact of being in care for our children we are able to evidence that on 31 March 2022 17% of our children in care population were living with either parents, relatives or friends. This continues to be an area of focus in our permanence planning and independent oversight of Care planning.

Children in care by placement with parents, relatives, or friends

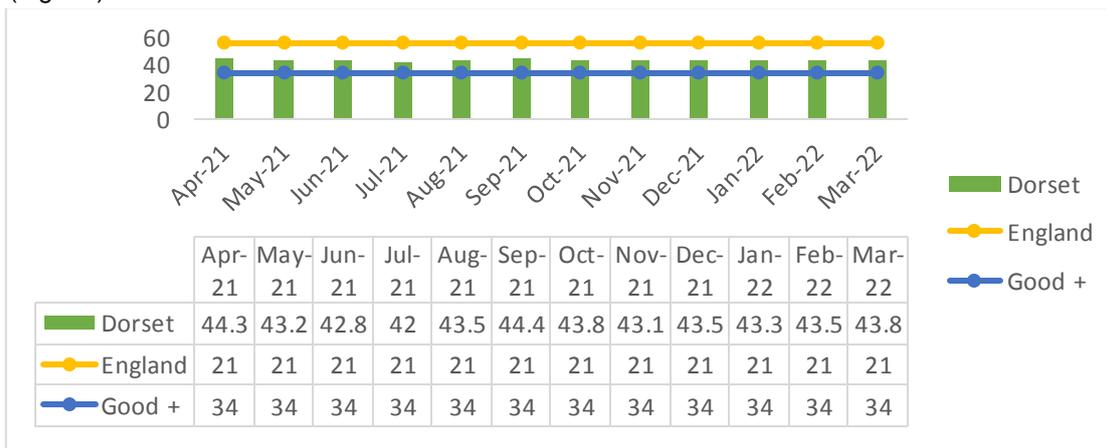
(Fig. 10)



4.18 On 31 March 2022, Dorset have 43.8 % children living more than 20 miles from home, which is higher than national and our good+ statistical neighbours. A low % is good for this indicator. The current figure indicates that we have more children than comparable areas that are living further from home. However, we should also consider that as a rural county we are likely to have more living further from home (hence why our statistical neighbour averages are higher than national). This shows that we need to continue our focus on finding more placements closer to home for our children when it is the right time for them. Whilst plans have been in place for several young people, these have been delayed due to the need for some of our young people to complete their education, which would be otherwise disrupted. We are confident that this figure will continue to reduce over the next 12 months (a positive direction). Reducing the travel time for QAROs to see their children and young people and chair their reviews, will also enable increased capacity within the team. Dorset as a County is large and for some children who live in Dorset can still be more than 20 miles away from their family home.

Children in care % home to placement ≥ 20 miles

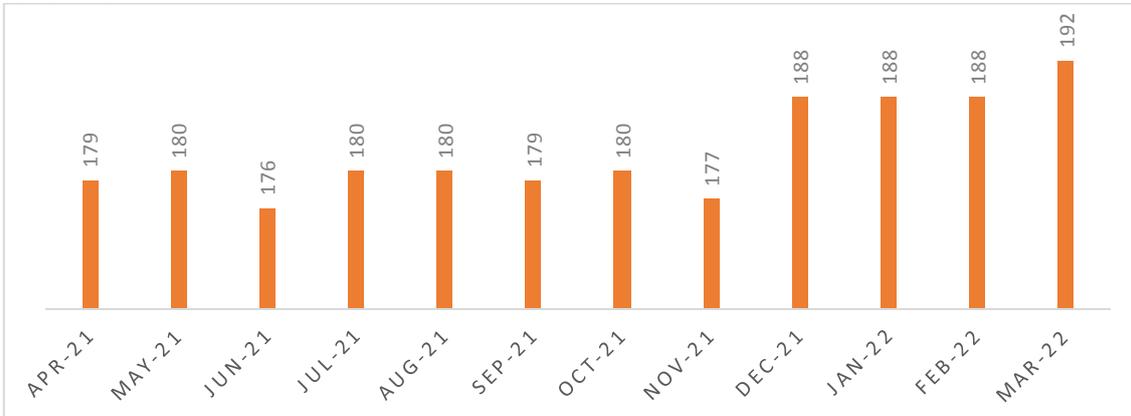
(Fig. 11)



4.19 When looking at the data for our children who live outside of Dorset the number is larger than we would like (194 or 43% of children on 31.3.22) and slightly higher than April 2021 (40%). The increase in unaccompanied young people moving to Dorset from Kent from January 2022 has impacted on our increasing numbers of young people living outside of the County. Diagram 12 shows the numbers of children in care living outside of the Local Authority.

Number of children in care living outside of Dorset

(Fig. 12)



4.20 On 31.3.22, we had 23 young people were placed in an unregulated placement, this accounts for 5% of the total Children in care population within Dorset. This is reduction in four young people being in an unregulated provision over the last 12 months. These young people are over the age of 16 requiring support to live independently rather than needing full time care. For the young people in an unregulated provision (such as supported housing) there is a high visiting frequency by the allocated social worker and enhanced monitoring, contact and oversight by the QARO. This is in recognition of the additional needs and vulnerabilities for these young people. An unregulated placement is one which is not a children’s home, subject to S1(2) of the care Standards Act, 2000 & does not have to be registered with Ofsted. For young people age 16+ who need semi-supported accommodation as part of transition planning into adulthood.

4.21 It is positive to note that we have no young people in an unregistered provision and continue to work closely with our colleagues in commissioning to ensure that all of our children and young people are in the right accommodation or family according to both their identified need and individual wishes. An unregistered provision is when a child (under the age of 16) who is being provided with some form of “care” is living in a placement that is not registered with Ofsted. Once a provider delivers a care element as well as accommodation, they must register as a children’s home.

5. Quantitative information- The QARO Service

5.1 Between 1 April 2021 and 31 March 2022 the QARO service completed a **total of 1,128** child in care reviews. This is a decrease of 241 reviews from the performance data of 2021/22. This figure seems linked to an increase in

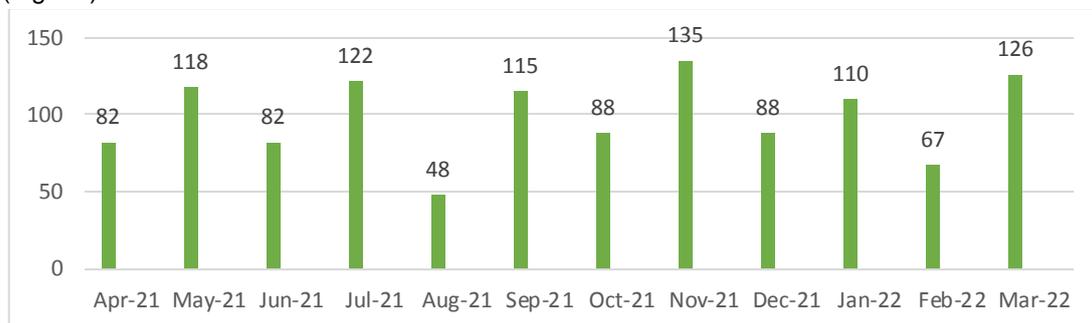
stability and less moves for our children in care, which is positive. QAROs have continued to seek to address matters of concern through direct communication with social workers and team managers, alongside utilising the escalation process. It is important that the frequency of reviews reflects the need to review and/or change the child or young person’s care plan, as opposed to using it as an opportunity for case or care planning meetings. The QAROs are aware of the need to not blur boundaries between case management, oversight and maintaining an independent view.

5.2 QAROs are required to hold a child’s first review within 28 days from the date they came into care, then no later than 3 monthly and 6 monthly thereafter. For children living back with their parents where a care order remains in place; we hold reviews every 12 weeks. This is to ensure sufficient oversight and to avoid drift and delay in progressing the permanence plans for the children. An important performance measure is for children to have their reviews held within the statutory timescales.

5.3 On average there are 94 reviews held each month with peaks of 135 in November 2021 and 126 in March 2022. The less busy months being August and February 2022 where 48 and 67 reviews were held respectively.

Details number of review held

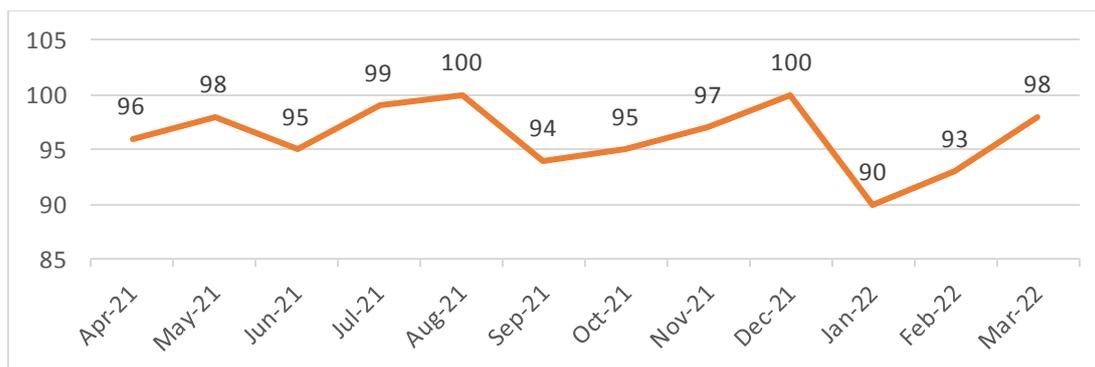
(Fig. 13)



5.4 Over the last 12 months the QAROs have completed on average 96% of reviews on time, this is the same level of performance as last year. The dip in performance in January of this year is attributable to a high number of QAROs being off work due to leave and unplanned sickness. Despite some relaxation in the covid restrictions during this year the pandemic has had an impact on the health and wellbeing of our children, carers, and professionals. We continue to be proud of the continued dedication and hard work of the team.

Reviews held within timescales (%)

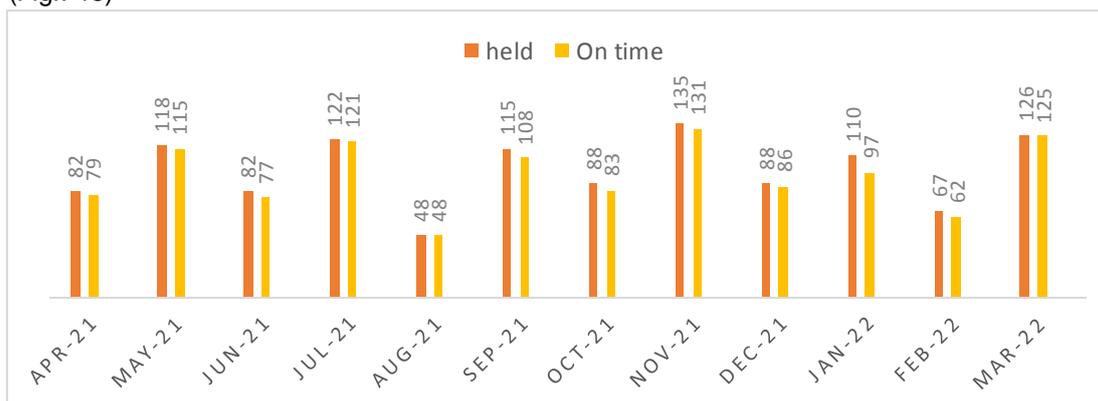
(Fig.13)



5.5 The reviews that have been out of timescale are few (4.27%). There are several reasons for late reviews which include changes and the sickness of allocated social workers, the impact of Covid (health of carers and children/young people), and the long term and unexpected sickness from a full time QARO in May. The timeliness of reviews remains a focus for the team and a continued priority action for the coming year.

Timeliness of Reviews

(Fig.. 15)



5.6 The QARO service is notified by the business support central team of children who are likely to or have come into care. This system works well, and children are allocated a QARO within 5 working days of the notification (usually the same day). The QARO will then liaise with the social worker to arrange a date and time for the review, to ensure it is held within the statutory timescale. If there are delays in the service receiving the notification, then this will impact on the timescales for allocating a QARO and being able to arrange the review within timescales. We have also found that delays are caused by the availability of interpreters for our unaccompanied young people. We continue to work closely with our colleagues in commissioning to ensure we have the right interpreters to work with our children in care where English is their second language. We are mindful that reviews need to be meaningful and include the young person and there are sometimes necessary and unavoidable delays in reviews taking place within timescales.

5.7 The performance data for the timeliness of sending out review recommendations and minutes (within 5 and 20 days of the review taking place) is a continued area for improvement. We have recently changed the permission levels on our recording system (Mosaic) which allows the QARO to complete both the recommendations and minutes without a reliance on our business support colleagues.

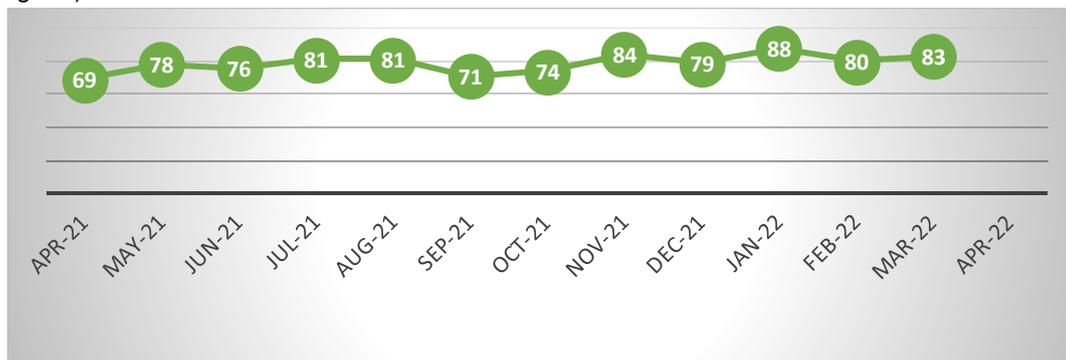
6. Children and young people participation

6.1 A primary objective of the service is to ensure children are central to decisions made about them and that their Voice is evident in their care plans. A key element in delivering this objective is the measure of the young person's participation in the Statutory Review of their care plan and care arrangements.

6.2 Across the year from April 2021-March 2022, there was variability initially in the number of children attending their reviews. The data shows that between April 2021 and Jan 2022 there was an increase from 69% to 88% of children, & young people (age 4 years +) who had attended and participated fully in their review. Those children and young people who have not attended or contributed to their review have been seen by their QARO and offered an advocate as well as exploring other ways, they feel they would be able to contribute. The engagement and participation of all of our children and young people in the review process remains a key priority.

Percentage of children/young people participating in reviews

(Fig. 16)



6.3 The overall figure considers the full range of acceptable methods of participation agreed by the DfE. All methods of participation add value to the review process and for some young people it can take considerable effort from them and those working with them to achieve it. The move to virtual reviews for some children and young people has enabled full participation in their reviews, when in the past they have chosen not to engage. These forced changes through Covid are areas of practice where we have been able to continue with a level of engagement for some of our children and young people.

Details of DfE participation

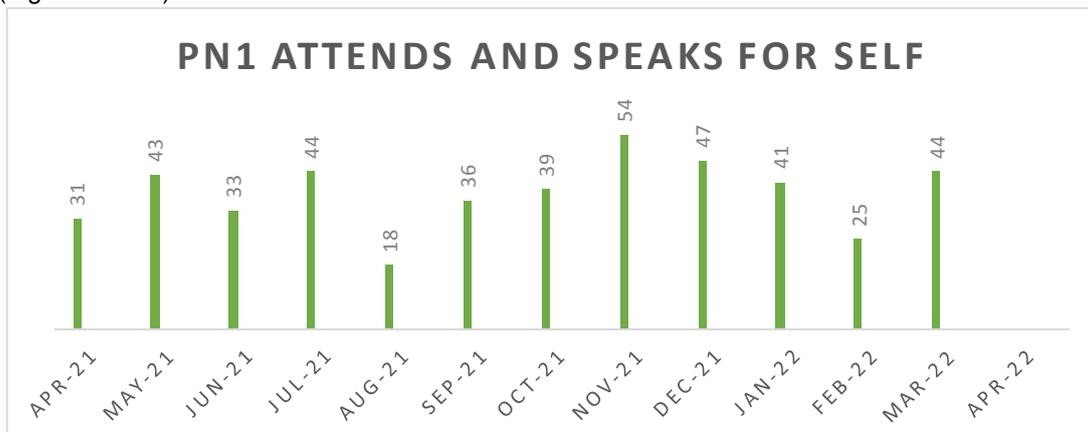
(Fig. 17)

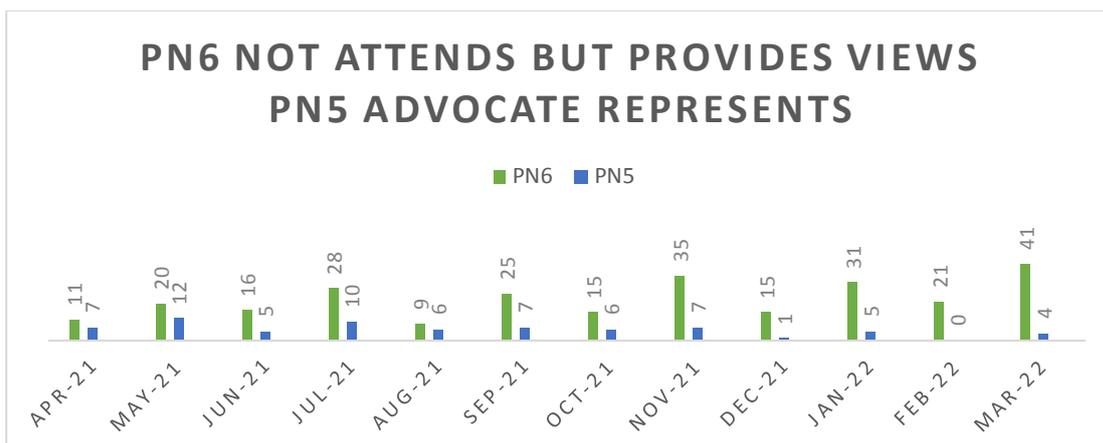
Detail	Actions
Child under 4 at time of review	Observations of behaviour, interactions
Child physically attends and speaks for him/herself	Attendance
Child physically attends but advocate speaks for them.	Views represented by advocate or QARO
Child attends and conveys views non-verbally	Symbols, behaviour
Child attends but does not speak, does not convey views and does not ask an advocate to speak on their behalf	Attendance without contribution
Child does not attend but briefs an advocate to speak for them.	Through advocate or QARO Text, phone, audio, video format and written format
Child does not attend but conveys his/her feelings to the review by a facilitative medium	Text, phone, audio, video format and written format with QARO

6.4 The data shows that on average only 38% of children over the age of 4 physically attended their review between 1.4.21 and 31.3.22. With 28% not attending but providing their views or being represented by an advocate. It should be noted that Dorset's attendance figures compare favourably with other local authorities in the region.

Review participation April 21 to March 22

(Figs. 18 & 19)





6.5 A closer look at the ways that children & young people have taken part in their review (Diagram 18) tells us that 70% of the reviews held last year had the child and young person's views represented either through them attending and speaking themselves, providing their views independently or represented by an advocate. There is no identified single reason why young people are not motivated to participate in their reviews. QAROs have identified that where the child or young person has not attended in two thirds of these occasions, this was the child or young person's choice not to attend, and for the most part those who chose not to attend do so because they are satisfied about how the review will function and what it will do. We have identified the need to look at ways we can adapt the meetings to become person centred. The QAROs have worked in partnership with young people, social workers, education, and health colleagues to formalise the process for person centred reviews to ensure there is consistency across the service. We will continue to support all of our young people to engage in their review and a key priority remains for their views, thoughts and wishes to be central to any review meeting.

6.6 QAROs use a variety of methods to understand and establish the views and promote the voice of the child. Whilst it is understood that views of children should be established by social workers, QAROs find it important to ascertain views themselves. They often are the most consistent professional and have found that one of the best ways to understand the child's voice is to see the child and young person within their home and to spend time with them understanding their lived experiences, what's going well for them and an opportunity to raise anything that may need to be reviewed or considered changing. It is expected the child will speak with their named QARO certainly before each review, and QAROs are encouraged to visit each child and see where they live. In the period of 1.4.21 to 31.3.22 93% of all children in care had seen or had direct contact with their QARO in the last 6 months. This is an increase on the previous year where social distancing and lockdown measures made visits to children and young people challenging.

- 6.7 The service continues to provide a robust approach to improving the quality of our records through quality assurance oversight. During the past year, the QAROs continue to develop the quality of their outcomes and recommendations ensuring these are SMART and based on the child's individual needs. The minutes of the meetings continue to be written direct to the child or young person as a letter. This assists in making it person centred, relevant and more accessible to our children & young people now and in the future. This will continue to be implemented to ensure we have a consistent response to our children and young people who are in care.
- 6.8 We recognise the need to improve participation and that further work is required. Linked to understanding the role of the QARO and reviews, as well as reflection with QAROs as to how we are doing and what evidence there is to show how we are all supporting participation and prioritising the voice of the child. We continue to explore the use of technologies to enable direct involvement. QAROs aspire to conduct reviews at times and venues that will be child focused and maximise children & young people's attendance. They are mindful for the review not to impact on the child's education or leisure activities. This is not always possible and has proved to be a significant challenge, as this involves the availability of others (including carers) for reviews outside of school hours, as well as being aware of after school time with their families & friends.
- 6.9 In addition to formal reviews, the service continues to embed progress updates between reviews and evidence the QARO footprint in the child's electronic records.
- 6.10 Feedback from children and young people is important and has been an area of focus for the last 12 months. We continue to work closely with NYAS to enable independent feedback to understand further the child's experiences, what we are doing well and areas where we need to strengthen practice.

This feedback has identified the following:

- 75% of children who were asked, know what is happening to them.
- 84% of children who were asked, understand how their social worker is supposed to help them.
- 84% of children who were asked said they had opportunities to express their views, wishes and feelings
- 73% of children who were asked said that they understand what is being said when they go to meetings about their care.
- 82% of children who were asked said they are able to tell their social workers what they think about their care.

- 6.11 As a result of this feedback, we have developed a pack of information for children in care, what to expect and to explain who does what. This will hopefully help children and young people who are new into care to understand the review process and improve their engagement and contributions. We will continue to monitor the use and impact of these information packs over the coming 12 months.
- 6.12 From August 2021 advocacy for children in care in Dorset, has been provided by NYAS and the referral process has changed considerably. As part of the Quality Assurance work of the team we are working closely with our business support partners to explore ways of making the referral process quicker and more accessible for social workers so that we can improve the representation significantly over the next 12 months.
- 6.13 The use of advocates for our children in care needs to increase; the number of referrals made for children over the age of 8, compared to the number of reviews that take place are disproportionate. The data shows that out of 776 reviews (from August 2021 to March 2022) 548 children were over the age of 8 and 217 referrals to NYAS were made. This shows that 40% of children had access to an advocate over this period.

Number of advocacy referrals and reviews

(Fig. 20)

Month	Number of Reviews	How many children over 8 years old	Number of referrals made
April 2021	82	60	
May 2021	118	78	
June 2021	82	61	
July 2021	122	89	
August 2021	48	37	14
September 2021	115	78	43
October 2021	88	67	39
November 2021	135	92	66
December 2021	88	67	18
January 2022	110	73	19
February 2022	67	49	12
March 2022	125	85	6

- 6.13 In April 2021, the participation service is no longer commissioned having been contracted to Participation People for the previous 4 years. This service is now delivered in house and called Youth Voice. This team have hosted two whole fostering family days to get alongside and listen to younger children in care. There are a further four events planned for the rest of this year. What has been heard from the younger children so far, has helped to inform the foster carers handbook and the guide which children receive when they come into our care. The Children in Care Council is growing organically through these events and

the team are taking the time to 'catch up' with these children to nurture relationships. The team are mindful of the trauma our children and young people have experienced and sensitively and skilfully tune in. The approach to co-production must be done in a trauma informed way.

6.14 Care leavers were involved in two workshops during National Care Leavers Week in October 2021, and They helped to co-produce how they want their achievements and successes to be recognised. They have also worked on shaping improvements to the council's web pages which host the care leaver local offer. Care leavers have been involved in two interview panels for the recruitment of senior management positions and their feedback was an incredibly helpful part of the process. 14 care leavers have been working with the Youth Voice Team in a variety of ways since August 2021.

There were twenty care leavers who contributed their digital voice in January 2022 on an activity about foster care. The Youth Voice Team continue to challenge themselves to think of ways to hear from those they find it harder to reach. Communication and collaborative working has been developed over the last 12 months. This includes regular space for QAROs to meet and chat with the Youth Voice Team and to ensure that everyone is kept up to date about the opportunities and development of the team.

6.15 The QA manager and manager of the Youth Voice Team meet every quarter to share information and discuss opportunities for engagement and participation. There are a number of exciting opportunities and activities planned over the coming months for our children in care which include:

- Launch of the Children in Care satisfaction survey
- Launch of the new WhatsApp Policy so that young people can have 'peer-to-peer' conversations in a way which is safe and can be monitored by the team, helping them to collaborate together.
- Takeover Challenge this year is taking place from the 14-18 June 2022. This will offer hybrid opportunities as we know young people like to meet in person, but it is not always possible around school/college commitments. We are specifically keen to encourage children and young people who are in our care, leaving our care, young carers and children and young people with SEND.

6.16 It remains an ongoing challenge for the Youth Voice Team to build the numbers of young people participating in children in care and care leaver activities. The team adopts the same principles as is expected of the wider children's services workforce, ensuring that trusting relationships are built making young people feel safe when participating. This remains an area of focus for the QAROs who can help support their children & young people to engage and participate.

Case studies and quotes which evidence participation and QARO involvement with our children and young people in care

“AN – was so shy and unable to come or stay in her reviews, though would at times come at the end if enticed in with Orio biscuits! A young person so anxious about life that even within education we needed to refer to Maths as “Unicorns” as this was the only way she could manage the lessons or discussions about the subject. Over time with lots of visits and TEAMS calls along with cards sent to her, we now sit together in the same room and invite who else she wants to join her review by TEAMS. This has resulted in her staying for the whole of her meeting, being able to ask questions and share views. When we sit together AN has full control over the screen and the meeting. I’m not sure I’d say she chairs it, but she is certainly very much in control of it.

“Ch really, really appreciated your card which arrived yesterday. thank you so much. her actual words were, “The QARO does more for me than my social worker.”!!

Concerns were raised about decision making of AA and her long- term carers. Carers she was very attached to and had great relationships with. This was evident in her progress at school, friendships, and connections with extended family. Her voice was not being heard by those making decisions. I (QARO) managed to get her to write her feelings, views, and thoughts on paper I then presented to the Fostering panel. AA remains in the placement and continues to do very well.

DD plan was for adoption for him. However, this had drifted, and no matches were being found. He has been with his carer for some time, he is settled and mentions lots that he wants to stay with them. Through several meetings I was able to get his voice heard, the placement order is being revoked, care order in place and permanency being gained with a plan for him to stay with his foster carers and work towards SGO.

In terms of giving children and young people choice about their reviews, when I meet the child/young person prior to the review, if appropriate in terms of their age, I ask them how they want their review to work and then plan the review with what they have said guiding me.”

7. Caseloads

- 7.1 It is recommended in the IRO (QARO) Handbook that a caseload of 50 to 70 looked after children (full time equivalent QARO), would represent good practice in the delivery of a quality service and facilitate the full range of functions as set out in the handbook.
- 7.2 The average caseload for Dorset QAROs ranges from between 38 and 61. For those that have additional responsibilities (such as the Reg 44 visits) this is significantly lower (around 46). By having a central allocation process this facilitates and maintains a degree of equity in caseloads across the service. We allocate in terms of needs of the child, QARO capacity and worker skills mix, rather than solely on geography.

QARO caseload 31.3.22

(Fig.21)



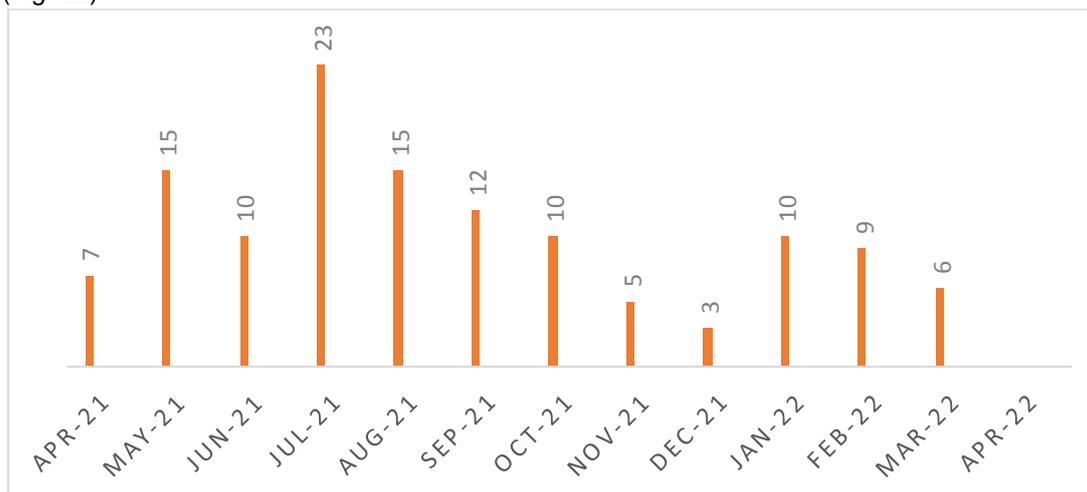
- 7.3 National data (taken from NAIRO benchmarking research) indicates that 16% of QAROs have between 50-60, 42% 60-70, 16% between 70-80 and 11% between 80-90. Dorset has a commitment to keeping QARO caseloads at 60 or below. This will enable the QARO to have the capacity to meet with their children and young people as and when required, depending upon the individual circumstances. It is important for the QARO to have contact with their children & young people at mid-way points and prior to reviews, working towards progression of review decisions, developing relationships, gaining feedback and overall participation in the process.
- 7.4 Other tasks that QAROs complete include enhanced monitoring visits and contact with young people in unregistered and/or unregulated housing provision, maintaining links with locality teams, contributing to foster carer reviews as well as auditing and moderating as part of the wider service quality assurance framework.

8. Escalation and dispute resolution

- 8.1 One of the pivotal roles of the QARO is to raise issues affecting a child's care with the social work service where, for example, performance issues, care planning, education, and resources are having a negative impact on the child, or that permanence plans are not progressing at pace.
- 8.2 This is an area identified as a key priority and over the last 12 months, work has taken place to continue to develop the escalation process. There are clear resolution and escalation policy and procedures in place, with a focus on how QARO escalations in respect of care planning interface with impact for the child or young person's needs not being met by partner agencies, particularly health education and housing. QAROs continue to seek resolutions informally to issues through dialogue with the team manager and social worker before and at each stage of the procedure, but if no resolution is achieved the problem can and should be escalated to the attention of senior managers and ultimately the Chief Executive and or Cafcass. The process is supported by the QA managers who oversee those proceeding outside of timescales. Whilst significant progress has been made over the last 12 months, this remains a key priority and area of focus.
- 8.3 Between April 2021 to March 2022, there were 125 formal escalations, an increase from 104 in 2020-21 (and the largest number since we started to record numbers of escalations raised) In 2021-22 there was a 17% increase in formal escalations from the previous year.

Number of escalations 2021-22

(Fig. 22)



- 8.4 Audits of escalations have identified continuing positive outcomes for children from interventions by their named QARO and the use of the escalation process to raise issues of delay or concern. Escalations have been grouped around 4 areas:

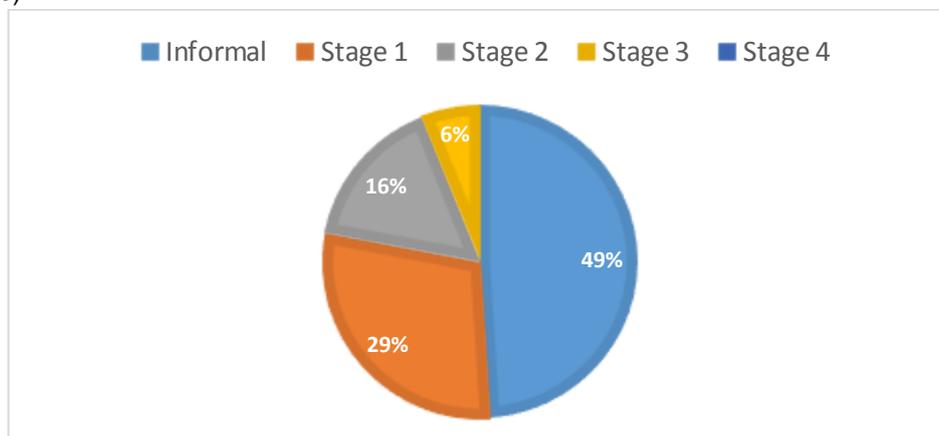
- **Permanency:** These made up the highest number of escalations and generally relate to lack of a permanency plan, insufficient permanency planning meetings and delays in children achieving permanency.
- **Care planning:** These concerns centre around lack of up-to-date care plans in place, insufficient transition plans & lack of progress in accessing suitable education.
- **Practice concerns:** Involved the impact of changes or lack of social workers, lack of evidence of supervision and/or sufficient management oversight on the cases between reviews and statutory visiting patterns. This was also highlighted in audits and a supervision tracker is now in place. A further audit of supervision and management oversight completed in April 2021 has shown significant improvements in this area.
- **Drift and delay:** The escalation for this area focuses primarily on delay in applications to court to revoke care and placement orders. Although this is often outside of the control of the Local Authority it is important to continue to raise so that there is evidence when discussing themes and areas of practice with legal services and the local courts.

8.5 Oversight of the escalations indicates that all have resulted in the locality teams implementing the advice or recommendations of the QARO. QAROs are working to the time agreements for resolution or further escalation, and this has resulted in a higher number of escalations being resolved at an informal level. This shows the continued working relationship and importance of communication between the QARO

service and fieldwork teams. We have had no escalations direct to the executive director, although there has been executive director oversight for those escalated to the corporate director, in line with the escalation procedures.

Resolution of escalations

(Fig. 23)



Stage	Number	%
Informal	61	49%
1	36	29%
2	20	16%
3	8	6%
4	0	0%
Total	125	100

- 8.6 The QA manager reviews the escalations on a monthly basis and provides detail of those remaining outstanding to locality team and service managers. Although time consuming, this process is helping to ensure the timeliness of conclusion to formal escalations. We have seen an improvement of the number of escalations resolved in the year 2021/22 compared to the previous year 2020/21 when the formal process had been implemented. As at 31.3.22 all escalations had been resolved.
- 8.7 The QA manager also provides a report each quarter to CPAG (children’s performance action group) for additional senior leadership oversight and agreed actions to ensure we continue to strengthen our practice in this area. In addition to the formal Dispute and Escalation Process and in keeping with the service’s aim of developing a high challenge, high support ethos, QAROs are encouraged to add value to planning for children by developing relationships with key partners within the localities. The aspiration is not to formally escalate disputes unnecessarily but to achieve the desired outcomes for children by positively influencing social work practice through dialogue, negotiation, and resolution meetings. Usually this will make resolutions timelier for the child.
- 8.8 Management audits, oversight and Practice Evaluation suggest that recording of the QARO footprint on the child’s record is continuing to improve and becoming more consistent. We are working on developing a monthly report to highlight the QARO activity for each of our children in care.
- 8.9 The data reporting and monitoring of escalations has proved challenging over the last 12 months. The data has been reliant upon the QARO updating a central tracker, with support from the QA manager and BST. This has meant that we are not confident in the figures for our escalations being a true representation of the actual formal challenge that takes place within day-to-day practice. As a result of this we have been working closely with colleagues in our data and performance team to strengthen the workflow of the electronic recording system (Mosaic) so that escalations can be easily reported on and part of the data dashboard.

9. QARO service review and summary of priorities and actions

9.1 Summary of progress from identified actions 2020/21 report:

- 1. High-level service commitment to Learning and Development opportunities for QAROs:** Bespoke training for all QAROs on restorative practice has been available. QAROs have been able to access a wide range of training and development opportunities throughout the last 12 months. This has included gaining knowledge and skills understanding the impact of trauma, the five to thrive model, domestic abuse tool kit, sexual abuse tool kit. Supervision has a focus for CPD, and reflective practice and group supervisions have been established on a monthly basis.
- 2. Refresh and implement practice developments in respect of engagement, and a strengths-based, approach to Child in Care Reviews:** This continues to be an area of focus and development. We are able to evidence progress in this area through the QA framework, monthly audits, and on-going dip samples. Alongside we have the feedback from children, young people, and the Youth Voice Council.
- 3. Continue to facilitate the meaningful involvement of Children in Care in their Reviews:** This continues to be a focus for the team. Regular reporting on participation (weekly) and discussions through peer supervision has shown an increase in participation over the last few months.
- 4. Improve performance on the timeliness of distributing the recommendations and minutes of all our child in care reviews:** We have been able to remove the reliance for completion and distribution of recommendations and minutes from our business support colleagues, meaning that QAROs are now able to complete and send off recommendations and minutes as soon as they are completed. Performance in this area is improving but this is slow and been further impacted through some team sickness.
- 5. Develop a consistent monitoring of cases between reviews to ensure timely progress of the child's plan and continuing QARO footprint:** This area of work is on-going and near completion. We have worked collaboratively with our business support to develop a reporting system to identify the level of contact a QARO has with a child or young person between formal reviews. Dip sample audits has also identified a significant increase in QARO footprint within the records which is positive to see and needs to continue to improve.
- 6. Increase quality assurance of the QARO impact for the child and young person and increase in observation of practice:** Observation of practice has increased through the monthly audit framework; alongside this

we held practice observation week (October 2021) where a number of CICRs were observed. Feedback from this has enabled the team to consider new approaches and continue to improve practice and performance. The QARO completes an audit following every CiC review held. This enables independent oversight of the quality-of-care plans and overall performance which is measured on outcomes for the child or young person being met.

- 7. Development of the QARO role within child exploitation and contextual safeguarding meetings:** QAROs are now chairing MACE (Multi-agency child exploitation) meetings. This enables an independent overview and oversight of planning for those who are considered to be at significant risk. Where the risk is significant the allocated QARO will chair the meeting as they have knowledge and understanding of the young person's history and individual circumstances which helps to engage the young person in the meeting without the need to repeat information. The QA managers are responsible for chairing contextual safeguarding meetings and having discussions with partner agencies regarding the process and criteria for convening the meetings. Over the past 12 months there have been 2 face to face contextual safeguarding meetings held and consultations with a range of professionals and stakeholders.
- 8. Working with Dorset Council in respect of key strategic priorities including permanence for children & considering alternative exits from care:** We have seen a significant improvement on the number of children achieving permanence over the last 12 months. This has been through the development of a clear permanence pathway alongside the drive for children and young people to return home (where it is considered safe), to discharge care orders and for children to achieve permanence through special guardianship or adoption orders. This continues to be a focus within the CICRs and challenge from the QARO to ensure assessments are undertaken and plans progressed without delay.
- 9. Ensuring that young people are better prepared for leaving care by robust review and challenge around pathway assessment and transition planning:** We have established links with the leaving care team, with 2 QAROs attending team meetings and the QARO manager attending the managers meeting on a monthly basis. Dip sample auditing alongside monthly audits have focussed on the quality of pathway plans and transitional arrangements. Transition planning remains an area to strengthen for the next year. Through the in/formal challenges we have seen improvements in the quality of pathway plans and the QARO maintaining contact for some young people post 18 where there is an identified need. Our working relationship with the CWAD and adult services

team to ensure clear and appropriate transitional plans and arrangements are in place for our most vulnerable young people has also strengthened throughout the last 12 months. This will continue to be a focus for the coming year.

10. Develop relationship and communication between the QARO Service and CAF/CASS: Senior managers meet regularly with CAF/CASS. We have seen increased communication and consultation between the QARO, and court appointed Guardians with Guardians being invited (and attending) both CICRs and PPMs.

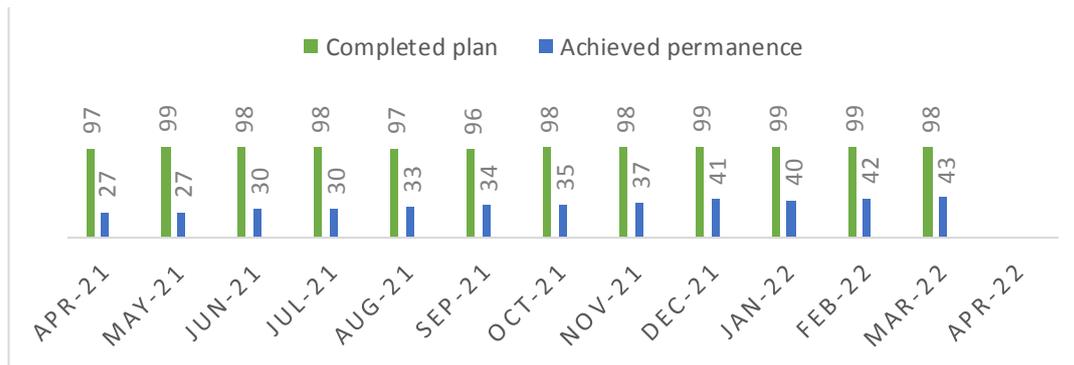
- 9.2 The QARO Service is continuing to make steady and purposeful improvement on many of its key activities. We have embedded previous improvements and demonstrated that the service can sustain these.
- 9.3 Children and young people are being provided with a QARO within one working day of coming into care or within 2 days of notification to the service. There have been few changes in QARO allocations and where unavoidable, these have been kept to a minimum.
- 9.4 Most reviews (on average 96%) are being held within timescale and children are being provided with opportunities to contribute to these reviews. A significant number of review records are completed within timescales, with social work managers being advised of recommendations and decisions within the statutory timescale.
- 9.5 Dorset Council continues to be challenged through formal and informal escalations, whenever there are concerns about children's care plans not being effective or delays in plans being pursued. In addition to this, the QARO footprint on children's files is now visible. The escalation process is now routinely used, with the team focus being on maintaining this and acting upon disputes effectively and within realistic timescales.
- 9.6 QAROs continue to have a specific impact for individual children and young people in supporting them with plans and issues that arise for them. QAROs continue to work collaboratively with those with responsibilities for caring for, and working with, children and young people in care to improve their outcomes. The team is stable with a permanent QA manager and no current team vacancies (although we are aware that 1 part time QARO will be retiring in May 2022). Staff supervision is regular and provides management oversight and support, observations of practice take place across the service alongside monthly audits which helps to identify professional development and training needs.

10. Quality of Care Plan & Permanence Planning

- 10.1 QAROs play a significant role in monitoring permanence planning at an early stage of a child's time in care and considering all options for young people by their 2nd review, scrutinising the timeliness of family finding and preparing children for permanent placements.
- 10.2 Achieving permanence for all our children in care remains a priority for the QAROs and Dorset Council. To avoid drift and delay in securing permanence, regular permanency planning meetings are held along with a senior management permanence panel for all new children coming into care and/or those who have not achieved permanence after 12 months.
- 10.3 The figures show that on 31.3.22 the number of children who had a permanency plan was 98% with those who have achieved permanence being 43%. An analysis of the escalations found that delays occurred mostly around permanence in arranging matching of a permanent foster placement for children with a care plan of long-term fostering; delays in progressing assessments of connected persons carer; and delays in moving forward the child's agreed permanence plan. Through QAROs highlighting this informally and formally, we have made significant improvement over the last 12 months. This continues to be an area of focus for the team and weekly reporting to senior leaders will continue for the coming 12 months.
- 10.4 QAROs ensure in reviews that the legal status of the child remains appropriate for the child's care plan and also maintain a significant role in reviewing plans for court. This ensures that proposed plans meet children's needs and that undue drift and delay is avoided. There is a particular focus on the use of section 20, the timely revocation of Placement Orders (when adoption is no longer the plan for the child) and seeking revocation of Care Orders when children have remained safely at home in parents care. The QARO service's footprint is more visible in care plans to court and in communication with Guardians, and there are references to their recommendations in social work statements. QAROs have access to Independent Legal Advice to enable them to effectively challenge plans. The QARO service footprint is more visible in care plans to court and in communication with Guardians.

Percentage of those achieving permanency

(Fig. 24)



- 10.5 Dorset continues to work with colleagues from the regional adoption agency (Aspire) to increase the number of SGO carers with financial and practical support being maintained. There is now a panel in place to consider all SGO and Adoption Order allowances to prevent delays in the progression and agreement of bespoke support plans.
- 10.6 As of 31 March 2022, Dorset has a total of 20 children currently living with prospective adopters (15 families). 11 of these children (55%) have been impacted by the Somerset ruling which highlighted the need for all children to have their adoption medicals seen and agreed by the ADM prior to agreeing the best interest decision. 6 children (30%) are waiting for adoption applications to be submitted or are awaiting a court date. 3 children (15%) have been identified of needing further support and interventions before agreement to lodge the adoption application. These 3 children are over the age of 5 and have a range of additional needs.
- 10.7 The service continues to develop and maintain positive links with the Virtual School Service with QAROs encouraging the attainment, achievement, and progress of each child by ensuring PEP meetings are taking place and their impact is evidenced through progress in education. QAROs remain active in recognising the educational achievement of children by celebrating their successes within reviews however small these may be.

11. Quality Assurance of the QARO service

- 11.1 As part of the Quality Assurance Framework, the QARO Service has a data set of relevant information in respect of children in care and about the effective working of the QARO Service. Performance information is available through the Mosaic case record system and Performance data collection through Power BI.

- 11.2 The data set is reported to QARO managers on a monthly basis and is reported quarterly through Quality Assurance Performance Group (QPAG) report. The QARO data set includes:
- Timeliness and timescales for CIC reviews.
 - Timeliness of completion of review records and sharing of key decisions and outcomes.
 - Availability of social work reports and plans for children.
 - The participation and attendance of children and young people at reviews, as well as parental involvement.
 - Whether the child has a suitable plan for permanence and CIC reviews and specifically at 2nd CIC reviews, whether the child's views have been suitability considered in their plans.
 - Whether a midpoint check has been undertaken and progress of planning details of children in care population.
 - Suitability of care plans and pathway plans being implemented.
 - Details about QARO visits and footprint on case records.
- 11.3 There is now less of a reliance on manual trackers and spreadsheets, with performance data collated electronically through Mosaic (children's data base) Dashboards and Corius reporting system. The service works closely with our colleagues in business support to ensure the data collation and collection is correct and highlights early exceptions, potential risks, and concerns to colleagues within Children's Services.
- 11.4 The service undertakes regular audits of reviews, care planning and monitoring of plans following each Child in care Review. The outcome of these audits is shared with the worker and manager and where necessary escalations are made to avoid any further drift or delay. In addition to the audits following the reviews, the service contributes to the quality assurance framework within Children's Services. The team work alongside social workers and managers as auditors or moderators which also includes formal observations of social work practice and identifying areas of outstanding and good practice with agreed actions on areas where additional focus to strengthen practice is needed.
- 11.5 Some of the overall findings that have been identified as good practice include:
- Reviews undertaken within timescales.
 - QARO stability and relationship with the child or young person.
 - 98% of children having a permanency plan.
 - High number of children had been visited face to face by their QARO during the last 12 months and where this was not possible, there was

evidence of communication and representation of the child's voice within the minutes and recommendations of reviews.

- 11.6 The areas we have identified through the Quality Assurance framework to improve practice and outcomes for children and young people are:
- The need for improved communication between social workers and QAROs so that they are informed in a timely way of significant events and are able to respond appropriately.
 - Consistent and effective use of escalation processes.
 - To continue to be imaginative and creative in the way we support and encourage participation in the review process and evidence the impact this has on the child/young person.
 - Increase in observations of practice and seeking feedback following monthly audits across children's services.
- 11.7 In June 2021 a set of QARO practice standards were approved and implemented. Below is each of the key statements with commentary from IRO observation and monitoring.

Practice Standard 1 – Voice of the child

Children need to be listened to and heard. Through the CICRs that were held in 2021-22 and the feedback detailed previously in this report we know that QAROs are helping children & young people know and understand what arrangements are in place to review and support their journey. The writing of review minutes and recommendations in a personalised letter further supports the importance of the review meeting centralising on the child or young person.

Practice Standard 2 – Children should be in the most suitable placement for them

Stability for our children & young people remains a focus for the QARO and all those involved in the care and planning for our children in care. The development of a change of placement approval group (CPAG) meeting weekly, where the QARO attends has helped to prevent unnecessary moves for our children and enabled creative thinking on support plans to help children. Young people and their carers.

Practice Standard 3 – Children need an understanding of their own story

QAROs ensure that all aspects of a child/young person's needs are fully considered within the review process. Letters from the QARO help to explain the reasons why they are in care and what the longer-term plans are. Children and young people are supported to engage with life story work once permanence plans are in place. This can be through formal or informal direct work with their allocated social worker. There is evidence of workers and

QAROs being creative in helping children or young people with communication difficulties to engage in meaningful work. This can be through translation services and skilled workers (such as sign language, interpreters) as well as using technology to engage (such as voice and eye activated communication systems for children with a disability and adapted apps and computer programmes).

Practice Standard 4 – Permanence

Children and young people in Dorset are wherever possible provided with permanent living arrangements. The high % of children who have a permanence plan reflect this. The QARO ensures that permanence planning meetings take place for those children & young people where permanence has not been achieved and that the momentum to achieve this is maintained.

Practice Standard 5 – Transitions

QAROs ensure the right support is in place for young people to transition to adulthood. We know that this is an area of practice we need to strengthen. An increase in escalations, creating stronger links and working partnerships with our care leavers team and attending transitions meetings have been some of the recent changes which need embedding.

Practice Standard 6 – Protection

The QARO makes sure that all their children and young people feel and are safe. There is enhanced monitoring and communication with young people in an unregulated or semi-supported accommodation, as well as close links with our safeguarding and standards advisors for schools. QAROs are invited to and attend necessary LADO and strategy meetings if safeguarding concerns regarding their children and/or carers arise.

Practice Standard 7 – Independence

The QARO is independent and holds the corporate parent to account. This continues to be evidenced through the increase in escalations and completion of case and practice audits with regular reporting to senior leaders and the corporate parenting board.

12. Supervision & Training

- 12.1 Supervision is an essential activity for providing support and development to individual QAROs and to work toward creating consistency across the service in terms of practice and process. The team's supervision and appraisal arrangements have been conducted in accordance with Dorset's supervision policy. Each QARO has around 10 formal supervisions a year, as well as an

annual appraisal. In addition to this there is peer supervision which takes place monthly.

- 12.2 Supervision covers personal matters, professional development, performance observations of practice and feedback as well as discussing the QARO standards, providing evidence of practice and discussing the high risk or need to know children and young people. Supervision is reflective and booked 12 months in advance. It takes place either face to face or virtually depending on the needs and preference of the QARO. Detailed notes are kept but are not stored on the children's records but are accessible for auditing as/when necessary. This is in line with Dorset policy and procedures.
- 12.3 QAROs have access to a range of training within Dorset Council Children's Services workforce development programme. This consists of formal and informal events as well as a "Thinking Thursday" and "Weekly Wordout" which will focus on themes highlighted through the monthly audits (such as completing chronologies, and the importance of permanence planning). In addition to accessing training, the QAROs also support the principle Social Worker with training and webinars sharing their skills and experience across the workforce. The feedback from these from social workers in the localities has been positive and plans are in place to further develop the links and relationships between the QAROs and locality teams across Dorset.

13. Areas for Development 2022-23

- 13.1 The focus of work to continuously improve in our performance will include:
- Continue to offer Learning and Development opportunities for QAROs, including the embedding of restorative practice to support the focus on strengths based social work practice.
 - Develop more creative ways to facilitate the meaningful involvement of Children in Care in their Reviews, particularly those who are currently reluctant.
 - We need to develop an improved system that will enable us to strengthen our current performance on the timeliness of completing and distributing the minutes of all our child in care reviews.
 - Better utilise data about our QARO footprint to assure ourselves that we have strong and through oversight of our children's care, their ambitions, their future plans and ultimate success into adulthood
 - Maintain oversight, monitoring and challenge for those young people where there is a Deprivation of Liberty (DOLs) and ensure that as an

Authority we are acting in a legal way to protect the best interests of the young person.

- Ensuring that young people are better prepared for leaving care by robust review and challenge around pathway assessment and transition planning, especially those young people where there is a need for transition into adult services.
- To develop formal feedback following children in care reviews through our work with the Dorset Youth Council & NYAS.
- Ensure that our offer to our unaccompanied children seeking asylum meets their needs and they are provided with appropriate information to support them understanding what is happening to them.

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Corporate Parenting Board

30 November 2022

Quality Assurance and Reviewing Officer (QARO/IRO) Annual Report 2021-2022

For Review and Consultation

Portfolio Holder: Cllr A Parry, Children, Education, Skills and Early Help

Local Councillor(s): Cllr

Executive Director: T Leavy, Executive Director of People - Children

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Report Status: Public

Brief Summary:

This Annual Quality Assurance & Reviewing Officer (QARO/IRO) Report provides quantitative and qualitative evidence relating to the QARO Service in the Dorset Council which incorporates the role of the IRO as required by statutory guidance. The Annual Report must be presented to Corporate Parenting Board and the Safeguarding Children Partnership.

Recommendation:

Members are requested to note the content and actively consider and comment upon the strengths and future recommendations.

Reason for Recommendation:

To be assured that the report has identified the strengths and areas for development that will strengthen the work we do as corporate parents. To ensure children and young people in Dorset will be happy, safe and have opportunities to reach their goals.

1. **Financial Implications**
N/A
2. **Environmental Implications**
None identified
3. **Well-being and Health Implications**
None identified
4. **Other Implications**
None identified
5. **Risk Assessment**
Not applicable
6. **Equalities Impact Assessment**
Not applicable
7. **Appendices**
Appendix 1: IRO Annual Report 2021 - 2022
8. **Background Papers**
None