

Corporate Parenting Board Thursday 29th April 2021 Fostering Service Annual Report including update on the Modernising Fostering Plan

For Decision

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

Local Councillor(s):

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

Report Author: John Heron

Tel: 01305 224664

Email: john.heron@dorsetcc.gov.uk

Report Status: Public

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 had identified the strengths and areas for development that will strengthen the work we do as Corporate Parents and ensure that children and young people in Dorset will be happy and safe and have opportunities to reach their goals.

1. Executive Summary

The Fostering Services Regulations 2011 require that the Fostering Services provides written reports on the management, outcomes, and financial state of the fostering service. This Annual Fostering Service Report provides quantitative and qualitative evidence relating to the Fostering Services in the Dorset Council area as required by statutory guidance. The Annual Fostering Service Report must be presented to Corporate Parenting Board.

2. Financial Implications

None identified

3. Well-being and Health Implications

None identified

4. Climate implications

None identified

5. Other Implications

At the beginning of 2020 a worldwide Pandemic started and on 23 March 2020 the UK was advised that all unnecessary social contact should cease. The pandemic continues and has impacted the way we have implemented our statutory duties.

6. Risk Assessment

Having considered the risks associated with this decision, the level of risk has been identified as:

Current Risk: N/A

Residual Risk: N/A

7. Equalities Impact Assessment

N/A

8. Appendices

None

9. Background Papers

1. Background

The Fostering Services Regulations 2011 require that the Fostering Services provide written reports on the management, outcomes, and financial state of the fostering service. This report provides an overview of activity from the last financial year, April 2020 to March 2021, and the plans from the service for the forthcoming year (April 2021 to March 2022).

2. Executive Summary

This has been a busy and unprecedented year within the fostering service. The Covid-19 virus has presented logistical challenges for service delivery but has also brought out the very best in our foster carers. It is remarkable that many foster carers were able to accept new placements and continue to provide foster homes for children who need them.

Since the last annual report consideration has been given to the way in which Dorset Council delivers the fostering service. Alternative delivery models were considered, and due diligence work was completed. It was ultimately decided that the service would remain in-house. The fostering service has since undergone a restructure in line with the Blueprint for change programme.

2.1 Service Improvement Plan

The Fostering Service has developed a Service Improvement Plan which will ensure service delivery is monitored and continually improving.

Since November 2020 the service has been reviewed and areas for development have been identified. These have been included in the Service Improvement Plan.

2.2 Mainstream Foster Carers

Early in 2018 the Fostering Service began working with Whitehead Ross Education and Consulting (WREC) to recruit mainstream foster carers. The role of WREC has been to work with the Fostering Service and Corporate Communications service to produce and implement a fostering recruitment strategy, receive enquiries from the public about becoming a foster carer, undertaking initial home visits where appropriate and encourage suitable prospective foster carers to apply to foster. In November 2020 two Fostering Social Workers were seconded to WREC from the Post-Approval team in order to undertake foster carers assessments. However, this contract will expire at the end of May 2021 these functions will revert to being delivered in-house.

In this reporting period, the Fostering Assessment Team and WREC have recruited 20 new mainstream fostering households. In addition, 16 new Connected Persons Foster Carers were approved bringing the total of new foster carers for Dorset to 36.

As at 31 March 2021 there are a further 19 new mainstream fostering assessments in progression. Of these 3 are with foster carers with IFA' looking to transfer to Dorset. Additionally, 28 Connected Persons assessments are in progress. This work will carry over into 2021/22.

In this reporting period, 19 foster families were deregistered from fostering leaving an overall net gain of 1 mainstream household (17 including Connected Persons).

2.3 In-House Fostering Placements

On 31 March 2021 there were 218 children and young people living within 207 in house fostering placements.

Throughout the period 2020-21 27 households were temporarily approved as connected persons foster carers under Regulation 24 of the Care Planning Review and Placement Regulations 2010. Sixteen Connected Persons households became fully approved Foster Carers.

In addition to statutory visiting requirements which have been carried out in person wherever safe to do, the fostering service has provided weekly check in calls to carers through periods of lockdown and a county wide, virtual foster carers support group has been provided on a monthly basis. Senior Managers have also facilitated a fortnightly foster carers touchdown meeting. These virtual meetings have been well attended.

The Support offer to Foster Carers has been further enhanced by the establishment of the Dorset Foster Carers Association.

3. Fostering Service Restructure.

The fostering service has recently undergone a significant restructure alongside Dorset's Blueprint for change programme.

Earlier in the reporting period consideration was given to alternative delivery models for the fostering service. Work was undertaken with Mutual Ventures as part of the Department of Digital, Culture and Sports (DCMS) Mutual Support Programme to explore alternative delivery options for the Fostering Service that would drive service improvements and improve financial stability.

3.1 Drivers for Change

The drivers for change in the delivery of the fostering service in Dorset included:

- Improving outcomes for children through placing more children locally enabling them to maintain relationships with friends, family, and community
- Delivering value for money: significant investment has been made in the service, but this has not, yet, delivered anticipated reduction in spend on external placements
- Ability to compete in the market: current approaches to recruitment are not delivering an increased number and range of local foster carers with the skills and competencies required to meet our needs.
- Supporting foster carer resilience: the current offer does not sufficiently meet the needs of all carers, particularly those caring for the most vulnerable, and a model that is based on best practice is needed
- Ensuring there is a sufficient number of foster carers with the right skills in the right location to enable appropriate matching

3.2 Business Case

An Outline Business Case, which presented a range of options for the future delivery of the Fostering Service, including in-house transformation and a range of externalisation approaches was considered by the Children's Services Leadership Team in December 2019 and approval was given to develop a Full Business Case for the preferred option, the creation of Corporate Joint Venture between Dorset Council and an external partner.

The rationale for this was that whilst the creation of a Corporate Joint Venture requires initial investment and investment of time it would enable the service improvement to be delivered by experts, support an increased commercial focus and enable innovation to deliver improved outcomes for children, young people and foster carers and contribute significantly to reductions in spend on placement costs. There was a concern that historic attempts to improve the service in-house had not been effective and that an external partnership would prove beneficial, and a desire to ensure that Dorset Council still retained some element of control over the delivery of this important service.

The Full Business Case was presented to the Children's Services Leadership Team in August 2020. It was apparent by this stage that the decision to restrict the scope of the case to considering a corporate joint venture had been unnecessarily restrictive. Market engagement had given mixed feedback from providers. It was decided that the establishment of a corporate joint venture would not be pursued because

- The process carried a level of risk and uncertainty around any potential partner
- Further investment was required
- There was insufficient confidence in the savings and benefits which had been identified

As a result, the fostering service was restructured under the scope of the Blueprint for Change.

The fostering service consists of three teams:

- Pre-Approval Team
- Post-Approval
- Post Approval Complex Needs

Each team has a Team Manager who currently reports to the Fostering Transformation Consultant.

3.3 Pre- Approval Team

The Pre-Approval Team has 6 full time equivalent (fte) workers. These workers undertake all Connected Persons Viability Assessments for temporary approvals under Regulating 24 of the Care Planning Review and Placement Regulations 2010 and Full Connected Persons Fostering Assessments and mainstream fostering assessments under the

Fostering Agency Regulation 2011. Currently each fostering assessment worker carries a caseload of 6 assessments at any one time.

These workers also provide supervision and support to those temporarily approved foster carers as required by the National Minimum Standards in Foster Carer 2011.

The Pre-Assessment team also works closely with WREC who have since October, been undertaking mainstream fostering assessments.

3.4 Complex Needs and Post Approval Teams

Prior to the September 2020 reorganisation both post approval teams had the same remit but were geographically based. Following the restructure one team has become the Complex Needs Post Approval Team. This is still a work in progress. It is planned that this team will be responsible for the support, supervision, and training of the most experienced foster carers who will be able to offer robust and tenacious foster homes for children with the more complex needs. The team is linked to The Harbour Project and is supporting our first Harbour Foster Family Carers. They will continue to provide this support to other Harbour Specialist foster carers as we add to our numbers of these carers. We plan to have 10 Harbour Foster Families by March 2022.

It is also planned that the Complex Needs Post Approval Team will support foster carers caring for teenagers and other children with additional needs.

Currently the two Post Approval Teams have a total of 15 staff between them. The workforce is made up of a mixture of full and part-time staff. In aggregate, there is the equivalent of 11.25 fte Fostering Social Workers within the team (417 Fte hours). The Complex Needs team has 4.3fte and the Post Approval team has 4.8fte.

However, 2 part time workers (42.5 hours) have been seconded to WREC, to undertake foster carer assessments. Fostering Social Workers currently hold caseloads of 20 fostering households per fte worker (pro-rata).

A third, full time (37 hours) worker acts in the role of Fostering Panel Advisor and is therefore non-caseholding. This leaves 337.5 hours or 9.12 fte FSW's time across the post approval teams.

Two of these workers are on temporary contracts until June 2021.

Post Approval Fostering Support	Post Complex Support	Approval Fostering	Fostering Team	Assessment
1x TM 4.8 Fte SW	1xTM		1xTM	

(Does not include worker seconded to WREC)	1 x AP Panel Advisor 4.3 Fte SW (This does not worker seconded to WREC)	6 x FTE Assessment Workers
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mainstream Foster Carer Supervision and Support • Connected Persons Foster care Supervision and Support • Foster carer Training and Development • Support Groups • Foster care Annual Reviews • Placement service • Long term matching within house carers • Support Groups 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mainstream Foster Carer Support Supervision and • Harbour Fostering Support • Connected Persons Foster care Supervision and Support • Foster carer Training and Development • Support Groups • Foster care Annual Reviews • Placement service • Long term matching within house carers • Support Groups 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reg 24 Viability Assessments with CSW's • Reg25 Extensions • Reg 27 Assessments using form C • Court reports where required • Respond to enquiries • Initial visits • Mainstream Form F Fostering Assessments

Whilst it is understood that substantial investment was made by the council in 2017 under the Modernising Fostering initiative the majority of this money went towards the funding of a new foster carer payment system which increased foster carer payments and ensured that Dorset Council fostering service is financially competitive in the marketplace. Since this time there is no evidence of any foster carers leaving Dorset Council to join an Independent Fostering Agency for financial reasons.

A discussion paper is being prepared for CSLT to discuss the staffing needs of the fostering service to ensure good levels of support to foster carers and therefore to assist placement stability.

The fostering service aims to provide a high-quality responsive child-centred service in relation to its core functions and to recruit new foster carers from the community. We

prepare applicants through training to be able to deal with the range of issues that foster carers face when looking after children.

The service assesses a range of foster carer applicants i.e. Mainstream Foster Carers, Connected Persons Carers and Parent and Child, Short Breaks etc. The service undertakes comprehensive assessments and checks to ensure that prospective carers are suitable and can carry out their role. The service supervises, supports and develops carer's skills and knowledge in order that they promote and achieve the highest standards of care, safeguarding and outcomes for children in care.

4. Types of Foster Care

The types of Foster Care offered includes:

- **Short Term/Time Limited:** Time limited placements across all skills Levels. However, level 4 carers would be expected to undertake assessments on children and young people in their care or undertake specified tasks.
- **Long Term:** Planned, permanent placements across Skills levels. Level 4 carers would be expected to provide permanent placements for children with significantly complex needs or challenging behaviors.
- **Respite:** Planned, child needs led support for placements and agreed support for carers across skills levels.
- **Support Care:** Part of a package of support (including day care and child minding) where carers provide planned time limited support to maintain children with their current foster placements and to prevent placement breakdown.
- **Children with Disabilities:** Short Term / Short Breaks provision and Long Term (Permanent) placements for children with disabilities.
- **Kinship Care & Connected Persons:** Planned and Court approved placements for children and young people within their wider network including family members or other with whom children have an existing and positive relationship.
- **Parent and Child:** Parent and child fostering is a specialist type of supportive fostering where a parent, often a mother and their baby, can learn parenting skills and foster carers are able to assess of the parent's capabilities.

5. Recruitment and Marketing

Early in 2018 the Fostering Service, began working with Whitehead Ross Education and Consulting (WREC) to recruit mainstream foster carers. The role of WREC has been to work with Fostering Service and Corporate Communications service to produce and implement a fostering recruitment strategy to attract and receive enquiries from the public about becoming a foster carer, undertake initial home visits where appropriate and encourage suitable prospective foster carers to apply to foster.

In October 2020 WREC began undertaking the assessments of prospective foster carers when two fostering social workers were seconded to the company from the fostering service. However, this contract will expire at the end of May 2021 and these functions will revert to being delivered in-house.

5.1 Initiatives and Events

Throughout the year there have been a number of initiatives and events designed to recruit new foster carers for Dorset children. Due to the current pandemic the vast majority of this has been conducted online. Alongside advertising on social media and the corporate website events have included -

- Drop-in and Chat events hosted on zoom. These events have been held at least weekly and provide an informal opportunity for new enquirers to chat with existing foster carers, social workers, panel members etc.
- Live Chats and Interviews, particularly during the first lockdown period. These discussed a range of pertinent subject matters to generate reach and general engagement. e.g. Live Well Dorset, SuperKids Webeing, Friends of Dorset Care Leavers, South West Recruitment, Foster Carers and live Q&A.
- Online Information Sessions/Introduction to Fostering. Featuring foster carers video interviews, blogs, written case studies. Discussions regarding Work commitments and Fostering, Fostering Siblings, Being a single Male Foster Carer and Care experienced young people's interviews – 'Paige's Top Tips'.

The service has also worked with the South West Regional Local Authorities to run joint recruitment campaigns online. #fosterforyourcouncil. These have included;

- September – Social Media posts directed at myth busting ideas about fostering, followed by 'Why foster for your council? This included daily quotes from foster carers
- December – Christmas Countdown – 24 videos and quotes based on what fostering means at Christmas.
- January – All walks of life – daily videos and quotes about what careers foster carers have had or still have alongside fostering.

The next joint campaign is due to run in April and will focus on attracting foster carers for teenagers.

5.2 Outcomes

In the period 1st April 2020 to 31st March 2021 WREC received 248 enquiries from the public seeking information about becoming a foster carer. The team completed 131 Initial Visits (IV's) and 20 new fostering households were approved.

As at 31 March 2021 there are a further 19 new mainstream fostering assessments in progression. Of these 3 are with foster carers with IFA's looking to transfer to Dorset. Additionally, 28 Connected Persons assessments are in progress.

Enquiries	248										
<u>April</u>	<u>May</u>	<u>June</u>	<u>July</u>	<u>Aug</u>	<u>Sept</u>	<u>Oct</u>	<u>Nov</u>	<u>Dec</u>	<u>Jan</u>	<u>Feb</u>	<u>March</u>
20	42	19	13	13	16	27	20	19	23	20	19
Initial Visits	131										
<u>April</u>	<u>May</u>	<u>June</u>	<u>July</u>	<u>Aug</u>	<u>Sept</u>	<u>Oct</u>	<u>Nov</u>	<u>Dec</u>	<u>Jan</u>	<u>Feb</u>	<u>March</u>
12	20	14	6	9	12	12	11	5	12	11	7
Invited to Apply	87										
<u>April</u>	<u>May</u>	<u>June</u>	<u>July</u>	<u>Aug</u>	<u>Sept</u>	<u>Oct</u>	<u>Nov</u>	<u>Dec</u>	<u>Jan</u>	<u>Feb</u>	<u>March</u>
11	19	11	5	3	5	7	7	3	7	6	3
Approvals	20										
<u>April</u>	<u>May</u>	<u>June</u>	<u>July</u>	<u>Aug</u>	<u>Sept</u>	<u>Oct</u>	<u>Nov</u>	<u>Dec</u>	<u>Jan</u>	<u>Feb</u>	<u>March</u>
0	1	0	1	0	2	2	4	2	2	3	3

6. Fostering Panel

Under the Fostering Service (England) 2011 Regulations Fostering Services are required to

appoint a foster panel. Under Regulation 25 the fostering panel is required to:

- To make a recommendation as to whether the applicant is suitable to be a foster carer and the terms of the approval.
- To consider the first annual review for newly approved foster carers, as well as reviews following the managing allegations process, and where foster carers are seeking a change in the terms of their registration status.

- To recommend whether or not a person remains suitable to be a foster carer, and whether the terms of their approval (if any) remain appropriate.
- To give advice or make recommendations, on other matters or cases referred to it by the fostering service provider, including terminations of approval.
- The fostering panel must also advise, where appropriate, on the procedures under which reviews in accordance with Reg. 28 are carried out by the fostering service provider, and periodically monitor their effectiveness.

In addition, the National Minimum Standards 2011 requires that:

- Panels provide a quality assurance feedback to the fostering service provider on the quality of reports being presented and the timeliness of assessments and decisions.

Fostering panel is held on consecutive days once a fortnight i.e. Tuesday and Wednesday every other week. In the future it is planned that panels will be held weekly. This will even out the administrative load on business support and reduce waiting time if a case is needed to be presented urgently.

The panel has a 'central list' of 14 members who attend on a rota basis. A panel is quorate when at least 5 members are in attendance. This must include the Chairperson, a Social Worker and at least three other members.

As a result of the pandemic in 2020-21 the fostering panel has met virtually. This has had an impact on the number of cases being presented to panel because of the technical challenges involved of panel Members, social workers and foster carers logging in to meetings and the trials of internet stability. Dorset has also increased the number of panel members available to each panel to allow for IT issues and dropout rates.

In the reporting period the panel met 48 time and heard 176 cases.

<u>2020 -2021</u>	
Number of panels	48
New Approvals	20
Connected Persons	16
Regulation 25 Extension (Connected Persons)	12
Resignations/Deregistration	3
Matches	44 Children
Reviews	68

Total number of actual cases presented	176
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It would be true to say that following the reorganisation of the fostering service in September 2020 there have been some difficulties with panel administration. Unfortunately, a combination of changes of personnel and staff sickness meant that the planned handover period to new staff was curtailed. This resulted in some difficulties until the new staff were able to become familiar with the processes systems required by panel. Since this time panel processes have been reviewed and are now managed by a single team of administrators. Social work staff have also been made aware of the deadlines necessary in order to ensure all necessary documentation is available for panel.

7. Dorset Approved Fostering Households and Beds (31st March 2021)

As at the 31st of March 2021 there were 453 children who were being looked after by Dorset Council. Of these 326 or 72% of all children in care were being looked after by foster carers either through an Independent Fostering Agency (IFA) or with Dorset's own in-house fostering service. Of all children in care 48% were placed with Dorset in-house foster carers.

Of the 326 children in foster care, 218 (or 67%) were placed within Dorset Council Foster Carers and 108 (33%) were placed with IFA carers.

The table below shows the number of approved households by type, the optimum number of registered placements and the number of placements used by type

Type of Fostering Household	Total Number of Fostering Households	Total Number of Beds	Total Number of Children Placed
Mainstream Including Parent and Child	148	286	144
Kinship Foster Carers	57	80	72
Foster for Adoption	3	3	2
Total number of Households	207	369	218

The combined number of all types of approved fostering households including Short Breaks, Kinship Care and Supported Lodgings, is 207. The optimum number of

placements provided through the Fostering Service is 369, and the number of fostering beds used was 218.

The current utilisation rate of foster children to fostering households is 1.05. This is low. However, this number is inflated by the number of fostering households with fostering beds on hold due to fostering families shielding or other covid-19 related issues.

Fostering households are approved for one, two or three children. Often the approval can be for one or two if siblings. This is usually due to bedroom space available and in Dorset we allow siblings (if appropriate) to share bedrooms. For the purposes of reporting the number of beds approved, the maximum number is reported. On the 31st March 2021 there were 151 fostering beds not in use.

It is unlikely that a fostering agency will be able to use all the fostering beds the agency has registered. There are two reasons for fostering beds not being used. These are, that the beds are available but waiting for a child to be appropriately matched or, the foster carers have beds on hold.

Foster carers can be on hold for a number of reasons, for example, the foster carers may request that they are put on hold due to health issues or due to personal or family circumstances. Foster carers can also be placed on hold by the service due to complaints or safeguarding concerns. It is also common for fostering households not to be used to the maximum number of beds they have available because of the needs of children already placed with them.

It is important to differentiate between fostering households that have vacancies and have no foster children placed (primary vacancies) and those that have vacant beds but do have other foster children in place (secondary vacancies). Likewise, fostering households that are on hold without any foster children placed have primary beds on hold and those that have children in placements but have additional unused beds have secondary beds on hold.

On the 31st March 2021 21 fostering households have 23 vacancies between them. Of these, 10 households have 12 primary vacancies between them and of these 7 beds were only available for respite care. Three were available for children under the age of 5 and 2 were available for teenagers and were in the process of being matched. Of the secondary vacancies 6 were for children under 10, 3 were for respite alongside the existing foster child. 2 were available for older children but require careful matching alongside.

Examples of why fostering households were on hold included; Covid-related issues (18), on hold to resume short breaks for specific children after lockdown (2) other health related issues (7), matching consideration regarding placing children alongside another child (8), taking a break following adoption of foster child (2), break after complex placement (2) personal issues (8) placed on hold by the fostering service (4).

Carers on hold due to Covid-19 have expressed a willingness to return to fostering once the second vaccine has been given.

8. Fostering Reviews

The foster carer's annual review of approval, addresses all relevant aspects of the National Minimum Fostering Standards and Regulations 2011. The reviews are initiated by the Fostering Social Worker with a written summary of achievements and significant events within the foster carer's home over the preceding year. A Fostering Independent Reviewing Officer convenes and chairs an independent annual review meeting. A report is then either presented to Panel and endorsed by the Fostering Panel Agency Decision Maker or submitted to the Senior Manager for Fostering who is the Agency Decision Maker for non-Panel reviews. All the completed reviews are scrutinised by the relevant Team Managers who monitor compliance with the regulations before final agreement.

The Fostering review process is currently being revised in order to streamline the procedure and ensure continued compliance with the Regulations. Is this fair to add continued compliance?

The current process of fostering reviews includes Personal Development Plans, feedback from children and young people, their social workers and other professionals working with the fostering household as well as obtaining the views from the carers own children.

9. Foster Carers Support

As mentioned elsewhere in this report 2020-2021 has been full of unprecedented challenges for foster carers. Foster carers have valued more than ever the contact and support they have received for Dorset Council. Foster carers have particularly appreciated that Dorset Council agreed that Foster carers should be included in the first wave of Covid vaccines as front-line workers. They also appreciated that an extra payment was made during the main lockdown periods of April 2020 and January 2021.

9.1 Support Groups

In more usual times the fostering service provide a number of local support groups for foster carers throughout the county. However, as a consequence of the Covid pandemic these support groups have been paused and a county wide support group has been established online. These meetings are held on the first Monday of each month and have been well attended.

In addition, during the pandemic senior managers have held touchdown meetings with foster carers every fortnight, alternating evening and daytime meetings. Again, these meetings have been well attended by foster carers who tell us they value them.

The fostering support groups enable foster carers to meet with their peers and form supportive relationships to help them understand their fostering role and share their experiences and provide opportunities to develop their knowledge and skills. Various speakers have been invited in the past to the foster carer support groups to talk about specific topics and offer any information about local activities within the community.

Minutes from the support groups are sent to all foster carers regardless of their attendance so they are kept informed.

It is our intention to re-instate foster carers support groups as face-to-face meeting in line with the governments roadmap as we come out of the current covid restrictions.

9.2 Therapeutic Support

The Fostering Team work in partnership with the Clinical Commissioning Group to promote the emotional wellbeing of fostered children and young people. A total of 18.5 hours of Clinical Psychology support is provided through 2 part time clinical psychologists. The clinical psychologists work predominately with the foster carers as the agent of change to provide trauma informed strategies to meet the emotional wellbeing needs of children and to help manage behaviour. The psychologists hold regular surgeries which can be attended by foster carers and/or fostering social workers alike. They will also undertake short interventions directly with children where this is an identified need.

9.3 Child's Voice

The Fostering Service actively seeks to support children and young people to share their views about how they are being cared for and supported by the fostering service and wider directorate.

Children and young people are invited to comment about the support they are receiving from their foster carers, including support for family time with their birth family and friends and support with education ahead of their statutory child in care reviews. In addition, children are consulted with as part of the foster carers annual review.

The fostering social worker also aims to see children and young people in person when they are undertaking unannounced visits to fostering households. This will usually involve the Fostering Social Worker talking with the child or young person to ensure they are safe and happy within the foster home.

Children in foster care also have access to a Children's Advocates. This service is provided independently through Action for Children. The Advocacy service can help children or young people to explore and express their opinions and be heard.

The Participation People undertake an annual Children in Care survey in order to receive feedback from Children and Young People. As at the 30th March 2021 32 completed surveys have been returned from children aged 5 to 10 and 52 have been received from the over 11s. The final results and analysis of the survey will be reported to the Corporate Parenting Board in June 2021.

The fostering service meets regularly with the Participation People. The group meets fortnightly. The group runs three Children in Carer Councils;

- Junior in Care Council for children aged 5 to 10 years

- Children in Care Council for Children and Young People aged 11 to 15 years
- Care Leavers Council for young people aged 16+

Young People from the Children in Care Councils contribute to the fostering recruitment process by participating in the 'Journey to Fostering' training provided to all prospective foster carers.

The Children in Care Councils and the Fostering Service are also exploring how we can work together to enhance training provided for existing foster carers.

Young people and Care Leavers have also worked closely with the Harbour Project and the Fostering Service to identify qualities and develop a profile for prospective Community Foster Family Carers to be used in the targeted recruitment of Harbour Foster Carers.

9.4 Delegated authority

Children in care have often stated that they are treated differently to their peers who are not in care and foster carers have also been concerned that they have not been able to make the same decisions for their foster children as they can for their birth children. This can lead to tensions within the household.

In 2020/21 Dorset Council Children's Services have worked to ensure that foster carers have delegated authority to make certain decisions for the children they care for. A delegated authority agreement is completed at the point of the initial placement planning meeting which provides clarity and enables foster carers to make common sense, everyday decisions about the children and young people they care for, for example allowing them to go to friends' houses for sleepovers, signing consent forms for school trips and even arranging haircuts.

9.5. Dorset Foster Carer's Association (DFCA)

The Dorset Foster Carer's Association was formed in March 2021 by some of the foster carers from Dorset. The association is constituted with a Chairperson, a Vice-Chair, Treasurer and Secretary. Jan Hill has been appointed by the Association to be Chairperson, Martin Hill is Vice Chair, Kayleigh Barguss is Treasurer and Mandy Jarvis is Secretary. A Service Level Agreement has been drafted for use between Dorset County Council and The Foster Carers Association.

The aim of the DFCA is to raise the profile of all foster carers and to ensure that they are viewed as professionals by social workers and colleagues working with children that are looked after by Dorset Council.

The DFCA will:

- Provide strong channels of communication between the Fostering Service and the Association
- Work in partnership with Corporate Parenting and Fostering Services

- Seek to improve all aspects of fostering
- Promote good practice
- Represent foster carers as a group
- Organise support and social events for foster carers

The formation of the DFCA will raise the profile of DC foster carers, advance foster carers views and recommendations regarding the Fostering Service and support carers to provide to provide high quality care for the children they look after.

Currently the DFCA are in the process of setting up a website for all Foster Carers to access information regarding various issues and topics and for them to leave their views in relation to any fostering matters. This will ensure that there are robust channels of communication and feedback from foster carers to senior managers.

9.6 Peer Mentoring

As well as offering the fostering support groups and touchdown meetings the fostering service also operates an informal peer mentoring/buddy scheme where identified foster carers offer support and guidance to all newly approved or less experienced foster carers.

The mentors/buddies are experienced, with at least five years of fostering experience and are approved at skills level 3 and above.

The mentors/buddies offer their experience in all different types of fostering:

- from moving babies on to adoption
- to adolescent/teenage management and support
- long term foster care
- parent and child placements
- caring for children with disabilities

The identification of mentors/buddies is established by the fostering social workers who know the carers best and where their skills sit and is also influenced by the demographic/location within Dorset.

Mentoring remains a valuable resource aspect of fostering and mentees continue to offer positive feedback in relation to support received by them from the mentor.

9.7 Long Service Awards

In October 2020, foster carers, children and young people attended the annual Star Awards event with foster carers receiving awards in recognition of the outstanding care they have provided and in recognition of length of time they have fostered for Dorset

Council. Eighteen foster carers received awards for fostering for Dorset Council for 15, 20, 25 and in one case 45 years. Fifteen 'children who foster' were also recognised with awards at the event. Unfortunately, due to the pandemic the awards ceremony was held virtually but was still successfully inspiring. We are looking forward to holding the next event in person, Covid allowing.

10. Complaints and Allegations

The Fostering Service always takes any complaints and allegations against foster carers very seriously and all complaints and allegations are thoroughly investigated. Wherever possible we will attempt to resolve complaints informally, but these can be escalated should the complainant remain dissatisfied.

All Allegations against foster carers are referred to the LADO and are thoroughly investigated

10.1 Complaints

There were 7 complaints about the fostering service.

Two of these were from children, one upset about a foster carer regarding contact. This complaint was resolved informally.

The other complaint from a child concerned her previous foster carer. This complaint is current and ongoing at the time of writing.

Two complaints were made by birth parents concerning care of their children. One of these complaints was resolved informally. The other is ongoing.

One complaint was received from Grandparents who have applied to become connected foster carers. The Grandparents have referred to the Independent Review Mechanism (IRM) to appeal against the Agency Decision Makers decision not to approve their application.

Two further complaints were received from foster carers. Both complaints were resolved informally by meeting with the foster carers who did not wish to pursue the complaint any further and were satisfied with the outcomes.

10.2 Allegations

During this reporting period there were 25 referrals to the Designated Officer (aka LADO) concerning foster carers during this reporting period. Ten of these were did not meet the allegation threshold and were therefore closed.

After deliberation with the LADO 10 were considered to be unfounded.

Four were substantiated and appropriate actions taken. After formal reviews 3 carers were reapproved at fostering panel subject to additional training etc. The fourth carers approval was terminated and a referral was made to the Disclosure Barring Service (DBS)

One new allegation is current and ongoing.

11. Foster Carer Training.

In 2020 – 2021 227 foster carers enrolled on 38 e-learning courses. In addition, there were 25 courses offered in a virtual face to face format and these were attended by 224 foster carers.

Most foster carers tell us that they enjoy and value the training they have received however, some very experienced foster carers tell us they would like some more advance courses. The new foster carers training handbook is currently in development and will cater for this request.

12. Budget

The 2020/21 budget for Inhouse Fostering Fees & Allowances totalled £5.2M funding an average of 231 placements during the year.

Placements were consistently below this level and an estimated underspend of £1.1M is forecast.

It is anticipated that usage of in-house provision will increase in the coming year as the COvid-19 restrictions are lifted, foster carers receive second vaccinations and in-house placement availability is improved through the recruitment of foster carers more able to meet the sufficiency needs of Dorset children.

13. Summary

The fostering service has had a busy year helping to place and support children with foster carers in the midst of a pandemic. Staff and foster carers have risen to the challenge, adapted and found new ways of working to enable us to continue our essential tasks to provide safe and loving homes for our children. Although visits to foster carers homes have continued wherever safe and appropriate some visits and the support groups have been undertaken virtually. The Fostering Panel too moved online and managed to hear 176 cases during the reporting period. We have learned from these experiences and will take the lessons forward. We may never fully return to pre-Covid working models. Some meetings may remain on-line whilst others may be run in a combination of on-line and in person. Social workers have reported that for many young people meeting online appeals to them.

The fostering service is responsible for recruiting, training, supervising and supporting Foster Carers. It is also responsible for undertaking connected person's assessments. The service also works closely with commissioning colleagues and provides a Duty Service every day to identify any urgent and emergency placements required across Children's Social Care.

In addition, the service runs a successful foster carer mentoring scheme and a monthly support group, currently online, but with a keen intention to return to in-person support groups as conditions allow.

During the course of the last year the fostering service has been through a period of uncertainty as consideration was being given to an alternative delivery model and then change as part of the Blueprint programme. Managers and staff who relocated into new roles have now settled.

The fostering service has created a Service Development Plan in order to strategically manage and monitor the continual improvement and development of the service. This will form the basis of the Fostering Service Development strategy for the coming year and will be monitored through the fostering steering group.

It is recognised that there is a continued urgent need to recruit more foster carers willing and able to offer foster homes to Dorset children. It is important to target our recruitment efforts towards recruiting foster carers for teenagers, groups of brothers and sisters, children with additional needs and children from black and minority ethnic groups. The service is in the process of enhancing the fostering recruitment strategy in order to ensure we are able to meet the sufficiency requirements going forward. At the 31st March 2021 19 potential mainstream foster families were being assessed. This would provide a potential of 23 new homes for children.

The Fostering Service has also worked hard to improve the quality of support offered to Foster Carers. As part of this the service has worked with foster carers to establish the Dorset Foster Carers Association. Although the committee is now established the Association is still in an embryonic stage. The Service and the Association will work in the coming months to fully develop communication strategies and partnership working in order to promote foster care and foster carers in Dorset.

14. Developments For 2021/22

The fostering service has developed an exciting and ambitious action plan and over the coming year will prioritise work in the following areas:

14.1 Strengthening Business Intelligence and Performance Monitoring Arrangements.

A range of key performance indicators and business information requirements have been identified in order to more effectively monitor the fostering service. Currently management information and business tracking information are held in a combination of excel spreadsheets and on mosaic. The intention is to hold and report all information through mosaic. This will be used to produce a dashboard which will be able to provide quality and

practice information at a granular level. A draft dashboard has already been produced and is being refined.

14.2 Ensure Fostering Service Has Sufficient Staffing to Meet Current and Predicted Service Demand (In Line with Planned Service Development)

To undertake a modeling exercise to understand the staffing needs of the fostering service based on planned targets and caseloads of 15 households per fostering social worker and 5 assessments per fostering assessment worker. This will include posts already identified in the Blueprint for Change programme but not yet appointed to and the transfer to Dorset Council of 1 post under TUPE arrangement following the end of the WREC contract.

A first draft paper is currently being produced.

14.3 Ensure Effective Policies, Procedures and Processes Are in Place and Align with Statutory and National Minimum Standards and Best Practice.

The fostering service will undertake a root and branch review of all fostering service policies and procedures to ensure they are fit for purpose and Ofsted ready to support the service and reflect the wider locality children's services offer. This will include a full benchmarking exercise against the National Minimum Standards and the implementation of any subsequent action plan. It is good practice for fostering agencies to benchmark themselves in this way at least annually to keep abreast of national and local changes.

This will also include the revision of key documents required by Ofsted under the National Minimum Standards in Fostering 2011. These include:

- Statement of Purpose
- Foster Carers Handbook
- Children's Guide
- Foster Cares Training Handbook
- Foster Carer Financial Allowance Guidance
- Foster Carers Register

The fostering service will also review and revise the training offer made available to both foster carers and staff to ensure all carers and staff have the knowledge and skills to meet the needs of the children they care for.

14.4 Ensure the Quality of Practice in Dorset's Fostering Service Meet Fostering Regulations and Standards

The Fostering Service will develop and implement practice standards for workers with the service. It will also ensure that regular reflective supervision is taking place across the service and that this is recorded by managers.

The fostering service has strengthened their suite of foster carer file audit proformas which correlate to the Fostering Agency Regulations and link to Dorset Policies and Procedures. These templates are being used by the fostering reviewing officers.

14.5 Strengthen Fostering Duty Service Arrangements

The fostering service alongside the commissioning team work hard to identify foster placements for children who need them. The fostering service will review the process of placement finding and consider transferring the placement finding functions for inhouse placements to be within the fostering service. This may increase the identification and use of inhouse foster placement first and thereby reduce the number of IFA placements.

The fostering team will also consider setting up an out of hours fostering duty system to support foster carers and children in need of advice or support during evenings and weekends. This service is currently provided through the general Dorset Council out of hours duty service. A dedicated out of hours duty system would strengthen the support provided to foster carers by having fostering social workers they are likely to know and who have specialist fostering knowledge. This could lead to increased placement stability.

14.6 Strengthen Fostering Panel Arrangements

The fostering service will continue to work to improve the efficiency and cost effectiveness of the fostering panel.

New processes have already been put in place to ensure that all documentation for panel is panel ready. The fostering service will continue to review these procedures in order to streamline the process and maximise panel time. For example, it is planned that the process for matching children to their long-term foster families will no longer be presented to panel. This is not a statutory requirement and will speed up decision making as the case does not need to be booked in to panel. This will also free up panel time.

A benchmarking exercise has also been undertaken regarding the cost of Dorset's Fostering Panel. It has revealed higher than average costs and actions are being taken to reduce these costs.

14.7 Strengthen Fostering Recruitment

The Fostering Service is working with Dorset's Corporate Communications Service to develop a coherent Fostering Recruitment Strategy designed to meet the needs of the sufficiency plan. The plan will take in to account placement demand and demography using the Mosaic demographic analysis tools. This work is already underway.

The fostering service is keen to maximise recruitment and retention efforts and to ensure that Dorset fostering service is the provider of choice for foster carers. As such the service is keen to explore a range of Dorset Council fostering friendly initiatives including loans for house extensions, concessions on Council tax, free parking passes for foster carers etc.

14.8 Work with Foster Carers to Establish the Dorset Foster Carers Association

At a meeting on the 9th March 2021 Dorset Foster Carers appointed a Chairperson, Vice Chair, Treasurer, and Secretary to form an interim Committee in order to establish the Dorset Foster Carers Association.

The idea of the Foster Carers Association is to have an organisation run by foster carers for foster carers that will work in partnership with the Dorset Council Fostering Service and other senior managers to improve all aspects of the fostering service. By working together in this way we can ensure strong channels of communication, raise issues that affect foster carers, share ideas to improve the service, promote good practice, improve the outcomes for the children we care for and organise events for children and young people to have fun. The Association will be funded by Dorset Council.

The fostering service will continue to work with the committee and other foster carers to establish the Association. A draft service agreement has already been produced and will be finalised shortly.

14.9 Implement the Mockingbird Programme.

Mockingbird uses an extended family model, in the form of 'constellations' which consist of a 'hub' home and several 'satellite' homes nearby. The specially recruited and trained hub home carers offer respite care, peer support, regular joint planning and social activities.

Because of its structure, Mockingbird helps alleviate the sense of isolation foster carers can feel and offers immediate practical support - similar to that a non-fostering family might receive from friends and relatives.

Dorset Fostering Service intends to set up two Mockingbird fostering communities in Dorset by September 2021.

Author: John Heron

Fostering Transformation Consultant

April 2021

[Please do not delete the footnote.](#)

Footnote:

Issues relating to financial, legal, environmental, economic and equalities implications have been considered and any information relevant to the decision is included within the report.