

# People and Health Scrutiny Committee

## 8<sup>th</sup> June 2021

### Fostering Service Annual Report

## For Review and Consultation

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

**Local Councillor(s):**

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

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**Report Status:** Public

**Recommendation:** Committee are asked to consider and note the contents of the Fostering Services Annual Report and comment on the strengths and future recommendations

### Reason for Recommendation:

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

## 1. Executive Summary

1.1 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).

1.2 The report provides an overview of the areas of strength and areas for development and modernisation within the fostering service focusing on:

- Service Improvement Plan
- Our current mainstream foster carers and the number of in-house placements
- Fostering Service restructure and drivers for change
- Pre-approval team, complex needs and post approval team and types of foster care
- Recruitment and Marketing and incentives and events to attract new foster carers
- Fostering Panel
- Support for our foster carers and celebrating their successes
- Dorset Foster Care Association
- Managing complaints and allegations
- Training offer for foster carers
- Budget

1.3 Whilst important to reflect on the successes and opportunities from the previous year, the report also provides focus and detail as to the strengthening fostering plan as highlighted in

- Developments for 2021/2022
- Strengthening Fostering Plan

1.4 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.

1.5 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.

1.6 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 as detailed within this report.

## **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<sup>rd</sup> 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**

[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.

## **1. Introduction and Background**

- 1.1 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**

- 2.1 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.
- 2.2 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.

## **3. Service Improvement Plan**

- 3.1 The Fostering Service has developed a Service Improvement Plan which will ensure service delivery is monitored and continually improving.
- 3.2 Since November 2020 the service has been reviewed and areas for development have been identified. These have been included in the Service Improvement Plan.

## **4. Mainstream Foster Carers**

- 4.1 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.

- 4.2 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.
- 4.3 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.
- 4.4 In this reporting period, 19 foster families were deregistered from fostering leaving an overall net gain of 1 mainstream household (17 including Connected Persons).

## **5. In-House Fostering Placements**

- 5.1 On 31 March 2021 there were 218 children and young people living within 207 in house fostering placements.
- 5.2 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.
- 5.3 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.
- 5.4 The Support offer to Foster Carers has been further enhanced by the establishment of the Dorset Foster Carers Association.

## **6. Fostering Service Restructure**

- 6.1 The fostering service has recently undergone a significant restructure alongside Dorset's Blueprint for change programme.
- 6.2 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.

## **7. Drivers for Change**

7.1 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

## **8. Business Case**

8.1 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.

8.2 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.

8.3 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

8.4 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

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

## **9. Pre- Approval Team**

9.1 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.

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

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

## **10. Complex Needs and Post Approval Teams**

10.1 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.

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

10.3 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 hrs). The Complex Needs team has 4.3fte and the Post Approval team has 4.8fte.

10.4 However, 2 part time workers (42.5 hrs) 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).

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

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

<b>Post Approval Fostering Support</b>	<b>Post Approval Complex Fostering Support</b>	<b>Fostering Assessment Team</b>
1x TM 4.8 Fte SW (Does not include worker seconded to WREC)	1xTM 1 x AP Panel Advisor 4.3 Fte SW (This does not worker seconded to WREC)	1xTM 6 x FTE Assessment Workers
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mainstream Foster Carer Supervision and Support</li> <li>• Connected Persons Foster care Supervision and</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mainstream Foster Carer Support Supervision and</li> <li>• Harbour Fostering</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reg 24 Viability Assessments with CSW's</li> <li>• Reg25 Extensions</li> </ul>



<p>Support</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Foster carer Training and Development</li> <li>• Support Groups</li> <li>• Foster care Annual Reviews</li> <li>• Placement service</li> <li>• Long term matching within house carers</li> <li>• Support Groups</li> </ul>	<p>Support</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Connected Persons Foster care Supervision and Support</li> <li>• Foster carer Training and Development</li> <li>• Support Groups</li> <li>• Foster care Annual Reviews</li> <li>• Placement service</li> <li>• Long term matching within house carers</li> <li>• Support Groups</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reg 27 Assessments using form C</li> <li>• Court reports where required</li> <li>• Respond to enquiries</li> <li>• Initial visits</li> <li>• Mainstream Form F Fostering Assessments</li> </ul>
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10.7 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.

10.8 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.

10.9 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.

10.10 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.

## 11. Types of Foster Care

11.1 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 behaviours.
- **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.

## 12. Recruitment and Marketing

12.1 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.

12.2 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.

### **13. Initiatives and Events**

13.1 Throughout the year there have been a number of initiatives and events designed to recruit new foster carers for Dorset children. Due 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'.

13.2 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.

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

### **14. Outcomes**

14.1 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.

14.2 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.

<b>Enquiries</b>	<b>248</b>										
<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
<b>Initial Visits</b>	<b>131</b>										
<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
<b>Invited to Apply</b>	<b>87</b>										
<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
<b>Approvals</b>	<b>20</b>										
<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

## 15. Fostering Panel

15.1 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.

15.2 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.

15.3 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.

15.4 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.

15.5 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.

<b><u>2020 -2021</u></b>	
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

15.6 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.

#### **16. Dorset Approved Fostering Households and Beds (31<sup>st</sup> March 2021)**

16.1 As at the 31<sup>st</sup> 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.

16.2 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

16.3 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.

16.4 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.

16.5 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 31<sup>st</sup> March 2021 there were 151 fostering beds not in use.

16.6 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.

16.7 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.

16.8 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.

- 16.9 On the 31<sup>st</sup> 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.
- 16.10 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).
- 16.11 Carers on hold due to Covid-19 have expressed a willingness to return to fostering once the second vaccine has been given.

## **17. Fostering Reviews**

- 17.1 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.
- 17.2 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?
- 17.3 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.



## **18. Foster Carers Support**

18.1 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.

## **19. Support Groups**

19.1 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.

19.2 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.

19.3 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.

19.4 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.

## **20. Therapeutic Support**

20.1 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.

## **21. Child's Voice**

- 21.1 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.
- 21.2 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.
- 21.3 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.
- 21.4 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.
- 21.5 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.
- 21.6 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+

- 21.7 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.
- 21.8 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.
- 21.9 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.

## **22. Delegated authority**

- 22.1 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.
- 22.2 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.

## **23. Dorset Foster Carer's Association (DFCA)**

- 23.1 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.
- 23.2 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

23.3 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.

23.4 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.

## **24. Peer Mentoring**

24.1 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.

24.2 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

24.3 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.

24.4 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.

## **25. Long Service Awards**

25.1 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.

## **26. Complaints and Allegations**

26.1 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.

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

## **27. Complaints**

27.1 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.

## **28. Allegations**

28.1 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.

28.2 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.

## **29. Foster Carer Training**

29.1 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.

29.2 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.

## **30. Budget**

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

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

30.3 It is anticipated that usage of in-house provision will increase it 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.

## **31. SWAP audit**

31.1 A SWAP audit was undertaken December 2019. Please find below the recommendations made and updates:

31.2 We recommend that the Corporate Director Care & Protection ensures that the current contract monitoring meetings that take place focus on scrutiny of performance with actions agreed where performance falls below targets. If

the contract continues to be provided by an external supplier after March 2020, meaningful targets and KPIs need to be agreed at the outset of the contract and scrutinised at monthly contract management meetings with the supplier and DC officers working together to agree actions where performance falls below what is expected.

- 31.3 Progress- Key Performance Indicators were established for the recruitment of foster carers, for the WREC contract and following 31<sup>st</sup> May 2021 when the recruitment function return to the fostering service. WREC and the fostering service have worked well together are on track with the recruitment of cares as detailed within this report and are confident to recruitment 20 new fostering households in the financial year 2021/2022.
- 31.4 We recommend that the Corporate Director Care & Protection decides which Board or Group within the Children's Service Directorate is to provide oversight of the progress and performance of the Modernising Fostering Programme. Regular reports providing an update on performance should then be provided which should be scrutinised with actions agreed where performance falls below what is expected.
- 31.5 Progress- Reports are provided to the Strengthening Services Board, Corporate Parenting Board on a 6 monthly basis and monthly at Children's Services Performance Board. These reports will also be accompanied from now on with a fostering dashboard. This work is all undertaken by the Fostering Steering Group.
- 31.6 We recommend that the Corporate Director Care & Protection ensures that a full appraisal exercise is carried out, analysing in full the benefits that have been realised from the Modernising Fostering Programme. The results of this exercise should assist to inform the decision that is made regarding the future delivery model for the fostering service as part of the Blueprint for Change proposal.
- 31.7 Progress- A full appraisal was undertaken to inform the mutual ventures work and Blueprint for Change. This in turn is supporting the current Strengthening Fostering Plan.
- 31.8 Once the full appraisal exercise has been carried out, the Corporate Director Care & Protection should ensure that a report is presented to Members, providing an update of the progress of the Modernising Fostering Programme, the expected benefits, details of those that have been realised together with those which have not yet been realised. The report should also include details of how the recruitment of foster carers is to be provided once the current contract expires in March 2020.

31.9 Progress- This report, shared with Corporate Parenting Board and People and Scrutiny Committee is by way of member update. In March 2021 a presentation was also shared with Corporate Parenting Board members to update on the Strengthening Fostering Plan by the Corporate Director Cdre and Protection.

## **32. Summary**

32.1 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.

32.2 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.

32.3 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

32.4 During the course of the last year the fostering service has been through a p.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.

32.5 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.



### **33. Developments For 2021/22**

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

### **34. Strengthening Business Intelligence and Performance Monitoring Arrangements.**

34.1 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.

### **35. Ensure Fostering Service Has Sufficient Staffing to Meet Current and Predicted Service Demand (In Line with Planned Service Development)**

35.1 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.

35.2 A first draft paper is currently being produced.

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

36.1 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.

36.2 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

36.3 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.

### **37. Ensure the Quality of Practice in Dorset's Fostering Service Meet Fostering Regulations and Standards**

37.1 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.

37.2 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.

### **38. Strengthen Fostering Duty Service Arrangements**

38.1 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.

38.2 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.

### **39. Strengthen Fostering Panel Arrangements**

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

- 39.2 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.
- 39.3 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.

#### **40. Strengthen Fostering Recruitment**

- 40.1 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.
- 40.2 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.

#### **41. Work with Foster Carers to Establish the Dorset Foster Carers Association**

- 41.1 At a meeting on the 9<sup>th</sup> 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.
- 41.2 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.

41.3 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.

**42. Implement the Mockingbird Programme.**

42.1 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.

42.2 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.

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

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**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.

## APPENDIX 1

Date 17<sup>th</sup> May 2021

Dorset Council Fostering Panel

### CONSTITUTION AND TERMS OF REFERENCE

#### **1. INTRODUCTION**

1.1 Dorset Council is a local authority Fostering Service Provider. The Panel considers mainstream fostering, family and friends, Harbour foster carers, Short Breaks and specialist foster carers.

1.2 The Panel complies with The Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011, and the National Minimum Standards for Fostering Services 2011, and with other legislation and guidance as listed below. Detailed guidance is also available in the 2019 Coram BAAF publication Effective Fostering Panels.

1.3 The composition of Fostering Panels, terms of reference and functions are set out in The Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011.

1.4 All Fostering Service Providers are legally required to have a Fostering Panel. The Regulations ensure that Fostering Panels have an independent role separate from the Fostering Service Provider

1.5 This constitution and terms of reference will be the framework for the operation of the Fostering Panel. It will be reviewed annually.

#### **2. AIMS AND OBJECTIVES**

2.1 The aim of the Dorset Fostering Panel is to ensure the provision of a high-quality fostering service that safeguards and promotes the welfare of children in care and looked by after by our foster carers.

2.2 The Fostering Panel will carry out its responsibilities in accordance with –

2.3 The Children Act 1989

2.4 The Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000

2.5 The Adoption and Children Act 2002

2.6 The Children Act 2004

2.7 The Children and Young Person's Act 2008

2.8 The Breaks for Carers of Disabled Children Regulations 2011

- 2.9 The Care Planning, Placement and Case Review (England) Regulations 2010
- 2.10 The Accommodated Children Visiting Arrangements Regulations 2010
- 2.11 The Care Leavers (England) Regulations 2010
- 2.12 The Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011
- 2.13 The Arrangements for Placement of Children by Voluntary Organisations and Others (England) Regulations 2011
- 2.14 Volume 1 (2008), Volume 2 (2010), Volume 3 (2010), and Volume 4 (2011) of the Children Act 1989 Guidance and Regulations.
- 2.15 The Family and Friends Care: Statutory Guidance for Local Authorities 2011
- 2.16 The Fostering Services: National Minimum Standards 2011
- 2.17 The Care Planning, Placement and Case Review and Fostering Services (Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations 2013
- 2.18 The Assessment and Approval of Foster Carers; Amendments to the Children Act 1989 Guidance and Regulations (Volume4; Fostering Services)
- 2.19 The Care Planning and Fostering (Miscellaneous Amendments) (England) Regulations 2015
- 2.20 All other relevant Guidance, and Children and Families policy and procedures.
- 2.21 The Fostering Panel is committed to practice which promotes inclusion and diversity, and will carry out its duties in accordance with Dorset Council Celebrating Diversity policy and will not discriminate on the grounds of gender, race, religion, sexuality, age or disability or for any other reason.
- 2.22 In all matters the Fostering Panel will hold the welfare of children to be paramount.

### **3. ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES**

- 3.1 The role of the Fostering Panel is to consider the full approval, the re-approval through annual review, change of approval, and termination of approval of anyone either seeking to be approved as, or currently approved as, foster carers, who wish to care for children and young people up to the age of 18 years.
- 3.2 Approval of carers will include specifying the ages, gender and numbers of children who will normally be fostered and evaluating their future training needs.
- 3.3 The Panel will also consider, in the case of connected persons (family and friends), applicants who have had children placed with them under Regulation 24 of the Care Planning, Placement and Case Review (England) Regulations 2010, all exceptional

requests for a Regulation 25, 8-week extension to a Regulation 24 temporary approval and placement.

3.4 The Panel will also consider and make recommendations on first annual reviews of all foster carers and every third annual review thereafter and significant changes to a fostering household. It will consider significant complaints, allegations of abuse or standards of care investigations. Panel will be notified of all resignations.

3.5 In addition to the above the Fostering Panel may be consulted if appropriate on the preparation and review of Fostering Service Provider policies and procedures in relation to any aspect of fostering. The Panel will be rigorous in monitoring quality standards and will contribute to the development of good practice.

3.6 The Fostering Panel's role is to provide thorough and critical consideration of all cases presented to it and to make sound and appropriate recommendations to the respective Agency Decision Maker. The Panel is not permitted to make any conditional or 'in principle' recommendations, but may defer making a recommendation.

3.7 The Panel will monitor the standards and quality of assessments and reports and give feedback to the appropriate managers via the Agency Adviser.

3.8 The Panel will be committed to anti-discriminatory practice and to ensuring that the welfare of the child is paramount.

3.9 The Panel will be transparent in the process of how it arrives at its recommendations, which will be fully reflected in the official minutes of the Panel, and Panel will welcome comments and suggestions, which will improve both its practice and operation. Feedback forms will be sent to all those who have attended Panel to assist in monitoring user's views.

3.10 Agreement to vary a foster carer's terms of approval (ie age range, gender or number of places) may be made by the Fostering Service Provider's Agency Decision Maker, where necessary, in accordance with current Department for Education guidance. A carer review will be carried out and sent to the Agency Decision Maker, and carers will be given the option to go to the IRM.

3.11 Exemptions to the usual fostering limit may be agreed by the Agency Decision Maker.

3.12 Exemptions must be presented to the Fostering Panel as reports if they are to continue for more than 6 weeks.

#### **4. MEMBERSHIP**

4.1 The membership must satisfy The Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011

4.2 Membership of "the central list" for the Joint Fostering Panel is open ended in number, but there will be a core membership and other members who may be included

as and when their expertise is needed. Panel is quorate when 5 members including at least one social worker is present. The number of members present at a Panel will not exceed 7 members, and must include:

- An Independent Chair or one of the two vice chairs
- A Qualified Social Worker (Social Work England registered) with at least 3 years relevant post-qualifying experience.
- An independent person if the vice chair is chairing the meeting and is not an independent member
- At least three other members

Dorset Council will aim to recruit a core membership as follows:

- An Independent Chair
- Two Vice Chairs (to be nominated from within the membership below, excluding the elected member)
- An elected member of Dorset Council
- Two Social Work England (SWE) registered social workers, one with fostering expertise
- At least four independent members including a foster carer from another Fostering Service Provider and an adult with experience of being in the care system
- A Health representative

An Agency Adviser and a Panel Administrator will also be in attendance

4.3 The Panel will nominate two Vice Chairs from those people listed in 4.2 above who will chair meetings in the absence of the Chair

4.4 The Panel will aim to have a balance in terms of gender, race, sexuality, culture and religion and should reflect the diversity of the community it serves.

4.5 The Fostering Panel will not conduct business unless at least five of its members are present. The following representatives must be present for the Panel to be considered quorate:

Chair or one of the two Vice Chairs, a SWE registered social worker and 3 other members.

4.6 Panel members will be recruited by the Agency Adviser and the Panel Chair, (and for the Independent Chair Person, the Senior Manager of the Fostering Service), via advertisements either within the agency (for agency nominated representatives) or via relevant publications (for independent members). Applicants will be required to submit a completed application form or cv and attend an interview. Verbal and written references and an enhanced DBS (Disclosure and Barring Service) check will be obtained for each Panel member prior to being appointed.



4.7 All Panel members will be appointed for an open-ended term of office (but will not exceed 10 years) and will be asked to sign a Panel membership agreement.

4.8 All Panel members will have suitable qualifications and/or experience and are expected to comply with the Panel protocol. Each Panel member will have an annual review meeting with the Chair and Agency Adviser. The Chair will be reviewed by the Agency Adviser and the senior manager of the fostering service.

4.9 Panel members should always declare an interest where they have direct knowledge of a matter being presented. The Chair will decide whether that interest is such as to debar the Panel member from discussion or decision making in respect of that item.

4.10 Panel members who do not attend Panel as part of their paid employment will receive a net fee of £220 per Panel attended irrespective of panel being held virtually or in person. Travel and parking will also be paid if the panel member attends in person. Fees and expenses are to be claimed monthly, on receipt of an invoice. This sum covers most costs associated with Panel attendance.

## **5. PROTOCOL FOR MEMBERS OF PANEL**

5.1 All Panel members are required to sign a Panel Member's Agreement.

5.2 Core Panel members are expected to attend a minimum of 75% of meetings in a year and to arrive on time for all Panel meetings. Members unable to attend a Panel meeting must ensure that apologies are sent in advance to the Agency Adviser. The Agency Adviser will have discussions privately with any Core Panel member where attendance is proving to be a problem.

5.3 Panel members will be committed to anti-discriminatory practice and will consider each case on its own merits.

5.4 Each Panel member has a duty to maintain the confidentiality of the information to which they have access. The agreement that Panel members sign includes a section on confidentiality.

5.5 Panel members should have read all Panel papers carefully before Panel and should come prepared to contribute to Panel discussions.

5.6 Panel members are expected to keep up to date with developments in fostering and to avail themselves of training opportunities. The Agency Adviser will offer advice and support on this.

5.7 Panel members will be kept informed about current practice, issues and legislation in relation to fostering by means of updates from the Agency Adviser, consultations etc.

5.8 A minimum of 1 annual training events are offered. There is an expectation that Panel members will attend the training events. Panel members will be consulted on the content and format of the training. There is an expectation that all members of the

central list will attend the joint training run with members of the fostering social work staff group.

5.9 All Panel members will have a current enhanced disclosure from the Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS), which will be updated every three years. Panel members must inform Dorset Council at once if they are convicted or cautioned for any criminal offence.

5.10 Two written references (confirmed by verbal references) will be required for all Panel members.

5.11 Each Panel member will have an electronic file held by Dorset Council with details of recruitment, references, full name, date of birth, home address, photograph, proof of identity, and where relevant, qualifications and experience. Any complaints and allegations made against the Panel member including details of any investigation and its outcome will be recorded.

5.12 All new Panel members will be expected to observe one Panel prior to full membership.

5.13 All new Panel members will receive an induction pack and will have an induction programme. The Agency Adviser will offer support regularly, particularly to independent members.

5.14 A Panel member may resign at any time by giving one calendar months' notice in writing to the Panel Chair or Agency Adviser. If Dorset Council is of the opinion that a member is unfit or unable to hold office, the agency may terminate his or her office by giving him or her one calendar months' notice in writing.

5.15 The Agency Adviser, in consultation with the Panel Chair, will informally approach any Panel member whose behaviour is considered inappropriate or ineffective. If the matter cannot be resolved at the informal stage by further individual training and/or advice and guidance, a letter addressing the issue will be sent to the Panel member with a copy to the Agency Decision Maker and Panel Chair. If there are no substantive changes and difficulties persist then consideration will be given to terminating their membership.

## **6. PANEL CHAIRPERSON**

6.1 The Chair of the Panel will be an independent person with significant experience of social work and fostering work, including at a senior management level, and the necessary skills to ensure that the Panel's work is carried out efficiently and sensitively. The Fostering Service Manager will be responsible for the recruitment of the Panel Chair in liaison with the Agency Advisor. When a vacancy arises for a Panel Chair, advertisements will be placed in relevant publications. The two vice-chairs will be drawn from the central list.

6.2 The Chair will ensure that Panel meetings are conducted in a professional and proper manner and that all items of business are covered. The Chair will assume responsibility for co-ordination of discussion and time keeping. The Chair will ensure that all applicants, social workers and managers attending Panel will be treated with respect and courtesy.

6.3 The responsibilities of the Chairperson include:

- Agreeing who will attend Panel in addition to Panel members
- Ensuring that all Panel members contribute fully to the Panel's recommendation and to ensure that where Panel members have serious or dissenting reservations these are recorded in the minutes of the Panel's meetings.
- Ensuring that all verbal contributions and all documents presented to Panel are given due consideration, and that Panel records are accurate
- Involvement when a Panel member appears unfit, unwilling, or unable to continue
- Involvement in deciding when a matter is urgent and when an additional Panel meeting may need to be convened.
- That there is clarity concerning the reasons for Panel's recommendation and accurate recording of such.
- The promotion of good practice and consistency of approach and fairness by Panel members in assessing carers.

6.4 The Chair of the Panel will be responsible for producing an annual report of the Panel's work for Dorset Children and Families.

6.5 The Agency Decision Maker undertakes an annual performance review of the Chair. The views of Panel members and those attending Panel will be sought and taken into account as part of this process.

## **7. INDEPENDENT MEMBERS**

7.1 There is no limit in law to the number of independent Panel members, however practicality dictates that numbers should be restricted. We will aim to have a central list for the Fostering Panel of no more than fifteen members. These members should have personal or professional knowledge and experience of fostering.

## **8. MEDICAL ADVICE**

8.1 Medical advice is available to the Panel from the Agency Medical Adviser, who is a Community Paediatrician and Designated Doctor Looked After Children at Dorset CCG, and who is not a Panel member, and does not attend Panel.

8.2 The Agency Medical Adviser is a senior member of the community child health service and will have an in-depth knowledge of child health and development and the consequences of abuse and neglect.

8.3 The Agency Medical Adviser will provide a written report to the Panel on foster carers presented and will be available to discuss resulting issues.

## **9. LEGAL ADVICE**

9.1 Legal advice is available from a senior lawyer employed by Dorset Council, who is experienced in family and childcare law. They are not a Panel member and does not attend Panel but will give specific legal advice to Panel members on individual cases presented to the Panel when necessary.

9.2 The Legal Adviser can if needed provide general advice to Panel members on the legal functions and duties of the Panel.

9.3 The Legal Adviser can be contacted by social workers for advice.

## **10. AGENCY ADVISER**

10.1 The Agency Adviser to Panel must be a senior member of staff with at least five years post qualifying experience and relevant management experience. The Agency Adviser plays a key quality assurance and advisory role in respect of cases coming to Panel.

10.2 The Agency Adviser will advise the Chair and Panel as required on matters relating to Dorset Children and Families practice, policy and procedure.

10.3 The Agency Adviser is responsible for ensuring comprehensive and appropriate papers are sent to Panel members at least five working days before the Panel meeting, and for reporting back to the agency any concerns or issues raised by Panel members.

10.4 The Agency Adviser is responsible for ensuring that accurate and timely minutes of Panel are produced and forwarded to the Chair for checking and agreeing, and that verbal and written notifications of the agency decision are forwarded within statutory timescales, ie within two and five working days respectively.

10.5 The Agency Adviser will assist the Panel Chair in the appointment, termination and review of Panel members. The Agency Adviser is responsible for the induction and training of Panel members and for monitoring the performance of Panel members and Panel administration.

10.6 The Agency Adviser is available for consultation and advice to the Agency Decision Maker on matters relating to the Panel and will attend a briefing meeting with the Agency Decision Maker if required. If the Agency Adviser is unavailable, alternative arrangements will be made to ensure that Panel has agency advice.

10.7 The Agency Adviser will provide Panel members with specialist advice and access to appropriate training materials as necessary.

## **11 OTHER ADVISERS**

11.1 If other specialist advice is required for any other reason the Agency Adviser to Panel will source this appropriately. Advisers are not voting members of the Panel, are therefore not involved in decision making at Panel, and they can therefore assist the Agency Decision Maker in his deliberations.

## **12 CONFIDENTIALITY**

12.1 All information presented to the Fostering Panel is confidential and Panel members must respect this.

12.2 All Panel members (and any observers) will be required to sign a confidentiality agreement. For Panel members this is included in the Panel member's agreement.

12.3 All Panel members must be able to indicate what arrangements they have for ensuring that confidential information is kept securely and is password protected.

12.4 Any breach of confidentiality by a Panel member will be considered as serious and will be taken up by the Agency Adviser.

## **13. CONFLICT OF INTEREST**

13.1 It is possible for a Panel member to have some knowledge, either in a professional or personal capacity, of a case under consideration.

13.2 If a Panel member believes they may have personal knowledge they should not read the papers before seeking advice from the Agency Adviser or Panel Chair.

13.3 Professional knowledge should be declared at the Panel meeting.

13.4 The Chair will decide whether a declared interest in a case is such as to debar the Panel member from the discussion relating to that case and/or participation in the Panel recommendation.

13.5 Declaration of an interest, personal or professional, may not of itself preclude a Panel member from being involved in considering the item. Any declaration of interest will be recorded in the Panel minutes.

## **14. ADMINISTRATION OF THE PANEL**

14.1 An experienced administrator will support the work of the Panel.

14.2 Cases will only be placed on a Panel agenda once the Panel Administrator/Agency Adviser has received all the relevant paperwork.

14.3 The Fostering Panel Administrator will minute Panel meetings. The minutes will record:

- Date of Panel
- Attendance at Panel
- Apologies for absence from Panel
- Name of applicants/foster carers/child
- Purpose of presentation to Panel
- Issues raised by Panel members
- Areas discussed with social workers and applicants/foster carers/children
- The positive factors and potential difficulties/risk factors
- Recommendation reached together with the reasons for the recommendation including detailing the reports read by Panel
- Any advice to the agency from the Panel
- Whether the recommendation was unanimous and if not the reasons and reservations of those not able to support the recommendation
- Any request from Panel for further information, amendments to reports or reporting back to Panel
- Any business for discussion

14.4 The Panel Chair and Panel members must agree the accuracy and content of the minutes before they are sent to the Agency Decision Maker.

14.5 The Chair will sign all Panel minutes to confirm their accuracy.

14.6 The Panel minutes and recommendations relating to the approval or review of approval of foster carers will be placed on the foster carer's file. Foster carers do not have the right to see Panel minutes, however they will receive the list of the positive factors and risk factors identified by Panel with their letter informing them of the Agency Decision.

14.7 A central record of all minutes of the Fostering Panel must be kept securely.

14.8 The tabling of reports and agenda items is co-ordinated by the Panel Administrator in consultation with the Agency Adviser. Panel members will receive copies of the agenda and all reports/papers at least five working days in advance of the meeting. An agenda is sent to all Panel attendees.

14.9 The Panel Administrator will be responsible for scheduling each case in a Teams Meeting if the panel is held virtually or for the booking of rooms for Panel meetings held in person.

## **15. PANEL MEETINGS**

15.1 The Panel meets twice a fortnight on consecutive days (Tuesdays and Wednesdays) usually from 09.15am – 5.00pm

15.2 The Panel will consider cases with the following approximate timings:

- Approval of prospective foster carers: 60 minutes
- Review/re-approval of foster carers: 45 minutes

- Complaints and Standards of Care reviews 60 minutes
- Termination of approval: 90 minutes
- Regulation 25 extension of Reg 24 temporary approval 30 minutes

15.3 Panel members are expected to read the Panel papers in advance of the Panel meeting and come prepared to contribute to the discussion. All Panel members have an equal role in reaching a recommendation.

15.4 Panel members will discuss the issues they wish to explore with the social workers and applicants before inviting them in. The Chair will co-ordinate the discussion and ensure that all areas are covered and that the social workers and applicants have the opportunity to present any other relevant information.

15.5 Panel members will endeavour to reach a consensus and the Chair will ensure that all members can express their views. Every Panel member must express a view about whether or not they support the recommendation.

15.6 If a consensus cannot be reached then a majority view will prevail with the dissenting members' views being noted in the minutes. The views of those not able to support the recommendation will be communicated to the Agency Decision Maker. The Chair does not have a casting vote but will summarise the voting for the Agency Decision Maker.

15.7 If there is insufficient information available for Panel to reach a recommendation, they will defer the case (see section 16) until the additional information is provided by the relevant social worker.

15.8 At the end of each case the Chair will summarise the recommendation made and the reasons for it. The Chair will also advise all attendees of the recommendation and decision-making process and when the agency's decision will be made.

15.9 The appropriate social workers will convey the Panel recommendation orally to all those involved i.e. children, applicants, and foster carers within 48 hours of receiving the details from the Agency Adviser, who will send the decisions by e-mail on the day of the Agency Decision Maker meeting.

## **16. PROCEDURES FOR DEFERMENT OF CASES**

### 16.1 Guiding principles

16.1.1 The relevant social work team managers and team managers from the Fostering team, in liaison with the Agency Adviser, should try to prevent cases booked for the Fostering Panel being deferred, by carefully quality assuring and scrutinising all reports prior to submission. On occasions the Agency Adviser may have to defer a case being placed on sharefile for Panel members if insufficient information, evidence or analysis has been provided. This decision will be made in consultation with the relevant social worker and their manager.

16.1.2 Once Panel papers are placed on sharefile a decision to defer a case before the meeting should be made as early as possible by the Chair, Agency Adviser and fostering Team Manager. Deferring a case at a Panel meeting causes much distress to applicants/carers and prevents time being available for other cases. This should be avoided if possible.

16.1.3 The Fostering Team Managers, the Agency Adviser and the Chair have the power to defer a case before Panel. However, consideration at a Panel meeting may reveal a significant gap in information, evidence or analysis that was not clear before an individual contribution is made or a pattern or theme emerges from collective discussion. This could lead to a case being deferred at a Panel meeting. This underlines the value and purpose of the Fostering Panel with its different professional and lay perspectives carrying out a quality assurance role.

16.1.4 Nevertheless it is hoped that deferment will normally be a rare occurrence.

## **16.2 Deferment before a Panel meeting**

16.2.1 Once papers have been circulated to Panel members, if the Chair considers a report has significant gaps in information, evidence or analysis or is of a poor quality they will contact the Agency Adviser (or relevant Team Manager in the Agency Advisers absence) to discuss the concerns. The Chair should either ask for the case to be deferred or, if there is sufficient time available, ask the Agency Adviser to ask the supervising social worker or assessing social worker, in consultation with their manager, to re-write the report, or write a supplementary report for tabling at the Panel meeting. It is understood that this will not normally be a feasible option because of time constraints.

16.2.2 Normally the decision to defer a case before a Panel meeting will be made by the Chair in consultation with the Agency Adviser and Team Manager, or the Agency Adviser in consultation with the Chair and relevant manager. If a Panel member has concerns about the adequacy of a report prior to a Panel meeting and considers the item should be deferred they should contact the Agency Adviser to discuss their concerns. If, after discussion, serious concerns are maintained the Agency Adviser should contact the Chair to discuss whether the case is deferred prior to the Panel meeting. It is understood that because of members' time constraints this option would be rarely used.

16.2.3 Once the Chair or Agency Adviser has agreed with the relevant team manager to defer a case prior to a Panel meeting the Agency Adviser should contact the supervising social worker immediately so that the carer's attendance at Panel can be postponed and explanations and future plans discussed with them.

16.2.4 At the Panel meeting, after minutes and matters arising, the Chair will inform members that the case has been deferred and give the reasons for the deferment. The Chair will clarify any questions or queries members may have and in consultation with the Agency Adviser inform Panel, if known, when the deferred item will be presented to Panel.



16.2.5 After the Panel meeting the Agency Decision Maker should be informed of the deferment by the Agency Adviser.

### **16.3 Deferment at a Panel meeting**

16.3.1 If during the Panel's initial consideration of a case, serious concerns arise about the adequacy of a report in terms of insufficient information, evidence or analysis, the Chair, in consultation with the Agency Adviser, should either:

- clarify through questions and discussion with members whether they wish to continue to hear the case with additional verbal input from the carers and social workers, or,
- based on the concerns expressed, decide to defer consideration of the case and give the reasons for the decision.

16.3.2. Once the Panel has made a decision to defer considering the case and has clarified their reasons for doing so, the Chair and Agency Adviser will leave the meeting and explain briefly to the applicants/carers and supervising social worker and manager (if present) that the item has been deferred for further information to be obtained, and clarify what further information the Panel will require. It will also be clarified with the supervising social worker and their manager which future Panel the item has been deferred to.

16.3.3. There may be some occasions when, prior to the Panel deciding to defer an item, members may wish to try to clarify certain queries or issues with the supervising social worker and their manager within the Panel meeting. Panel may consider that further clarification could confirm that the case should be deferred or that queries can be answered sufficiently and clarify that the assessment work was carried out satisfactorily but not fully recorded in the report. On such rare occasions, prior to this discussion, the Chair or Agency Adviser will leave the meeting and ask the supervising social worker and manager to join the meeting and ask the applicants/carers to wait explaining to them that a number of points in reports need to be clarified before the Panel decides to invite them in. If the verbal responses the supervising social worker and manager give to the Panel's queries are sufficient to fully answer the concerns raised the Panel will ask for the assessment report to be amended and the application can be considered fully and not deferred. If the responses clarify that there is still significant assessment work to be carried out, the Panel will confirm the item is deferred until the outstanding work is completed. The Chair and Agency Adviser will leave the meeting and with the supervising social worker and their manager explain to the applicants/carers that the item has been deferred for further information to be obtained.

16.3.4 After the Panel meeting the Agency Decision Maker should be informed.

## **17. PROCEDURE FOR TERMINATIONS OF APPROVAL**

17.1 Terminations of approval will only be dealt with when an annual review, scheduled or otherwise, has been completed, and the carer has been involved in discussions leading to the recommendation.

17.2 Voluntary resignations will not need to be presented to Panel.

17.3 Where a termination of approval, against the wishes of the carers is being presented to the Panel, the supervising social worker must supply to Panel full annual review documentation, PLUS a full report including details of complaints, allegations of harm, standards of care and all other investigations and all concerns; a clear account of the process of investigation; an explanation of any mitigating factors; and setting out recommendations as to termination of approval, with clear and complete evidence as to the reasons. The foster carer must be given the opportunity to respond in writing to the report and for their response to be considered by Panel at the same time as the supervising social worker's report.

17.4 Normal Panel process will then be followed for dealing with the reports, as this offers the option of transparency, openness and honesty. However, if the relationship between the carers and the social work staff has become very acrimonious, or it is felt that either party may become so upset as to make it difficult for the Panel to function, the Chair may decide to see them separately in Panel.

17.5 If the concerns have been serious, the Fostering Service will need to consider whether to report the carers to the Disclosure and Barring Service, or to Ofsted.

## **18. REPORTS FOR PANEL**

18.1 The Panel will require the following reports:

- For approval of prospective foster carers - foster carers' Assessment Report and supporting documentation.
- For approval as foster carers regarding the placement of a child with connected persons – family and friends foster carer's Assessment Report, and all relevant supporting information.
- Review of foster carer approval - annual foster carers review reports and minutes of previous Panel
- Review of foster carers with recommendation for termination of approval – see guidance in CoramBAAF's "Effective Panels", and guidance above – full review documentation, previous minutes and detailed report and analysis of reasons for recommendation.
- Any other matters – following advice from the Agency Adviser

18.2 The Agency Adviser to the Panel will be available to offer advice to social workers on the completion of reports and the standards required by Panel.

18.3 Reports to the Fostering Panel in relation to fostering matters upon which the Panel are asked to make recommendations must be prepared by sufficiently experienced and qualified staff (Fostering Services NMS Standard 19) and who have the, skills and experience necessary for the work they are to perform (The Fostering Services (England) Regs 2011, regulation 20). This should include direct experience of fostering work. Where the author of the report does not have the requisite qualifications and experience, he or she should be supervised by a suitably qualified and experienced colleague or manager.

18.4 Where those preparing reports are not employed by the Fostering Service Provider, they should always be suitably qualified and experienced and supervised by a member of staff with the suitable qualifications and experience.

## **19. ATTENDANCE BY SOCIAL WORK STAFF**

19.1. All social workers must attend and present their cases to Panel as follows, this expectation also applies to social workers attending from other fostering agencies or Fostering Service Providers:

- Approval of prospective foster carers: Assessing social worker.
- Placement of a child with foster carers: Child's social worker and the prospective foster carers supervising social worker
- Foster carer review of approval: Supervising social worker and Fostering Reviewing Officer were required

19.2 The Agency Adviser must be notified as soon as possible regarding any problems with staff attending Panel.

19.3 Staff attending Panel will be asked to complete a feedback form regarding their experience of the Panel process.

## **20. ATTENDANCE OF CHILDREN, APPLICANTS, AND FOSTER CARERS AND OBSERVERS**

20.1 Dorset is committed to user involvement and transparent decision-making. Prospective and existing foster carers are always invited and strongly encouraged to attend Panel when their full assessment or review is being considered. However, there is no obligation for the foster carer to meet with the Panel; if they decline to do so, this in itself will not be considered as a reason for recommending that they are not suitable.

20.2 Attendees will be given a Panel leaflet explaining the Panel process and what to expect when they attend. Attendees will also be sent a feedback form so that their views on their experience at Panel can be gained and fed back on a regular basis to Panel members.

20.3 All applicants will be given sufficient notice to enable them to attend. The responsibility for this lies with the supervising social worker.

20.4 An invitation will be sent to applicants by the Panel Administrator confirming the date and time of the Panel meeting at least one week beforehand.

20.5 When applicants attend, they will be invited into the Panel meeting with the social work staff after the Panel has decided upon the areas on which it needs further discussion or clarification. The applicants will be introduced to the Panel, and will also have the opportunity to ask any questions they may have of Panel, give any further information they may want Panel to be aware of, or make a statement to Panel.

20.6 The applicants may remain in the Panel meeting with the social work staff whilst the Panel asks its questions. They will then be asked to leave the meeting whilst Panel reaches its recommendation.

20.7 Once the Chair has summarised the recommendation of the panel the Agency Adviser will inform the Social Worker of the recommendation and the reasons for it. The Social Worker will then inform the applicants of the recommendation. They will also be advised when the decision will be made by the Agency Decision Maker. Applicants will be informed of the strengths in their application and any areas of potential difficulty/risks. In the event of a split decision or rejection, Agency Adviser and social worker will share the recommendation with the applicants. In the event of a contested or conflictual matter, the Panel may wish to hear the carer's contribution on their own, and then hear the social workers on their own. This procedure will be tailored to the specific details of each case.

20.8 Approved foster carers will be encouraged to attend the Panel meeting when their first annual foster care review, subsequent review or any other relevant information regarding the care they provide is being considered. Carers are welcome to bring a representative or friend with them if they so wish.

20.9 Birth parents are encouraged to make written or recorded representation to Panel and in any event should be shown and be fully aware of the information about them which is presented to Panel.

20.10 Children should be supported and encouraged to write or record their views for Panel or, when appropriate to attend in person. Arrangements for a child to attend Panel should always be discussed in advance with the Agency Adviser.

20.11 Usually no more than two people at a time will be allowed to observe at Panel. Panel attendees will be informed that observers are often at Panel; if they have any objection to this, they must notify the Agency Adviser in advance of the Panel meeting. Observers are required to sign an undertaking regarding confidentiality.

## **21. DECISION MAKING PROCESS AND NOTIFICATIONS**

21.1 The Chair or Agency Adviser will provide immediate feedback to all attendees of the Panel's recommendation. Panel minutes will be shared in draft form with the Chair of the Panel, and with any Panel member who has made a dissenting recommendation

prior to them being sent in a finalised, agreed version by the Chair to the Agency Decision Maker (ADM). Panel members will have seen the minutes and commented on them prior to the Chair agreeing them.

21.2 The social worker will verbally convey the Panel recommendations to applicants within two working days. However, applicants must be clear that whilst Panel makes a recommendation the final decision is made by the Agency Decision Maker.

21.3 The Service Manager for Placements and Resources has delegated responsibility for making the decision on behalf of Dorset Children's Services and is the designated Agency Decision Maker. In the event of their absence the other nominated Agency Decision Maker is Corporate Director, Care and Protection.

21.4 The Agency Decision Maker must consider the Panel recommendation when making the decision. The decision process cannot be delegated to the fostering Panel and no Panel member can take part in any decision made.

21.5 The Agency Decision Maker will be sent a copy of all the papers presented to Panel. They will be notified of all recommendations made by the Fostering Panel finalised Panel minutes and a verbal briefing session, where required, with the Agency Adviser.

21.6 Where the Agency Decision Maker is minded to disagree with a Panel recommendation, before making a final decision he may consult with a senior colleague with the relevant social work qualification and experience, and record the discussion and outcome; a copy of the record must be passed to the Agency Adviser for placing on the foster carer's record. If the result is a recommendation with which the applicants or carers disagree and contest, then the Independent Review Mechanism process may be invoked on the carers' application to the IRM.

21.7 The Agency Adviser will notify the social workers of the agency decision within one working day. Social workers will orally inform foster carers of the agency decision within two working days of the decision being made. The Agency Decision Maker will write to the carers confirming his decision within 5 working days. The Agency Decision Maker will include the reasons for the decision and, where the agency decision is different from the recommendation of the Panel, information about his and the Panel's recommendations.

## **22. PROTOCOLS FOR ADDITIONAL MEETINGS**

22.1 Additional meetings may be required when there is sufficient pressure of business, and the organisation of any additional meetings will be undertaken after consultation with Panel members.

22.2 The normal Panel procedures will apply to additional Panels. Panel members will receive the papers at least 5 working days in advance of the Panel meeting. Panel

members will be contacted by telephone or email to ascertain their availability and the Agency Adviser will liaise with the chair to arrange the meeting.

### **23 MONITORING ROLE/FEEDBACK TO AGENCY**

23.1 The Agency Adviser will take responsibility for reporting back to the Fostering Service and Dorset Council any concerns or issues raised by Panel. Examples of good practice will similarly be fed back. Fostering managers will take forward practice issues as necessary within the agency and ensure that any actions taken by them are fed back to the Panel and the Agency.

23.2 An annual report on the work of the Fostering Service Provider will be published each year and presented to the Corporate Parenting Board. This report will include the annual Panel report prepared by the Chair for endorsement by elected members. The Agency Decision Makers and senior managers from the fostering service will be invited to Panel for an agenda item on an annual basis. This will enable a dialogue to take place between Panel members, senior managers and the Agency Decision Makers on general practice and quality assurance issues. The Agency Decision Makers will also be invited to take part in the annual Panel training day.

23.3 The Panel will be consulted on any proposed changes to fostering policy and practice guidance, to enable them to contribute

### **24 COMPLAINTS AND REPRESENTATIONS**

24.1 Any complaint specifically about the Fostering Panel should be directed to the Agency Adviser or Chair to assist resolution.

24.2 Where a carer is not in agreement with the decision made regarding their suitability as a foster carer, and/or the Fostering Panel's recommendation, and does not accept the recommendation, the following representation procedure will be followed.

24.3 The prospective or existing foster carers may choose to either make a written representation directly to Dorset Council or a written application to the Independent Review Mechanism (IRM) – they cannot do both. If a representation is made directly to Dorset Council, the prospective or existing foster carers must write directly to the Agency Decision Maker (ADM) within 28 working days from the date of the ADM letter. The Agency Decision Maker may at his discretion meet with them to discuss their concerns and must then refer the matter back to the Fostering Panel. The Panel will consider the matter taking into account the prospective or existing carer's comments and concerns and will make a new recommendation. This recommendation will be communicated to the Agency Decision Maker who will make the final decision. If the applicant decides instead to make a representation to the IRM, they should directly notify the IRM of their wish to do so within 28 working days from the date of the qualifying determination (the Agency Decision Maker's letter to them). Dorset Council fostering service will forward all relevant information to the IRM within 10 working days of being informed by the IRM of the need to do so. The IRM will review the matter and notify the Dorset Council Agency

Decision Maker of its recommendation and the reasons for it. The Dorset Agency Decision Maker will make the final decision.

24.4 Where a practitioner is not in agreement with a recommendation made by the Fostering Panel and wishes to pursue the matter, they should do so directly through their line manager and the Agency Adviser (who will inform the Chair of the Panel).

24.5 A prospective foster carer cannot make use of the IRM unless a full assessment has been completed and presented to the Fostering Panel.

## **25 ANNUAL REPORT**

25.1 The Panel Chair will produce an annual report on the work of the Fostering Panel following the end of the financial year.

25.2 The report should include:

- number of foster carers approved, ethnicity, family structure, geographical location
- work of the Panel and the service
- strengths and weaknesses of current provision including sufficiency
- quality of work presented to Panel
- specific issues arising for Panel over the past year
- recommendations regarding the operation of Panel and the provision of fostering services in Dorset.

25.3 The annual report will be presented to Panel.

25.4 The annual report will be presented to the Corporate Parenting Board as part of the Annual Fostering Service Provider Report.

## **26 REVIEW**

26.1 The function, role, policy, procedure and operation of the Fostering Panel will be formally reviewed annually.

26.2 After each Panel a feedback forms will be sent to all attendees (applicants, social workers, foster carers and children) seeking their views and feedback. The outcome of this feedback will be incorporated into the annual report.