

# Corporate Parenting Board

## 28.4.22

### Fostering Service Annual Report

#### For Recommendation to Council

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

**Local Councillor(s):**

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

**Report Author:** Louise Drury, Head of Service Children in Care and Care Leavers

**Tel:** 01305 228382

**Email:** [louise.drury@dorsetcc.gov.uk](mailto:louise.drury@dorsetcc.gov.uk)

**Report Status:** Public

**Recommendation:** Members of Corporate Parenting Board are requested to note the content and actively consider and comment upon the strengths and future recommendations.

#### **Reason for Recommendation:**

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

#### **1. Executive Summary**

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

#### **2. Financial Implications**

None identified

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

None identified

#### **4. Climate implications**

None identified

#### **5. Other Implications**

None identified

#### **6. Risk Assessment**

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

Current Risk: N/A

Residual Risk: N/A

#### **7. Equalities Impact Assessment**

N/A

#### **8. Appendices**

None

#### **9. Background Papers**

### **1. Introduction**

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 2021 to March 2022 and the plans from the service for the forthcoming year (April 2022 to March 2023).

This has continued to be a busy and challenging year within the fostering service. While Covid-19 has sustained logistical challenges for service delivery it has also shone a light on fostering, and our carers, their capacity for kindness, innovation, commitment, and contribution to service development.

During the Inspection of Dorset local authority children's services in September 2021, Ofsted noted, *'Foster Carers are recruited, supported and trained by experienced and aspirational social workers who support them to understand the trauma that children may have faced earlier in their lives. Through the challenges of several lockdowns, foster carers have been supported well to build and maintain relationships with children.'*

The transformation programme for fostering includes the development of Mockingbird which alongside an ambitious recruitment and marketing strategy will support growth in

the number of fostering households, ensuring our children remain close to the people and places they have attachments with.

This year we have welcomed a permanent Service Manager and Fostering Panel Chair, Advanced Practitioner, Panel coordinator, 2 Fostering social workers and Advanced Practitioner (Mockingbird). Current vacancies include two Team Managers – Mockingbird and Post Approval. Where there are vacancies in the team, these are being recruited to at pace.

The service knows itself well, its strengths and areas for improvement and has a clear plan to grow and develop over the next year.

The plan focuses on:

- Improving outcomes for children through placing more children locally enabling them to maintain relationships with friends, family, and community
- Delivering value for money, reducing spend on external placements
- Ability to compete in the market, increasing the number and range of local foster carers with the skills and competencies required to meet our needs.
- Supporting foster carer resilience through the delivery of high-quality supervision and training and access to specialist support when needed
- Ensuring there is a sufficient number of foster carers with the right skills in the right location to enable appropriate matching

## **2. Recruitment, Assessment, Approval and De-registration.**

On 31<sup>st</sup> March 2022 there were 191 Dorset Council fostering households, of which 129 are mainstream households, 57 are connected persons (approved and temporary approved) and 5 households are foster to adopt/early permanence.

On 31 March 2022 there were 178 (218) children and young people living within 126 (207) in house fostering placements which includes mainstream, approved and temporary approved connected persons.

### **2.1 Recruitment**

In this reporting period 2021/22, the Fostering Assessment Team has recruited 17 new mainstream fostering households, 2 of which transferred from another area (IFA and local authority). Throughout the period 2021/22 41 (27) households were temporarily approved as Connected Persons under Regulation 24 of the Care Planning Review and Placement Regulations 2010. A total of 16 (16) Connected Persons households became fully approved foster carers.

The total number of new foster carers for Dorset in 2021/22 was 33 in comparison to 36 in the previous year.

## 2.2 Enquiries, Assessments and Approvals

In the period 1st April 2021 to 31st March 2022 206 (248) enquiries from the public seeking information about becoming a foster carer. The team completed 104 (131) Initial Visits and 15 (20) new fostering households were approved.

The Fostering Network estimates that on average one out of ten enquiries progress to approval as foster carers. To ensure the conversion rate is as high as possible it is vital that our approach ensures:

- Enquirers are welcomed positively, provided with a personal service and responded to within 24 hours.
- Prospective carers are given clear, engaging verbal and written information that highlights what Dorset Council Fostering can offer at every touch point with a consistent message.
- The application process is smooth and efficient with fostering carers approved with 26 weeks where possible

<b>Enquiries</b>											
<b>206 (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>Mar</u>
16 (20)	20 (42)	15 (19)	16 (13)	26 (13)	16 (16)	8 (27)	15 (20)	19 (19)	20 (23)	15 (20)	20 (19)
<b>Initial Visits</b>											
<b>104 (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>Mar</u>
9 (12)	9 (20)	11 (14)	6 (6)	17 (9)	6 (12)	3 (12)	5 (11)	10 (5)	12 (12)	8 (11)	8 (7)
<b>Invited to Apply</b>											
<b>41 (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>Mar</u>
3 (11)	7 (19)	5 (11)	3 (5)	5 (3)	4 (5)	1 (7)	2 (7)	2 (3)	5 (7)	3 (6)	1 (3)
<b>Approvals</b>											
<b>15 (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>Mar</u>
4 (0)	1 (1)	0 (0)	3 (1)	0 (0)	2 (2)	0 (2)	1 (4)	0 (2)	1 (2)	1 (3)	2 (3)

As of 31 March 2022, there are a further 28 (19) new fostering assessments in progress which includes 11 mainstream households and 17 Connected Persons. This is a significant increase from 19 at the same time in the previous year. Of the 11 mainstream households, 3 are from IFA's and in the last week we have received a further 2 enquiries from households looking to transfer to Dorset.

### **2.3 De-registration**

Nationally 13% of the foster carer workforce are retiring or leaving every year.

In this reporting period, 26 mainstream fostering households compared to 19 in the previous year, and 18 Connected Persons were deregistered from fostering. Reasons for deregistration are as follows:

#### Mainstream

22 resigned from fostering

1 retired

2 ill health

1 resigned following allegation

#### Connected

6 SGO awarded

8 children moved placement of which 3 children returned home

4 children turned 18

This has resulted in an overall loss of 11 fostering households (9 Mainstream and 2 connected persons).

### **3. Recruitment and Marketing**

The recruitment of foster carers nationally is currently a significant issue with an estimation by the Fostering Network (2021) that 7,300 fostering families are required nationally with 720 of those needed in the Southwest.

The aims of the Recruitment Strategy are:

- To improve local placement choice and stability for children and young people in Dorset, particularly for teenagers.
- To increase the number of black and minority ethnic foster carers.
- To increase the number of in-house placements and reduce the usage of independent fostering agencies and residential care.
- To provide an effective, high quality and best value fostering service to meet the needs and numbers of the looked after population

- To ensure that all people who are interested in becoming foster carers are welcomed without prejudice, responded to promptly and given clear information about recruitment, assessment, approval and support services.

In May 2021 the recruitment of foster carers reverted to in-house having previously been delivered by WREC (Whitehead Ross Education and Consulting). Traditionally recruitment methodology has focussed on face-to-face situations such as libraries and local events. However, the impact of the pandemic significantly reduced face to face engagement opportunities and during this time attention has been given to on online and digital recruitment. Nevertheless, it is clearly evidenced that both methodologies are required, and the lack of face-to-face recruitment has led to Dorset Council having less of a 'footprint' within the county.

### **3.1 Marketing**

Colleagues in the Communications Team are working closely with us to deliver an ambitious marketing strategy for foster carer recruitment. We have commissioned an external marketing agency, which has experience of running a number of successful fostering campaigns for local authorities, and have redesigned Dorset Council's fostering image, produced a new insights-led campaign and working with colleagues in IT, a new micro-site. This work will be completed by end of April 2022 and will ensure that Dorset Council fostering is competitive and highlights to both individuals considering fostering and foster carers currently with other agencies the benefits of fostering with Dorset Council. As interim lead generation activity, we have been running targeted Google advertising since after Christmas and through to end of March 2022.

We are putting new systems in place to monitor the results of marketing activity and the number and quality of enquiries generated. This insight will be used to continually refine the marketing activity. Fostering is something that people think about for a number of months or years before they contact an organisation. Our marketing activity will aim to support people along their consideration journey, providing useful information, inspiration and advice to help them decide whether to pursue foster care.

### **3.2 Face to Face Recruitment Events**

In recent months we have once again been able to get out into the local communities to raise our profile and awareness of the need for more carers to support our children in Dorset. We have hosted fostering information stands at local events, such as Christmas Markets, local family friendly venues- such as Moors Valley Country Park, Nothe Fort, Kingston Lacy House, Sea Life Centre, local football grounds and country fayres. We have a variety of venues booked for the coming year and welcome members of Corporate Parenting Board to join us.

Our 'Fostering Roadshow' has commenced in partnership with the local libraries, and we are hosting in person drop-in sessions in libraries across Dorset to ensure we are reaching all areas throughout April and May 2022. This provides a great opportunity for people to gain further information and to ask questions in a venue close to their homes.

Further engagement includes:

- Monthly online drop-in events hosted on TEAMS. These have been open to the general public and advertised via our social media formats, alongside invites being sent to potential carers that have made an early enquiry with us. The drop-ins are hosted by the Enquiries Officer and are supported by current Dorset foster carers and social workers from the Fostering Assessment Team. These are held in the evenings to ensure they are accessible for potential applicants who may be working during the day.
- Initial Enquiry Calls and Home visits- These are an opportunity for potential carers to have a 1:1 discussion and to gain further information about fostering to see how it will fit for their family.
- Social media campaigns via our online formats- Facebook, Instagram and magazine advertising in local magazines delivered to households.

All of our events are shared via the communications team to ensure members of the public know where we are and where they can attend to gain further information. We are also working in partnership with Dorset Foster Carers Association to hear the voice of current carers and their views on areas we could develop to support our recruitment programme.

We will launch our new branding in late April which will see a wider range of advertising and a new look microsite. We are also engaging with the textile department at a local college to develop and design items of clothing with Dorset branding to support our campaign and

#### **4. Fostering Panel**

Under the Fostering Service (England) 2011 Regulations Fostering Services are required to appoint a foster panel. Under Regulation 25 the fostering panel is required to:

- To make a recommendation as to whether the applicant is suitable to be a foster carer and the terms of the approval.
- To consider the first annual review for newly approved foster carers, as well as reviews following the managing allegations process, and where foster carers are seeking a change in the terms of their registration status.
- To recommend whether a person still is 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 by the fostering service provider, including terminations of approval.
- The fostering panel must also advise, where appropriate, on the procedures under which reviews in accordance with Reg. 28 are carried out by the fostering service provider, and periodically monitor their effectiveness.

In addition, the National Minimum Standards 2011 requires that:

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

In July 2021 we were delighted to welcome our newly recruited Panel Chair and through her leadership we have seen the development of processes to strengthen quality of conversations in panel, completion of member appraisals and improved quality assurance.

We have also been able to permanently recruit to the posts of Advanced Practitioner whose role also includes providing advice to fostering panel, and Panel Coordinator. It is recognised that not having these posts permanently recruited has presented challenges which we anticipate will now be overcome through strengthened quality assurance streamlined panel administration processes with dedicated support.

Fostering panel continues to be held on consecutive days once a fortnight on Tuesday and Wednesday every other week although there are opportunities to review this.

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. The current number of members (14) on the central list has created vulnerability in panel being consistently quorate. With the hugely successful recruitment of a further 14 members to the central list, 7 of which are social workers, means that panel remains resilient.

As a result of the pandemic, Fostering Panel has continued to meet virtually. Following a recent development day with Mark Finnis on 30 March 2022, plans are now being put in place so that panel can meet face to face with the opportunity of attendees being able to join virtually where this is necessary.

In the reporting period the panel met 43 times and heard 158 cases.

<b><u>2021 -2022</u></b>	
Number of panels	43
New Approvals – mainstream and connected persons	44 presented, 34 approved
Connected Persons - approvals	16
Regulation 25 Extension (Connected Persons)	20 presented, 17 approved
Resignation	21
Reviews	35
Total number of actual cases presented	158

## **5. Dorset Approved Fostering Households and Beds**

As of the 31st of March 2022, there were 448 children who were being looked after by Dorset Council. Of these 310 or 69% 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 the 310 children in foster care, 184 or 59% were placed within Dorset Council Foster Carers and 126 or 41% 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	129	249	126
Connected Persons	57	73	55
Foster for Adoption	5	5	3
Total number of Households	191	327	184

The combined number of all types of approved fostering households including Short Breaks, Connected Persons and Foster to Adopt is 191. The optimum number of placements provided through the Fostering Service is 327, and the number of fostering beds used was 184.

The current utilisation rate of foster children to fostering households is 1.04. This continues to be low and has been impacted in the year by the number of fostering households with fostering beds on hold and the number of unavailable placements.

Fostering households may be 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 purpose of reporting the number of beds approved, the maximum number is reported. On the 31<sup>st</sup> March 2022 there were 143 fostering beds not in use which is a decrease from 151 as reported on 31<sup>st</sup> March 2021.

There may be a number of reasons why fostering beds are not in use which may range from matching to being on hold due to ill health, personal or family circumstances. Foster carers may also be placed on hold by the service due to complaints or safeguarding concerns. It is also common for fostering households not to be used to the maximum number of beds they have available because of the needs of children already placed with them.

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

## **6. Fostering Reviews**

The foster carers 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 carers 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 quality assured by the relevant Team Managers who monitor compliance with the regulations before final agreement.

Over the last 6 months, the Fostering review process has been revised in order to streamline the procedure and ensure continued compliance with the Regulations. Weekly meetings between the team managers in fostering and the manager of the fostering reviewing officers (FROs) now take place to monitor and track the reviews as well as highlighting those due for review at the 9 month mark which allows for sufficient time to plan and prepare before the formal review processes commences. The FRO manager provides quarter reports to QPAG (Quality Assurance Performance Group) to share progress and to further strengthen practice and performance in this area.

We have been able to evidence the following areas of strength:

- The gap between review meetings is now starting to decrease.
- There is an independent overview of the individual circumstances agreed actions and plans.
- The workflow and timescale between review completion, Quality Assurance from line manager and ADM has significantly improved.
- Escalation procedure is now in place which alerts managers within Fostering, Quality Assurance and Fieldwork teams of outstanding input into foster carer reviews.

- Increased management oversight and monitoring of reviews has started to become embedded in practice.
- Reviews are progressed at pace as soon as the work is allocated to the FRO and on average completed within 4 weeks.
- Increased management oversight is evidenced on the foster carer records.

Alongside the development of the service over the last 12 months the following areas for development have been identified as a priority for the 2022/23 service plan:

- To complete fostering reviews within 11 months to improve timeliness and meet statutory requirement.
- Improve the progress of reviews progressed to fostering panel. FSW must book a panel slot prior to the review being sent to The FRO's to prevent the reviews from sitting in the Virtual Panel tray.
- Understanding and commitment from supervising social workers, QAROs and childcare social workers to contribute and inform the statutory review. This includes providing all the relevant information within the required timescales.
- To maintain high expectations in the standards of fostering reviews to ensure our foster carers have the skills, training, and support to meet the individual needs of our children & young people.
- To embed the audit framework within the FRO process to regularly highlight areas of strength and development. This will enable learning and improvement in practice from any emerging themes.
- To establish regular feedback from foster carers as part of the review process.
- To use the escalation process to drive standards and highlight key areas for managers and senior management oversight.

There is an expectation that on average 20 fostering reviews should be completed per calendar month. The team is currently operating at 61% completion and improvements continue to be made, through collaborative working and increased communication between the FRO's and the FSW's. Increased management oversight and regular meetings have improved the tracking of review timescales and reviews are now booked in advance at the review meeting, which should improve the timeliness of the reviews going forward.

## **7. Foster Carer's Support**

Foster carers have valued more than ever the contact and support they have received throughout the last year. The service has adapted to

### **7.1 Support Groups**

Throughout March 2021 – April 2022 monthly support groups have taken place virtually on the first Monday of each month between 1.30pm – 3pm. These groups provided a regular opportunity for carers to come together supported by fostering social workers to discuss a range of topics. As a number of these groups took place during Covid-19, themes centred around home schooling, vaccinations and balancing home and work.

While attendance at virtual meetings was consistent, the number of carers attending was quite small.

More recently the fostering service has re-established a number of local face to face support groups for foster carers in the North and East of the county with plans for these to be county wide beginning in May 2022.

Carers have clearly identified a preference for face to face meetings and attendance is higher and feedback is positive. The groups provide the opportunity for carers to meet with each other, to form supportive relationships, to deliver localised training and share experiences and knowledge. Going forward, the Support Groups plan to reinstate the attendance of guest speakers and are extending the number of locations at which groups are being held to ensure localized information and support is available to carers.

## **7.2 Therapeutic Support**

The Fostering Team work in partnership with the Clinical Commissioning Group to promote the emotional wellbeing of fostered children and young people. A total of 18.5 hours of Clinical Psychology support continues to be provided through 2 part time clinical psychologists.

Due to the rise in the numbers of requests for support, advice, and guidance from foster carers to the children in care Psychologists for adoption and permanence we are developing a model of practice that improves the skills of the supervising social workers to provide the direct support to the foster carers. This is consistent with Dorset Council Children's Social Care's restorative practice model. Through consultation and group supervision, support and joint training foster carers will have an improved understanding of the emotional needs of the children in their care and how to respond to these. This will further be underpinned by the development of a therapeutic DDP (Dyadic Developmental Practice/PACE (playfulness, acceptance, curiosity, empathy) led service.

## **7.3 Child's Voice**

Listening to children's voices is key to improving fostering care practice. In January 2022 the Children's Commissioner for England published a report detailing the responses for children in care and children in need to her Big Ask survey conducted last year. The most consistent message was that children in care want the same things as all other children: to be loved, to have friends, to make plans for their future and to be able to pursue their own interests.

The Fostering Service actively supports children and young people to share their views about how they are being cared for and supported by the Fostering Service.

This includes support for keeping in touch with their family and friends, support with education, hobbies and interests and planning for the future. Views are shared ahead of child in care reviews and as part of the foster carer's annual review.

Children in foster care also have access to a children's advocate. This service is provided independently through NYAS (National Youth Advocacy Service) who are also exploring the potential of using digital workflow to improve their capacity and raise the profile of advocacy with children, young people, colleagues and our partners. NYAS are also helping us to understand the "distance travelled" by children and young people by monitoring how they use advocacy over time to share their views – this feedback will also be used to inform how we can change the way we work to make it easier for children and young people to share their views as directly as possible.

The Youth Voice Team are also working closely with our Fostering Service to take a 'whole family approach' to engagement, where foster carers, their birth families and the children they foster are able to attend events together, creating an opportunity to engage with foster families at the same time.

#### **7.4 Delegated authority**

Dorset Council Children's Services continue to work 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. Completion of delegated Authorities is tracked weekly at Leadership Oversight to ensure timely completion by social workers.

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

The Dorset Foster Carer's Association was formed in March 2021 by a number of the foster carers from Dorset with the aims of:

- Providing strong channels of communication between the Fostering Service and the Association
- Working in partnership with Corporate Parenting and Fostering Services
- Seeking to improve all aspects of fostering
- Promoting good practice
- Representing foster carers as a group
- Organising and supporting social events for foster carers

This year has seen the DFCA establish support groups which offer peer mentoring. These take place monthly with one group in the East, one in the North and two groups in Weymouth. DFCA has also supported foster carer recruitment events at local sports clubs which has yielded additional benefits of receiving complimentary tickets for foster carers. A recent raffle raised £400 which will be used to provide events in the summer. The DFCA continues to raise the profile of Dorset Council foster carers, advance foster carers views

and recommendations regarding the Fostering Service and support carers to provide to provide high quality care for the children they look after.

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

## **7.6 Long Service Awards**

Plans are well advanced for our annual Foster Care Award Ceremony which is taking place face to face on 29<sup>th</sup> April 2022 with keynote speaker Yvette Stanley, Ofsted National Director – Social Care. At this event we will see carers being celebrated for the outstanding love, care and kindness they provide for Dorset children and their longevity of service. Thirty-five carers will be recognized for 5-10 years' service, 23 carers for 11-15 years' service, 7 for 16-20 years' service, 3 for 21-24 years' service and 14 for 25 years plus. Further family events are being planned in the summer which will include the celebration of our children who foster.

## **8. Complaints and Allegations**

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

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

### **8.1 Complaints**

Between 1 April 2021 and 3 March 2022 there were 13 complaints about the fostering service, 4 of which were upheld.

Two of these were from children both of which were upheld and resolved informally.

Four complaints were made by foster carers, 2 of which were upheld.

One complaint was made by a 'other professional', which was not upheld.

Four complaints were children and young people's parents, none of which were upheld, and a further 2 complaints were made by 'others' both of which were not upheld.

The themes from these complaints identify the need to pause and consider the wider impacts of making decisions to move children from foster placements and strengthen communication. The focus of the Fostering Service in response to complaints made is to build rapport and heal relationships whilst delivering the best possible outcomes for children and young people in care. As a learning authority, our approach is to promote the

best relationship with our foster carers, young people and their families by learning from complaints.

## **8.2 Allegations**

During this reporting period there were 22 referrals to the Designated Officer (aka LADO) concerning foster carers during this reporting period. Four of these did not meet the allegation threshold and were therefore closed.

After deliberation with the LADO 11 were considered to be unfounded, unsubstantiated or malicious

Seven were substantiated and appropriate actions taken. After formal reviews, 2 carers resigned from their position as foster carers and were subsequently de-registered as foster carers for Dorset.

## **9. Foster Carer Training**

Foster carers have access to a comprehensive learning and development offer through the Foster Carers Training Handbook. During the period 1 April 2021 – 31 March 2022 29 training courses were delivered with a total of 556 attendances. While the majority of these training events were online (20), more recently training events have been face to face with high attendance rates (between 11 -30).

To enhance the training offer available to foster carers, children's services now subscribe to The Training Hub which has a wide range of specialist e-learning modules targeted specifically at foster carers. The Foster Carer Training Hub offers the UK's largest cohort of online subjects. All their online training is built upon scientific evidence. This means it is engaging, interactive, and is supported by unique modules which include assessments, course-related handbooks, and an in-depth learning outcome review to ensure the learning outcomes have been met by our carers. In this period 61 foster carers have also completed e training available on the Learning Hub.

All foster carers providers can access Research in Practice although to date only 6 have created accounts. This is an area identified for improvement. Work is currently being done to establish foster carers with Dorset Council email addresses which will mean the 'creating account' process will become much easier for them. More benefits such as direct emails and promotion of resources from Research in Practice will encourage foster carers to access the site more.

New training handbooks were created for foster carers and can be viewed using the links below.

[Foster Carer Handbook 1 - 1 \(pagetiger.com\)](https://www.pagetiger.com/foster-carer-handbook-1-1)

## **12. Budget**

The 2021/22 budget for Inhouse Fostering Fees & Allowances totalled £5.2M funding an average of 231 placements during the year.

Placements were consistently below this level and an estimated underspend of £1.3M is forecast.

It is anticipated that usage of in-house provision will increase going forward through the recruitment of foster carers and implementation of Mockingbird.

## **13. Developments for 2022/23**

The Fostering service has closed off a number of actions from last year's Strengthening Fostering Action Plan and developed a revised Action Plan which over the coming year will prioritise work in the following areas:

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

Embed the Fostering Dashboard within the service with access being extended to fostering social workers.

Develop the Fostering Dashboard further to ensure that all KPIs are captured and reportable.

For example:

- Foster Carer Supervision
- Unannounced visits
- Medical
- DBS
- Health and Safety
- Foster Carer agreements

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

Evaluate the Business Support needs of the service while also looking at ways develop ways to be more streamlined and effective such as through the recording of panel minutes.

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

The fostering service has implemented a new approach to ensure that Fostering Reviews are tracked and recorded effectively, and progress is being made in this area. Next steps include a review of panel processes to identify where these can be strengthened further particularly considering having the benefit of permanent panel chair, advanced practitioner and panel coordinator now in post.

The annual review of Fostering Regulations will be undertaken to ensure compliance with National Minimum Standards and assess the maturity of practice for Dorset Fostering

Service. This will be used to inform annual self-assessment and ensure that any areas for development are incorporated into the plan.

Work is also planned to improve Foster Carer Medicals process including:

- Partnership practice standard/
- policy
- Automating Foster Carer
- medicals (between health
- providers, CCG and children's
- services) (to remove delays from
- reviews)

A workshop is being developed to strengthen the interface between the Fostering Service and Locality Teams with a focus on planning better for children in care.

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

Implement monthly dip sampling of Fostering social work supervision.

The learning offer for Fostering Service which includes viability and assessment process training will be designed and embedded.

Fostering Service Practice Standards are to be reviewed to ensure these remain current. Audit activity will be undertaken to evidence standards are being adhered to.

### **13.5 Strengthen Fostering Panel Arrangements**

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

A review of Fostering Panel processes is underway and focus will be given to implementing reviewed panel processes to ensure this is streamlined, supports effective and timely decision making and is compliant with national and regulatory standards.

### **13.6 Strengthen Foster Carer Support**

Work with DFCA to introduce and develop support groups and peer and buddy systems.

Support the Dorset Foster Carer Association to introduce and implement flexible and professional support for foster carers who are providing care for children and young people with more complex needs, e.g. Training Ambassadors.

Implement a programme of regular training events for foster carers around frequent health issues/strategies to support children and young people e.g. Foster Carer Health Training

Implement specialist support for foster carers who are providing care for children and young people with more complex needs

### **13.7 Implement the Mockingbird Programme.**

The first implementation working group meeting took place on 31/3/2022 led by Di Frake and Caroline Kerley (Fostering Network Mockingbird coach). The draft Operation Protocol is being finalised and information events for foster carers are being delivered throughout April 2022. The advanced practitioner role has been successfully recruited to and the Mockingbird Team Manager post is out to advert.

Dorset Fostering Service intends to establish our first Mockingbird constellation by April 2023.

### **13.8 Strengthen Fostering Recruitment**

Establish long term communications/marketing capacity/expertise to support Fostering recruitment.

Develop Fostering Friendly employer information and support:

- Create Fostering Friendly information.
- Promote Corporately.
- Promote to partners and organisations – including engagement with local business partners to promote Dorset Council as the fostering provider of choice

Undertake recruitment of Harbour Foster Carers.

[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.