

Corporate Parenting Board

28th April 2022

Fostering Panel Chair's 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

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Report Status: Public

Recommendation: Members of Corporate Parenting Board are requested to note the content of the report and the activity that has been undertaken during the reporting year and the impact for children.

Reason for Recommendation:

To be assured that the report had identified the strengths and areas for development and that steps are being taken for further improvement.

1. Executive Summary

This report covers the year from 1st April 2021 to 31st March 2022. This has been a busy year, with 43 Panels having been held, hearing a total of 158 cases. Panel has seen significant changes to staff, process and case types presented to Panel. Members of the Central list have remained resilient, constant and positive, focusing on their role of independently scrutinising and quality assuring all assessments of existing and potential foster carers (mainstream and connected), Whilst successfully managing the continuing challenges and impact of covid.

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

This report covers the year from 1st April 2021 to 31st March 2022. This has been a busy year, with 43 Panels having been held, hearing a total of 158 cases. Panel has seen significant changes to staff, process and case types presented to Panel. Members of the Central list have remained resilient, constant and positive, focusing on their role of independently scrutinising and quality assuring all assessments of existing and potential foster carers (mainstream and connected), Whilst successfully managing the continuing challenges and impact of covid.

Fostering Service Annual Report April 2021, John Heron.

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

- *To make a recommendation as to whether the applicant is suitable to be a foster carer and the terms of the approval.*
- *To consider the first annual review for newly approved foster carers, as well as reviews following the managing allegations process, and where foster carers are seeking a change in the terms of their registration status.*
- *To recommend whether or not a person remains suitable to be a foster carer, and whether the terms of their approval (if any) remain appropriate.*
- *To give advice or make recommendations, on other matters or cases referred to it by the fostering service provider, including terminations of approval.*
- *The fostering panel must also advise, where appropriate, on the procedures under which reviews in accordance with Reg. 28 are carried out by the fostering service provider, and periodically monitor their effectiveness.*

In addition, the National Minimum Standards 2011 requires that:

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

Dorset Council, Fostering Service Statement of Purpose 2021-22

[**Fostering Service statement of purpose April 2021 to March 2022 - Dorset Council**](#) - (full statement)

'Fostering and Permanence Panel scrutinises the fostering assessments undertaken by the Fostering Service and recommends whether approval of an application should be granted, and the terms on which the approval should be given.

The Fostering and Permanence Panel also scrutinises the first annual review carried out on newly approved foster carers, reviews which follow from the conclusion of the managing allegations procedure, reviews which request changes of approval, and reviews conducted on a three-yearly cycle in conjunction with the renewal in the foster carer's DBS and medical examination. All other reviews are conducted internally.

The Fostering and Permanence Panel recommends whether or not the foster carer remains suitable to continue fostering and, if so, whether the terms of approval remain appropriate or need to be varied. The Panel also oversees the matching of children and young people with approved long-term foster carers

where there is a plan for permanency in foster care. The Fostering and Permanence Panel is advised on operational matters by the Agency Adviser'

During this review period there has been an Ofsted inspection: (Full report here: [50172438 \(ofsted.gov.uk\)](https://www.ofsted.gov.uk/inspections/50172438))

Judgement	Grade
<i>The impact of leaders on social work practice with children and families</i>	<i>Outstanding</i>
<i>The experiences and progress of children who need help and protection</i>	<i>Good</i>
<i>The experiences and progress of children in care and care leavers</i>	<i>Good</i>
<i>Overall effectiveness</i>	<i>Good</i>

'Services for children and families in Dorset are of good quality and are continuing to improve. The senior leadership team is an impressive and successful force for change, with a proven determination to give every child in Dorset a brighter future. Strong political and corporate commitment to the improvement agenda supports an environment where good social work can flourish, and children are increasingly better protected.'

2. Panel meetings and membership

Fostering Panel meets 4 times a month, on the first and third Tuesday and Wednesday, with the availability to add or cancel panels if so required. All of these have been virtually conducted through Teams. 43 panel meetings were held over the reporting period out of a potential 48 booked dates – 158 cases heard in total. Averaging 3.7 cases per Panel.

This reviewing period has seen a new Panel Chair appointed, significant changes to Panel Administration, as well as 3 Interim Panel Advisors. It is hoped with the very recent appointment of a permanent Panel Co-Ordinator, and the recruitment of a permanent Panel Advisor, that some of the challenges to consistency and efficiency will stabilise at pace. Change is always a challenge, and with credit to both the Service and Panel Members it has not faltered in ensuring Panel is still able to function in line with Regulations and National Minimum Standards, ensuring continued service in the best interest of the young people of Dorset.

Panel lost 6 members from the central list over this reporting period, including the Chair and the 2 Vice-Chairs. There have been times where quoracy has been a challenge, at times this has understandably been exacerbated by ill health, and unavailability due to other work commitments Focus has been given to improving the processes and professional relationship between Panel and the service. I have witnessed investment from both the service and Panel Members as well as renewed positive and open lines of communication.

2022/23 will see an expansion of central list members which currently sits at 10 members including Panel Chair. Whilst there is an undoubted wealth of experience and professional knowledge held by current Panel Members, the aim is to diversify central list membership and increase breadth of knowledge and experience available for the Service to call on. Dorset is a large area, with a high number of panels per month – the central list should have a minimum of 20 members, to future proof panel meetings and avoid any further challenges of quoracy.

We are in the planning stages of a phased, hybrid return to face-to-face meetings. These will allow for both in person and virtual (if needed) attendance, making full use of the new skills learnt and technology available, to allow for an increase in active participation for all involved in each case. Panel have seen children attend long term matching and appropriate portions of annual reviews to hear their voice and views directly, being involved in the conversation about their lives – this was enabled and supported by the carers and the school (providing a confidential space and laptop for them to link in) something panel would welcome more of.

3. Training, Development and Appraisals

Since July 2021, there has been extensive investment in both Panel Members and the meeting itself, in varying forms. There has been commitment shown from all involved to provide an effective and efficient service:

- **August – September:** *Consultation on Terms of Reference, Code of Conduct, Confidentiality Agreement, Communications Plan.*
- **August:** *implementation of Social Worker and Attendee feedback to panel forms – 360 feedback is essential; Panel Chair also implemented a new process of feeding back to attendees directly after deliberations instead of the Fostering Social Worker feeding this back via email.*
- **September - October:** *Ofsted visit.*
- **October:** *Internal Central list recruitment & Interviews. 2 x members appointed.*
- **November:** *Day at County Hall, looking at policies, identifying gaps and areas for improvement, minutes/administration & processes moving forwards, this was attended by:*
 - *Lianne Chorley - Independent Panel Chair*
 - *Gerry Connell – Service Manager Fostering, Fostering & Supported Lodgings*
 - *Louise Drury - Head of Service Children in Care and Care Leavers, Care and Protection*
 - *Lisa Reid – Agency Decision Maker*
 - *Nicola Meakin -Team Manager Social Care – Fostering, Fostering Assessment*

- *Fiona Darlington-Black – Panel Advisor*
 - *Sarah Middleton – Business Support Manager*
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- **November - December:** *Annual Appraisals for all Panel Members carried out by Panel Chair and Panel Advisor, these were a positive experience, which allowed for reflection and future development actions to be discussed, all Panel Members have received a written account of their appraisal. There is a strong pool of knowledge and experience, both professional and personal.*
 - **December:** *commencement of Independent QA feedback to agency documents by Chair and Panel Advisor. This includes identifying strengths, exemplary reports and social work practice including identifying the individual for internal recognition. It also highlights any practice concerns, areas of vulnerability for the applicants and service, it also identifies any gaps in paperwork or statutory checks which may have been missed, its gives advice and highlights themes and trends.*
 - **January:** *ICT training mornings x2 at County Hall for Panel Members in response to issues with using provided ICT and accessing required paperwork.*
 - **January – April:** *External recruitment to central list (nearly 100 applicants from across the UK) Special thanks to Fiona Darlington-Black who led on the entire recruitment task for this period, administration & communication with all applicants.*
 - **February:** *Induction Pack for Panel Members, thanks to Panel Advisor Fiona Darlington-Black for pulling this together.*
 - **March:** *Helping Children & Young People Thrive through Fostering – reparative and relationship building away day for Panel Members and Senior Management, with a number of positive actions moving forwards identified.*
 - **March:** *process of developing a training programme for Work Force Development on role, function and expectations at Panel began, with the Panel Chair and Service commenced.*

4. Case type and Recommendations

Case Type	Total Presented	Positive Recommendation	Deferments	Negative Recommendations
New Approvals	44	34	3	7
Regulation 25 Extension (prior to date of process change)	20	17	1	0 – 2 unable to make recommendation
Resignations	21	20	1	0
Foster Carer reviews 1 st and 3 rd year, review after allegation and ADM requested early reviews.	35	32	2	1
Long Term Matches	22	22	0	0
Other – reviews change to status and following allegation	16	15	0	1
TOTAL CASES	158	140	7	11

Year	Total new Applications	Mainstream	Connected
2021/22	44	15	29

5. Strengthening opportunities identified in previous reports

Covid has continued to affect the practical way in which Panel operates, with examples showing the adaptable, flexible, and modern way in which Panel Members are working, Panel also have additional Panel Members scheduled for each meeting to retain quoracy should ICT fail during a meeting.

The stability of Panel Administration, Panel Advisor and Central List is being addressed. Pre-Panel Preparation sheets are now submitted to the Chair in advance of Panel to enhance the effectiveness of Panels questions and timings to be respectful of proceeding presentations. Long Term matches no longer come to Panel.

The Fostering Service annual report highlighted a benchmarking exercise: *‘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.’* Since my appointment it could appear that Panel days are not currently being utilised to their full potential, and this is addressed further in the next section.

6. Themes and Observations

Having been appointed as Panel Chair in July 2021, the scope of this report covers the period from July 2021 to March 2022.

Delays in the presentation of reviews to panel have been highlighted by the Panel Chair which can account for the relatively low numbers noted in the case type & recommendations section of this report. This is being proactively addressed, with the Service managing this alongside the need to prioritise current reviews.

‘Voice of the child’ being evidenced in Panel documentation could be strengthened; this is not just what is written by a child but can be evidenced in a variety of ways. It is planned that this will be an area for development at a Panel planning day to look at new ways of gathering this feedback both directly and indirectly in the future.

A Panel Away Day was held in March 2022 which focused on restorative and relationship-based practice to develop a strength’s-based panel. This was facilitated by Mark Finnis and attended by Panel members and senior management. The outcome from this day resulted in a clear action plan to support the development of Panel being Dorset’s independent critical friend, whilst using the desired strength-based approach of ‘high challenge, high support’.

Reports that are being presented are consistently improving, as is the internal quality assurance of paperwork prior to Panel receiving it. There has been conversation about language used and information captured sometimes in reports

and feedback has always been well received when highlighted to workers appropriately outside of the Panel meeting itself. It can appear at times that there may be some challenge in communication between the childcare team and the fostering assessment team, which has impacted on the timeliness of connected carer applications being heard at Panel or the wishes and voice of the child not being heard sufficiently.

Panel minutes have been a challenge, and this was also identified Panel Chair and during by Ofsted in the Panel Chair Interview. There have been discussions over speed of turnaround getting to Chair and in turn to ADM, impacted upon by multiple minute takers. As a result, the service has recruited to the post of Panel Co-ordinator and we have now agreed the Panel will be recorded to support minute taking which in turn should improve timeliness of approval.

Attention has been given to ensuring the conciseness of minutes whilst retaining their integrity. It is hoped that with the ongoing developmental work and future plans, we will continue to see improvement in the fullness and accuracy of minutes. As Chair, I remain mindful of care leavers making a subject access request to see how recommendations about their life were made and with what evidence. Language, comments, or lack of information can have a lasting and detrimental effect on care leavers.

There have been times, where cases have been pulled after paperwork has been received and read or Panel meetings cancelled last minute (1 time due to my sudden ill health) due to lack of cases ready for scheduling. Progress has been made in this area and to further support the Quality Assurance of the service feedback is sent following each panel to the Head of Service and Service Manager to enable any immediate learning and actions to be taken and the panel advisor pulls together quarterly themes. This learning is then fed back into the service through their quality assurance processes to consider practice, policy or procedure changes and any training as well as learning from good practice.

It has appeared at times that Panel's time has not always been utilised to its full potential, with as little as one review and two 8 week extension requests scheduled. This appears to be changing and last 2 months have had full days becoming more regular hearing between 5 and 7 cases.

Overall, I have found management to be transparent and accessible, valuing the input of Panels observations as well as having a keen and proactive desire to ensure strength-based working with Panel Chair, whilst enabling Panel Meetings to remain the Independent Quality Assurance it needs to be. There is a desire to strengthen communication, have clearly documented policies and processes to avoid reactive working. The provision of safe, stable and secure homes for all children remains at the forefront for all.

7. Developmental work & future plans

The implementation of pre panel prep sheets and advance question formulation is still in its early stages, any new process will have challenges and opportunities for improvement during the embedding stages, but the confidence is there that any problems can be resolved. The process and application is in a constant state of review to ensure overall effectiveness.

A recent change in process for Regulation 25 Extension, has highlighted a need to bridge the gap in understanding of the processes that Social Workers follow when preparing documentation for Panel, and Panel's experience and understanding of Dorset's processes and policies up to this point, including how this is communicated.

Clarity of process and policies will ensure that Panel are remaining Independent in their Quality Assurance role, but also ensuring full awareness and understanding of what the Service is doing and how it is meeting regulatory requirements with the processes it follows or changes. This can be achieved by simply signposting Panel members to the relevant documents and would be welcomed.

Independent QA feedback to Agency documents to be revisited and reviewed to enable the document to be utilised as efficiently as possible and avoid any duplication of reporting.

There is a commitment from the Panel Chair to continue working closely with Senior Management, to continue developing open and strength-based communication, and feeding back to Panel Members on this work regularly.

There is a desire to revisit The Panel Bio sheet, look at modernising and making it not only more accessible to applicants prior to panel, but also foster children so they can feel part of the process or understand the backgrounds and what qualifies Panel members to make their recommendations.

There is also a conversation being had with the Panel Chair to work with Dorset's Children in Care Council to potentially set up a pre-approval panel meeting for applicants (Mainstream) to attend, replicating the format of Fostering Panel, but with children in care as Chair, Vice Chair and Panel Members asking questions. This could be part of the assessment process, and their feedback could be included with the information Fostering Panel receives.

Recruitment of 2 Vice Chairs once all new members have been inducted to ensure cover for holidays or sickness.

There is a goal to utilise Teams more effectively to enhance Panel and administration performance. Panel Members will receive training to ensure a smooth transition. There is a drive to get more documentation and communication active through the Teams Channels, this includes, but is not limited to: Minutes,

Agendas, Panel Papers, AOB, rolling feedback as well as the option to have a confidential channel to converse directly with management to hear outcomes of issues raised, as well as a sharing of success function. It will be an area where Panel Members can access and update training, access policies, terms of reference and participate in consultation. They may be able to confidentially access their appraisals – the options are limitless and will end any concerns over communication.

Return to face to face/hybrid meetings is proving a challenge but Business Support are active in trying to get this going.

Bring and share lunches with the social work team to be recommence once a quarter, and a regular 'time to talk' is going to be facilitated by Louise Drury, to continue to build of the success of the awayday.

Audio recording of Panel minutes is due to start imminently.

8. User feedback

Business Support are currently designing an online feedback platform. Feedback received whilst individual documents were emailed out for return to business support at the end of each panel as well as feedback, I have received during regular check ins includes:

- Four (4) feedback forms that were received between September and December 2021 from carers and applicants. These identified their experience at Panel as being sensitively treated, experiencing empathy, being helped to feel at ease and being asked relevant questions.
- Social workers are generally feeling positive about attending Panel.

As Panel Chair, I would advise reinstating the old process in the interim, to ensure we are not missing feedback and opportunity for growth and learning.

9. Conclusion

It is safe to say that this reporting period has been one with significant and rapid change for Fostering Panel Members, with a number changes planned for the coming year to support aspirations of a 'Digital Dorset'

Stability will be further achieved with the appointment a permanent Panel Advisor. The working dynamic between Panel Chair, Panel Co-ordinator and Panel Advisor, needs time to settle and will continue to strengthen and develop, which will provide Panel with the required consistency it needs to proceed through more change. The continued communication and investment from management is of real benefit, I can only envisage Dorset's Fostering Panel going from strength to strength, that's

not to say there won't be any more challenges, but I am confident in the solution focused thinking and attitudes I have seen all round in the last 8 months, to overcome them and learn from them.

In conclusion, I would like to thank all of Dorset's Fostering Panel Members, the Interim Panel Advisors, the Business Support Team, ADM and Senior Managers for their commitment to ensuring that the most vulnerable children in our care are provided with the highest quality foster care possible, showing continued dedication in striving to achieve best outcomes for all children.

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.