

# People and Health Overview Committee

## 31 January 2023

### Children in Care and Care Leavers Strategy Update

#### For Recommendation to Cabinet

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

**Local Councillor(s):** All

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

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**Report Status:** Public

#### Brief Summary

The aim of this paper is to:

- Set out the current national policy context in relation to services for children in care and care leavers
- Detail key challenges we face currently in delivering our strategic objectives for children in care and care leavers in Dorset
- Advise members on service developments we will be implementing to address those challenges
- Propose and recommend an uplift to the fees paid to Dorset Council foster carers in order to improve our ability to recruit and retain carers and to place children in care in high quality, local, Dorset Council foster homes

This paper discusses a number of positive service developments aimed at increasing our ability to provide excellent care and support to our children in care and our care leavers. These include:

- The successful operation of our Harbour service for adolescents
- The expansion of our care leavers service to include additional senior leadership, team management and personal advisor capacity
- A plan to create a new approach and service for caring for and supporting unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (UASC)
- A recommendation to increase Dorset Council foster carer fees

The developments discussed are in line with our strategic objectives to; support children and young people to stay at home with their parents and to avoid the care system; enable children and young people to live in local foster placements where they do have to come into care; provide excellent support to our care leavers; and meet the diverse needs of our unaccompanied children.

To continue to respond effectively to the needs of our children and young people we need to increase the number of our foster carers and supported lodgings carers. We have an ambitious recruitment strategy, however, Dorset Council foster carers and supported lodgings carers have not received a financial uplift since 2018. The cost-of-living crisis has brought this even more into focus and carers have raised this as having a significant impact on all.

To address this, it is proposed that an average of 15% uplift is made to the overall payment to foster carers and supported lodgings carers.

### **Recommendations:**

The People and Health Overview Committee are asked to note the contents of this update report on the progress of our children in care strategy which operationally delivers the Sufficiency Strategy 2020 – 23 approved by Cabinet on 19 January 2021.

The People and Health Overview Committee are further asked to recommend to Cabinet that there is an average 15% increase in the overall payment for Dorset foster carers and supported lodgings carers.

### **Reason for Recommendations:**

To progress work to ensure that foster carers and supported lodgings carers receive financial uplift in their overall payment to support sufficiency of Dorset Council carers and ensure carers are suitably financially rewarded for the invaluable role they play for our children in care and care leavers. Successful recruitment and retention of foster carers will support the health and wellbeing of

our children in care and result in cost efficiencies for the Council through the reduced use of high-cost residential placements.

## **1. Report - National Landscape**

1.1. In November 2021, HM Government decided that the National Transfer Scheme for unaccompanied minors would become mandatory.

1.2. The scheme sets a quota for all local authorities to be required to accommodate a number of children equivalent to 0.07% of the local child population. This was revised upwards in a letter from the Minister for Safe and Legal Migration on 24 August to 0.1% of the local child population. In the case of Dorset, this represents a rise from 47 young people to 67 young people. We are currently looking after 43 young people and are responsible for 33 care leavers who were formerly unaccompanied minors. This has been a 400% increase in this calendar year.

1.3. The National Transfer Scheme has had immediate effects on Dorset Council with a sharp rise in the number of unaccompanied children in our care and supported by us as care leavers.

1.4. Dorset Council has sought to engage constructively with the National Transfer Scheme throughout, but this has proved difficult due to the state of the social care placements market. We were successful in placing children in Dorset initially, but over time we have struggled with a number of factors:

- We have not always been able to source accommodation for children in Dorset, so although we have responsibility and arranged accommodation, we have an associated efficiency issue because these are out of area placements and the full local offer of care, education and health cannot be delivered to these children.
- A number of young people have been unwilling to transfer to Dorset and have expressed a preference to be housed in urban centres.

1.5. In March 2022, the Competition and Marketing Authority (CMA) published the final report of the market study of children's social care. Key findings and recommendations included:

- A judgement that the market is dysfunctional

- Profits are excessive in private sector, and there are concerns about financial resilience particularly those companies financed through private equity
  - Foster care is better and more cheaply delivered by local authorities and more work should be undertaken to bring fostering “in house”
  - Regional and national bodies should be set up to help local authorities improve their leverage in the market place
- 1.6. On Monday 23 May 2022 the independent review of children’s social care published its final report ‘[The independent review of children’s social care: final report](#)’. HM Government has said it would publish an implementation strategy on children’s social care before the end of 2022. Key areas are likely to include:
- Changes to the child protection system
  - Changes to family support and early help systems
  - Support for foster carer recruitment
  - Regional commissioning arrangements
- 1.7. The findings of both the CMA study and the independent review resonate with local experience, particularly in respect of the difficulties we face in the social care marketplace.
- 1.8. A national survey of foster carers was undertaken in July 2022 by FosterTalk which are recognised as the ‘go to’ organisation for fostering advice, practical guidance, and independent support for both foster carers and fostering services alike. Key findings included 92% of carers who responded feel financially worse off compared to last year with 18% currently in debt due to cost of living increase and 43% reporting that they may leave fostering in the next 2 years without further financial support.
- 1.9. A report published 27 October 2022 by Coram BAAF – Adoption and Fostering Academy highlighted that the rising cost of living is resulting in the cost of caring becoming untenable for many foster carers, both local authority and independent, risking children and young people’s stability and wellbeing.

## **2. Local Context and key data**

- 2.1. There are currently 457 children in care in Dorset.
- 2.2. Since the beginning of 2022 we have seen an increase in the number of children in care in Dorset. (Fig 1)

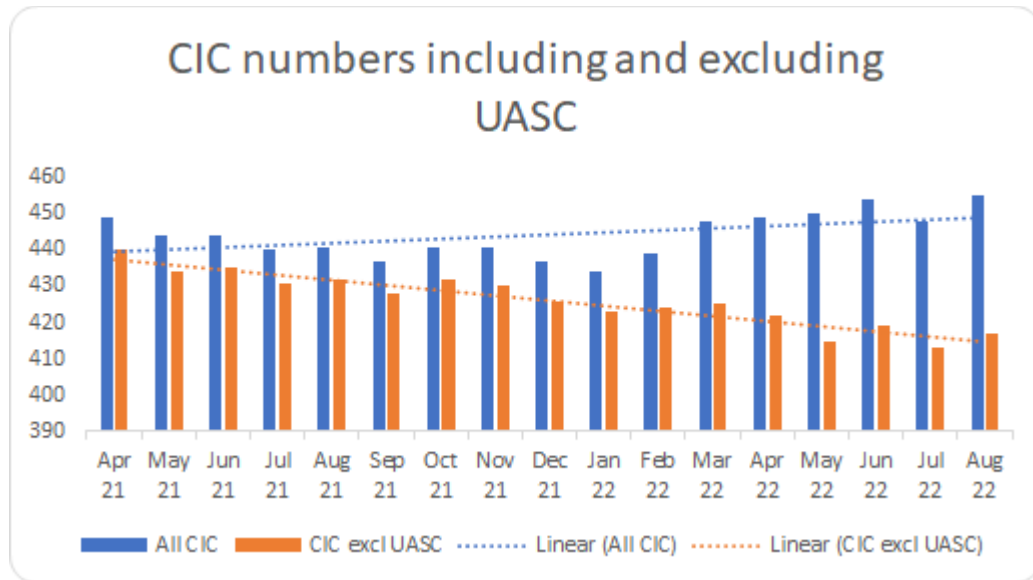


Fig 1: Children in care numbers including and excluding unaccompanied children

- 2.3. The greatest influence of this increase has been through the National Transfer Scheme, which has had more immediate effects on Dorset Council. The rise in numbers of unaccompanied minors can obscure the fact that our underlying numbers of children in care have begun to reduce.
- 2.4. More children in care (70%) are cared for by foster carers and 40.4% are cared for by Dorset Council foster carers.
- 2.5. While the % of children in care who are placed 20 miles from home continues to improve, the number of children living in out of county placements remains similar to March 2022 at 194 in September 2022. However, 46 of these children are living in permanent arrangements either with a relative or friend, long-term fostering or placed with parents as part of a reunification plan, pending discharge of the care order.
- 2.6. The number of children who have experienced 3+ moves in the previous 12 months is on target and better than England average and Good + statistical neighbours.
- 2.7. Achieving a permanent placement ensures children have a secure stable and loving family to support through childhood and beyond, to create a

sense of security, continuity, commitment identity and belonging. We have continued to focus our attention in supporting our children to achieve permanence. Permanence can be achieved in a number of ways:

- Long term fostering – At the end of September 2022, 55 % of young people who have a permanence plan for long term fostering have achieved this compared to 39% at the same time last year.
- SGO - 11% (8) of young people who ceased being in care in the six months prior to September 2022 were placed subject to Special Guardianship Order compared to 17% (11) in the previous year
- Adoption – 19% (14) of young people who ceased being in care in the six months prior to September in 2022 were placed for adoption compared to 14% (9) in the previous year
- Return Home to Parents - The number of children who ceased being in care following re-unification to birth family in the 6 months to September 2022 was 12. This compares to 6 in the 6 months to August 2021.

- 2.8 The Children & Social Work Act, 2017 extended the service offer for young people leaving care up to their 25<sup>th</sup> birthday. In Dorset there are 512 young people aged between 18-25yrs who have left our care, of these 289 young people are receiving a service from the leaving care team.
- 2.9 As of September 2022, we are in touch with 97% of our care leavers.
- 2.10 Most young people are steady and settled, living in independent accommodation. 20 young people have remained with their foster carers through Staying Put and 17 young people are supported in supported lodgings. However, 15 young people remain in unsuitable accommodation which includes 3 young people in custody and 1 young person in bed and breakfast.
- 2.11 In July 2022, 17 young people were in higher education including university. The number of care leavers (age 19/21) in education, employment and training has increased from 20-21 and is now just outside the range of good and outstanding local authorities.
- 2.12 We continue to closely monitor all our care leavers who are receiving a service and we are engaging with local employers and businesses to strengthen this area of performance further.

- 2.13 Earlier this year all care leavers in Dorset were asked to participate in the New Belongings online survey 'Your Life Beyond Care' to find out how they felt about their lives.
- 2.14 The things young people described as going well included leaving care support, sustained, trusted relationships with their personal adviser, better internet access and smartphones, more young people having a network of supportive relationships and reduced feelings of loneliness.
- 2.15 Things that could be better included, housing, where fewer young people felt where they lived was right for them, the number of young people who were either studying or working, young people experiencing financial difficulties, feeling less positive about the future with increased feelings of stress and anxiety and feeling unhappy with how they look.
- 2.16 We anticipate that the current number of care leavers receiving a service from the Leaving Care Team will increase from 289 to 441 by July 31<sup>st</sup>2024.

### **3. Foster Care and Supported Lodgings**

- 3.1. On 30<sup>th</sup> September 2022 there were 191 Dorset Council fostering households, of which 126 are mainstream households, 59 are connected persons (approved and temporary approved) and 6 households are foster to adopt/early permanence.
- 3.2. 20 young people who have left care have remained with their foster carers through Staying Put and 17 young people are supported in Supported Lodgings.
- 3.3. In the last 6 months, the total number of new carers for Dorset is 15 in comparison to 12 this time last year, the increase being associated with the number of connected carers.
- 3.4. The challenges for fostering recruitment are being noted nationally within both local authority and IFA services. With the number of enquiries to be foster carers and supported lodgings for Dorset Council declining it is all the more important for Dorset to be the fostering agency of choice for foster carers and supported lodgings carers.
- 3.5. Nationally 13% of the foster carer workforce are retiring or leaving every year.
- 3.6. From 1 April 2022 to 30<sup>th</sup> September 2022, 11 mainstream fostering households deregistered, of which 8 resigned compared to 18 in the same period last year of which 13 resigned. From 1 April 2022 to 30<sup>th</sup> September 2022, 17 Connected Persons deregistered from fostering, 8 of which were

due to a Special Guardianship Order being awarded. This compares to 22 Connected Persons deregistered from fostering, of which 8 was due to a Special Guardianship Order being awarded in the same period last year.

- 3.7. Retention of our foster carers and supported lodging carers is critical to the service building experience and resilience to meet the needs particularly of older children and young people with varied needs. Work continues to ensure our carers are well supported through their relationship with their fostering social worker, regular visits, supervision, and reviews and engagement in innovation and transformation projects such as Mockingbird.
- 3.8. Dorset Council foster carers and supported lodgings carers have not received a financial uplift since 2018. The cost-of-living crisis has brought this even more into focus and carers have raised this as having a significant impact on all.
- 3.9. The table below provides a comparison between Dorset Council, other local authorities and independent fostering agencies based on the placement of a child aged 0-4yrs. (The figures for Dorset reflect our payments for carers who are on skill level one. We have a skill level remuneration scheme for foster carers that is made up of five levels and carers can move up the levels dependent on skills and experience. The different skill levels are set out further on in the paper in the financial implications section. Most local authority fostering services have similar skill level remuneration schemes for their carers).

Provider	Payment per week	Payment per year
Dorset Council - current	£216	£11,232
Dorset Council (15% uplift to overall payment)	£251	£13,052
Devon Council	£231	£12,012
Hampshire Council	£263	£13,676
Southampton Council	£270	£14,032
Wiltshire Council*	£357	£18,564
FCA (independent fostering agency)	£390	£20,300



Capstone (independent fostering agency)	£400	£20,800
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\*Wiltshire Council have structured their fostering payments into 3 payment levels only and do not differentiate by age.

Fig.2 Comparison of fostering payments between Dorset Council and other authorities and agencies.

- 3.10. As at the end of October 2022, the average weekly cost for an Independent Fostering Association placement was £1,027 (inclusive of fees and allowances to carers, agency overheads and profit margin).
- 3.11. As at the end of October 2022, the average weekly cost for an independent residential children's home was £4,469 (excluding cost of education and NHS contributions).
- 3.12. As at the end of October 2022, the average weekly cost for a Dorset Council Fostering placement was £372 (this does not include cost of fostering social workers and council overheads).
- 3.13. Even considering that the IFA and local fostering costs are not presented as like for like, it is evident that it is significantly more cost efficient for children to be cared for by Dorset Council foster carers. In addition to financial benefit, we have greater assurance of the quality of our carers and are able to provide placements for children that are close to people and places that are important to them.

#### 4. The Harbour and Dorset Children's Homes

- 4.1. The Harbour is an integrated service for young people on the edge of care, in care and leaving care. Since December 2020, the team has worked with 153 young people. Of these 100 young people were on the edge of care with 94% being supported to remain at home with their families. We have seen a reduction in the number of young people entering care and those placed in residential children's homes out of county. The number of first-time entrants to the youth justice system has halved.
- 4.2. Having recently recruited to the Speech and Language Therapy post, we now have all our embedded specialist roles filled which also includes psychologist and police.
- 4.3. Building work is now concluded at College House, a 3 bedroomed children's home in Weymouth and we have successfully registered with Ofsted and welcomed our first residents.

- 4.4. College House is a short-term home where the team will work intensively with young people and their families/foster carers to support a timely return home or to family based care.
- 4.5. Work continues to develop a similar approach, incorporating residential and fostering provision, community-based support and in reach provision, for children who are disabled.
- 4.6. Building work has concluded at Chestnut House, a 4 bedroomed children's home for children with a learning disability and autism, and we are looking forward to our Ofsted registration visit in January 2023.
- 4.7. We are engaging with young people, parents, and colleagues to co-design our approach to better support children and their families.

## **5. Successful Grants and Awards.**

- 5.1. Dorset Council was successful in receiving £96500 from the DfE as part of the Children's Social Care COVID-19 Regional Recovery and Building Back Better Fund to support with the development of Mockingbird. Mockingbird is an extended family model, which has been evaluated to show improved stability of fostering placements and strengthened relationships between carers, children and young people, the fostering service and birth families. The embedding of this approach in Dorset forms part of our recruitment and retention strategy. We have recruited our first Hub Home Carer and launched our first constellation on 12<sup>th</sup> November 2022. We anticipate that our second constellation will be launched by end of March 2023 with a fourth and fifth by the end of the year.
- 5.2. A further grant of £627802, was awarded by DFE for Staying Close. Staying Close is a model which provides enhanced support for young people leaving care from children's homes and is designed to be a comparable offer to the option to Stay Put, which supports young people in foster care to remain with their former foster carers until age 21. Staying Close focuses on the following areas:
  - Accommodation stability: including access to improved housing options, reduced rates of evictions and fewer placement moves.
  - Wellbeing: positive changes in both mental and physical health and reductions in antisocial behaviour, episodes of going missing and criminal activity for young people at risk of these behaviours.
  - EET: increasing numbers of young people in employment, education and training, including through support gaining work experience, with application forms and advice and guidance.

- Strong relationships and support network: an increase in social connectedness and developing healthy relationships.
- Independent living skills: including improvements in cooking, budgeting, time management and practical skills.

5.3 This grant which runs over 3 years and creates the opportunity to enhance the Leaving Care Service through the development of two Champion Personal Advisor Roles, one to lead Staying Close and the other to lead employer engagement. These lead areas correlate with those identified by young people through the New Belongings Survey and create a career development pathway in the Leaving Care Team.

## **6. Future Developments**

6.1. Work is in progress with the ICB and other health partners to design a service that will meet the needs of children and young adults experiencing mental distress who would not have their needs met in a psychiatric in-patient setting.

6.2. Developments are also underway to increase our capacity to care for and support unaccompanied children by:

- Using capacity in good or outstanding boarding schools to provide education and term time accommodation.
- Using school communities to host children in school holidays as connected people.
- Using innovation funding to cover the costs of these packages of education, accommodation and support.
- Seeking temporary easement of specific regulations and guidance

## **7. Financial Implications**

7.1 The total amount paid to Dorset foster carers in 2021-2022 was £3,717,804. This was broken down into fees of £1,737,153 and allowances of £1,980,651.

7.2 If an average of 15% uplift were to be made to the overall payment, this would amount to an additional £557,671 per annum.

7.3 This amount also includes an enhancement of £10 per week for carers offering a home to teenagers and a proportionally higher increase for level 1 carers. This is intended to incentivise the recruitment of new carers and

those with an interest in caring for teenagers to support our Placement Sufficiency Strategy 2020-2023.

- 7.4 The tables below show the current weekly payments to foster carers and the proposed weekly payments.

Age Banding for Allowances	Skills Level 1	Skills Level 2	Skills Level 3	Skills Level 4	Skills Level 5
0-4	216	256	326	486	
5-10	238	278	348	508	
11-15	278	318	388	548	718
16+	322	362	432	592	762

Fig.3 Total current weekly payment (fee + allowance)

Age Banding for Allowances	Skills Level 1	Skills Level 2	Skills Level 3	Skills Level 4	Skills Level 5
0-4	251	297	377	561	
5-10	273	319	399	583	
11-15	323	369	449	633	794
16+	367	413	493	677	838

Fig.4 Proposed weekly payment (fee + allowance)

- 7.5 If the above inflationary increase is applied to the current budget for fostering fees & allowances, there will still be capacity for growth of 20 placements within the service.
- 7.6 The additional cost of a 15% increase based on the current cohort of young people in Staying Put arrangements would be £13,300 per annum.
- 7.7 The additional cost of a 15% increase based on the current cohort of young people in Supported Accommodation arrangements would be £16,800 per annum.

- 7.8 The recruitment of Dorset foster carers is more cost effective, reducing the amount spent on high cost external residential placements and supporting our local economy.

## **8. Environmental Implications**

- 8.1 A reduction in the number of children and young people that are living in care in independent provision outside of Dorset will reduce the amount of travel undertaken by families, social workers, and other children's services staff. There are currently 150 children living in care in independent provision outside Dorset. A third of children live under 20 miles away, with 2 thirds over 20 miles. While the majority of children live in neighbouring authorities, there are some children living as far afield as Blackpool, Sheffield, Leeds and Manchester. This should result in a reduction in the associated emissions from travel which is in line with the council's priority of protecting the natural environment, climate and ecology.

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

- 9.1 Support for the recommendations will recognise the challenging landscape we are experiencing regarding the increase in the number of children in care and the availability of local family-based care. Implementing the recommendations will result more local foster placements for our children in care and this will enhance their health and wellbeing.

## **10. Other Implications**

- 10.1 Support for the recommendations will significantly contribute and support the Council in meeting its corporate parenting responsibilities.

## **11. Risk Assessment**

- 11.1 Having considered the risks associated with this decision, the level of risk has been identified as Low.

## **12. Equalities Impact Assessment**

- 12.1 Not relevant for the purposes of this paper.

## **13. Appendices**

None

## **14. Background Papers**

[Placement Sufficiency Strategy 2020 - 2023.pdf \(dorsetcouncil.gov.uk\)](#)

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/childrens-social-care-market-study-final-report>

<https://childrensocialcare.independent-review.uk/final-report/>

[FosterTalk-Cost-of-Living-Report-2022.pdf](#)

[Rising costs of caring risks the stability of children and young people in care | CoramBAAF](#)