

# Corporate Parenting Board

## 25 May 2023

### Fostering Panel Chair's Annual Report 2022 - 2023

Choose an item.

**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. Fostering Panel Chair's Annual Report

### Introduction

1.1. This report covers the year from 1st April 2022 to 31st March 2023. This has been a busy year, with 34 panels having been held, hearing a total of 139 cases. We have noted a number of areas of significant progress:

- Consistency in the quality assurance of panel papers provided by the advance practitioner advising panel.
- Embedded new process to support panel members in their preparation for panel.

- Embedded independent quality assurance feedback provided by panel to social workers and fostering social workers.
- Expanded our central list of panel members.
- Appointed a panel vice chair.
- Attachment training and IT training delivered to panel members.
- Annual appraisals completed.
- Updated panel members' profiles which are shared with foster carers prior to attendance.
- Panel members have adopted a trauma informed approach to their questions.
- Strengthened performance in timeliness and quality of minutes.
- Moved back to hybrid/face to face panels.
- Utilising Teams more effectively – digital Dorset.

## **2. Panel meetings and membership**

- 2.1. 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. 34 panel meetings were held over the reporting period out of a potential 46 booked dates. 139 cases were heard in total averaging 4.1 cases per panel. 1 extra ordinary panel was arranged as requested by Corporate Director of Care & Protection and 12 panels cancelled due to lack of panel business/paperwork.
- 2.2. This reviewing period has seen a new panel vice-chair appointed, 15 new panel members added to the central list and changes to panel administration. The consistent advance practitioner has proved invaluable and has further added to the stability and positive panels we now experience. Change is always a challenge, and it is with credit to both the service and panel members that panel has continued to strengthen, in line with Regulations and National Minimum Standards and in the best interests of the children and young people of Dorset.
- 2.3. Last year's focus on improving processes and professional relationship between panel and the fostering service has resulted in a strength based and solution focused panel, which is a positive experience for all who attend. High challenge and high support in a respectful and empathic approach has led to a high level of professional independent scrutiny. This is expected to continue in the next year.
- 2.4. 2023/24 will see a further expansion of central list members which currently sits at 14 members including panel chair. Whilst there is an undoubtable wealth of experience and professional knowledge held by current panel members, the aim is to diversify central list membership and increase breath 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.
- 2.5. We have facilitated a hybrid approach and returned to face-to-face meetings. These allow for both in person and virtual attendance (if needed) to allow for an increase in active participation for all involved in each case. Panel have seen

children attend connected care approvals and appropriate portions of annual reviews to hear their voice and views directly. Supporting children to being involved in the conversation about their lives is something panel would welcome more of.

### **3. Training, development and appraisals**

3.1. There has been continued 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:

- April 22 - March 23 - monthly feedback meetings with head of service and panel chair as well as monthly meetings with team manager and panel chair.
- April 22 – Oct 22 - appointment, inductions and observations of the 15 newly appointed panel members.
- June 22 - panel chair appraisal completed (positive).
- July 22 - face to face/ hybrid panels commenced.
- August 22 - interviews and appointment of vice chair.
- August 22 - extraordinary panel held on 31<sup>st</sup> at the request of Corporate Director.
- September 22 - new panel member profile distributed with panel invitations.
- November 22 - annual appraisals for all panel members carried out by panel chair and advanced practitioner. 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 22 – development of independent quality assurance feedback. This includes identifying strengths, exemplary reports and social work practice, identifying the individual for internal recognition. It also highlights any practice concerns, areas of vulnerability for the applicants and service, and identifies any gaps in paperwork or statutory checks which may have been missed, offering advice and highlighting themes and trends.
- January 23 - IT training morning – Teams
- February/March 23 - planning underway to commence Children in Care fostering panel.
- March 23 - attachment ½ day training for panel members
- March 23 - panel chair attended fostering team meeting further building on partnership/ relationship building.
- March 23 developing a training programme for workforce development on role, function and values and behaviours at panel.

#### 4. Case type and recommendations

Case Type	Total Presented	Positive Recommendation	Deferments	Negative Recommendations
New Approvals	35	34	0	2
	Mainstream - 12	Mainstream – 12	Mainstream – 0	Mainstream – 0
	Connected Persons - 23	Connected Persons – 22	Connected Persons – 0	Connected Persons - 2
Regulation 25 Extension	20	5	0	0
Resignations	33 (plus 3 deregistration)	N/A	N/A	N/A
Foster carer reviews 1 <sup>st</sup> and 3 <sup>rd</sup> year, review after allegation	1 <sup>st</sup> year - 26 3 <sup>rd</sup> year - 19	1 <sup>st</sup> year – 26 3 <sup>rd</sup> year - 19	1 <sup>st</sup> year – 0 3 <sup>rd</sup> year – 0	1 <sup>st</sup> year – 0 3 <sup>rd</sup> year – 0
	Allegation - 13	Allegation – 11	Allegation – 2	Allegation – 0
Other – reviews change to status, ADM requested early reviews.	Change of status 8	Change of status 7	Change of status 1	Change of status 0
<b>TOTAL CASES</b>	<b>139</b>			

#### 5. Strengthening opportunities identified in previous reports

5.1. Pre-panel preparation sheets are now completed jointly in Teams and submitted to the chair in advance of panel to enhance the effectiveness of panel's questions and timings to be respectful of proceeding presentations. This is shared on the morning of panel with those attending and is very much a flexible working document- these have been a great success and have had the additional benefit of supporting business support with minutes.

- 5.2. Independent QA feedback sheets – these are now being completed completely independently and distributed appropriately via advanced practitioner to team managers, ADM and fostering services manager– I have been advised that they are used by some workers and evidence for their professional registration as well as their one-ones and appraisals which is great.
- 5.3. The working relationship has gone from strength to strength. Communication and transparency has improved greatly and will remain a priority focus.
- 5.4. There have been a number of panels cancelled in these 12 months, but the ones that have progressed have utilised panel time better with more cases coming to each panel, particularly noticeable since December 2022. We are anticipating that with the new reviewing officer in post this will improve further in the coming 12 months.
- 5.5. Panel is currently without a permanent panel coordinator and wanted to praise the business support team for the way in which they have supported panel developing at pace and supported the induction of new members alongside ensuring all documents and panel requirements were met during some challenging times.
- 5.6. Minutes are now reaching panel members within 48 hours. They are concise, accurate, full and generally great quality which is a significant improvement from where they were last year. They are finalised by panel chair and with Agency Decision Maker (ADM) generally within 7 days – this has a positive impact for all awaiting ADM Decisions.

## **6. Themes and Observations**

- 6.1. Delays in the presentation to panel of reviews post allegation or standards of care, has been highlighted this year by the panel chair. Panel remain determined that Standards of Care should be presented to panel without delay, to ensure that the focus remains on the child and the care they are receiving. I believe this is being proactively addressed, with the service managing this, alongside the need to prioritise current reviews. The recently appointed second reviewing officer should help in the timeliness of reviews reaching panel.
- 6.2. On the occasion where a deferral or return to panel has been advised, better tracking is required to ensure timely return to panel.
- 6.3. 'Voice of the child' being evidenced in panel documentation could be strengthened further; 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, this is ongoing and continues to be explored.
- 6.4. A recent observation, in particular of the final 4-6 months of the year, panel have noticed reports from some foster carers describing ways in which children could

be better supported by their social workers through strengthening communication and working together so that children are not needing to re-tell their story.

- 6.5. Reports that are being presented are consistently improving, as is the internal quality assurance of paperwork prior to panel receiving it. These are generally excellent.
- 6.6. Panel are working with the childcare teams to ensure that there is good communication and that connected carer applications and viability assessments are timely following the placement of a child. In addition to ensure that the Independent QA feedback is utilised more efficiently to serve both teams in getting the feedback they need
- 6.7. There have been 3 differing ADM decisions. Helpful discussions with ADM and panel members for learning purposes have taken place post ratification. Panel remain confident in their reasoning for a negative recommendation and respect that the final decision lies with the Agency. This evidences openness for challenge and learning.
- 6.8. Previous challenges with panel members receiving minutes post panel have been resolved and the challenges of getting these to be ADM ready i.e. fullness and accuracy have also been resolved. This process is now efficient and correct. As chair, I continue 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.
- 6.9. Panel are impressed with how well all the social workers have adapted to our additional questions which focus additionally on therapeutic practice, mindfulness/wellbeing, equality and diversity as well as contextual care i.e online safeguarding, with most building this into their reports as standard practice now. We are also impressed with how well prepared fostering social workers are to present to Panel, often answering our questions in their opening summary.
- 6.10 During this review period we have had 12 panels cancelled, but this is no longer happening last minute or when paperwork has been sent out. I believe this is due to the diligence and forward planning of the advanced practitioner and business support colleagues who remain determined that further progress is made.
- 6.11 I have found managers to be transparent and accessible, valuing the input of panel observations as well as having a keen and proactive desire to ensure strength-based working with panel chair, whilst enabling panel meetings to retain the independent quality assurance. There is a commitment to continue to strengthen communication, have clearly documented policies and processes to avoid reactive working. The provision of loving, safe, stable and secure homes for all children remains at the forefront for all.

## 7. Developmental work & future plans

- 7.1. There is a commitment from the panel chair to continue working closely with senior managers, to continue developing open and strength-based communication, and feeding back to panel members on this work regularly.
- 7.2. Now the panel members profiles have been updated and are more accessible to applicants prior to panel, the next step is to share these with Children in Care so they can feel part of the process and understand the backgrounds and experiences of panel members who are making their recommendations about their lives.
- 7.3. The panel chair is working with Dorset's Children in Care Council to establish 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. We aim to run 4-6 annually during half terms – first one in August 2023.
- 7.4. Recruitment of a second vice chair and advertise for more central list members.
- 7.5. Ensure foster carers have access to a warm drink etc whilst they are waiting to meet with panel members.
- 7.6. Pilot therapeutic assessments for both mainstream and kinship care – I believe Dorset is the first Local Authority in England to pilot this, this is excellent and shows how much Dorset cares for its children and values/champions its foster carers.

## 8. User feedback

- 8.1. Business support are currently emailing for feedback post panel. I have received feedback during regular check ins with managers this includes:
  - 33 pieces of written feedback have been received from carers and applicants and professionals. These identified their experience at panel as being sensitively treated, experiencing empathy, being helped to feel at ease, feeling valued, listened to and being asked skilful relevant questions, receiving 4/5 across the board for overall experience at panel.
  - Social workers are generally feeling positive about attending panel and improvements in process are being noted.
  - Observations from head of service *'it was a real privilege to have been able to join Fostering Panel - it is clearly well led and there was so much attention given to ensuring carers feel welcome and comfortable. Panels members are really*

*invested in making the best decisions for children - it was a really great experience'*

- New social workers observing – they have found this opportunity rewarding and appreciated being able to witness the whole process report-formulating of recommendations and rational.

## **9. Conclusion**

9.1. Stability has been achieved, relationships have been built, the processes are more efficient and generally panel is a positive experience for all who attend. There is a mutual respect. This is now a strength based panel which has high challenge and provides robust and thorough independent overview and scrutiny. I wanted to thank the advanced practitioner in particular – her robust and skilled quality assurance of paperwork, understanding of the legal framework , best practice and regulations is an asset to Dorset Council.

9.2. In conclusion, I would like to thank all of Dorset's fostering panel members, 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.

## **10. Financial Implications**

None identified.

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

None identified.

## **12. Environmental Implications**

None identified

## **13. Other Implications**

None identified

## **14. Risk Assessment**

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



## **15. Equalities Impact Assessment**

N/A

## **16. Appendices**

None

## **17. Background Papers**

None