

# Corporate Parenting Board

## 25 May 2023

### 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:** Gerry Connell, Service Manager for Fostering and Supported Lodgings.

**Tel:** 01305 225568

**Email:** [gerard.connell@dorsetcouncil.gov.uk](mailto:gerard.connell@dorsetcouncil.gov.uk)

**Report Status:** Public

#### **Brief 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.

This report details the advancements that the fostering service has made over the 2022 / 2023 reporting year, particularly with the launch of Mockingbird, but also with the embedding of Dashboard which has seen a marked improvement in compliance and key performance indicators. The service has also been able to recruit permanent staff which has provided stability and continuity and has led to foster carers and in turn children and young people feeling more supported.

The national challenge of recruitment of foster carers caused by the cost of living crisis, the Ukrainian crisis (potential carers providing homes to refugees) and the hangover from the pandemic has impacted upon Dorset. but the service has risen to the challenge by providing an uplift to foster carer skill fees and with the speed that the Mockingbird project has been built there are positive signs for 2023 that enquiries and interest in Fostering in Dorset is rising.

**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. Introduction and synopsis**

1.1. The Fostering Services Regulations 2011 require that the Fostering Services provide written reports on the management, outcomes, and financial state of the fostering service. This report provides an overview of activity from the last financial year, April 2022 to March 2023 and the plans from the service for the forthcoming year (April 2023 to March 2024).

1.2. The service has had a very busy year and has also been faced with the challenges resulting from the cost-of-living crisis, the continued issues arising from the pandemic and also the Ukrainian crisis. The service has however continued to develop with a focus upon the support provided to our wonderful carers whose commitment, resilience, and skill to ensure that children's needs are met remains outstanding. Performance data has evidenced the strengthening of the service which has also seen near capacity staffing with permanent members of staff (95%).

1.3. However, the highlight of the year has been the commencement and implementation of the Mockingbird Program which saw the first constellation 'Pegasus' launched on the 12<sup>th</sup> November 2022 and the second 'Orion' launched on the 25<sup>th</sup> March 2023.

1.4. Excitingly the third constellation is due to launch on the 29<sup>th</sup> April with the fourth and fifth to follow later in the year. The program has moved with pace with the evidential knowledge that Mockingbird provides placement stability, retains foster carers, and improves the outcomes for children. This also evidences the ambition of Dorset Council and the fostering service.

1.5. With the ongoing cost of living crisis providing such a challenge Dorset Council has responded by agreeing a 15% uplift from the 1<sup>st</sup> April 2023 in foster carer skill fees and coupled with a 12.43% rise in national fostering allowances, will ensure that Dorset Council remains competitive when recruiting new carers. With the implementation of Mockingbird, the future looks positive.

1.6. The transformation program for fostering continues with a focus upon:

- 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.

1.7. The development of the service has continued with:

- The embedding of the Fostering Dashboard with access granted to both managers and social workers which has led to significantly increased compliance to KPI's in respect of such areas as:
  - Foster Carer Supervision
  - Unannounced visits
  - Safer care plans
  - Reviews
- The fostering service had a vigorous staff recruitment campaign to meet its sufficiency needs which has resulted in a workforce that is both permanent and sufficiency led.
- The completion of a review of fostering regulations to ensure that there was full compliance of national minimum standards.
- The implementation of both regular in-service dip sampling and safeguarding dip sampling occurring with every fostering review.

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

2.1. On 31<sup>st</sup> March 2023 there were 169 Dorset Council fostering households, of which 116 were mainstream households, 52 were connected persons (approved and temporary approved) and 1 household was foster to adopt/early permanence.

2.2. On 31<sup>st</sup> March 2023 there were 179 children and young people living in 169 in-house fostering placements which included mainstream, approved and temporary approved connected persons.

## **3. Recruitment**

3.1. In this reporting period 2022/23, the Fostering Assessment Team has recruited a total of 59 fostering households of which 10 were new mainstream fostering

households. There were 47 connected persons recruited and 2 foster to adopt placements. This equated to 21.54% of newly approved foster carers being mainstream.

#### **4. Enquiries, Assessments and Approvals**

4.1 In the period 1st April 2022 to 31st March 2023 there were 62 enquiries from the public seeking information about becoming a foster carer. From these enquiries the team completed 41 Initial Visits and 10 new fostering households were approved. This equated to a 16.1 % conversion rate from enquiry to approval which compares to an estimated conversion rate of 10% nationally. (Fostering Network). To ensure that this high conversion rate is achieved the following actions are undertaken.

- 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 as standard within 26 weeks.

4.2 As of 31<sup>st</sup> March 2023, there were a further 22 new fostering assessments in progress which includes 9 mainstream households and 13 Connected Persons. Of the mainstream fostering assessments, all, (subject to positive assessments) will be approved by June 2023.

#### **5. De-registration**

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

5.2 In this reporting period, 29 mainstream fostering households (compared to 26 in the previous year), and 47 Connected Persons were deregistered from fostering. Reasons for deregistration are as follows:

- Mainstream

27 resigned from fostering.

2 initiated by the fostering service.

- Connected

42 children moved on either returning home or becoming independent.

14 SGO's awarded.

1 carer resigned.

This has resulted in an overall loss of 21 fostering households (19 Mainstream and 2 connected persons).

## **6. Recruitment and Marketing**

6.1 Recruitment has proved to be a significant challenge for fostering nationally with the government responding to this through the publication of 'Stable Homes, Built on Love: Implementation Strategy and Consultation' February 2023. The recruitment of foster carers nationally is currently a significant issue with OFSTED statistics from 1<sup>st</sup> April 2021 - March 2022 indicating that 5435 fostering households deregistered compared to 4035 that were approved with 1 in 8 fostering households leaving.

6.2 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 recruit carers for our children and young people with disabilities.
- To recruit carers to the Harbour.
- 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.

## **7. Marketing**

7.1 The year saw the implementation of a new fostering image with an external marketing agency working in tandem with the fostering service and colleagues from the communications team. Alongside this is a new standalone micro-site which is both dynamic and informative. The external marketing agency has also been used to support targeted Google advertising and this has provided focussed and informed campaigns. This has been particularly useful when highlighting the benefits of fostering with Dorset Council, with such innovations as the Mockingbird Project. The service has been made more competitive and a platform has now been provided to attract both individuals interested in fostering for the first time and foster carers currently with other agencies.

7.2 The service now has the ability to monitor all digital marketing activity and to allow focussed and targeted advertising. This level of detail also allows for the fact that many foster carers take a prolonged period to decide on fostering, sometimes over a number of years and it is vital that their interest is maintained. This is supported

through the provision of good information and the sharing of current foster carers experiences.

- 7.3 The service is currently finalising planning for the Foster Care Fortnight campaign which runs from the 15<sup>th</sup> May – 28<sup>th</sup> May. This is an annual campaign started by the Fostering Network and is designed to raise awareness around fostering and the extraordinary role of carers.

## **8. Face to Face Recruitment Events**

- 8.1 Face to face recruitment has been built upon over the past 12 months with attendance at events across Dorset. This has ranged from shows and events to family friendly venues. Information stands have been setup at supermarkets, coffee shops and other areas where a significant footfall is located. Significantly this has been developed with our foster carers who have been able to provide the service with their local knowledge, expertise, and time. Word of mouth still remains the primary means of recruiting new foster carers.
- 8.2 In all the team undertook 68 face to face events across Dorset from March 2022 – March 2023.

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.
- 8.3 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 program.

## **9. Fostering Panel**

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

- To make a recommendation as to whether the applicant is suitable to be a foster carer and the terms of the approval.
- To consider the first annual review for newly approved foster carers, as well as reviews following the managing allegations process, and where foster carers are seeking a change in the terms of their registration status.
- To recommend whether 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.

9.2 Fostering panel continues to be held on consecutive days once a fortnight on Tuesday and Wednesday every other week.

9.3 There are currently 16 members on the central list including the panel chair. 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 increase in the number of central list members has provided resilience and most significantly a wide breadth of experience and knowledge.

9.4 The panel during the reporting period of 2021 – 2022 had been meeting virtually but positively meetings are now held in person. The panel has developed during this time period led by our wonderful chair Lianne Chorley and with the strong partnership built with the panel advisor the feedback from both professionals and foster carers is very positive.

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

10.1 As of the 31st of March 2023, there were 437 children who were being looked after by Dorset Council. Of these 307 or 70% 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.

10.2 Of the 307 children in foster care, 180 or 59% were placed within Dorset Council Foster Carers and 127 or 41% were placed with IFA carers.

10.3 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 by approval	Total Number of Children Placed
Mainstream Including Parent and Child	116	268 (This includes respite and short break carers)	126
Connected Persons	52	52	52
Foster for Adoption	1	1	1
Total number of Households	169	321	179

- 10.4 The combined number of all types of approved fostering households including Short Breaks, Connected Persons, and Foster to Adopt is 169. The optimum number of placements provided through the Fostering Service is 321, and the number of fostering beds used was 179.
- 10.5 The current utilization rate of foster children to mainstream fostering households is 1.09.
- 10.6 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 142 fostering beds not in use which remains equitable with the figure of 143 last year.
- 10.7 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.
- 10.8 It is important to differentiate between fostering households that have vacancies and have no foster children placed (primary vacancies) and those that have vacant beds but do have other foster children in place (secondary vacancies). Likewise, fostering households that are on hold without any foster children placed have primary beds on hold and those that have children in placements but have additional unused beds have secondary beds on hold.

## **11. Fostering Reviews**

- 11.1 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.
- 11.2 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.
- 11.3 Over the last 12 months, the Fostering review process has continued to be developed with 81% of annual reviews completed which has shown a marked improvement of 20% compared with the figure reported last year. This has primarily been achieved through the strong partnership working with the fostering reviewing service. There is a weekly meeting between the two services with oversight from the service managers ensuring that outstanding or delayed annual reviews can be tracked and individual action plans completed. The fostering review service manager provides quarterly reports to QPAG (Quality Assurance Performance Group) to share progress and to further strengthen practice and performance in this area.
- 11.4 Of significance is the improvement in quality assurance which has been built upon every review now being audited by the fostering reviewing officers. This has in turn led to an overall improvement in fostering household compliance and data and the quality of review reports.
- 11.5 The priorities remain within the service to:
- Complete fostering reviews within 11 months to improve timeliness and meet statutory requirement.
  - Ensure the 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.
  - 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.
  - 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.
  - Establish regular feedback from foster carers as part of the review process.
  - Use the escalation process to drive standards and highlight key areas for managers and senior management oversight.

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

- 12.1 Ensuring that foster carers feel valued is vital to maintain a strong service and to ensure that foster carers are retained. The Dorset Foster Carer Association stated in March that 99% of Dorset Council foster carers felt supported by the fostering service. Both the DFCA and the service will continue to strive together in partnership to ensure that every foster carer feels their needs and in-turn the needs of their children are met.

## **13. Support Groups**

- 13.1 Support groups are now conducted face to face. These groups provided a regular opportunity for carers to come together supported by fostering social workers to discuss a range of topics.
- 13.2 One of the key developmental areas of the service is to further develop the scope, availability, consistency, and attendance of support groups.
- 13.3 Groups are now due to launch across Dorset with venues including the North, South, West, Poole and Weymouth and Portland. Significantly rather than groups being run by one or two social workers there will be attendance by all social workers involved with that group of carers and managers will also be attending on a regular basis.
- 13.4 It has also been identified that consistency is a key requirement of the groups so in partnership with our foster carers a single agenda will be agreed which will include information sharing, training and development and keynote speakers.

## **14. Foster carer Forums**

- 14.1 November 2022 saw the launch of the first forum just outside Dorchester with a further forum taking place in the North and 3 additional forums booked for 2023. The feedback from foster carers has been very positive with an opportunity to listen to service development and updates, partake in service planning and speak directly to senior managers from across children's services. This has allowed the service to listen to foster carers and incorporate their views and ideas into ensuring that the needs of children in Dorset continue to be met.

## **15. Therapeutic Support**

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

15.2 There has been a focus upon developing a service that is proactive rather than reactive and in order to achieve this the following pieces of work have been undertaken.

- The development of a working group to improve and redesign therapeutic provision for all looked after children.
- Regular meetings between the fostering service and the clinical psychologists to continue to adapt provision to meet both the needs of children but also our foster carers.
- The commencement of working alongside Sarah Naish (National Association of Therapeutic Parents) to trial a new strengths based therapeutic assessment for mainstream foster carers and also to develop and pilot a strengths based therapeutic assessment for connected persons.

## **16. Child's Voice**

16.1 Listening to children's voices is key to improving fostering care practice. Throughout March 2023 the fostering service took part in the Coram Voice Bright Spots survey. The survey has three underlying principles:

- Focus on what children and young people say about their lives and what is important to them.
- Ensure the views and experiences of children influence service development and strategic thinking.
- Share good practice between local authorities by encouraging opportunities for learning and development.

16.2 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.

16.3 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.

16.4 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.

16.5 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.

- 16.6 The Christmas event at Carey Camp Wareham was one of many successful activities undertaken which saw wonderful participation from foster carers but most of all saw children and young people simply enjoying themselves.

## **17. Delegated authority**

- 17.1 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.

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

- 18.1 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
- Organizing and supporting social events for foster carers

- 18.2 The DFCA have continued to be instrumental in supporting the fostering service and they have worked in partnership to challenge, provide innovative ideas and work alongside the team.

This has included:

- Supporting with Forums
- Regular meetings with senior managers
- The August Fair
- Partaking in a training working group
- Being involved in a recruitment working group and supporting with activities.

## **19. Long Service Awards**

19.1 The foster care award ceremony on the 29<sup>th</sup> April 2022 was according to the foster carers who attended 'sensational and brilliant'. The keynote speaker was Yvette Stanley, Ofsted National Director – Social Care. The event saw the celebration of the outstanding love, care and kindness Dorset council foster carers provide to Dorset children and their longevity of service. This year will see the event repeated with over 30 carers being recognised including a new pioneering award and the Councillor Andrew Parry Award for outstanding services.

## **20. Fostering Service Compliance**

20.1 An improvement and strengthening of the management team has seen a marked rise in compliance particularly in respect of supervision visits which are currently at 95% timeliness and also ensuring that all households are reviewed in case supervision every 8 weeks. In addition to this dip sampling on a monthly basis and fostering reviewing audits undertaken on every review have meant that there is a greater scrutiny of the support being provided to our foster carers.

## **21. Complaints and Allegations**

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

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

## **22. Complaints**

22.1 Between 1 April 2022 and 3 March 2023 there were 13 complaints about the fostering service, 6 of which were upheld.

- 1 complaint was from a child which was not upheld with the matter being informally resolved.
- 8 complaints were made by foster carers, 4 of which were upheld.
- 1 complaint was made by an 'other professional', which was not upheld.
- 2 complaints were children and young people's parents, none of which were upheld.
- 1 complaint was made by 'others' which was not upheld.
- No complaints were received from children's social workers.

22.1 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 an authority which constantly wants to listen, learn and develop, our approach is to promote the best relationship with our foster carers, young people, and their families by learning from complaints.

## **23. Allegations**

23.1 During this reporting period there were 20 referrals to the Designated Officer (aka LADO) concerning foster carers during this reporting period. 13 of these allegations were by children and 7 were from other sources.

23.2 After deliberation with the LADO 19 had no further action and 1 case was referred to the fostering panel. 0 cases were referred to DBS, the child protection team or had section 47's undertaken. Whilst 95% of the referrals led to no further action because the criteria were not met for all those situations, additional training and development was identified to ensure that both the foster carers and supporting social workers learnt from the situation.

23.2 These 20 referrals were further broken down by the following allegations:

- Physical 6
- Sexual 1
- Neglect 6
- Emotional 7

## **24. Foster Carer Training**

24.1 Foster carers have access to a comprehensive learning and development offer through the Foster Carers Training Handbook. During the period 1 April 2022 – 31 March 2023 154 training courses were delivered to 317 foster carers. The majority of courses have continued on-line but there have been a number of face to face courses including joint training with the fostering service social workers.

24.2 To support the training and development of foster carers they 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.

24.3 This has been further enhanced by the development of the 'Fostering Together' portal and with foster carers now provided with their own Dorset Council e-mail address there is greater opportunity to access resources from Research in Practice.

24.4 2023 has seen the commencement of a review of training and development and leading this is a working group containing foster carers. The focus has been upon developing the service even further in respect of being therapeutically based and in conjunction with health partners a proactive and resilient service is being developed.

## **25. Budget**

25.1 The 2022/23 budget for Inhouse Fostering Fees & Allowances totalled £5,320,883 funding an average of 220 placements during the year.

25.2 There was an expenditure of £3,995,295 leading to an underspend of £1,325,558.

25.3 As previously stated, the cost of in-house placements compares incredibly positively with the costings for both residential and independent fostering agency placements. An in-house placement costs approximately £450 a week less than an independent fostering agency placement.

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

## **26. Mockingbird**

26.1 The standout achievement of the fostering service has been the launch of the Mockingbird Project. Mockingbird is a pioneering programme delivered by The Fostering Network in partnership with 62 fostering services across the UK. The programme nurtures the relationships between children, young people and foster families supporting them to build a resilient and caring community of six to ten satellite families called a constellation.

26.2 Relationships are central to Mockingbird. The hub home carer builds strong relationships with everyone in the constellation, empowering families to support each other and overcome problems before they escalate or lead to placement breakdown, which increases protective factors around the children.

26.3 Being able to support a diversity of placement types has met the needs of different care-experienced populations and embraces the ethos of the model with child-centred practice, maintaining relationships, emphasising an extended family network, and reducing bureaucracy. The model also offers supportive peer relationships for sons and daughters of foster carers.

26.4 The support and encouragement of Fostering Network has allowed the project to move with pace and the service was thrilled to launch the first constellation 'Pegasus' on the 12<sup>th</sup> November and the second 'Orion' on the 25<sup>th</sup> March. Excitingly the third constellation 'Draco' is due to launch on the 29<sup>th</sup> April with at least a further two to follow later in the year.

26.5 Pegasus is composed of one hub carer and 10 constellation carers with Orion containing 8 constellation and 1 hub. With the launch of a further 3 constellations, it will mean that over 25% of all Dorset Foster carers will be part of a constellation.

## **27. Service Developments for 2023 - 2024**

### **27.1 Mockingbird**

27.1.1 To continue building Mockingbird with a target of 10 constellations by the end of 2024.

### **27.2 Therapeutic Service**

27.2.1 The continued development of a therapeutic service through both the work already undertaken with health partners but also through evaluation and the potential embedding of an assessment process for both mainstream and connected persons currently being undertaken with Sarah Naish (Centre for Excellence in Child Trauma).

### **27.3 Strengthening Foster Carer Recruitment**

27.3.1 To build upon the significant advantages that the service has gained through the foster carer fee uplift, the implementation of the Mockingbird Project and therapeutic support.

27.3.2 The recruitment strategy to focus upon approving local Dorset foster carers with skills in the following areas:

- The Harbour
- Children with disability
- Older children

## **28. Financial Implications**

The impact upon Dorset Council financially is significant as having low numbers of in-house foster carers means that there is a reliance upon expensive independent fostering and independent residential provisions.

## **29. Natural Environment, Climate & Ecology Implications**

None identified.

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

Having a sufficiency of foster carers to provide caring and loving family homes to children and young people means that this is positive for their health and

wellbeing. It is also key to be able to place children within Dorset so that they remain local to their families and known environment.  
Therefore, having a good and well invested in fostering service means good health outcomes for children and good outcomes for the council budget. We must stress this – we are an essential and very valuable service.

**31. Other Implications**

None identified.

**32. 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

**33. Equalities Impact Assessment**

N/A

**34. Appendices**

None