

Committee Title: Corporate Parenting Board

28 May 2025

Report Title: Fostering Service Annual Report

For Review and Consultation

Cabinet Member and Portfolio:

Cllr C Sutton, Children's Services, Education & Skills

Local Councillor(s):

Executive Director:

P Dempsey, Executive Director of People - Children

Report Author: Lisa Wilms

Job Title: Acting Service Manager

Tel: 01305228292

Email: lisa.wilms@dorsetcouncil.gov.uk

Report Status: Public [Choose an item.](#)

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

Reason for Recommendation:

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

1. Executive summary

- 1.1 The Fostering Services Regulations 2011 require that the Fostering Service provide 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 Service in the Dorset Council area as required by statutory

guidance. The Annual Fostering Service Report must be presented to Corporate Parenting Board.

- 1.2 This report details the advancements that the Fostering Service has made over the 2024 / 2025 reporting year, particularly with the embedding of Mockingbird and constellation 6 preparing to launch in May 2025
- 1.3 The service have been successful in the recruit of permanent staff including the management team. The service has continued to grow with the launch of a dedicated kinship service from January 2025.
- 1.4 We continue to provide stability and continuity to our fostering families, and in turn our children and young people feel supported.
- 1.5 Dorset Council's participation in the Southwest regional fostering hub provides positive signs for 2024/2025 that enquiries and interest in Fostering in Dorset is rising.

2.0 Introduction

- 2.1 The service has had another busy year. The service has continued to develop a focus on the support provided to our foster carers to ensure that the needs of our children and young people are safely and consistently met.
- 2.2 The service has welcomed an exciting transformation programme, which has seen a growth in the services being offered which includes a dedicated Kinship service.
- 2.3 The service knows itself well, its strengths and areas for focus and has a clear plan to strengthen practice over the next 12 months.
- 2.4 The plan focusses on:
 - Supporting more children to live within their wider family network, if it is not possible for them to live safely with their parents.
 - Improving outcomes for children & young people through the recruitment and retention of local foster carers is a priority.
 - We are committed to ensuring that our foster carers are able to meet the diverse needs of our children and enable them to live close to the people and places that are important to them.
 - Supporting foster carer resilience through the delivery of high-quality support, supervision and training.
 - Delivering value for money, by reducing spend on commissioned external homes.

3.0 Recruitment, Assessment, Approval and De-registration.

- 3.1 As of 31 March 2025, we had 188 Dorset Council fostering households caring for 192 children.
- 120 were mainstream households (an increase from 119 in 2024)
 - 62 were Kinship foster households (compared to 67 in March 2024) and
 - 6 households approved as foster to adopt/early permanence.
- 3.2 This is a reduction overall from 197 fostering households in March 2024. However, there are more children living with Dorset carers than in previous reporting years, with an increase from 186 to 192.
- 3.3 In the period 1 April 2024 to 31 March 2025 there were 56 fostering enquiries, and 17 mainstream fostering households were recruited. There were a further 22 kinship foster carers recruited and approved and 4 foster to adopt placements.
- 3.4 This equated to 30.36% conversion rate from enquiry to mainstream approval which compares to an estimated conversion rate of 10% nationally. (Fostering Network).
- 3.5 As of 31 March 2025, there were a further 42 fostering assessments in progress.
- 11 Mainstream fostering assessments
 - 31 Kinship assessments
- 3.6 Nationally 14% of the mainstream foster carer workforce are retiring or leaving every year. In this reporting period 16 mainstream foster households (10.8%) and 13 Kinship carers were deregistered through resignation and a further 22 were no longer Kinship carers as the young person reached 18 and/or left care. This compares to 26 mainstream carers and 18 Kinship foster carers in 2023/24.
- 3.7 Reasons for deregistration include:
- Mainstream:** 16 resigned from fostering of these
- 4 retired
 - 2 moved out of area
 - 2 employment opportunity
 - 1 unable to continue fostering
 - 2 wider family commitments
 - 2 deregistered post allegations
 - 2 resigned post allegations
 - 1 SGO awarded

Kinship: 13 resigned and a further 28 ceased being a Kinship carer due to changes in the legal circumstances of the child or young person.

- 22 children moved either home or left care (turned 18)
- 5 SGO were awarded
- 1 adoption order was made.
- 5 resignations were initiated by service
- 7 resignations were initiated by carer
- 1 carer resigned post allegation

4.0 Recruitment and Marketing

- 4.1 Nationally there has been a 14% decrease in the number of approved or newly approved mainstream foster carers in the last 4 years between 2020 – 2024. The overall change in number of mainstream households (joiners minus leavers) recorded in 23/24 (-765) is smaller than the previous year (-1,045). While this is an improving picture, there remains a national challenge in the recruitment of mainstream carers. While our increase is small, we are bucking the national trend.
- 4.2 The marketing and recruitment and retention of carers is underpinned by the Dorset Council Recruitment and Retention Strategy 2023 - 2026.
- 4.3 The Fostering Service maintain a strong local presence, interacting in community spaces with various stands, activities and more widely through social media to share what a difference becoming a fostering family could make to a child or young person and their future outcomes. Through the collaboration of the partnership, Dorset has benefitted from additional advertising campaigns and recruitment days.
- 4.4 Funding through the DFE to design and launch a regional fostering hub has allowed Dorset Council to become part of the Southwest Regional Fostering Hub. This is a partnership of 15 Local Authorities working in collaboration to improve the recruitment and retention of foster carers.
- 4.5 Since September 2024, we have seen an incremental increase in the number of initial enquiries but are yet to see this translate into sustained improvement in the recruitment of new mainstream households.
- 4.6 Marketing

This year has seen the continued use of the new fostering image and collaboration with an external marketing agency working in tandem with the fostering service and colleagues from the communications team.

- 4.7 Alongside this is our standalone micro-site which is both dynamic and informative. The external marketing agency has also been used to support targeted Google advertising, which has provided focussed and informed campaigns.
- 4.8 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 wishing to transfer to Dorset Council.
- 4.9 The service 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.
- 4.10 Face to Face Recruitment Events
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. The team undertook 46 face to face events across Dorset between April 2024 and March 2025.
- 4.11 We work in partnership with Dorset Carers Voice to hear the voice of current carers and their views on areas we could develop to support our recruitment program.

5.0 Fostering Panel

- 5.1 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:
 - make a recommendation as to whether the applicant is suitable to be a foster carer and the terms of the approval.
 - 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.
 - recommend whether a person still is suitable to be a foster carer, and whether the terms of their approval (if any) remain appropriate.
 - give advice or make recommendations on other matters or cases referred to by the fostering service provider, including terminations of approval.

- 5.2 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
- 5.3 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.
- 5.4 There is a separate fostering panel chair annual report 2024-2025, provided to Corporate Parenting Board. This details the progress, performance and plans of Dorset's fostering panel.

6.0 Dorset Approved Fostering Households

- 6.1 As of the 31 March 2025, there were 435 children who were in Dorset's care. 69.9% of Dorset's children were being looked after by foster carers either through an Independent Fostering Agency (IFA) or with Dorset's own in-house fostering service. This compares to the National average 67% with good+ statistical neighbors at 67.3%. 50.11% of all of Dorset's children in care are living with mainstream or kinship carers (a total of 218 children).
- 6.2 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. This also includes temporary approved foster carers where the child may not yet be living with them.

Type of Fostering Household	Total Number of Fostering Households	Total Number of availabilities for children	Total Number of Children living with carers
Mainstream Including Parent and Child	120	231	126
Kinship Foster Carers	62	86	86
Foster for Adoption	6	6	6
Total number of Households	188	323	218

- 6.3 Fostering households may be approved for one, two or three children. This is usually due to bedroom space being available. In Dorset we allow siblings

(if appropriate) to share bedrooms. For reporting the number of availabilities for children, the maximum number is reported.

- 6.4 On the 31 March 2025 there were 105 fostering availabilities not in use (323-218) this shows improvement from 114 last year (2023/24).
- 6.5 The utilisation rate as of 31 March 2025 of foster children to mainstream fostering households is 1.04. This continues to be low and has been impacted in the year by the number of fostering households on hold and the number of unavailable placements.
- 6.6 There may be several reasons why we are not able to use or match full availability with our foster carers. This can 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 available because of the needs of children already living with them and the prioritisation of stability and longer-term security within the foster family.
- 6.7 It is important to differentiate between foster households that have vacancies and have no foster children placed (primary vacancies) and those that have vacant availability but do have other foster children in place (secondary vacancies). This means that whilst we need to identify the full capacity of our foster community, we are not able to use all availability due to a range of complex factors and known vulnerabilities. The priority is always enabling children to have stability and security with carers who can meet their individual needs.
- 6.8 Of the 105 vacancies, 38 are currently unavailable at foster carer request meaning there are 67 “active” vacancies within our foster families. Of the 67 vacancy reasons, over 60% are providing short breaks, 15% are unavailable due to being Hub home carers. 3% are unavailable due to Harbour specialist carer and matching. 15% are unavailable as approval states 2/3 if sibs and therefore carers do not have capacity or a physical room in their home.

7. Fostering Reviews

- 7.1 The foster carers annual review of approval addresses all relevant aspects of the National Minimum Fostering Standards and Regulations 2011.

- 7.2 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.
- 7.3 A Fostering Independent Reviewing Officer convenes and chairs an independent annual review meeting.
- 7.4 Over the last 12 months, the Fostering review process has continued to be developed with improvements made to the work step process, to support workers with completion. This has primarily been achieved through the strong partnership working with fostering reviewing and quality assurance service.
- 7.5 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.
- 7.6 Of significance is the improvement in quality assurance which has been built upon with 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.
- 7.7 As of 31 March 2025, there were 41 Reviews outstanding. Of these 15 were initial reviews. Initial reviews are prioritised for completion with weekly telephone support and consultation with the fostering social worker and enhanced visiting patterns for those where initial reviews are outstanding. In addition to this there is service manager oversight and weekly reporting to the head of service.
- 7.8 There have been challenges over the last 12 months in reducing the number of outstanding annual reviews. This has been due to long term sickness within both the fostering and Quality Assurance teams. There are 19 outstanding reviews for which the fostering team are responsible for progressing. We now have in place daily action plans and management oversight to progress and prevent further delays.

8. Foster Carer's Support

- 8.1 Ensuring that foster carers feel valued is vital to maintain a strong service and to ensure that foster carers are retained. Dorset Foster Carers Association shared with us that 99% (March 2024) felt supported by the fostering service. Both the Dorset Carer Voice and the service will continue

in partnership to ensure that every foster carer feels their needs and in turn the needs of their children are met.

8.2 Recognising and celebrating the work of our foster carers

The foster care award ceremony on the 10 May 2024 was according to the foster carers who attended 'inspirational and brilliant'. 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. 39 carers were recognised for long service awards, as well as including a pioneer award and the Childrens Director Award for outstanding services.

8.3 Support Groups

Support groups take place face to face, with the addition of a monthly online offer for those who cannot attend during the day. These groups provide a regular opportunity for carers to come together supported by fostering social workers to discuss a range of topics.

8.4 This year we have widened our support group offer to include a Special Guardianship and Kinship support group that run monthly.

8.5 We have started to explore how we can develop a foster carer birth children support group to ensure they have a space to ask questions, share their voice and be provided with support from peers and professionals.

8.6 Foster carer Forums

The foster carer forums are now embedded in the service. The attendance by foster carers, mainstream and kinship is equally attended. The feedback from foster carers has been 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.

8.7 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. We provide feedback to foster carers four times a year on the "you said, together we have" to maintain communication and confidence in progressing timely actions and developing the service to meet need.

8.8 Over time we have developed space for other professionals around the foster families to attend, listen, take on board feedback and provide

updates. The attendance of the child in care nursing team, leaving care service and QARO service manager has been particularly well received.

8.9 Therapeutic Support

The Fostering Team works in partnership with NHS Dorset to promote the emotional well-being of fostered children and young people.

8.10 A total of 22.5 hours of Clinical Psychology support continues to be provided through 2 part time clinical psychologists. They offer a range of support to foster carers and supervising social workers which includes:

- Foundations to attachment
- 1:1 support for foster carers
- Clinical supervision to supervising social workers
- Child and young people formulations- to help foster carers to understand the child's individual needs

8.11 There has been a focus upon developing a service that is proactive rather than reactive, to ensure we can provide a graduated response and 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 Dyadic Developmental Practice (DDP) training across the fostering service staff.
- Free pilot of 'Storm break'. Direct work with foster carers over 12 weeks based on mental health areas to be trialled.
- Commencement of foundations of attachment training for our foster carers.

9. Child's Voice

9.1 Listening to children's voices is key to improving fostering care practice. Throughout March 2025 the fostering service took part in the Coram Voice Bright Spots survey. The survey enables us to focus on what children and young people say about their lives in care and what is important to them.

- 9.2 The outcome of the Bright Spots children in care survey will ensure the views and experiences of children in care influence service development and strategic thinking.
- 9.3 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.
- 9.4 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.
- 9.5 Children in foster care also have access to a children's advocate. This service is provided independently through NYAS (National Youth Advocacy Service).
- 9.6 NYAS are 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.
- 9.7 The Youth Voice Team work closely with the 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.
- 9.8 The Network captures the voice of Dorset's children and young people and ensure their voice is heard in the right spaces whilst influencing positive change and outcomes.
- 9.10 Dorset Carers Voice
Dorset Carer Voice has been established over the last 12 months by Dorset foster carers to provide support, strengthen communication between the Fostering Service and our fostering families, to challenge and have a voice and to advocate for the needs of children and young people in their care.
- 9.11 As a group they meet regularly with the Service Manager and Head of Service within fostering so that we are confident and reassured that we understand the needs of our foster carers, so they have the right support to maintain the high quality of care we expect for our children and young people.
- 9.12 The service worked closely with foster carers to encourage the development of a Foster Carers Association. With the growth of Mockingbird and our hub

home carers supporting over 50 carers we are re-setting to ensure voices of all carers, including kinship carers are represented in our new Carer Voice Group. Quarterly meetings take place with the Executive Director and Head of Service Children in Care.

10. Fostering Service Compliance

- 10.1 On 31 March 2025 the service has 41 overdue reviews, this has reduced from 73 reported on 31 March 2024. Of the 41 overdue annual reviews, 19 (46%) are waiting for the fostering social worker to start the review process, 19 (46%) are waiting for the fostering reviewing officer to complete the review and 3 are due to attend panel.
- 10.2 The service has already implemented change to support improvement of review timeliness. This has included an update of the documentation being used and the process for completion. We will now need to focus on embedding the new review process and document to ensure all foster carers reviews are taking place within timescales and meeting fostering regulation standards.
- 10.3 Social worker training is another area of focus for the service. Individual performance plans will continue to support staff to complete all mandatory training and to ensure that we have suitably qualified workforce to meet the needs of our fostering families, children and young people.
- 10.4 Social work visits to foster carers are currently 70.97%, this is below our target of 80%. This has been impacted due to staff illness and recruitment. We now have a system in place to ensure that foster carers receive a visit and support from someone in the team that they know to increase and maintain our visiting patterns and support we provide our carers. The service manager provides a weekly report to the head of service so that we can identify where the areas of support need are and as a team can respond.
- 10.5 Foster carer diaries are completed on a weekly basis by carers to provide a narrative of a day in the life of a child living within their family. This helps provide a narrative of their journey, celebrations and identifies any worries or concerns. This is also a point of reflection between the foster carer and their supervising social workers. Through performance monitoring it is recognised these are not being signed off as read in a timely manner. Further service performance monitoring is in place along with individual staff support plans to ensure this area and the focus of our work is compliant and sustained moving forward.
- 10.6 Fostering households are reviewed in case supervision every 8 weeks. Supervision timeliness as of the 31 March 2025 was 82.2%, an increase from 64.8 % the previous month. This continues to be an area of senior

management oversight and focus, ensuring that the timeliness and quality of the recording of supervision is maintained and reflective discussions we know are taking place are evidenced.

11. Complaints and Allegations

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

11.2 All Allegations against foster carers are referred to the LADO. The Local Authority Designated Officer role is to ensure that concerns are handled fairly, promptly and confidentially, whilst protecting both the child and the individual.

11.3 Allegations

During this reporting period there were 14 referrals to the Local Authority Designated Officer (LADO) concerning foster carers. 5 of these allegations were raised by 5 children and 9 were from other sources.

Emotional harm	5
Physical harm	4
Transferable risk	3
Neglectful care	1
Sexual harm	1

11.4 Of the 14 referrals to LADO:

- 9 had no further action- the standards of care process were followed with additional training and development identified to ensure the foster carers were able to continue their fostering journey evidencing they were able to meet fostering standards.
- 3 were referred to the fostering panel- Of these 2 were deregistered and one with training recommended.
- 2 were referred to Disclosure and Baring Service with 2 deregistered.

11.5 There is a separate LADO annual report provided to the Corporate Parenting Board which provides further details of the role, activity and outcomes over the last 12 months.

11.6 Complaints

Between 1 April 2024 and 31 March 2025 there were 11 complaints about the fostering service, of which 5 were upheld. This is a reduction in overall complaints received by 1, and an increase in complaints upheld by 3 compared to the previous year

- 11.7 4 complaints were made by foster carers
3 complaints were made by 'others'.
2 complaints were direct from a child, the matter was informally investigated and resolved.
2 complaints were children and young people's parents.
- 11.8 The focus of the Fostering Service in response to complaints made is to build rapport and repair 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.
- 11.9 The annual report provided by the complaints service will provide further detail of learning and changes implemented.

12. Foster Carer Training

- 12.1 Foster carers have access to a comprehensive learning and development offer through the Foster Carers Training Handbook. We are able to offer a variety of online and in person training. We have worked collaboratively with the learning and development team to provide flexibility to timings and delivery methods to ensure training available to our carers is maximised.
- 12.2 Training is monitored in several ways, this included data collected by our learning and development team, as well as supervision records, training plan and through foster carer reviews. This ensures mandatory training attendance is tracked, reviewed and recorded regularly and then considered through team performance compliance by team managers and senior leadership oversight.
- 12.3 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.
- 12.4 The development of the 'Fostering Together' portal allows foster carers to have their own Dorset Council e-mail address increasing opportunities to access the tools and resources available through Research in Practice.
- 12.5 Our foster carers have been part of the working group undertaking a review of training. The focus has been to develop the service further in

respect of being therapeutically based to ensure we meet the training needs of our carers in conjunction with health partners to provide a proactive and resilient service.

- 12.6 This year has seen the rollout of Dorset Council laptops to foster carers, Kinship carers and supported lodgings carers, to enable consistency in accessing training platforms.
- 12.7 Mockingbird
The standout achievement of the fostering service continues to be the launch of Mockingbird and its progression to business as usual.
- 12.8 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 instability, which increases protective factors around the children, young people and their foster families.
- 12.9 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 the children of foster carers.
- 12.10 Across the 5 launched constellations we have 57 children being supported, with support from known carers that replicates that of an extended family.
- 12.11 Mockingbird constellations have not increased in numbers this year due to, 1 hub home resigning from their role due to personal circumstances changing, but remaining an approved foster carer, and 1 service led hub home carer not progressing to launch and their personal circumstances changed, they also have remained as an approved foster carer. The service ambition for the next 12 months is to launch a further 3 Mockingbird constellations, this remains aligned to the 5-year plan to launch 10 constellations.
- 12.12 We have started to explore how we can replicate the model to develop emergency fostering hubs and considering how we quickly target advertising and accessibility to the right audience.
- 12.13 Supported Lodgings Service
The Dorset Supported Lodgings Service ensures young people (16-25 years) who are care-experienced are provided with a stable home and receive high quality support and guidance to build on their life skills and prepare them for adulthood.

- 12.14 Supported Lodging arrangements offers a “step-down” from foster care for those young people who are not ready for living on their own. Carers step into a young person’s life at this important time to offer support, guidance, care and offer their home to the young person.
- 12.15 The supported lodgings service currently has 18 providers, with 2 new households under assessment. 22 of Dorset’s young people live in our supported lodgings provision. We are ambitious and committed to increase our supported lodging homes by 10 over the next 12 months.
- 12.16 Our supported lodging carers have support from the dedicated co-ordinator and access to training and support that reflects that available for foster carers. We continue to ensure that our supported lodgings carers have a sense of belonging within our fostering community and are provided with the same service and learning opportunities to promote their professional development.
- 12.17 It is recognised supported lodgings providers require oversight of attending panel. Whilst there is no requirement through regulations and standards, Dorset Council have aligned the service with Fostering best practice.
- 12.18 Dorset Council’s Supported Lodgings Service is now being regulated by Ofsted, to ensure there is explicit oversight to help make sure young people are safe, secure and living in appropriate accommodation which meets their needs.
- 12.09 Regulations are now applicable to all Local Authorities who are providing a Supported Lodgings Service in the hope of providing a consistent service that follows best practice and promotes positive outcomes into adulthood.

13. Budget

- 13.1 The 2024/25 budget for Inhouse Fostering Placements totalled £5,346,100. This funded an average of 210 placements per week. The 2024/25 expenditure totalled £4,928,341, funding an average of 191 placements per week, meaning that this area of spend was under budget. However, the number of IFA foster homes remains high and an area of budget pressure.
- 13.2 The overall average cost of an inhouse foster home was £496 per week, compared to the overall average of an independent Fostering Agency (IFA) at a cost of £1,202 per week.

- 13.3 It is anticipated that usage of in-house provision will increase going forward through the recruitment of foster carers through the Southwest hub, our priority for targeted recruitment and continued growth of Mockingbird constellations.
- 13.4 Through increasing our in-house sufficiency, we will reduce the reliance on IFA and higher cost homes for our children and young people.

14. Service Developments for 2025 - 2026

Our vision for the next 12 months is to:

- 14.1 Strengthen Foster Carer Recruitment.** To increase the number of foster carers who can provide safe and stable homes to our children and young people. We have identified the need to increase capacity for parent child foster homes, families for teenagers and capacity for offering emergency support and homes.
- 14.2 Develop and embed our Kinship care service.** Dorset now has a specialist Kinship Service. We need to embed the fostering single assessment to reduce duplication of work, information sharing and the need for the persons journey to be told multiple times throughout various assessments from viability stage through to approval or Orders being granted. Alongside assessments we will need to seek feedback from our Kinship carers to understand their lived experiences, identified need and develop support services to meet these needs. We will need to co-ordinate the Adoption Support & Guardianship Support Fund (ASGSF) to enable children and young people to access therapeutic support.
- 14.3 Increase the number of supported lodgings and staying put arrangements for our care leavers.** We have submitted our Ofsted registration and are anticipating approval within the next few months. Increasing staying put arrangements will aim to reduce the current high cost of staying put fees paid to IFAs. The oversight of the resource panel has helped to strengthen this area of our work but needs further attention from the fostering team.
- 14.4 Compliance.** Fostering reviews, visits, staff training, foster carer diary sheets completion and staff supervision are key areas of our work that need strengthening and continued improvement. This ensures that we are adhering to regulations, statutory requirements and our standards of practice and care. This in turn minimizes risks and supports both our

workforce and foster carers to continue to work with our most vulnerable children and young people.

15. 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.

16. Natural Environment, Climate & Ecology Implications

There are no environmental factors to consider other than foster and kinship carers living out of the area. Fostering social workers meet with foster carers face to face requiring at times long travel times.

We as a service try reducing our carbon footprint by using trains and allocating fostering families local to each other, reducing the number of separate journeys undertaken.

17. Well-being and Health Implications

Having a sufficiency of foster carers to provide well matched, stable, 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 provide a home for children and young people within Dorset to maintain relationships important to them and support links local to their families and known environment.

Providing an excellent fostering service with a sound ethos and model for nurturing relationships for our children and young people, that has the required investment, provides stability and the potential of positively impacting good health outcomes for children and young people. It is important to highlight – we are an essential and invaluable service within the children's directorate.

18. Other Implications

None Identified

19. Risk Assessment

HAVING CONSIDERED: the risks associated with this decision; the level of risk has been identified as:

Current Risk: Low

Residual Risk: Low

20. Equalities Impact Assessment

Not applicable

21. Appendices

None

22. Background Papers

None

23. Report Sign off

This report has been through the internal report clearance process and has been signed off by the Director for Legal and Democratic (Monitoring Officer), the Executive Director for Corporate Development (Section 151 Officer) and the appropriate Portfolio Holder(s)