

Corporate Parenting Board

28 May 2025

Fostering Panel Chair's 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: Lianne Chorley

Job Title: Fostering Panel Independent Chair

Tel: 01305 228382

Email: Lianne.Chorley@dorsetcouncil.gov.uk

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

Brief Summary:

This report provides detail of Fostering Panel activity over the last financial year. There have been noticeable changes in panel processes and where there is more to do, this is being progressed through feedback to the service. There is a working relationship between Dorset Fostering Panel and Fostering Service. This report highlights a number of areas of progress and developing strengths.

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. Introduction

1.1. This report covers the year from 1st April 2024 to 31st March 2025. This has been a quieter year than previous year, with 28 panels having been held, hearing a total of 103 cases. We have noted several areas of progress:

- Annual appraisals completed – generally positive feedback from members with regards to their experience of being members of Dorset Council Fostering Panel
- Panel members have maintained a trauma informed, strength-based approach with their questions.
- Compliance with regulations, policy, standards and best practice remains a notable strength
- A learning circle in February 2025 – this was beneficial to all involved in a challenging case.
- Panel Chair met with Ofsted in March 2025 as part of the ILACS- this was a positive experience.
- Increase in children's social workers attending panel, this is positive as they strengthen the voice of the child
- Panel remains committed to ensuring that the child remains central to all recommendations and advice to agency

2. Panel Meetings and membership

2.1. The Fostering Panel meets 2/3 times a month, on the first and third Wednesday and an additional booked Tuesday in known busy months retaining the availability to add or cancel panels if so, required in agreement with the Panel Chair.

28 panel meetings were held over the reporting period. In total 103 cases were presented including 8-week extensions, stage 2 approvals, connected person assessment and reviews.

This averaged 3.7 cases per panel.

2.2. There have been 3 panel members resigning during the reporting period, due to progression and personal circumstances. When ending this reporting period there were 13 Panel Members on the central list.

2.3. Of the 28 fostering panels held during the reporting period, 11 (39.29%) were chaired by Vice Chairs. While 2 of these occasions were planned development observations—aligned with best practice guidance of one

observation per Vice Chair per annum—and 2 were due to prior apologies from the Panel Chair.

- 2.4. 7 panels were chaired by Vice Chairs at the direction of the Head of Service (Oct 24-Feb25).
- 2.5. In 2025/26 we hope to see an expansion of the central list members which currently sits at 13 members including the appointed Panel Chair. Whilst there is an undoubtable wealth of experience and professional knowledge held by current panel members, we will be looking to strengthen social work members and a replacement Vice Chair.
- 2.6. Meetings are face-to-face and facilitate a hybrid approach to allow for both in-person and virtual (in exceptional circumstances with prior agreement) attendance to enable full participation. The service aim is for all panels to be held face to face. We need to develop clear guidance as to what is deemed as exceptional circumstance and requires a hybrid panel. This will provide consistency, equity and transparency and is a priority for the coming year.
- 2.7. The panel continues to be open to children and young people attending connected carer approvals and appropriate portions of mainstream reviews. The panel are keen to hear their voice and be involved in conversation about their lives. This is an area we need to develop further in collaboration with the fostering and childcare teams.
- 2.8. A new Panel Advisor was appointed to the Panel in February 2025. The panel members were disappointed to lose their predecessor, but confident that a positive and productive working relationship can be built moving forwards to ensure a professional transition.

3. Training, Development and Appraisals

- 3.1. Dorset has made a commitment to provide 2 training opportunities to panel a year, with the minimum requirement being 1.
- 3.2. There has been continued investment in panel members knowledge with regards to key updates to legislation, practice and performance. This has included:
 - June 2024: Panel Chair attended Reimagining Fostering and Kinship Care Workshop

- July 2024: Panel training facilitated by Panel Advisor – multiple topics including LADO's
- July 2024: Introduction of reflective sessions prior to panel meetings
- January 2025: Kinship Care event, facilitated by Panel Advisor
- February 2025: Learning Circle with Panel Chair, Senior Management and professionals involved in a previously sensitive and challenging case
- February 2025: Panel Chair and Vice Chair attended Reimagining Fostering and Kinship Care Workshop
- March 2025: ILACS short inspection: meeting with Fostering Panel Chair. Very positive verbal feedback given with regards to the Panel Chair, level of scrutiny and challenge, questions asked and minutes.

3.3. In addition to this panel members are encouraged to complete their mandatory training – this includes:

- TEAMS
- Safeguarding and Child Protection
- Equality and Diversity
- Health and Safety
- NEW Safeguarding Adults
- Prevent
- Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE)
- Data Protection Modules (to be completed on Day 1 in post)

3.4. During this reporting period we have started to have reflective sessions. This is protected time for panel to discuss and share key updates and learning in a timely manner. Panel Members enjoy these sessions and find them useful.

4. Panel Activity

	total by case type	positive recommendation	negative recommendation	Deferred
New Mainstream – approval	17	16	0	1
New Connected persons – approval	20	20	0	N/A

Reg 25 (8 week extension request)	15	14	0	1 x No recommendation
Reviews after allegation	8	6	2	N/A
1st year review - Mainstream	7	7	0	N/A
1st Review – connected person	4	3	0	1
3 year review - Mainstream	13	13	0	N/A
3 year review – connected person	3	3	0	
Change of status	10	9	0	1 x No recommendation
Resignations to panel	3	3	0	N/A
De-registration	3	3	0	N/A
Total to panel	103	97	2	2 x deferred 2 x no recommendation
ADM requested early return to panel	2 (1x Reg 25) (1 x CP approval)			

Fig.1.

Year	Total new Applications	Mainstream Carers	Connected Carers
2024/25	37	17	20
2023/24	46	15	31
2022/23	35	12	23

Fig.2.

- 4.1. In comparison to the 2023/24 we have seen a decrease in the number of new applications. Mainstream approvals increasing to 17 from 15 and the number of connected carers applications reducing from 31 to 20.
- 4.2. The number of resignations reduced from 33 to 6 in 2023/24 and reduced further to 3 In 2024/25 alongside 3 deregistration's. This appears to be a result of resignations not being reported to panel, this has been picked up by senior management moving forwards an increase is expected to be evidenced.
- 4.3. Performance in timely reviews is identified as an area where continued work and progress is required. Panel were advised that a new review policy had been agreed and implemented October 2024. The new review policy and procedure is in place to ensure timely reviews and a streamline of the review process. This does have an impact in terms of panel oversight and scrutiny as 3-year reviews, reviews after any allegation and changes of approval (post initial review) will no longer be presented to Panel.
- 4.4. It has been noted by Senior Management that panel should be receiving resignation reports, notifications of changes to terms and exemptions to usual fostering limits and any requests outside carers usual terms. I am hopeful this will happen within the next reporting period.

5. Strengthening opportunities identified in previous reports

- 5.1. Pre-panel preparation sheets are completed jointly in Teams and submitted to the Chair in advance of panel to ensure compliance with regulations and remit of Panel. This is shared on the morning of panel with those attending as a live draft working document. These have been a great success and have had the additional benefit of supporting with minutes. We are working to ensure this is now embedded in practice and becomes business as usual for panel members.

- 5.2. Independent QA feedback sheets continue to be completed independently and are shared appropriately via panel advisor with team managers, ADM (Agency Decision Maker) and fostering services managers. These highlight attendees' presentation as well as quality of reports. These identify strengths in practice and areas to strengthen if needed. We plan to review and update the feedback sheets to reflect recent policy changes.
- 5.3. Minutes are now reaching panel members within 48 hours. They are finalised by Panel Chair and with Agency Decision Maker (ADM) generally within 7 days of panel. This has a positive impact for all awaiting ADM decisions.

6. Themes and Observations

- 6.1. It has been noted that there continues to be delays in the presentation of reviews post allegation or standards of care, and this has been highlighted by the Panel Chair to the service. It is recognised that when this happens this has an impact on the foster carers particularly if a significant number of months have passed before getting to panel.
- 6.2. Panel remain determined that all standard of care concerns and allegations should be presented to panel without delay, to ensure that the focus remains on the child and the care they are receiving. This is being addressed, with the service managing this, alongside the need to prioritise current reviews.
- 6.3. There are still some delays in getting all the required paperwork to panel within the agreed timeframes. This has an impact on the timings of the agenda and compliance with policy and fostering standards (5 working days minimum to review all information). It is hoped that now there is a new policy and review paperwork this area of performance should start to strengthen.
- 6.4. It is noted that timely initial reviews are needed. The impact being unlawful placements if not presented to Panel in the first 12 months of approval. Panel are aware of the changes to the review process and the current senior management oversight and are confident that initial reviews will be conducted within timescales over the next 12 months.
- 6.5. During the reporting period 2024/2025 it was noted that there was a reduction in differing ADM decisions.
- 6.6. The Chair and Vice Chairs remain confident and sure in panel's recommendation making processes and their reasoning, but understand the final decision is with the ADM.

- 6.7. In the previous reporting period, the Panel Chair had requested a review of the approval of a connected carer who was subsequently de-registered following a substantiated LADO investigation and involvement in any learning circles that arise from this case. This took place in February 2025 & evidence openness for challenge and learning. There is a commitment for any learning to be fed back to Panel. This was beneficial to all in attendance. I would support the utilisation of learning circles moving forwards.
- 6.8. It had been noted in 2023/24 that there were regular occasions when addendums and additional reports are being added to or sent to panel members after the packs have been sent, this remains the case in this reporting period.
- 6.9. This has been raised with senior management as it has impacted on the reading time, pre panel preparation for panel members and the agenda timings. This needs improvement as it is not fully compliant with National Minimum Standard 14. There is enhanced oversight and support from panel advisor to track and ensure that all papers are completed and submitted to panel within the required timescales. This has had a positive impact on practice and performance in this area of the last quarter.
- 6.10. On the occasion where a deferral or return to panel has been advised, better tracking is required to ensure a timely return to panel.
- 6.11. Reports that are being presented are generally good to excellent.
- 6.12. During this reporting period it has been observed that there has been an increase in the need for regulation 25 extension requests. Panel will be conducting a quality assurance exercise to establish any themes at the request of the Head of Service. Evidencing collaborative working.
- 6.13. It has been noticed that there needs to be clearer policies and processes in place for, exemptions to terms/numbers over the usual fostering limit, extensions and changes of approval.
- 6.14. Panel continue to highlight the need for childcare teams to ensure that there is good communication between them and fostering. This ensures that connected carer applications and viability assessments remain within timescales for assessment (16 weeks from the placement of a child). In addition, this will ensure that the Independent QA feedback is utilised more efficiently to serve both teams in getting the feedback they need

- 6.15. Panel remain generally impressed with how well-prepared fostering social workers are to present to Panel, often answering and pre-empting any questions in their opening summary.
- 6.16. It has been noted that the service now encourages 0-18 approval for all fostering applications. Panel remain mindful of regulation 25, their function and responsibilities.

7. Developmental work & future plans

- 7.1. There is a commitment from the panel chair to work with senior managers, developing open and strength-based communication, and feeding back to panel members on this work regularly.
- 7.2. A renewed commitment from Head of Service to ensuring that Panel Chair can fulfil obligations in assisting in developing, promoting and monitoring policies and procedures and high standards of work in fostering services in the agency.
- 7.3. Panel chair appraisal for 2025 is outstanding. This is due to several reasons which include the period of absence of the panel chair as well as a change in Head of Service and management oversight. A date has now been set for this to take place in May 2025.
- 7.4. Panel Profile Sheets 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.
- 7.5. To progress work to establish a Children's Panel, this has not progressed in the reporting period, the Panel Chair remains committed to this project.
- 7.6. Ensure foster carers are welcomed and supported to attend panel and know what to expect. We will be working with our foster carers, social workers and panel to ensure we respond to feedback to make the process friendlier and more inclusive.
- 7.7. Recruitment of additional social work Panel members and a Vice Chair.
- 7.8. Continued conversations and learning regarding differing ADM decisions and other cases which have an impact on Dorsets Young People, looking at the impact for all involved potentially through Learning Circles.
- 7.9. 2 x training days for panel members

- 7.10. To support the embedding of the new Form K – Kinship Carer Assessments
- 7.11. Quality Assurance exercise with regards to Reg 25 Extensions
- 7.12. Continue to develop a relationship with the childcare teams to increase their participation in the Panel process and look at meaningful and effective ways of gathering young people's feedback and potentially attending panel.
- 7.13. Supported Lodgings Carers to join the panel process, this remains the same as 2023/2024 – we are yet to have any supported lodgings carers come to panel. We are aware that Ofsted registration is being progressed.
- 7.14. A commitment to ensuring the voice of the child is the golden thread in all paperwork and panel discussions.

8. User feedback

- 8.1 Business Support are currently emailing for feedback post panel. Written feedback has been received from carers, 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.
- 8.2 Attendees report that they really appreciate the conversations pre and post panel with the Panel Chair, finding the Chair to be helpful, calming, knowledgeable and empathetic.
- 8.3 Social workers are feeling positive about attending Panel. New social workers observing – they have found this opportunity rewarding and appreciated being able to observe the whole process from report to formulation of recommendations and rational.

9. Conclusion

- 9.1. Relationships are being nurtured and generally panel is a positive experience for all who attend. This is a strength-based panel which has high challenge, accompanied by advice and guidance to support, It provides robust and thorough independent overview and scrutiny.

- 9.2. There have been some challenges over the reporting period, I am confident that these can be resolved, with senior management generally keen to work with panel members and chair in the best interest of the children.
- 9.3. In conclusion, I would like to thank those that have consistently worked on 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:

There are no financial implications from this report, and all have been provided within budget of the service.

11. Natural Environment, Climate & Ecology Implications:

There are no environmental factors to consider.

12. Well-being and Health Implications

Not applicable

13. Other Implications

Not applicable

14. Risk Assessment

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

Current Risk: Low

Residual Risk: Low

15. Equalities Impact Assessment

There are no Equality implications for this report

16. Appendices

Not applicable

17. Background Papers

Not applicable

18. 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)