

Corporate Parenting Board

28 May 2026

Fostering Service- annual report

For Review and Consultation

Cabinet Member:

Cllr C Sutton, Children, Families & Education

Local Councillor(s):

Senior Leadership Team:

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Statutory Authority:

Report status: Public

1. Executive summary (maximum of 500 words)

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.

This report details the advancements that the Fostering Service has made over the 2025/2026 reporting year.

The service has been successful in the recruitment of permanent staff including the management team.

We continue to provide stability and continuity to our fostering families, and in turn our children and young people feel supported.

Dorset Council continues its participation in the Southwest regional fostering hub which has provided a single point of contact for all fostering enquiries. Towards the end of 2025 the number of enquiries and interest in Fostering for Dorset is starting to increase.

In February 2026, the government published *Renewing Fostering: Homes for 10,000 More Children*, setting out a major programme of fostering reform for England aimed at reversing the decline in foster carers and improving stability for children in care.

The reforms commit to creating 10,000 additional foster care places by the end of this Parliament, backed by new national investment and regional collaboration. Key measures include a national recruitment and awareness campaign, capital funding to help carers adapt or extend their homes (particularly for sibling groups) and expanded regional fostering recruitment hubs to provide a clearer, more consistent route into fostering.

Investment will expand peer-support models such as Mockingbird, strengthen training, and improve how allegations and standards of care concerns are handled to ensure fairness for carers and safety for children. The reforms also signal a simpler, more proportionate assessment and approval process, with clearer expectations on timescales and decision-making.

Importantly for corporate parents, the reforms place trusted, loving relationships at the centre of the system and align with wider children's social care reform to reduce reliance on costly residential homes and children living away from their families and communities.

2. Recommendation(s)

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

3. Reason for the recommendation(s)

- 3.1 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.

4. The report

4.1 Introduction

The service has had another busy year. We have 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.

The service knows itself well, its strengths and areas for focus.

Over the last 12 months we have been able to:

- Support more children to live within their wider family network, if it is not possible for them to live safely with their parents.
- Improve outcomes for children & young people through the recruitment and retention of local foster carers.
- Ensure that all our foster carers can meet the diverse needs of our children and young people, enabling them to live close to the people and places that are important to them.
- Support foster carer resilience through the delivery of high-quality support, visits, supervision, annual reviews and training.
- Strengthen our Kinship service for both assessment and post approval/order support.

Recruitment, Assessment, Approval, and De-registration.

As of 31 March 2026, we had 188 Dorset Council fostering households (Kinship and mainstream) caring for 206 children. This is an increase of 7 carers from March 2025 (183 carers caring for 187 children)

- 115 mainstream households (a decrease from 120 in 2025) caring for 133 children.
- 72 Kinship foster households (compared to 62 in April 2025) caring for 73 children.
- We currently only have 1 household approved as foster to adopt/early permanence. This is linked to reduced sufficiency of EP carers approved by Aspire regional adoption agency.

Despite the national decline in fostering households, Dorset has seen a small reduction of mainstream carers and a positive increase in connected carers which, overall has increased our fostering households. There are more children living with Dorset carers than in previous reporting years, with an increase from 187 to 206.

In the period 1 April 2025 to 31 March 2026 despite targeted local, regional, and national recruitment campaigns we have not seen a significant increase in initial inquiries across the year. The Southwest fostering hub now collates the information of all initial enquiries and tracks progress through approval. This

enables each of the 15 Local Authorities to compare and track progress across the region.

In this reporting period, the hub received 150 initial enquiries for Dorset. This is an increase from 139 in 2024/25. Of the 150 enquiries, only 45 were sent to the Local Authority to progress.

The expression of interest % rate for 2025/26 reporting period was 30%, compared to 37% in the previous year. 2025/26 reporting year saw 71% of enquiries close and progress to 12 approvals, compared to 54% closing in the previous year but a lower conversion to approvals (5).

Since the launch of the southwest fostering hub in May 2024, Dorset has received 289 initial enquiries. 96 were sent through to the Local Authority; 63% were closed in the period, with an overall expression of interest percentage of 33%. The hub has supported 17 approvals from May 2024 to March 2026.

As of 31 March 2026, there were a further 42 assessments in progress across the whole fostering service. These are broken down into

- 11 Mainstream fostering assessments
- 18 Kinship assessments for fostering
- 13 Special Guardianship (SGO) Assessments

The Kinship service also undertake Regulation 24 (Reg 24) viability assessments. These are short, initial assessment carried out by a local authority to determine whether a connected person can safely care for a child as an emergency or temporary arrangement. It comes from Regulation 24 of the Care Planning, Placement and Case Review (England) Regulations 2010. Reg 24 allows a local authority to agree for a child to be cared for immediately with a connected person who is not yet approved as a foster carer. They are usually completed urgently- within 24-72 hours.

The fostering service has completed a total of 194 viability assessments in this reporting period, averaging around 16 a month/3 a week.

Nationally 14% of the mainstream foster carer workforce are retiring or leaving fostering every year. Reasons include planned retirements, voluntary resignations, de-registrations following allegations or a breakdown in relationships with the fostering service and health/age related exits.

In this reporting period, 17 mainstream foster households, 13 Kinship carers and 6 Early Permanence (Foster to adopt) carers were deregistered. All foster carers can meet with the independent foster reviewing officer (FRO) as part of the ending process. This allows for the foster carers to have the opportunity to share their thoughts and views and for the fostering service and Agency Decision Maker (ADM) to understand the reasons for carers leaving and help to inform the recruitment and retainment strategies.

Reasons for deregistration include:

Mainstream: 17

- 15 resigned (retirement, change of career, personal circumstances which impacted capacity within the home to continue fostering, & changes to personal health)
- 2 deregistered (due to fostering minimum standards not being met)

Kinship: 31

- 10 due to legal orders being obtained (Special Guardianship, adoption and child arrangement orders)
- 15 as the child moved on- reaching 18, returning to parents or alternative care arrangements were made.
- 1 was not approved as a connected carer by panel and ADM
- 3 moved from temporary registered approved as matches were not progressed due to care plans for the children changing.
- 2 were initiated by fostering- due to minimum standards not being met.

Recruitment and Marketing

Dorset Council is part of the Southwest Regional Fostering Hub which was established in May 2024 and is hosted by Wiltshire Council. This is a partnership of 15 Local Authorities working in collaboration to improve the recruitment and retention of foster carers.

Published in February 2026 "Renewing fostering- Homes for 10,000 more children is the first standalone national fostering reform plan, building on Stable Homes, Built on Love but going significantly further on fostering specifically. There will be a focus for regional collaboration with shared recruitment, assessment and support models.

The marketing of recruitment and retention for foster carers is currently underpinned by the Dorset Council Recruitment and Retention Strategy 2023 - 2026. This will be reviewed and revised as the regional fostering hubs develop.

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.

The recruitment and marketing approach in Dorset is child-centred, targeted and values-led, aligning closely with national fostering reform priorities. Activity focuses not only on increasing the number of fostering households, but on attracting carers with the skills, capacity and resilience to meet the increasingly complex needs of children and young people coming into care.

Recruitment efforts are increasingly targeted rather than generic, focusing on areas of greatest need within the fostering service, including foster carers able to care for older children and teenagers, Households able to accommodate siblings, Carers with the capacity to support children with additional or complex needs and Local homes to reduce reliance on out-of-area provision.

Marketing activity uses a mix of digital platforms, local media, community engagement and word of mouth advocacy from existing foster carers. There is a strong emphasis on realistic and transparent messaging, ensuring prospective carers have a clear understanding of the role, responsibilities and challenges of fostering, alongside the support available.

We have run successful fostering recruitment campaigns over the last 12 months, regionally and locally. These were called “the run” and “stockings for Christmas”.

“The Run” was a fostering recruitment campaign led by the Southwest fostering hub, designed to illustrate the instability and uncertainty experienced by children who do not have a consistent foster home and to highlight the importance of having enough local foster carers to meet children’s needs.

The campaign used the concept of “*being on the run*”—moving from place to place—not in a literal sense, but as a metaphor for repeated moves and the emotional impact this can have on children and young people in care. Through this framing, the campaign helped the public understand that frequent moves are not just inconvenient, but can affect a child’s sense of safety, belonging, and trust.

“Stocking for Christmas” was a seasonal fostering recruitment campaign designed to highlight the shortage of foster carers and the impact this has on children and young people in Dorset during the festive period.

The campaign used the powerful image of an empty Christmas stocking to symbolise children who do not have the security, warmth, and consistency of a family home. By drawing on familiar seasonal traditions, it aimed to create an emotional but respectful connection with the public and prompt reflection on how fostering can transform a child’s experience of Christmas and beyond.

The service continues to be 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.

The service can 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 several years and it is vital that their interest is maintained.

Face-to-face recruitment has continued over the past 12 months with attendance at events across Dorset. This has ranged from shows and events to family-friendly venues.

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 and retention priorities.

Fostering Panel

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.

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.

There is a separate fostering panel chair annual report 2025-2026, provided to Corporate Parenting Board which details the progress, performance and plans of Dorset's fostering panel.

Dorset Approved Fostering Households

As of the 31 March 2026, there were 475 (an increase of 40 from March 25) children who were in Dorset's care.

70.19% of Dorset's children were being cared for 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 of 67%.

45.05% of all of Dorset's children in care, are living with mainstream or kinship carers (a total of 206/207 if including foster to adopt).

The table below shows the number of approved households by type and the number of children living in each type of fostering arrangement. April 2025

figures are in brackets for comparison. Despite fewer households we are caring for more children.

Type of Fostering Household	Total Number of Fostering Households	Total Number of Children living with carers
Mainstream	114 (117)	133 (126)
Kinship Foster Carers	72 (61)	73 (63)
Foster for Adoption	1 (5)	1 (5)
Total Households	187 (183)	207 (194)

The last 12 months show a stable but increasingly constrained fostering service. We have an increasing demand for mainstream fostering homes, placing pressure on matching, outcomes, and costs.

Despite some stability in overall numbers of foster carers, there has been an increase of children coming into care (40) and this does mask the underlying pressures of increased demand and sufficiency within the fostering service.

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, acknowledging that not all are/can be utilised.

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 carers 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. We also need to allow foster carers to have periods where they can take a break, have the opportunity for some time to reflect and consider future fostering matches as their own needs and those of their family may change over time. It is common for fostering households not to be used to the maximum available because of the needs of children already living with them and we prioritise the stability and longer-term security within the foster family.

It is important to differentiate between foster households that have vacancies and have no foster children (primary vacancies) and those that have vacant availability but have foster children (secondary vacancies).

This means that whilst we need to identify the full capacity of our foster community, we cannot 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.

On the 31 March 2026 there were 38 foster carer primary vacancies. Of these, 37 are not available due to planned short breaks only, being home hub carer for mockingbird or being unable to place alongside the other children in the family home. Across the fostering service there is 1 fostering family who are new to fostering and approved for 1 child (2 if siblings) with a preference for a younger child (under 3 years).

Fostering supervising social workers regularly contact those foster carers who can offer short breaks to ensure that foster carer data is correct and that short breaks can be considered for children who are needing to move in an unplanned way. This recognises that there is limited capacity within the fostering service to meet the growing needs of children coming into care.

The foster utilisation rate measures the proportion of available foster carer capacity that is occupied by children at a given time. It answers the question: *"Of the foster care places we have approved, how many are we actually using?"*. The utilisation rate has been closely monitored and tracked throughout this reporting year. We maintained a steady rate of around 1.10 until March 2026, when this dropped to 1.05. Despite the reduction overall, this reporting period we have increased our utilisation from 0.99 in March 2025.

Stability in households is a strength, but it does not equal sufficiency. Capacity, not carer numbers alone, is now the critical pressure point with the service relying on a smaller pool of available foster homes.

Fostering Reviews

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.

A Fostering Independent Reviewing Officer (FRO) convenes and chairs an independent annual review meeting.

Over the last 12 months, we have continued to support workers with timely completion of fostering reviews. This has primarily been achieved through the strong partnership working with fostering reviewing and quality assurance service.

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.

Of significance is the improvement in quality assurance which has been built upon with every review now being audited by the fostering reviewing officers

(FRO). This has in turn led to an overall improvement in fostering household compliance and data and the quality of review reports.

As of 31 March 2026, there were 13 reviews showing as outstanding, a reduction of 28 compared to last year.

Foster Carer's Support

Ensuring that foster carers feel valued is vital to maintain a strong service and to ensure that foster carers are retained. 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.

We continue to hold an annual award ceremony which is informal to acknowledge and celebrate the outstanding love, care and kindness Dorset council foster carers provide to Dorset children and their longevity of service.

Support groups take place face to face and virtually to ensure as many foster and kinship carers as possible can access them. The groups provide a regular opportunity for carers to come together supported by fostering social workers to discuss a range of topics.

Over the last 12 months we have supported the establishment of Dorset Carer Voice (DCV). A network for foster carers, run by foster carers. This is an opportunity for all carers to have the opportunity to share their thoughts, feelings and suggestions as a collective group with the fostering service to help inform and develop service delivery. The chair of DCV meets with the Head of Service and Service Manager every 3 months to agree priorities, feedback and track *"you said and together we have"*.

Following feedback from foster carers the fostering service now shares a regular newsletter which is an effective way of sharing news and information with our fostering community. We include progress on priorities, updates following their feedback and information on next steps and actions within the service.

We have established 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.

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.

In addition to the foster care forums we have also established a Kinship care reference group which has enabled us to develop and strengthen the service and support offer and continue to provide feedback and inform future service developments.

The establishment of the forums, groups & feedback channels have 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.

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

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

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.
- Commencement of foundations of attachment training for our foster carers.
- Family support workers providing therapeutic life story work.

Child's Voice

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.

The outcome of the Bright Spots children in care survey ensures the views and experiences of children in care influence service development and strategic thinking. 92% of children and young people reported that they 'always' felt safe in the home they live in now, including all (100%) of the youngest children (4-7yrs). This is higher than for children (82%) in the general population.

All (100%) of the youngest children (4-7yrs) felt settled where they lived. 80% of young people (11-17yrs) 'always' felt settled, an increase from (71%) the last survey in 2022-23. All children (4-11yrs) and all but one of the older young people (11-17yrs) trusted the adults they lived with*.

All of the youngest children (4-7yrs) and all but one of the children aged 8-11yrs felt the adults they lived with noticed how they were feeling.

Three-quarters (76%) of young people (11-17yrs) talked regularly with the adults they lived with about things that mattered to them, a notable increase from the last survey in 2022-23 (64%), and a greater proportion than young people (66%) in the general population.

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.

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.

Children in foster care also have access to a children's advocate. This service is provided independently through the NYAS (National Youth Advocacy Service).

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 can attend events together, creating an opportunity to engage with foster families at the same time.

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.

Fostering Service Compliance

As of 31 March 2026, there were 13 reviews showing as outstanding, a reduction of 28 compared to last year. Of these only 1 was waiting for fostering social worker to action (to start the review process) and was not required as it referred to a closure record, 6 awaiting fostering reviewing officer action (the review needs to take place and/or be written up) and 6 awaiting panel (for recommendation and ADM after first year of fostering and after an allegation or significant incident).

Fostering reviews continue to be monitored by the service manager in both fostering and quality assurance.

Social work visits to foster carers are currently 78%; this is below our target of 85% but has been increasing steadily over the last 6 months and a significant improvement from 69% last year. Visits to our foster families have been impacted by 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 to increase and maintain our visiting patterns and the 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.

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. 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 support plans to ensure this area and focus of our work is compliant moving forward.

Fostering households are reviewed in case supervision every 8 weeks. Supervision timeliness as of the 31 March 2026 was 90.06%, an 8% increase from performance in March 2025. 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.

Complaints and Allegations

The Fostering Service always takes complaints and allegations against foster carers very seriously and allegations are thoroughly investigated.

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

During this reporting period there were 39 initial enquiries to the Local Authority Designated Officer (LADO) concerning individual foster carers (26 households). For this report all data will be reported as households.

Of the 26 households, 15 resulted in contact/enquiry only. With 11 (42%) referrals going through the LADO management of allegations process.

Emotional harm	6
Physical harm	9
Transferable risk	1
Neglectful care	0
Sexual harm	0
Total	16

The total number of categories is higher than the number of referrals as some allegations covered more than 1 category.

Of the 11 referrals made to LADO:

- 1 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.
- 2 households received substantiated outcomes and were referred to a fostering panel for independent oversight.
- 6 households received unsubstantiated outcomes and followed the standards of care process
- 1 household received unfounded outcome
- 1 household has management of allegations process on going

There is a separate LADO annual report which will be presented to the next formal Corporate Parenting Board. This will provide further details of the role, activity and outcomes over the last 12 months.

Between 1 April 2025 and 31 March 2026 there were 6 complaints about the fostering service. This is a reduction in overall complaints received during this reporting period by 5. All complaints received were made by foster carers.

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. Our approach is to ensure learning from complaints becomes embedded and strengthens practice. Oversight of the learning is monitored through Quality Assurance and Head of Service.

The annual report provided by the complaints service will provide further detail of learning and changes implemented.

Foster Carer Training, Mockingbird and Supported Lodgings

Foster carers have access to a comprehensive learning and development offer through the Foster Carers Training Handbook. We offer a variety of online and in person training. We continue to work collaboratively with the learning and development team ensure all training available to our carers is maximised.

All our foster carers (mainstream and kinship) have a subscription to the Fostering Network. This is the UK's leading charity for fostering, dedicated to improving the lives of children and young people in foster care. It supports foster carers, fostering services, and the children they care for by setting standards, influencing policy, and providing practical advice and training.

During the last 12 months, as a direct response to feedback from care experienced children & young people we have developed the journey to fostering training. We now include training with a focus on identity, supporting children who are impacted by bullying and helping foster carers to understand and support a child having friends at school. All new foster carers attend the "in my shoes" training. This is being rolled out to all foster carers with the aim of being part of mandatory training in 2026.

A further development over the last 12 months has been delivering the "journey to foster" training that is accredited and has a whole unit on identity. This is facilitated by the Fostering Network.

Training is monitored in several ways, this included data collected by our learning and development team, as well as supervision records, training plans and through foster carer reviews. This enables us to track mandatory training, support carers where this is delayed and as a service monitor compliance through our dashboards by team managers (weekly) and senior leadership monthly.

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.

The standout achievement of the fostering service continues to be our Mockingbird model and progression to business as usual. The model is an evidence-based fostering approach that creates constellations of local foster families, centred around a hub home led by an experienced foster carer. These constellations provide peer support, shared care, and a sense of extended family for children and carers. It is designed to replicate the natural support networks that families typically rely on, reducing isolation and pressure on individual foster households.

With our fostering household numbers stable but availability reducing, the Mockingbird model is increasingly important as a retention, stability, and sufficiency strategy, not just a support offer.

For children and young people, Mockingbird offers greater stability through resilient support networks, improved emotional wellbeing from feeling part of a wider "family", opportunities for social connection, peer relationships, and normal childhood experiences, leading to fewer moves and crisis-driven decisions.

Across the 5 constellations we have 57 children being supported, with support from known carers that replicates that of an extended family.

Mockingbird constellations have not increased in numbers this year due to, the absence of a Mockingbird co-ordinator and fostering social worker and challenges in recruiting a suitable home hub 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.

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.

Supported Lodging arrangements offer a “step-down” from foster or residential 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.

The supported lodgings service currently has 12 providers, with 2 new households under assessment. Although a reduction from last year it is positive that we have the right people to support and meet the diverse needs of our young people. We continue to be ambitious and committed to increase our supported lodging homes over the next 12 months.

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.

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.

Budget

The 2025/26 budget for Inhouse Fostering Placements totalled £5,485,500, funding a maximum of 210 placements per week by the end of the financial year. The 2025/26 expenditure totalled £5,580,214, funding an average of 205 placements per week. The budget has overspent by £94,714 due to placements being above the budgeted level during the year. The number of IFA foster homes remains high and an area of budget pressure.

The overall average cost of an inhouse foster placement was £522 per week, compared to the overall average of an independent Fostering Agency (IFA) at a cost of £1,235 per week.

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.

Through increasing our in-house sufficiency, we will reduce the reliance on IFA and higher cost homes for our children and young people.

The budget for 2026/27 has increased to reflect the increases for the next financial year.

Service Developments for 2026 - 2027

Our vision for the next 12 months is to:

Strengthen Foster Carer Recruitment & retention. 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 to offer emergency homes. We also need to ensure we support our current foster carers by reducing the number of de-registrations/resignations. We will need to be part of the development of the regional fostering hub in alignment with government strategy and update our own sufficiency, recruitment and retention strategies towards the end of 2026.

Continue to strengthen our Kinship service. By combining early identification of kinship carers, family group conferences, practical support, clear financial support and allowances will help to develop meaningful partnership with families helping carers understand their options and receive timely advice. Listening to carers' experiences and involving them in service design ensures support is relevant and respectful. Strong partnerships with voluntary sector organisations can further enhance advocacy, support, and long-term outcomes for children growing up safely within their families. We want more families to offer permanence through special guardianship as opposed to fostering, knowing this provides greater stability and security for our children and young people. We have invested in additional capacity for the kinship service and hope to recruit additional social and family workers. Our family workers will be supported to complete the therapeutic life story diploma which will not only support our children, young people and their carers but generate an income through the Adoption & Special Guardianship Support Fund (ASGSF).

Increase the number of supported lodgings arrangements. Increasing the number of supported lodgings arrangements will enable more young people to move from residential care, often outside of Dorset, to a family where support is adapted to meet their changing needs towards independence. We will have target recruitment and ensure careful matching with building relationships as part of the movement towards independence for our children who are age 16+.

Compliance. Fostering reviews, foster carer training, visits and foster carer diary sheets completion 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 minimises risks and supports both our workforce and foster carers to continue to work with our most vulnerable children and young people.

5. Alternative options considered

5.1 N/A

6. Legal considerations

6.1 Statutory Framework- Fostering Service Regulations 2011

National Minimum Standards (NMS) for Fostering 2011

Care Planning, Placement and Case Review (England) Regulations 2010

Children Act, 1989, 2002

Safeguarding Duties- Working Together 2023

7. Financial implications

7.1

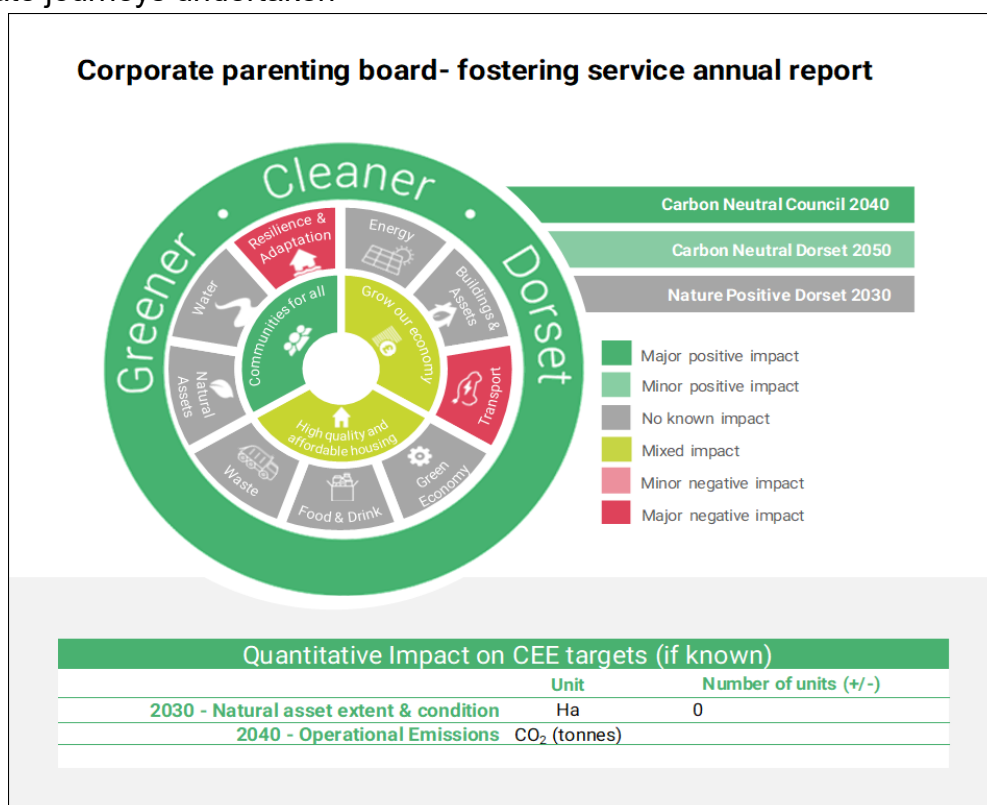
8. Natural environment, climate & ecology implications

8.1 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



9. Well-being and health implications

- 9.1 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.

10. Other implications

- 10.1 N/A

11. Risk implications

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

Current Risk: Low

Residual Risk: Low

12. Equalities

- 12.1 This EIA considers the equality implications of reduced availability and capacity, rather than policy change, recognising that service pressures can have unintended equality impacts.

There is no evidence of direct discrimination. However, the reduction in placement availability presents a risk of indirect and disproportionate impact on Disabled children, Children from minority ethnic backgrounds, Teenagers and children with complex needs & Children with protected identity characteristics.

The fostering service remains stable in household numbers, but reduced availability creates equality risks, particularly for children with additional needs or protected characteristics.

13. Appendices

- 13.1 None

14. Background papers

- 14.1 None

15. Report sign-off

- 15.1 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)