

Corporate Parenting Board

28 May 2026

Fostering Panel Chair Report

For Review and Consultation

Cabinet Member:

Cllr C Sutton, Children, Families & Education

Local Councillor(s):

Senior Leadership Team:

P Dempsey - Executive Director, Children's Services

Report author and job title: Deborah Forde, Independent Panel Chair

Email: Deborah.forde@dorsetcouncil.gov.uk

Statutory Authority:

Report status: Public Choose an item.

1. Executive summary (maximum of 500 words)

- 1.1 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 several areas of progress and developing strengths.

2. Recommendation(s)

- 2.1 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.

3. Reason for the recommendation(s)

- 3.1 To be assured that the report had identified the strengths and areas for development and that steps are being taken for further improvement.

4. The report

4.1 This report covers the year from 1st April 2025 to 31st March 2026. During this reporting period, there have been significant organisational changes, including changes in Chair / Vice Chair and the onboarding of a new panel Advisor. Despite the challenges, the panel maintained a strong performance. Hearing a total of 108 cases. We have noted several areas of progress:

- Annual appraisals were completed in February 2026 – overall there was positive feedback from members with regards to their experience of being members of Dorset Council Fostering Panel
- Preparation for panel continues to be thorough, using the pre panel preparation forms which are collated by the panel chair and discussed at 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
- Panel Members have also begun nominating exceptional Foster Carers for the “Star of the Week” recognition, including written feedback explaining their nomination. These are shared with the Executive Director. In this reporting year, three fostering household have received this acknowledgement for their outstanding support of Dorset’s children.
- There has been greater involvement from the children’s social workers attending panel, this is positive as they strengthen the voice of the child and when this is has not been possible, team leaders have stepped in to provide their input.
- Panel Members were invited to the Foster Carers Award Ceremony in September 2025, the chair and one panel member attended and it was evident the foster carers in attendance thoroughly enjoyed the event and appreciated the recognition given.
- Panel remains committed to ensuring that the child remains central to all recommendations and advice to agency decision maker.
- A significant development during this reporting year has been the Government’s proposals to reform fostering services ‘Renewing Fostering: homes for 10000 more children’ (February 2026)

Panel Meetings and membership

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.

30 panel meetings were held over the reporting period. In total 108 cases were presented including 8-week extensions, stage 2 approvals, connected person assessment and reviews.

This averaged 3.6 cases per panel.

There has been 1 panel member resigning during the reporting period, due to personal circumstances. The Panel Chair also stepped down from their role in September 2025, and the Vice Chair agreed to chair the panels until a new Panel Chair was appointed. When ending this reporting period there were 10 Panel Members on the central list.

Interviews for Panel Chair took place in February 2026 and the role was successfully appointed to. Interviews for Vice Chair roles took place in March 2026 and the two roles were successfully appointed to. Panel member interviews also took place in March 2026 and once the employment checks and induction process have been completed a further 4 panel members will be added to the Central List, including 1 independent social worker, adding valuable professional diversity to the panel. Notably, 3 of the 4 new appointments are male, which contributes to a more gender-balanced panel and supports Dorset's commitment to inclusivity and diversity

The Panel Administrator and Business Support Team continue to provide an efficient and high-quality service. The structure and guidance in place help the panel function smoothly.

In 2026/27, we are hoping to resume the quarterly meetings with Panel Advisor, Panel Chair and Vice Chairs to look at Panel's areas of strengths and areas for development.

Panel 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.

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.

The Panel Advisor appointed to the Panel in February 2025 left the service in September 2025. The role was temporarily covered by the Service Leader and Team Leaders until a new Panel Advisor was appointed in December 2025. The current Panel Advisor has worked collaboratively with panel and the fostering service to ensure the documents presented to panel meet the regulatory requirements.

Since December 2025, they have also taken the lead in preparing the reflective sessions'

Training, Development and Appraisals

Dorset has made a commitment to provide 2 training opportunities to panel a year, with the minimum requirement being 1.

There has been continued investment in panel members knowledge with regards to key updates to legislation, practice and performance. This has included:

- June 2025: 'In My Shoes – What's it like to be care experienced' training
- August 2025: IRM Information session facilitated by IRM Service Manager

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

- TEAMS
- Safeguarding and Child Protection
- Equality and Diversity and Inclusion Pathway
- Gender Identity
- Safeguarding Adults
- Prevent
- Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE)
- Data Protection Modules (to be completed on Day 1 in post)

Panel members also can access the Coram BAAF briefings and training events.

During this reporting year, the reflective sessions have continued. 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. Themes have included:

- Philomena Protocol
- Child Safeguarding Practice Reviews
- LADO Investigations and Panel's responsibilities
- The Mockingbird Family Model

- The Valuing Care Panel
- Foster Carer's Payments
- Graduated response to Kinship Carers in rural areas
- NMS for fostering: Implications for Kinship Carers
- Government's fostering reforms: Proposals and Call for Evidence
- Learning from Feedback received from foster carers / social workers attending panel meetings

Panel Activity

	Total by case type	Positive recommendation	Negative recommendation	Deferred	ADM Agreed	ADM Disagreed
New Mainstream – approval	15	14	1	0	14	1
New Kinship persons – approval	24	22	1	1	23	1
Reg 25 (8- week extension request)	23	23	0	0	23	0
Reviews after allegation	3	1	1	1	2	1
1st year review - Mainstream	18	15	1	2	17	1
1st Review – Kinship	12	10	2	0	11	1
Change of status	10	8	2	0	9	1
Resignations to panel	1	1	0	0	1	0

De-registration	2	2	0	0	2	0
Total to panel	108	96	8	4	102	6

Fig.1.

Year	Total new Applications	Mainstream Carers	Connected Carers
2025/26	36	14	22
2024/25	37	17	20
2023/24	46	15	31
2022/23	35	12	23

Fig.2.

In comparison to 2024/25 we have seen a decrease in the number of new applications. Mainstream approvals reduced from 17 to 14 and the number of connected carers applications increasing from 20 to 22.

The number of resignations reduced from 33 to 6 in 2023/24, from 6 to 3 in 2024/2025 and have reduced further to 1 during this reporting period, however we need to ensure that all resignations are being presented and acknowledged at panel. There have also been 2 deregistration's during this reporting year, in comparison to 3 in 2024/25.

There have been 6 differing decisions made by the ADM, and panel have asked for clear rationale for the differing decisions to be shared with panel and this has been happening as and when necessary.

Following the introduction of the revised review policy and procedure in October 2024, panel have been informed that there is no longer a back log of cases waiting to be presented to panel. The new review policy and procedure was designed to streamline the review process, and this appears to have successfully reduced the back log. Although there are no longer 3 yearly reviews being presented to panel, panel have been assured that if there is a need for independent scrutiny identified at a review meeting, this will then be presented to panel for oversight.

Strengthening opportunities identified in previous reports

Pre-panel preparation sheets continue to be 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.

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. The feedback identifies strengths in practice and areas to strengthen if needed. The feedback sheets were reviewed and updated in January 2026.

Minutes are 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.

Themes and Observations

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. Standard 22 (National Minimum Standards focuses on the handling of allegations however as part of the government's fostering reforms their proposal is to 'set out a simpler rulebook for fostering that puts trusted relationships first. This will include new sections on the handling of allegations and standards of care concerns.' (Foster Care Reform: Proposed changes assessment and handling of allegations of abuse – February 2026)

Within the Government's Fostering reforms there is also a proposal to remove the requirement for fostering panels to make recommendations about approval of foster carers and for the one-year annual review process. It also proposes to remove the requirement for panels to oversee the conduct of assessments carried out by the fostering service. There was a call for evidence which panel members responded to. On behalf of its members, Coram BAAF in collaboration with The Fostering Network, NSPCC, Coram Voice, Barnardo's, Foster Talk and NYAS also responded to the call for evidence (please refer to letter dated 26th March 2026 to the Minister for Children and Families) In this letter, they are publicly raising their concerns about the proposed removal of fostering panels altogether, emphasising the essential role that panels play in safeguarding, scrutiny, and quality assurance. Panels bring together a breadth of professional expertise, providing a level of oversight that helps ensure children are placed safely and appropriately—an important safeguard recognised across the sector. The proposed reforms suggest a shift toward a "simpler rulebook", streamlining assessments and potentially altering how quality assurance is delivered.

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 Panel Advisor in post, there will be enhanced oversight and support from the Panel Advisor to track and ensure that all papers are completed and submitted to panel within the required timescales. They will be able to review paperwork and ensure there is improvement in this area.

During this reporting period it has been observed that there has been an increase in the need for regulation 25 extension requests. Regulation 25 sits within care planning, placement & care review (England) regulations 2010 and deals specifically with the extension of temporary approval of a kinship/connected person who has been approved under regulation 24 but not yet had a completed full fostering assessment. This has generally been necessary due to the delays in obtaining medical reports and DBS checks in a timely fashion.

Most of the reports being submitted are of good quality and are well written, clearly highlighting both the strengths and vulnerabilities of applicants/foster carers.

There has been an increase in attendance from Children's Social Workers compared with the previous reporting period. This has been a very positive development, as the child's voice is now being heard more consistently within panel discussions. Their contributions provide valuable insight into what life is like for the child living with the foster carers being recommended. This enhanced involvement has been warmly welcomed by the panel. However, there remains further room for improvement to ensure children's views are fully embedded in all assessments brought to panel.

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.

Panel has also raised ongoing concerns regarding delays in foster carers receiving Dorset Council laptops. These delays have had a direct impact on carers' ability to complete mandatory training within required timescales, with reports of some carers waiting over a year for equipment. Standard 20.3 & 20.4 (NMS 2011) set out the requirements for foster carers to complete the required training therefore it is essential they are given the tools to do so. However, it is acknowledged that work is already underway with the Training and Development Team to address these concerns. A new training platform is currently being developed, which is expected to improve accessibility, streamline the process, and support carers to meet their mandatory requirements more effectively.

Safer Care Plans for individual children placed with foster carers continue to be inconsistently completed, and this remains an area requiring improvement. However, it is understood this is an area of focus for the teams with an action plan in place

During this reporting period, Panel escalated two cases for management attention. One related to a foster carer employed by Dorset Council who experienced difficulties accessing his entitlement to 5 days of fostering-related leave. The carer reported that his supervisors were unaware of this entitlement. Given Dorset Council's position as a fostering-friendly employer, this gap in awareness at supervisory level was concerning and warranted escalation. This incident may indicate wider inconsistencies in understanding or implementing the fostering-friendly policy across departments. The other case was a Kinship review following an allegation and panel requested reassurance from the ADM that the recommendations from panel would be acted upon and the ADM offered reassurance and supported the panel's recommendation and felt they had been thorough and fair and agreed that a return to panel for further review in six months would also form part of the action plan.

Concerns have been raised regarding the lack of consistency in the allocated fostering social workers for some foster carers. Several carers have experienced 2, 3, or even 4 changes in social worker within their first year of approval. This level of turnover can significantly impact the continuity of support, the quality of supervision, and the carers' ability to provide the best possible care for the children living with them. While the Panel recognises that changes in staffing can be unavoidable—for example due to ill health, staff turnover, etc., frequent changes have a noticeable effect on foster carers' experience and support levels.

Developmental work & future plans

There is a commitment from the panel chair and vice chairs to work with senior managers, developing open and strength-based communication, and feeding back to panel members on this work regularly.

We will continue inviting social workers and fostering team staff to observe panels to help them understand how cases are considered and recommendations are made from the panel's perspective.

An induction day will be planned for the new panel members in June 2026, and once they have completed their induction day and observed two panels, they will then be ready to fully participate in the panel process.

A meeting was held between the chair and a fostering team leader to look at the template report for Regulation 25 cases being presented to panel. In September 2025, the new template was then introduced and will be reviewed in May 2026

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. Panel meetings are usually held within the Committee rooms at County Hall, and we understand how intimidating it can feel for applicants and carers to attend panel meetings in such a formal setting. Consideration to be given to see if there are alternative venues available for panel meetings.

We will continue to explore the reasons behind the consistently low levels of feedback from foster carers, applicants and social workers who attend panel and develop strategies to improve response rates.

2 x training days for panel members to be planned for 2026/2027. One of the training events will be for panel members to attend the 'Journey to Foster' training, which will give them an opportunity to see the work that is undertaken with prospective carers.

Supported Lodgings Carers to join the panel process, this remains the same as 2024/2025 – we are yet to have any supported lodgings carers come to panel. Our first case is scheduled for May 2026

A commitment to ensuring the voice of the child is the golden thread in all paperwork and panel discussions.

User feedback

Fostering panel feedback questionnaires were provided to all applicants, foster carers and professionals who attended the panel, requesting their feedback around their experience of panel. Unfortunately, feedback has not been received consistently, and I have only had sight of feedback between June 2025 – December 2025. During these 7 months, out of approximately 150, 64 responses were received, 31 foster carers and 33 professionals.

Their experience is rated from 1–5: and the following ratings were given:

- Foster carers average: 4.61
- Professionals average: 4.42

This demonstrates that on average foster carers/applicants and professionals feel comfortable and confident in attending panel and feel able to share their experience with panel members. It is important that we use this feedback to improve our practice wherever possible and analyse in detail to help us understand any themes and trends.

The Panel Chair has introduced a new way for applicants / foster carers to receive the feedback from panel. Instead of the panel chair feeding back directly to the applicants / foster carers after panel, they are given the opportunity to return into panel to hear from individual panel members, giving their recommendation and highlighting their reasons. Obviously, this approach is only used if it is appropriate to

do so, considering the sensitive nature of panel and the recommendations being given. This appears to be well received, and attendees are opting to return into panel and welcome the comments from panel members.

Social workers are feeling positive about attending Panel. New social workers observing have found this opportunity rewarding and appreciated being able to observe the whole process from report to formulation of recommendations and rational.

Conclusion

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.

Evidence from programmes such as the Mockingbird family model shows that peer supported networks can improve placement stability and carer retention. We have heard first hand from carers about the support they have received from their Mockingbird constellations, and we encourage prospective carers to consider the benefits of being part of this innovation.

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.

5. Alternative options considered

5.1 N/A

6. Legal considerations

6.1 The Fostering Panel operates under the Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011.

The Panel Chair must monitor whether Assessments presented to panel meet Regulation 26 (approval of foster carers) requirements and that Reviews comply with Regulation 28 (review of approval)

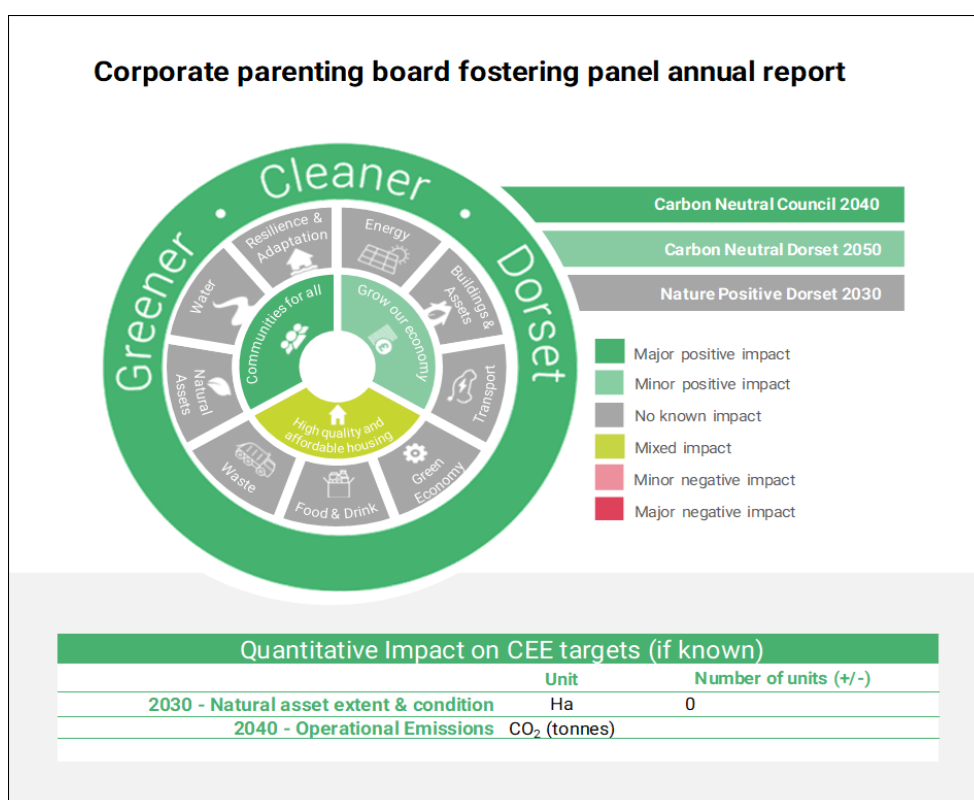
Panel recommendations have a direct impact on the Local Authority's ability to meet its sufficiency duty (Children Act 1989).

Panel must operate independently and without bias.

7. Financial implications

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

8. Natural environment, climate & ecology implications



8.1

9. Well-being and health implications

- 9.1 The fostering panel's activity supports the emotional well-being of children, foster carers and professionals through robust scrutiny, placement stability and a trauma-informed, child-centred approach. Some risks to well-being have been identified, particularly in relation to assessment delays, digital access and workforce continuity; however, these are recognised and subject to ongoing mitigation. Overall health and well-being impact is positive, with low residual risk.

10. Other implications

- 10.1 None identified

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 An Equalities Impact Risk Assessment has been undertaken. The report overall demonstrates positive impacts in relation to inclusion, fairness and the promotion of children's rights. Some low-level equality-related risks have been identified around accessibility, digital inclusion and kinship care; however, these are recognised and subject to ongoing mitigation. Residual equality risk is assessed as low.

This report demonstrates that due regard has been given to the equality impacts of fostering panel activity. The fostering panel operates in a manner that promotes fairness, inclusion, and safeguarding, with a clear commitment to continuous improvement.

Current Equality Risk: Low

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)