Corporate Parenting Board

26 November 2026

Local Authority Designated Officer (LADO) Annual Report April 2025 – March 2026

Choose an item.

For Information Only

Cabinet Member:
Cllr C Sutton, Children, Families & Education

Local Councillor(s): OBJ

Senior Leadership Team:
P Dempsey - Executive Director, Children's Services

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Statutory Authority:

Report status: Public Choose an item.

1. **Executive summary (maximum of 500 words)**

1.1 During 2025-2026, the Designated Officer Service experienced its highest recorded level of activity, managing 844 contacts relating to concerns about adults working with children. Of these contacts, 155 progressed to referrals under the management of allegations process.

1.2 The data demonstrates increasing use of the service for consultation, advice and threshold discussions, reflecting growing awareness of safeguarding responsibilities and confidence amongst partner agencies in seeking guidance at an early stage. This supports effective risk management and proportionate decision-making before concerns escalate.

1.3 Transferable Risk remained the most frequently reported allegation category, accounting for 69 referrals (44%). This continues to highlight the

importance of considering how behaviour or circumstances outside of the workplace may impact an individual's suitability to work with children.

1.4 Education remained the largest source of referrals, with continued referrals from fostering, social care, health services and other partners.

1.5 Outcome data remained broadly consistent with previous years, with 58 substantiated allegations, 66 unsubstantiated allegations and low numbers of false or malicious allegations. Seven referrals remained open at the end of the reporting period due to ongoing police investigations.

1.6 The report provides assurance that allegations continue to be managed through independent oversight, effective multi-agency working and proportionate safeguarding processes.

1.7 Priorities for 2026-2027 include strengthening quality assurance activity, maintaining workforce confidence, improving recording and reporting arrangements, further developing partnership learning, and enhancing information and support available to children, foster carers and adults involved in the management of allegations process.

2. Recommendation(s)

2.1 The Corporate Parenting Board is asked to note the findings of the Local Authority Designated Officer (LADO) Annual Report 2025-2026 and the priorities defined for 2026-2027.

3. Reason for the recommendation(s)

3.1 To provide assurance regarding the management of allegations against adults working with or volunteering with children and to update members on service activity, performance and emerging themes during 2025-2026.

4. The report

4.1 Introduction

The statutory guidance *Working Together to Safeguard Children (2026)* and *Keeping Children Safe in Education (2026)* set out the requirement for agencies to have clear procedures for reporting and managing allegations against those working or volunteering with children. The Designated Officer plays a key role in overseeing this process, providing independent advice on thresholds, risk management, and safeguarding actions when an allegation is made. This may include a range of measures, in consultation with an employer, such as the employer completing risk assessments, the use of suspension for more serious conduct matters or criminal investigations, alongside other measures, while promoting the organisation's duty of care to employees and ensuring a proportionate process that is concluded fairly and in a timely manner.

This report provides an overview of the management of allegations in Dorset, and the role of the Designated Officer between 1 April 2025 and 31 March 2026.

4.2 The Role of the Designated Officer

Working Together (2026) and Keeping Children Safe in Education (2026) state that organisations and agencies working with children and families should have clear policies for dealing with allegations against people who work with children. Such policies should make a clear distinction between an allegation, a concern about the quality of care or practice, or a complaint. An allegation may relate to a person who works with children who has:

- Behaved in a way that has harmed a child or may have harmed a child.
- Possibly committed a criminal offence against or related to a child.
- Behaved towards a child or children in a way that indicates they may pose a risk of harm to children.
- Behaved or may have behaved in a way that indicates they may not be suitable to work with children.

The final criterion includes concerns arising in an individual's personal life that may affect their suitability to work with children. This is known as transferable risk.

All agencies have a duty to contact the Designated Officer directly or make a referral through the Family Support and Advice Line if there is a child

protection concern or an allegation made that a criminal offence may have been committed or related to a child.

Allegations are considered across five categories: sexual abuse, physical abuse, emotional abuse, neglect, and Transferable Risk, where concerns arising in an individual's private life that may impact children.

The Designated Officer provides independent oversight, advice, and guidance in relation to allegations and patterns of conduct concerning adults working with children. Key responsibilities include assessing and managing referrals; coordinating and chairing allegation management meetings; liaising with Children's Services, Police and partner agencies; ensuring the child's voice is considered; monitoring investigations and actions to conclusion; maintaining accurate case records; identifying learning and practice improvements; supporting policy and procedure development; managing cross-boundary cases; and delivering safeguarding and allegations management training. The role helps ensure concerns are managed consistently, fairly and proportionately, while promoting safe practice across the children's workforce.

4.3 Service Structure and Supervision

The Designated Officers are located within the Quality Assurance, Safeguarding and Partnership Service based at County Hall, Dorchester. There are two full-time Designated Officers and a further 0.5 fte complement from a Safeguarding Standards Advisor who works flexibly across both roles.

All three Designated Officers are qualified social workers with a background in child protection and safeguarding practice. They are managed by a social work qualified Safeguarding Standards Service Manager.

The Designated Officers attend regional and annual National meetings, and this enables an opportunity for peer reflection and discussion around key issues and challenges within the role locally and nationally.

4.4 Allegation process

The flowchart below describes the local process used when an allegation is made against an adult working with a child.



All referrals continue to be recorded on our case management system (MOSAIC) where details of allegations, minutes of meetings and outcomes are recorded, including where necessary referrals to DBS. We also record all contacts on mosaic; these are referrals that do not progress to an Initial Evaluation Meeting and may require an internal investigation without Designated Officer oversight. Recording contacts on Mosaic ensures that there is a clear record of enquiries undertaken and decision making.

A secure database is also used to record all enquiries/contacts/referrals that agencies make with the designated officer and the outcome, whether this is a referral or a low-level enquiry. The database enables information to be accessed, so patterns and repeat concerns about an individual can be identified. It also provides the ability to track the number of contacts/referrals and progress, which enables easier analysis of service effectiveness and areas for development and improvement.

The Management of Allegations Service is carried out online, and this continues to be effective in securing a good level of participation from our key partner agencies, such as HR, fostering, social care, Police and schools. All Initial Evaluation meetings (IEM's) and Post Allegation Investigation Meetings (PAIM's) have been held via Microsoft Teams.

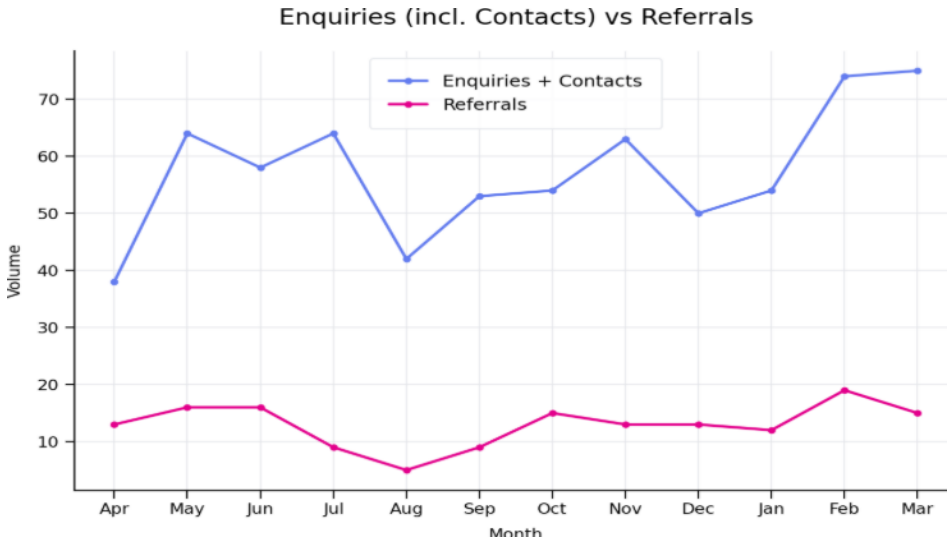
4.5 Enquiries and Referrals April 2025 – March 2026

During 2025-2026, the Designated Officer Service managed 844 contacts with the service, compared with 796 contacts in 2024-2025 and 658 contacts in 2023-2024. This total includes consultation, advice, and referrals.

Of the 844 contacts, 155 progressed as referrals, representing approximately 18% of total activity. This indicates that most activity relates to early consultation, advice, and threshold discussion, rather than escalation into formal processes. The Designated Officers continue to provide training to a variety of different agencies, and this has likely contributed to the continued awareness and increase of people seeking advice and guidance from the service.

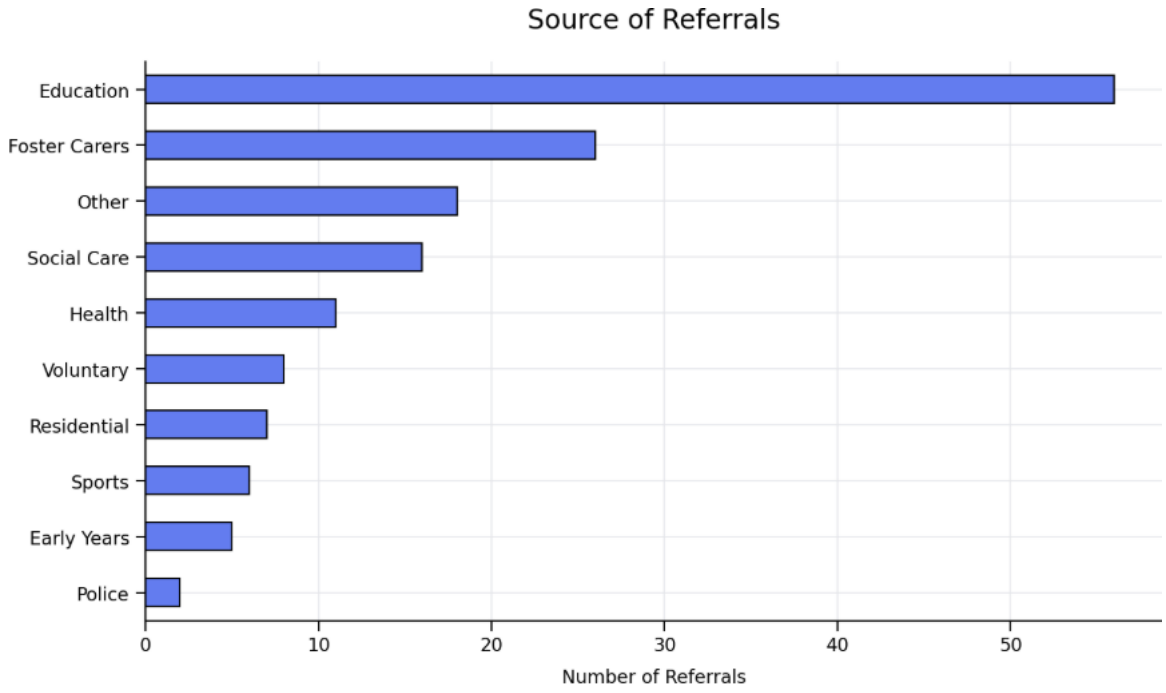
Demand remained steady throughout the year, with peak activity in February (93 contacts) and March (90 contacts), and lower levels during August (47 contacts). This pattern is consistent with previous years and reflects the influence of the academic year on safeguarding activity.

No significant anomalies were identified, providing assurance that demand for the service remains sustained rather than reactive.



4.6 Source of Referrals (that progressed under the Management of Allegations Process)

The chart below shows the agency where the adult was working when the allegation was made.



Education continued to represent the largest source of referrals, accounting for 56 referrals during the year. There were 26 referrals in relation to foster carers; 17 of these were Dorset Council foster carers, followed by social care (16) and health services (11). Additional referrals were received from voluntary organisations, residential settings, sports groups and early years provision.

Referrals from police services (2 cases) remained comparatively low and continued to represent an area for ongoing partnership development. The Service Manager has met with appropriate Police representatives and agreed to the development of a local escalation process to support attendance and awareness of responsibilities. There is now a police Single Point of Contact within the Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH) to support referral management and oversight. It is hoped that this and continued oversight and training during the 2026–2027 period will support awareness and development.

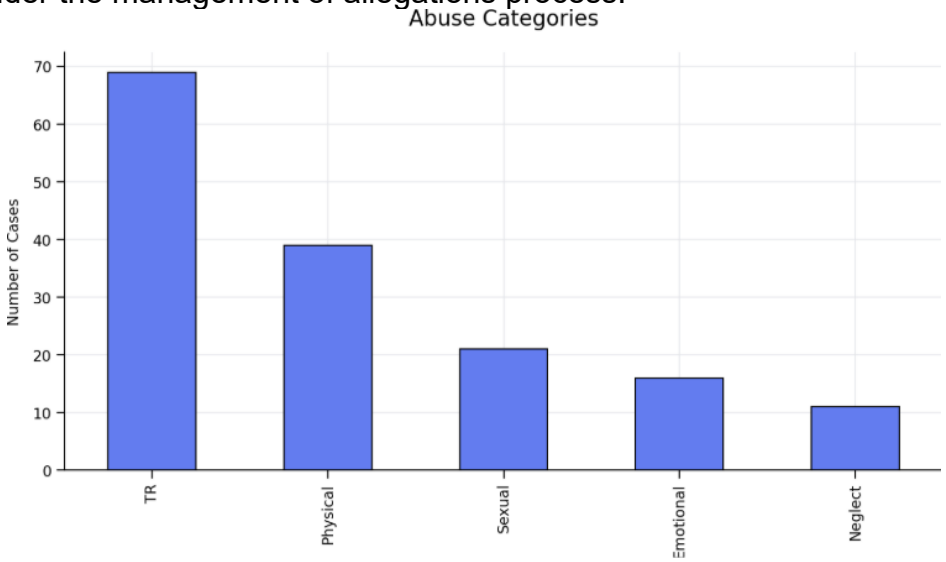
The diversity of referral sources demonstrates the continued multi-agency awareness of the management of allegations process and reflects the impact of ongoing training and engagement activity.

Key Messages

- Total contacts increased from 796 (2024–2025) to 844 (2025–2026), indicating continued growth in demand
- The proportion of contacts progressing to referral reduced (22% → 18%), suggesting increased use of early consultation and advice. It may also suggest that the wider training offer promotes awareness and understanding of the Designated Officer and professionals seeing the value in seeking earlier advice and guidance.
- Activity follows a consistent seasonal pattern, with peaks in late winter and reduced activity in August.
- Education remains the largest source of referrals, with continued multi-agency engagement.

4.7 Referral/Allegation Category

The chart below shows the category of allegations for cases progressing under the management of allegations process.



The most common category is still transferable risk (TR) at 69 cases, consistent with the previous reporting period. This is where there is a risk or concern identified about a person's behaviour outside of the workplace, which may not directly relate to the children they work with, but may present a risk that could transfer to the workplace. For example, domestic abuse incidents or criminal investigations.

Physical may include physical force or actions that may cause physical harm to a child, such as inappropriate restraint, excessive physical intervention. Sexual may include inappropriate sexual behaviour and/or communication towards or with a child, possession, creation or sharing of indecent images of children. Emotional harm may relate to a child being subjected to behaviour that may negatively affect their emotional wellbeing or development, for example, bullying, intimidation, conduct that may cause distress or fear. Neglect may relate to a child's needs not being appropriately met, potentially resulting in harm or risk of harm. This may include failures relating to supervision, safeguarding responsibilities, or access to support.

This chart shows the breakdown of the number of cases, percentage of referrals and the allegation category

Allegation Category	**Number of Cases**	**Percentage of Referral**
Transferable Risk (TR)	69	44%
Physical Abuse	39	25%
Sexual Abuse	20	14%
Emotional Harm	16	10%
Neglect	11	7%
Total	**155**	**100%**

The distribution of allegations remains broadly consistent with previous reporting periods, with Transferable Risk continuing to account for the largest proportion of LADO activity. Whilst allegation categories provide a useful overview of referral themes, individual cases may involve multiple forms of harm and are categorised according to the primary concern identified at referral. Transferable Risk referrals continue to represent the largest proportion of LADO activity, reflecting concerns about behaviour or circumstances outside of the workplace that may indicate a risk to children. Physical Abuse, Sexual Abuse, Emotional Harm and Neglect referrals continue to require careful assessment and, where appropriate, multi-agency safeguarding responses to ensure children are protected, and risks are effectively managed.

4.8 Outcome of Referrals

The outcome of investigations into allegations are categorised as follows:

Substantiated – which means there is sufficient identifiable evidence to prove an allegation.

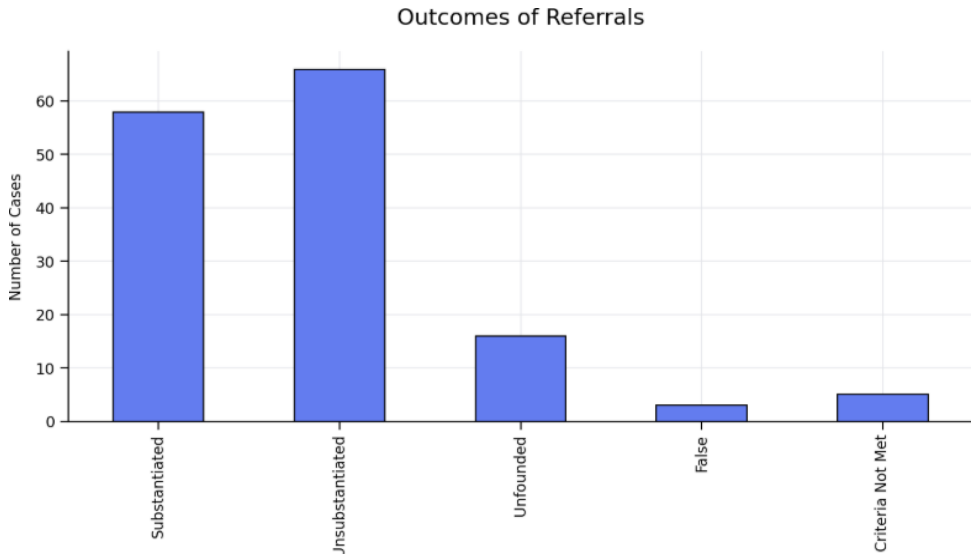
False – which means there is sufficient evidence to disprove the allegation.

Malicious – which means that there is clear evidence to prove there has been a deliberate act to deceive, and the allegation is entirely false.

Unsubstantiated – which means that there is insufficient evidence to prove or disprove the allegation.

Unfounded - which means there is no evidence or proper basis to support the allegation being made.

The chart below shows the outcomes of referrals concluded during 2025–2026.



Of the 155 referrals, the largest proportion of concluded allegations were recorded as unsubstantiated (66). There were 58 substantiated allegations, representing approximately 37% of referrals, consistent with previous reporting periods.

There were 3 false allegations, 16 unfounded, 5 criteria not met and no malicious referrals, providing reassurance regarding the quality and intent of referrals. A small number of investigations (7) remain open due to ongoing police investigations.

Outcomes are stable year-on-year, with substantiated cases at approximately 37% (2024 – 2025 38%), providing assurance of consistent thresholds and decision-making.

4.9 Foster Carers

During 2025-2026 there were 17 referrals relating to Dorset Council foster carers. Of the 17 foster carer referrals that progressed to an Initial Evaluation Meeting, the majority related to concerns of physical harm, emotional harm or neglect. Most allegations concluded as unsubstantiated, with a smaller number substantiated. Exact numbers are not provided due to this being a small number of foster carers.

Additional safeguards are in place where concerns are substantiated. This includes an early fostering review undertaken with independent oversight from the Fostering Reviewing Officer Service within Quality Assurance and Safeguarding, with review outcomes presented to Fostering Panel to provide additional scrutiny and assurance regarding carers' ongoing suitability and safeguarding practice. No emerging themes or patterns of concern were identified from the allegations received during the reporting period.

During the reporting period, the Designated Officer Service continued to work closely with Fostering services in relation to allegations concerning foster carers living within Dorset. Regular discussions aim to support learning, quality assurance, and careful balancing of safeguarding responsibilities alongside support, to maintain stability for the children and workforce sufficiency.

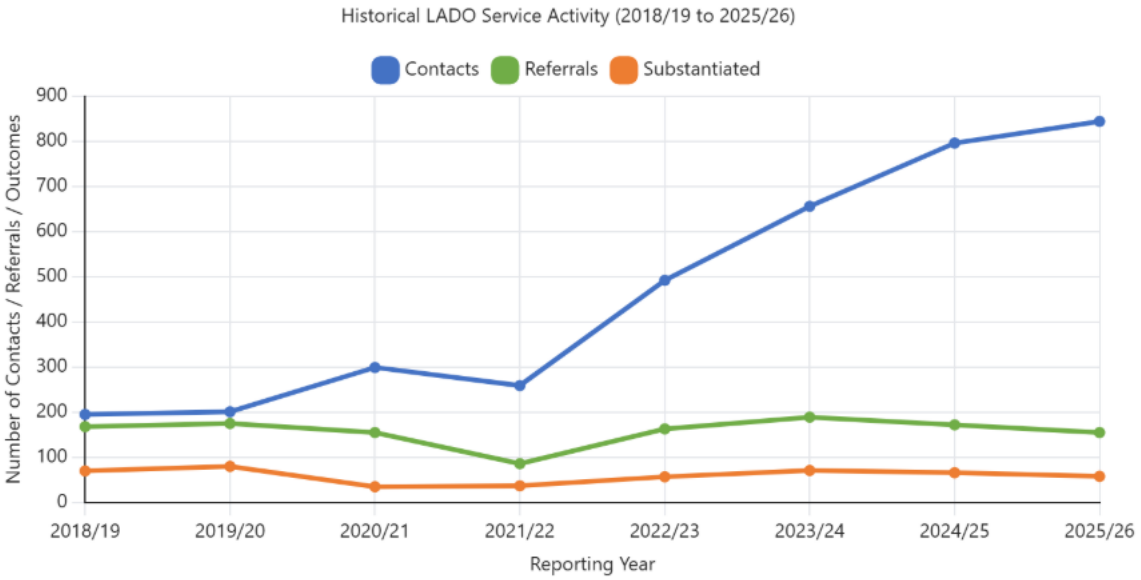
More recently, the Designated Officer Service plans to develop good practice guidance in respect of the Management of Allegations process for our Fostering colleagues, as well as providing additional training to the service and attend practice slots as and when required. Our aim is to continue to work closely with our fostering service, learn from each other, and strengthen practice across both service areas.

Allegation referrals concerning foster carers who care for Dorset children but reside outside the county are managed by the Local Authority Designated Officer (LADO) in the foster carer's home local authority. The child allocated Dorset social worker is responsible for ensuring that any such allegations are appropriately overseen by the external LADO. If there is any uncertainty regarding the decisions or actions taken by the external LADO, the Dorset social worker may seek guidance from the Dorset LADO service. In such cases, Dorset LADO will liaise directly with the external LADO to support resolution and ensure appropriate oversight. Where deemed necessary and appropriate, a Dorset LADO may also attend allegation meetings convened by

the external LADO to support the process and advocate for the child's best interests.

4.10 Service Activity

Historical LADO Service Activity Trends (2018/19 - 2025/26)



The volume of LADO contacts has continued to increase year on year, rising from 195 contacts in 2018/19 to 844 contacts in 2025/26, representing an overall increase of approximately 333% over the 8-year reporting period. This reflects sustained growth in consultation and safeguarding activity across the children's workforce.

Whilst contacts reached their highest level during 2025/26, referrals reduced slightly from 172 in 2024/25 to 155 in 2025/26. The number of cases resulting in a substantiated outcome also reduced from 66 to 58 during the same period. This may indicate that a greater proportion of contacts were managed through consultation, advice and guidance rather than progressing to the formal allegation management process.

The trend data suggests that agencies continue to seek advice and consultation at an increasing rate, indicating greater awareness of safeguarding responsibilities and confidence in using the LADO process. However, the proportion of contacts progressing to referral and substantiated outcomes remains relatively stable, suggesting that many contacts appropriately involve consultation, threshold clarification and early advice rather than allegations meeting the criteria for formal management through the LADO process.

Transferable Risk remains the most common allegation category and continues to be a key area of safeguarding practice and learning.

The data demonstrates that the Designated Officer Service is increasingly valued as a safeguarding consultation resource, supporting early risk assessment and professional decision-making.

Demand is expected to remain high during 2026-2027 as awareness and utilisation of the service continues to increase across the children's workforce.

Referrals have remained relatively stable, fluctuating between 155 and 189 over recent years.

While demand for consultation, advice and threshold discussions continues to increase significantly, only a small proportion of contacts progress to formal referral and an even smaller proportion result in substantiated allegations. This suggests increasing use of the LADO service for professional consultation, threshold clarification and early safeguarding advice.

Historical LADO Service Activity, Referrals and Substantiated Outcomes (2018/19 to 2025/26)

Reporting Year	Contacts	Referrals	Substantiated
2018/19	195	168	70
2019/20	201	175	80
2020/21	299	155	35
2021/22	259	86	37
2022/23	492	163	57
2023/24	656	189	71
2024/25	796	172	66
2025/26	844	155	58

The historical trend data demonstrates sustained growth in overall service demand, with contacts increasing significantly over the reporting period. Whilst referrals and substantiated outcomes have remained comparatively stable, the increase in consultation activity suggests that professionals are increasingly seeking advice and guidance at an earlier stage, supporting effective safeguarding decision-making and proportionate management of concerns.

4.11 **Service Performance and Timeliness**

The Designated Officer Service continues to monitor the timeliness of allegation management activity to ensure that safeguarding concerns are progressed appropriately and concluded without unnecessary delay.

During 2025-2026, 122 of 148 referrals requiring an Initial Evaluation/Post Allegation Investigation meeting were convened within timescales. Where

timescales were exceeded, this was generally due to case complexity and the requirement for initial multi-agency investigation planning.

Of the 148 referrals progressing through the management of allegations process, 96 reached an outcome within 28 days from referral to conclusion. Cases exceeding this timescale were typically associated with complex safeguarding enquiries, police investigations, employer processes, or wider multi-agency involvement.

A further seven referrals remained open at the end of the reporting period due to ongoing police investigations. Throughout the reporting period, the Designated Officer Service maintained oversight of all allegations to ensure that safeguarding risks were appropriately managed, actions progressed in a timely manner, and cases concluded as promptly as possible.

4.12 **Conclusion**

The 2025–2026 reporting period demonstrates a continued increase in demand for the Designated Officer service, with a higher number of contacts compared to the previous year.

Despite this increase, the proportion of cases progressing to formal referral has reduced, indicating a strengthening of the service's advisory and preventative role, with more concerns being appropriately managed through early discussion and threshold guidance.

Patterns of activity remain consistent and predictable, with no significant anomalies, providing assurance that safeguarding concerns are being identified and reported in a timely way.

The data continues to demonstrate strong engagement from partner agencies, particularly education, alongside sustained contributions from our fostering service in relation to foster carers, social care and health services.

Outcome data remains stable, with a consistent proportion of substantiated cases, and very low levels of false or malicious allegations, reinforcing confidence in professional decision-making and safeguarding practice across the partnership.

Overall, the evidence from 2025–2026 indicates that the Designated Officer service is operating in a consistent, proportionate and well-engaged way, with increasing demand being effectively managed through a combination of early advice, clear thresholds and robust multi-agency working.

4.13 **Update on Priorities set for 2025 – 2026**

Action	Expected Outcome	Project Lead	Due Date
Continue to deliver training bespoke training to raise awareness & professional development	The newly formed family help teams to receive LADO awareness training Family Help colleagues will understand what meets LADO threshold and how to refer.	LADO	Completed and remains an ongoing training offer within Children's Services.
External validation of the service	Regional partners are invited to undertake audit activity of Dorset LADO. Feedback to be used for further service development	New Service Manager (starts 06/01/25)	New Service Manager commenced in January 2026. LADO peer audit completed, awaiting feedback.
Develop a system for tracking recommendations following investigations are implemented.	Further work required to embed this action with the team.	Service Manager	Not completed, requires appropriate IT/business support to progress. Carried forward to 2026 – 2027 priorities. This will be included within QA auditing.
Reviewing and updating process for evaluation meetings.	To have a more streamlined process and less meetings for the LADO service.	Head of QA with LADO Service.	Completed.
Creating a regular internal audit process for the LADO service.	To ensure quality, assure our thresholds and processes remain of a high standard.	Head of QA and Interim SM.	Not completed, carried forward to 2026 – 2027 priorities.
Increased attendance by police for all relevant allegation meetings.	Police attend and engage in the allegation meeting for all LADO cases that have met criminal thresholds.	Interim SM and Head of QA	Completed but remains a focus.

4.14 **Priorities for 2026 – 2027**

The following priorities have been identified for the Designated Officer Service for 2026–2027, informed by analysis of activity, performance data, and emerging themes during the 2025–2026 reporting period.

Action	Expected Outcome	Project Lead	Due Date
Continue to deliver targeted training across partner agencies	Increased awareness and understanding of the management of allegations process. To promote appropriate use of the service and early consultation.	LADO Service / Safeguarding Standards Team	March 2027
Strengthen engagement with police to increase attendance at relevant allegation meetings.	Improved police attendance and engagement at Initial Evaluation Meetings and PAIMs will support timely information sharing and decision-making, particularly in cases involving criminal investigations.	Service Manager / Head of QA	March 2027
Further develop early consultation and advice offer	Ensure that the increase in contacts continues to be effectively managed through high-quality advice and guidance, supporting appropriate threshold decision-making and reducing unnecessary escalation.	LADO Service	Business as usual
Review and refine recording and data reporting processes – development of LADO BI dashboard	Improved consistency and clarity in recording (including enquiries vs contacts), enabling more streamlined	Service Manager / Head of QA/BI Team	March 2027

	reporting and clearer analysis of trends over time.		
Develop approach to engagement with harder-to-reach sectors (e.g. sports, voluntary, self-employed providers)	Increased awareness and reporting from underrepresented sectors, ensuring safeguarding concerns are identified and managed appropriately across all settings.	LADO Service / Safeguarding Partnerships	March 2027
Implement regular internal audit processes for the LADO service, including peer audits and twice-yearly QA audits in respect of recommendation tracking and completion.	Strengthened quality assurance of threshold decisions, process compliance and outcomes, providing ongoing assurance of service effectiveness.	LADO/Service Manager/Head of QA	March 2027
Continue work to track implementation of recommendations following investigations	Improved oversight of post-investigation actions, ensuring learning is embedded and risks are reduced.	Head of QA with LADO Service	March 2027
Develop information leaflets and letter templates for children and young people (our children in care). The letter on children's file is a result of learning from a complaint.	Children and young people will support the understanding of the LADO role and process when an allegation has been made. The letter will provide an outcome on the child's file.	LADO Service	December 2026
Information leaflet for Foster Carers and those adults subject to the management of allegations process.	Clarity in respect of the process and potential outcomes for adults subject to the Management of Allegations process.	LADO Service	December 2026

4.15 **Priorities Commentary**

The priorities for 2026–2027 reflect a continued focus on managing increased demand, while strengthening key areas identified through analysis of the 2025–2026 data.

The increase in contacts alongside a reduction in referrals highlights the importance of maintaining a strong advisory function, ensuring professionals continue to seek advice and apply appropriate thresholds.

Ongoing work to strengthen police engagement reflects the continued complexity of cases involving criminal investigations, and the need for timely and effective multi-agency collaboration.

The continued prominence of transferable risk reinforces the importance of maintaining a strong focus on training and awareness, ensuring that partner agencies remain confident in identifying and responding to these concerns.

The development of information sheets and letters to young people, along with information sheets for foster carers and other adults involved in the management of allegations process, has been a direct result of learning from complaints and requests made by the Fostering Service and young people.

We have been supported by Speech and Language colleagues to draft information sheets and letter accessibility for our young people. A young care experienced adult who has been supported through the complaints process, has also reviewed and provided feedback on these documents, supported by his advocate. Whilst the complaint process identified wider learning, it also identified the need for evidence to be recorded on children and young people's records, when allegations are made by children and young people. We need to record that appropriate processes were followed and if this involved LADO oversight, ensuring this is reflected on the child or young person's record. We are committed to ensuring we learn from complaints, keeping accessibility and young people at the core of our practice.

There is also a recognised need to:

- Improve consistency in recording and reporting
- Strengthening engagement with underrepresented sectors
- Maintain robust quality assurance processes.

Overall, these priorities are intended to ensure the service remains:

- Responsive to increasing demand
- Consistent in decision-making
- Effective in safeguarding children through strong multi-agency work.

5. Alternative options considered

5.1 Not applicable.

6. Legal considerations

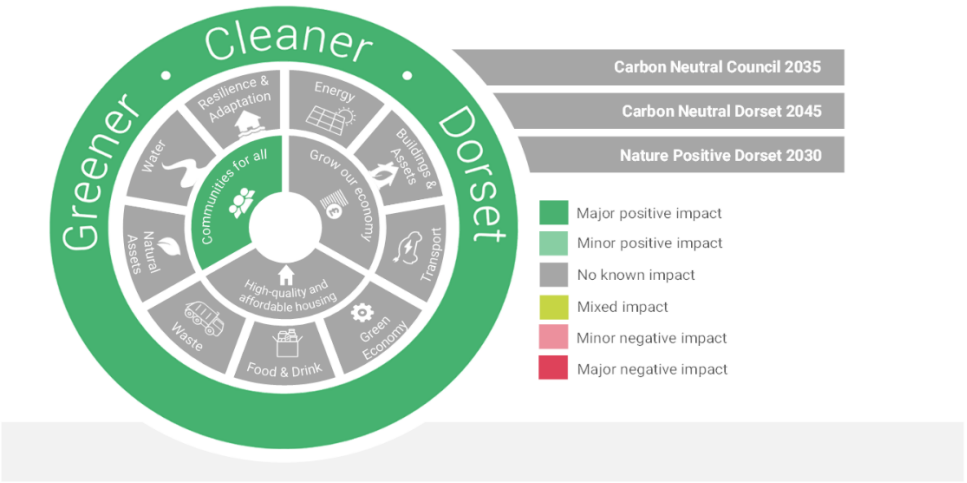
6.1 Not applicable. Statutory report.

7. Financial implications

7.1 The LADO Service is funded within the existing Children's Services budget. No additional financial implications arise from this report.

8. Natural environment, climate & ecology implications

8.1



9. Well-being and health implications

9.1 The wellbeing, safeguarding and health of all children in Dorset is at the centre of the work undertaken by the Local Authority Designated Officer. The child's voice, safeguarding, their lived experience and the wellbeing and the potential impact of those subject to and involved in the management of allegations process is considered at every meeting.

9.3 The Local Authority Designated Officer considers the support available to all concerned as part of the standard meeting agenda.

9.3 The wellbeing of the Local Authority Designated Officer overseeing the Management of Allegations process is support via regular supervision and support from their Service Manager and Head of Service. Staff also have access to Dorset Council's wellbeing offer.

10. Other implication

10.1 None identified.

11. Risk Implication

11.1 There is no decision required, this report is for annual information sharing purposes only.

12. Equalities

12.1 The Local Authority Designated Officer service plays an essential role in promoting equality by ensuring safeguarding concerns are managed fairly and consistently across all sectors and professional groups working with children. Through its commitment to fair and proportionate investigation processes, the service helps protect both children and professionals, ensuring that all individuals are treated with dignity and respect.

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 Assurance & Governance (Monitoring Officer), the Director for Resources (Section 151 Officer) and the appropriate Cabinet Member(s).