



CORPORATE PARENTING PANEL

THURSDAY, 17 JULY 2025

2.00 PM COMMITTEE ROOM, COUNTY HALL, LEWES

MEMBERSHIP - Councillors Kathryn Field, Colin Belsey, Bob Bowdler, Anne Cross, Sorrell Marlow-Eastwood, Colin Swansborough and Georgia Taylor

A G E N D A

1. Election of the Chair
2. Minutes of the meeting held on 2 April 2025 (*Pages 3 - 8*)
3. Apologies for absence
4. Disclosure of Interests
Disclosure by all members present of personal interests in matters on the agenda, the nature of any interest and whether the member regards the interest as prejudicial under the terms of the Code of Conduct.
5. Urgent items
Notification of items which the Chair considers to be urgent and proposes to take at the end of the appropriate part of the agenda. Any members who wish to raise urgent items are asked, wherever possible, to notify the Chair before the start of the meeting. In so doing, they must state the special circumstances which they consider justify the matter being considered urgently.
6. Exclusion of Press and Public
To consider excluding the public and press from the meeting for the next two agenda items on the grounds that if the public and press were present there would be disclosure to them of exempt information as specified in Category 1 of Part 1 of Schedule 12A to the Local Government Act 1972 (as amended), namely information relating to any individual.
7. Children's Home Regulations 2015, Regulation 44: Inspection reports for January - March 2025 and recently published Ofsted inspection reports (*Pages 9 - 58*)
Report by Director of Children's Services
8. Any other exempt items considered urgent by the Chair.
9. Looked After Children (LAC) Statistics (*Pages 59 - 78*)
Report by Director of Children's Services.
10. Fostering Annual report (*Pages 79 - 118*)
Report by Director of Children's Services.
11. Adoption South East annual report 2024/5 (*Pages 119 - 170*)
Report by Director of Children's Services.
12. Any other non-exempt items considered urgent by the Chair.

PHILIP BAKER
Deputy Chief Executive
County Hall, St Anne's Crescent
LEWES BN7 1UE

9 July 2025

Contact Summer Kelly, Governance and Democracy Officer,
01273 336654
Email: summer.kelly@eastsussex.gov.uk

Agenda Item 2

CORPORATE PARENTING PANEL

MINUTES of a meeting of the Corporate Parenting Panel held at Priory, Room 2F Centre Block, County Hall - County Hall, Lewes on 2 April 2025.

PRESENT Councillors Kathryn Field (Chair), Bob Bowdler, Anne Cross,
Penny di Cara, Colin Belsey and Colin Swansborough

ALSO PRESENT Carolyn Fair – Director of Children's Services

Kathy Marriott – Assistant Director of Children's Services

Fiona Lewis – Head of Looked After Children Services –
Provider Services

Deborah Ennis – Assistant Director of Children's Services

Fiona Lewis - Head of Looked After Children Services -
Provider Services

Sally Carnie - Head of Looked After Children Service – Operations

Charlotte De Retuerto – Operations Manager Children's Disability Services

Verity Lloyd – Operations Manager Children's Residential –
Open Homes

Dr Isabelle Hodgson – Designated Doctor – NHS Sussex

Georgina Seligmann - Governance and Democracy Manager

Summer Kelly – Governance and Democracy Officer

77. MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING HELD ON 30 JANUARY 2025

77.1 RESOLVED to agree as a correct record the minutes of the meeting held on 30 January 2025.

78. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

78.1 Apologies were received for Councillor Sorrell Marlow-Eastwood, it was noted that Councillor Johanna Howell was in attendance as substitute.

79. DISCLOSURE OF INTERESTS

79.1 Councillor Kathryn Field declared an interest as Battle Pre School Chair. She did not consider this to be prejudicial.

80. URGENT ITEMS

80.1 There were none.

81. REPORTS

81.1 Reports referred to in the minutes below are contained in the minute book.

82. EXCLUSION OF PRESS AND PUBLIC

82.1 RESOLVED to exclude the public and press from the meeting for items 6 and 7 on the agenda (see minutes 83 and 84) on the grounds that if the public and press were present there would be disclosure to them of exempt information as specified in category 1 of Part 1 of Schedule 12(A) of the Local Government Act 1972 (as amended), namely information relating to any individual. It was considered that the public interest in maintaining the exception outweighed the public interest in disclosing the information.

83. REGULATION 44 QUARTERLY SUMMARY REPORT - QUARTER 4 (JANUARY - MARCH 2025)

83.1 The Panel considered the Quarterly Registered Children's Home report relating to all East Sussex County Council Children's Homes, including updates from Regulation 44 reports and relevant Ofsted reports.

83.2 The following points were highlighted to the Panel:

- 1) The Bungalow was inspected in December 2024 where it received a judgement of 'Requires Improvement to be Good'.
- 2) There were 5 Ofsted Inspections during Quarter 4: Silver Birches was inspected on 2 January and judged 'Good', Acorns was inspected on 15 January and judged 'Requires Improvement', Hazel Lodge was judged 'Good' on 21 January, The Bungalow received an Assurance Inspection on 12 February where it continued to be judged 'Requires Improvement to be Good', Homefield was inspected in March.
- 3) All homes have received monthly visits from their Regulation 44 Independent Person including unannounced visits. The visits continue to pose valuable challenge and constructive reflection for the Registered Managers.
- 4) Staffing remains challenging in the current market; however there has been positive recruitment, particularly at The Bungalow. The homes now have few vacancies, and the managers are focussed on driving performance through management of attendance which has been a significant pressure over a number of years.
- 5) Ofsted inspection of Silver Birches Children's Home – 2-3 January 2025. A full inspection of Silver Birches in January rated the home 'Good' across all areas. There was one requirement relating to Ofsted notification criteria and one recommendation that the Registered Homes Manager (RHM) should 'fully consider the impact that a new child moving into the home could have on the existing group of children.'
- 6) Ofsted Inspection of Acorns – 15-16 January 2025. A full inspection of Acorns in January identified that the home 'Required Improvement to be Good'. This was a positive outcome given the changes that have taken place, the interim placement of one child

and the building work which is required to bring the home up to standard. There were four requirements relating to best practice following allegations or incidents, recruitment checks and the Reg 45 Review Document. There were 2 recommendations relating to promoting a safeguarding culture within supervision and developing a written policy covering use of monitoring equipment.

- 7) Ofsted Inspection of Hazel Lodge – 21-22 January 2025. A full inspection of Hazel Lodge in January found the home to be 'Good' overall with only Leadership and Management judged to 'Require Improvement to be Good'. There were 2 requirements relating to staff training and record keeping. There were 3 Recommendations relating to supervision, recruitment and Return Home Interviews.
- 8) Ofsted Inspection of The Bungalow December 2024 and February 2025. A full Inspection in December and an Assurance Inspection 2 months later both found The Bungalow to 'Require Improvement to be Good'. The original inspection took place within a few weeks of the service relocating back to the building, whilst decoration was still being completed and children still settling. The Bungalow provides care for 7 children with complex needs and disabilities. East Sussex challenged the initial report leading to a number of changes.

83.3 Following discussion, the panel RESOLVED to note the report.

84. EAST SUSSEX COUNTY COUNCIL CHILDREN'S HOMES

84.1 The Panel received a presentation on East Sussex County Council's Residential Children's Homes, the experience of Ofsted inspections, outcomes, strengths and areas for development across the homes. The presentation included the voices of young people's experiences of the Residential Children's Homes.

84.2 The presentation explored graded judgements, online safety, the maintenance of the county's Children's Homes and future challenges, such as digitalising services, the increased demand for placements and recruitment, in particularly recent changes in staffing.

84.3 The Panel heard details of the Ofsted framework and how this had been applied to East Sussex County Council's Residential Children's Homes.

84.4 Following discussion, the Panel RESOLVED to note the presentation.

85. EARLY HEALTH AND CHILDREN'S SOCIAL CARE REFORMS

85.1 The Panel considered an update on Early Help and Children's Social Care reforms.

85.2 The transformation activity across the Children's system is being implemented with a focus on driving improvements in outcomes and reducing costs.

85.3 The Panel received a presentation on the Early Health and Children's Social Care Reforms. The presentation informed the Panel of ongoing activity in East Sussex in response to the Government's strategy 'Keeping Children Safe, Helping Families Thrive' (November 2024) and the current Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill, to help reshape the delivery of early help

and social care services. The presentation explored 4 key strands, these were, prevention, family help, multi-agency child protection teams and family Networks and Kinship Care.

85.4 The presentation explored four key strands, these were, prevention, family help, multi-agency child protection teams and family Networks and Kinship Care.

85.5 The Panel RESOLVED to note the update on transformation activity in East Sussex in response to the national reforms in Early Help and Children's Social Care.

86. REGIONAL CARE COOPERATIVE (RCC) UPDATE

86.1 The Panel received an update on the development of the Regional Care Cooperative and the involvement of East Sussex County Council.

86.2 The following points were highlighted to the Panel:

- 1) The Department for Education (DfE) published Stable Homes, Built on Love, an implementation strategy and consultation, on 2 February 2023. The consultation was backed by £200m additional investment. The DfE launched a competition for regions to bid for the opportunity to be funded to implement a Regional Care Cooperative (RCC). East Sussex County Council (ESCC) committed to the successful regional bid and are working with the other 18 Local Authorities (LAs) involved to design and develop the RCC.
- 2) The DfE are running 2 regional Pathfinders to pilot Regional Care Cooperatives. The South East region was successful in bidding for one of the pathfinder projects and has been awarded a grant of £1.95m of revenue funding and up to £5m of capital funding for the 19 authorities in the region. As one of 2 regions taking part, ESCC will play a key role in shaping the future delivery of this key development in children's services.
- 3) The implementation of the South East RCC is one strand of much wider transformation activity that is being implemented across the children's system in East Sussex, with a focus on driving improvements in outcomes and reducing costs.
- 4) £1.95m of grant revenue funding is being provided to the South East region to help develop a model that delivers DfE requirements for RCCs and works well for all the authorities in the region. This work will also include key partners most notably health and youth justice agencies.
- 5) The project is being led by a Director of Children's Services (Lucy Butler – West Sussex County Council) from the South East who has been seconded from her role to lead the work. The RCC will be co-produced and designed by the 19 authorities in the region.

86.3 The Panel RESOLVED to note the update on the development of the Regional Care Cooperative and the involvement of East Sussex County Council.

The meeting ended at 12:34pm

Councillor Kathryn Field
Chair

This page is intentionally left blank

By virtue of paragraph(s) 1 of Part 1 of Schedule 12A
of the Local Government Act 1972.

Document is Restricted

This page is intentionally left blank

Document is Restricted

This page is intentionally left blank

Document is Restricted

This page is intentionally left blank

Document is Restricted

This page is intentionally left blank

Document is Restricted

This page is intentionally left blank

Document is Restricted

This page is intentionally left blank

Committee:	Corporate Parenting Panel
Date:	17 July 2025
Title of Report:	Looked After Children Statistics
By:	Director of Children's Services
Purpose of Report:	To provide Corporate Parenting Panel (CPP) with an overview of quarter 1 data for Looked After Children

RECOMMENDATIONS:

The Corporate Parenting Panel is recommended to note the content of the report.

1. Background – Financial Appraisal

1.1. Services for Looked After Children are predominantly funded from the Children's Services base budget with some additional smaller funding streams supporting specific activity e.g. Virtual School activity from the Pupil Premium Grant and the Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children's grant from the Home Office.

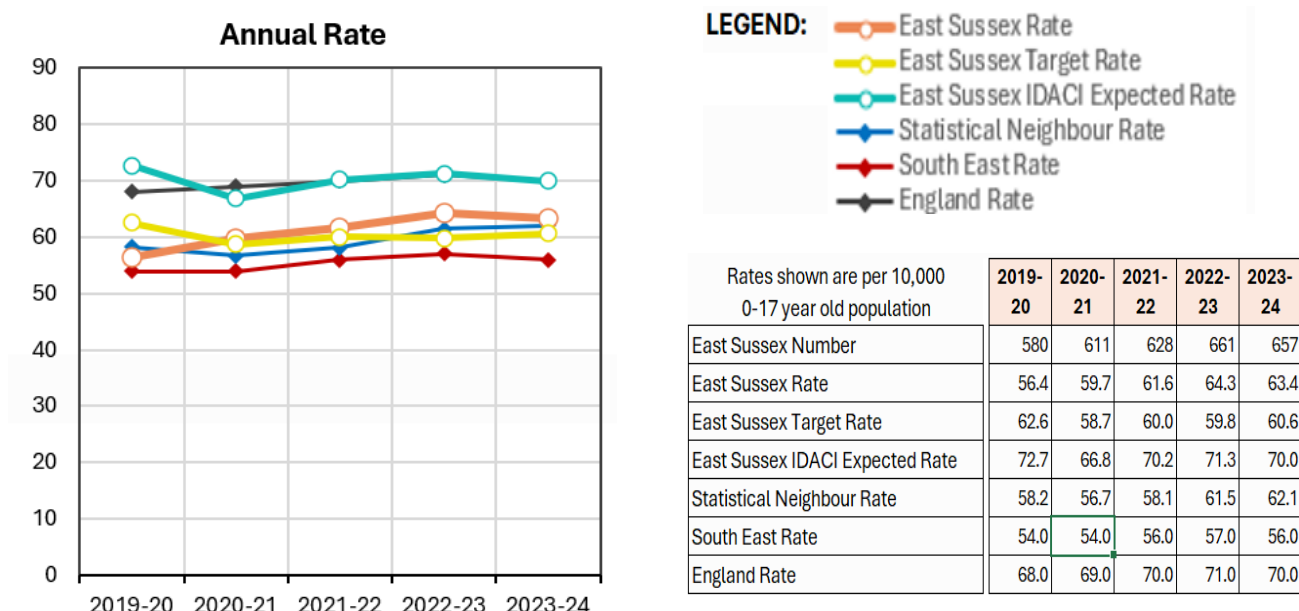
1.2. The Looked After Children Statistics report Quarter 4 has been appended to this report due to previous reporting timelines.

2. Supporting information

2.1. Looked After Children are children in the care of a local authority, typically as a result of concerns regarding their safety or welfare. East Sussex County Council (ESCC) is responsible for safeguarding, supporting, and promoting the welfare of children in its care. This regular report to the Corporate Parenting Panel aims to provide an overview of the most recent data regarding looked after children in ESCC.

2.2. The data found in the charts in this report is drawn as a snapshot on the last day of the month (unless otherwise stated) and some changes occur as data is cleansed within the system. Any changes made to the system will update the data as at the correct date of the activity not the date of entry. Therefore, the end of year figures produced for the Department of Education 903 collection will show the finalised East Sussex County Council (ESCC) ESCC figures which may appear slightly differently to the end of quarter figures presented to the Corporate Parenting Panel.

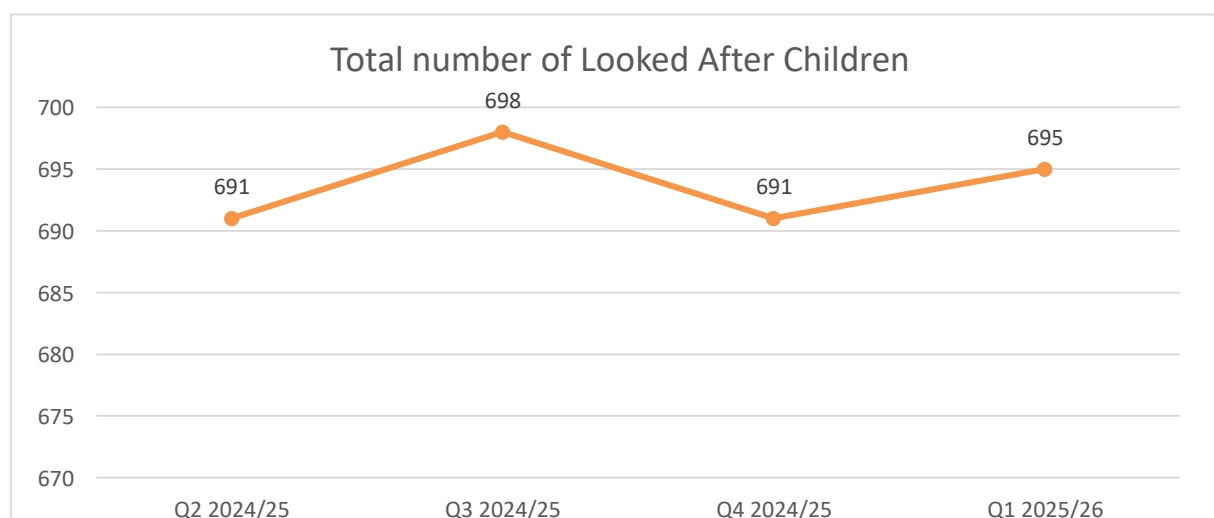
Graph 1: rate of LAC in East Sussex 2020-2024, compared with England, statistical neighbours, and Income Deprivation Affecting Children Index (IDACI).



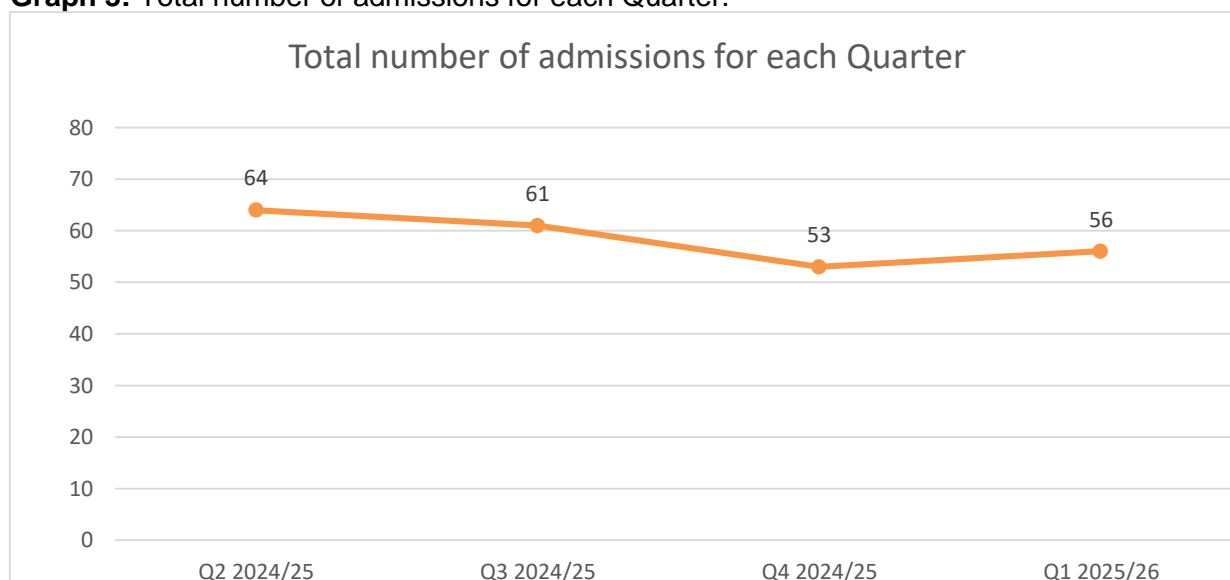
2.3. This is the most current published data available. It is updated through the Department of Education (DfE) data collection process and is due to be published in November 2025. The graph and data above evidence a gradual increase in the rate and number of looked after children in East Sussex over the last five years. The ESCC performance remains below the national rate for England and IDACI (expected rates based on levels of deprivation). However, it is significantly above the South East rate and slightly above our statistical neighbours. The Valuing Care Panel focusses on enabling children to live at home, or within their family networks wherever possible. A refreshed reunification framework has recently been developed, based on nationally recognised best practice, to support the operational service in maximising these arrangements. When children do need to come into our care the Valuing Care Panel supports the plans for our children to live in the right placement, for the right length of time and remove any barriers where necessary.

2.4. Graph 2 illustrates a small increase in the number of looked after children since the end of Quarter 4, with 695 looked after children (this includes 67 separated children-formerly known as unaccompanied asylum-seeking children) at the end of June 2025 (Q1). The figures have remained relatively constant over the last 12 months.

Graph 2: Total number of Looked After Children over the last 4 quarters.

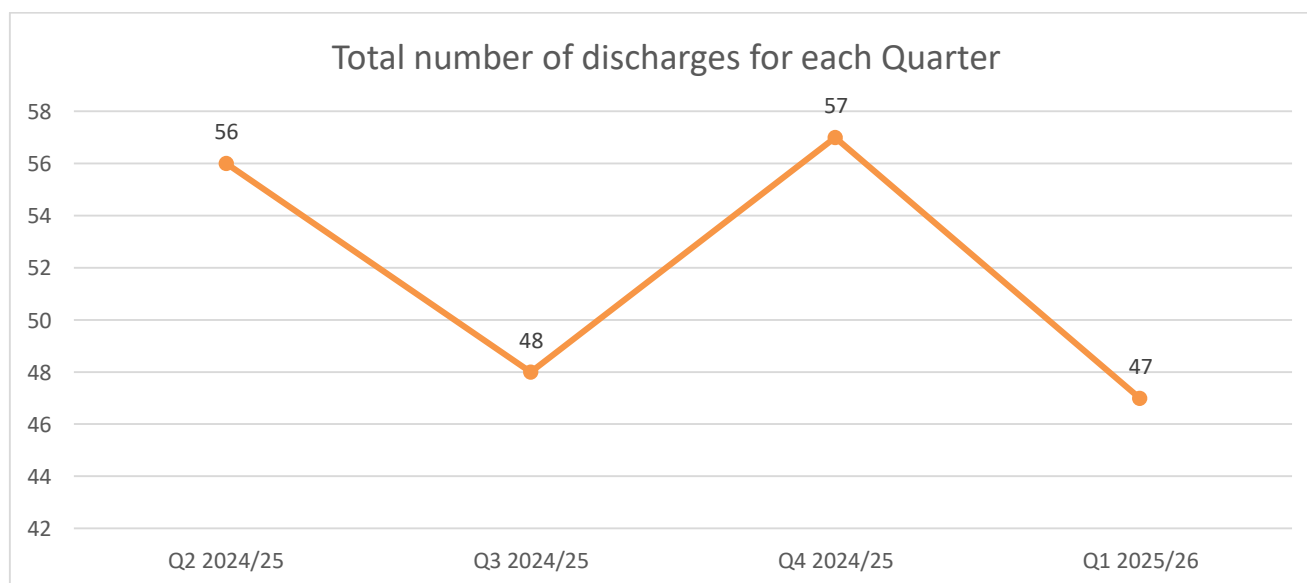


Graph 3: Total number of admissions for each Quarter.



2.5. There has been a total of 56 children admitted to care in Q1 which is a slight increase on the previous quarter of 3. The admissions were made up of 2 large sibling groups of 5 children, a significant number of smaller sibling groups of 2 and 3, a small number of single children and 4 separated children, being transferred via the National Transfer Scheme (NTS). Of this cohort 27 were accommodated through Section 20 of the Children's Act, 7 were admitted to care through emergency orders and 22 were admitted to care through planned Care Proceedings. The overall reduction in admissions over the last 12 months can be attributed to the impact of our Connected Families programme which is delivering evidence-based support and interventions to children and families subject to child protection planning.

Graph 4: Total number of discharges for each Quarter

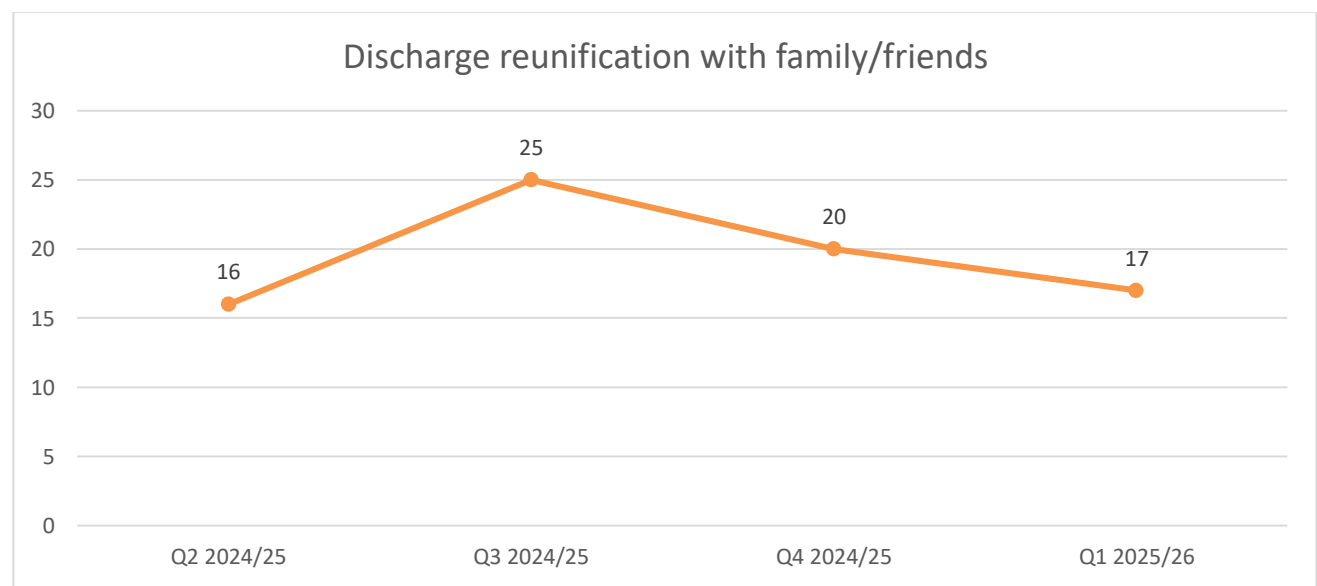


2.6. This data represents children who have left care because they have become 18 years old, have had a change in their legal status through being adopted or have had special guardianship, child arrangement or residence orders made, or have returned to their family networks. A total of 47 children were discharged from care over Q1. The gradual reduction in children being discharged from care clearly has a significant impact on the overall Looked after Children numbers.

As part of our approach to enabling more children to live safely with their families the service has been focused on supporting children to be reunited with their families or wider network

where it is possible to do so. In the last quarter 17 children were successfully reunified with family/friends. Graph five illustrates the number of reunifications achieved this year to date, which is showing a slight dip in this quarter, although it remains higher than this period 12 months ago.

Graph 5: Number of discharges where Looked After Children were reunified with family and friends each Quarter.

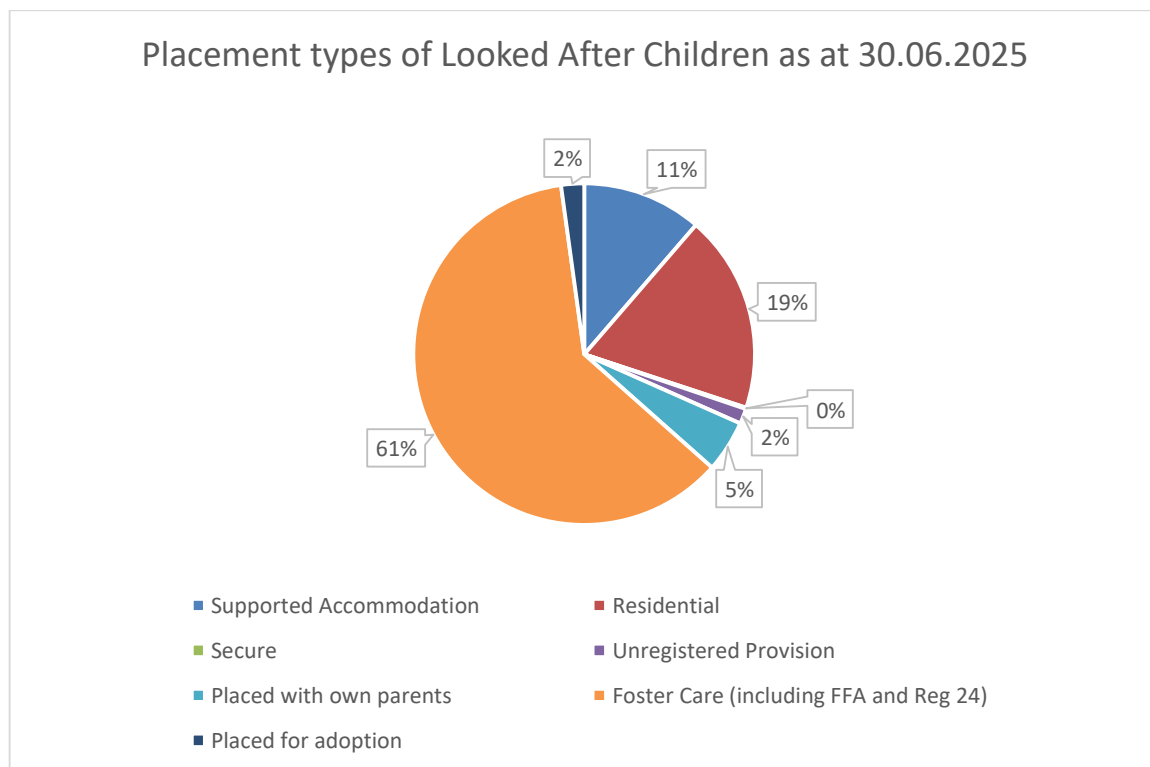


3. Placements

3.1. Children’s Services placement sufficiency aims to ensure that children in care have access to the right accommodation and services in the right places to effectively support East Sussex children, young people, and families.

3.2. Part of our sufficiency strategy is focused on ensuring that we have a wide range of placements to meet the diverse needs of our children and young people, these include foster care (in house and independent fostering agencies), residential children’s home (in house and private children’s homes) supported lodgings and supported accommodation. Decisions about where children live are made with the child’s best interests at the forefront, taking into account their emotional, physical, and educational needs, as well as any specific challenges they may face. Chart 6 provides an overview of the ‘placement mix’ at the end of Q1.

Chart 6: Details of the types of placements that Looked After Children are in at the end of Quarter 1:



3.3. A total of 426 children were living in foster care at the end of June 2025, this is an increase since the last quarter of 2. This makes up 61% of the overall total number of looked after children. Of that number, 270 (63%) were living with approved ESCC carers which includes 29 who were placed long term with fully approved family and friends' carers. 4 children were placed with foster carers who were also approved adopters as part of the Fostering for Adoption pathway. 102 children were living with external agency carers, and 1 child was placed with Other Local Authority foster carers. At the end of the quarter, the number of children who were living with temporary approved family and friends foster carers was 49 which is a decrease of 10 since the last quarter.

3.4. There were 15 children placed for adoption at the end of June 2025 which has remained the same as the previous quarter. This is 2% of the overall total number of looked after children.

3.5. There were 89 young people living in supported accommodation and unregistered provision which has remained the same as the previous quarter. This was 13% of the total number of looked after children. The figure of 89 included 10 children who were placed in unregistered provision, the majority of which were with providers who were in the process of registering with Ofsted. Of the 10 children living in unregistered placements there were 4 children who were under 16 years old. Of these 4, 2 providers were awaiting registration with Ofsted, 1 was CQC registered and 1 was a registered Children's home in Wales. These placements are only used in exceptional circumstances where no suitable alternative regulated provision is available. In these circumstances robust risk assessments and monitoring plans are made to ensure children are cared for safely.

3.6. At the end of June 2025, the number of children living in regulated residential children's homes increased from 125 to 130. This represents 19% of all looked after children. Of these 130 children, 23 were living in ESCC run children's homes, and 107 were placed in external residential homes. This quarter then, has seen an increase in the number of children living in our in-house children's homes of 4, and an increase in children living in agency children's homes of 1. Strenuous attempts are made to

place children in our in-house provision prior to referring out to an agency placement. There are rigorous negotiations on both quality and price when placement searches are made with external providers. Where children are placed in external residential homes the service remains committed to step the children down into family arrangements at the right time.

3.7. At the end of June there was 1 ESCC child placed in Secure Children's Homes. This child is placed locally within Lansdowne Secure Children's Home.

3.8. At the end of June there were no children remanded into youth detention accommodation.

3.9. The number of children living at home with their parents whilst remaining subject to a legal order to ESCC has decreased from 35 to 34 since the last quarter. This represents 5% of all looked after children.

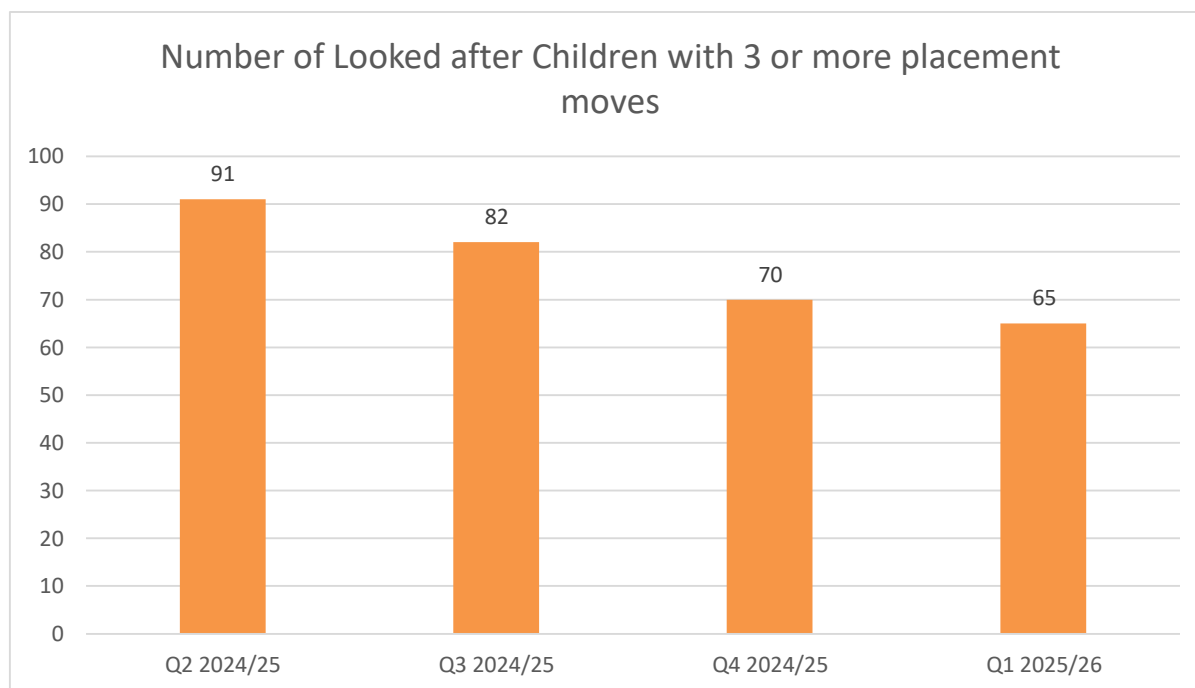
3.10. The improved financial offer that ESCC made to support the recruitment of local foster carers has made a considerable impact on the Fostering Service's recruitment success generally. The number of fostering enquiries over the last 12 months (rolling year) was up to 258. The number of initial visits increased to 75 from 53 in the same period last year. The total number of approvals made were 28 and new placements were 45. In 2024/5 we have had a number of foster carers retire/de-register so for that year our net gain was 17 households, equating to 25 new foster care placements. An analysis of the data suggests that there are fewer numbers of potential foster carers making enquiries, but the calibre of the candidates shows them to be well informed and more likely to proceed to approval successfully. If you take into consideration that last year's data included the conversion of all supported lodgings providers, then this data shows a very significant upturn in the successful recruitment of foster carers.

The table below shows quarterly figures across previous years for comparison:

	Enquiries	Initial Visits (IV)	Approvals	Places
2023/24 Q2	70	14	3	4
2024/25 Q2	66	25	4	7
2023/24 Q3	54	8	15	25*
2024/25 Q3	69	18	12	17
2023/24 Q4	66	11	5	6
2024/25 Q4	68	26	6	12
2024/25 Q1	71	20	8	11
2025/26 Q1	55	6	6	9

* High figure due to conversions of SL providers

Graph 7: Number of Looked After Children with 3 or more placement moves for each quarter.



**Please note that this data is part of the Quarterly Reporting and not from Live data*

3.11. Graph 7 shows the trend in the number of looked after children with 3 or more placement moves. This is an improving picture for this cohort with fewer children moving between placements more than 3 times. Given the very challenging placement sufficiency issues nationally this is a considerable achievement.

3.12. ESCC fully participates in the National Transfer Scheme (NTS) for separated children. The number of separated children who were looked after was 67 at the end of Q1, a reduction of 4 from the previous quarter. In addition, there were 151 asylum seeking young people who were Care Leavers aged over 18 during this period which is a decrease of 2 from the previous quarter (146 18–20-year-olds, an increase of 15, and 5 21–25-year-olds a decrease of 15). This makes up approximately one third of all Care Leavers in ESCC. The number of children being referred through the NTS continued at reduced levels during this quarter. However, the Home Office has been processing separated children's asylum claims much more swiftly this year. However, with an increase in the number of negative decisions, there has developed a significant backlog in the appeals process, with them often taking up to 2 years to be heard.

3.13. The number of children subject to Child Arrangement/Residence Orders (CAO) was 353, and the number of children subject to a Special Guardianship Order (SGO) was 464. Our rate of children cared for within their family networks under CAOs and SGO's is significantly higher than other areas and demonstrates our commitment to supporting children being cared for within their family networks wherever possible.

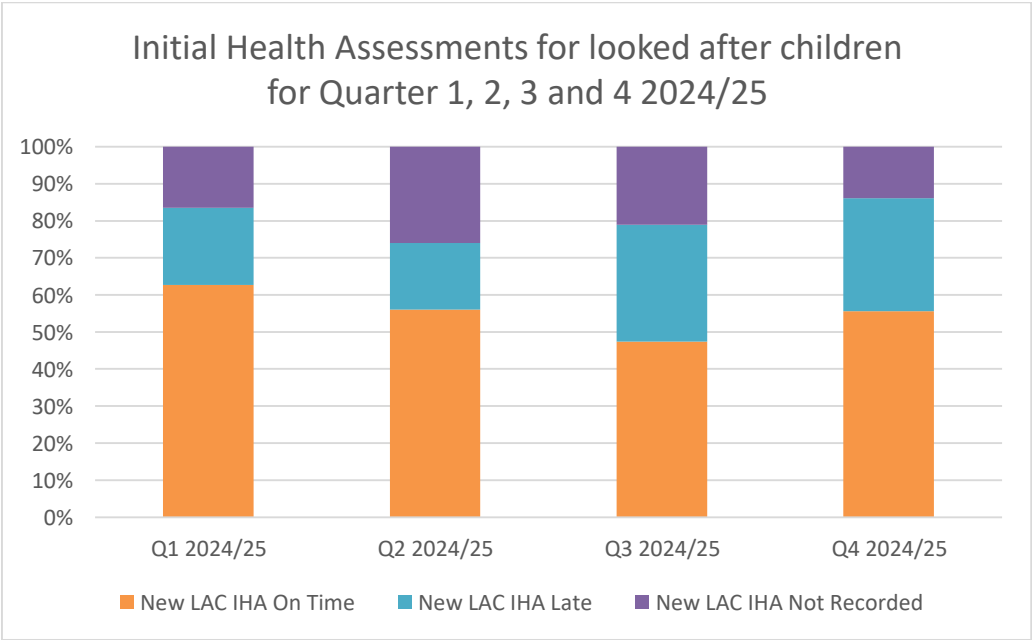
3.14. There were no complaints from Looked After Children during this period. There were 2 complaints received from Care Leavers.

4. Health

4.1 All looked after children require an initial health assessment (IHA) within the first 20 days of becoming looked after; and a subsequent review every 6 months after the IHA if they are under 5 years old, and 12 months if they are over 5 years old. These health assessments are used to inform each child’s care plan and necessary actions to be taken forward to improve their health outcomes.

4.2 The bar chart (Chart 8) below shows the percentage of IHA’s undertaken within 20 days, post 20 days, or not recorded. There has been close monitoring of this area of performance this year and it is pleasing to see the improvements made to date, although there continues much to be done in improving the overall timeliness. The primary reason for IHA’s being rescheduled was when the first appointment could not be attended by the child, the carer, social worker or parent. These appointments are prioritised and rescheduled, although they can fall outside of the 20-day target. For our children placed outside of the local authority area there can be challenges in accessing IHAs within the 20-day timescale as this requires communication with Looked After Children Nursing teams in those areas. A number of adolescent children decline IHAs. There is a robust system in place to ensure that these assessments are completed as a priority even if they do fall outside the recommended timeframe.

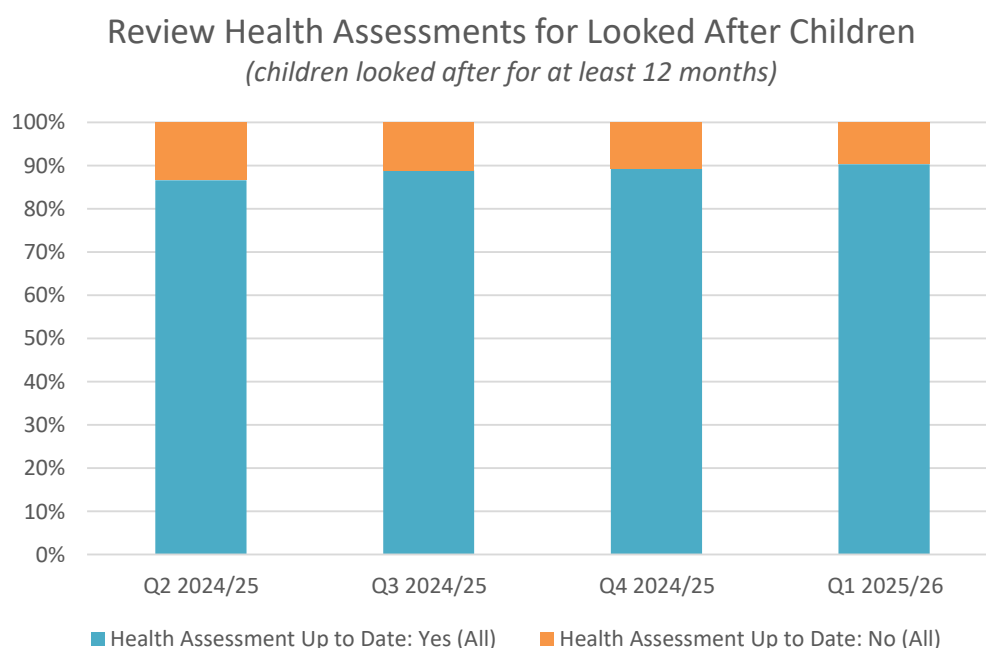
Chart 8: Percentage of Looked After Children with an Initial Health Assessment for Quarters 1,2, 3, and 4 for 2024/25.



**Please note that this Data is obtained from the Locality Dashboard and not from Live data*

4.3 Bar chart 9 below shows the percentage trend of looked after children with an up-to-date Review of their Health Assessment (RHA's). This performance remains strong even though there are a group of older children who chose to decline to take part in their review health assessments at times.

Chart 9: Percentage of Looked After Children with a Review Health Assessment for last 4 quarters.



**Please note that this Data is obtained from the LAC Dashboard and not from Live data*

5. Conclusion and reasons for recommendations

5.1. The number of looked after children has remained relatively constant over the last 12 months which indicates the decrease reported in the last quarter, was likely to be a one-off data issue rather than a trend. It is very pleasing to see the significant progress made during this period in the 3 placement moves or more data as this shows fewer children with disrupted care arrangements. There was a slight increase in children being admitted to care during this quarter and much lower numbers being discharged from care during this period, which accounts for the overall rise in number. In general, ESCC is not a significant outlier when you consider the England, IDACI and statistical neighbours performance data.

5.2. The number of children living in fostering and family placements has seen a slight decrease to 61%, and a dip in the number of children being reunified and placed with their own parents. Reunification plans need to be carefully considered; children and their families well prepared and detailed support plans coordinated for the greatest chances of success. The number of children living in supported accommodation has remained the same, but there has been an increase in the number of children living in residential care. This is an area of focus for the service, as the ESCC number of children living in residential accommodation is significantly higher than our comparator Local Authorities. Whilst there was an increase in the number of children living in our own ESCC residential provision, this overall increase is a key factor in the significant budgetary pressures faced by the Children's Service. The ongoing pressures in placement sufficiency and lack of foster placements nationally is largely responsible for this increase, particularly for children with complex needs.

5.3. We will continue to focus on managing demand through earlier support and interventions (particularly through Connected Families) and our Valuing Care approach, aimed at achieving step downs from high-cost residential provision to family placements wherever possible.

CAROLYN FAIR
Director of Children's Services

Contact Officer: Kathy Marriott
Tel: 01273 481274
Email: Kathy.marriott@eastsussex.gov.uk

LOCAL MEMBERS
All

BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS
None

Committee:	Corporate Parenting Panel
Date:	
Title of Report:	Looked After Children Statistics
By:	Head of Looked After Children
Purpose of Report:	To provide Corporate Parenting Panel (CPP) with an overview of quarter 4 data for Looked After Children
<hr/>	
Recommendations:	The Corporate Parenting Panel is recommended to note the content of the report.
<hr/>	

1. Background – Financial Appraisal

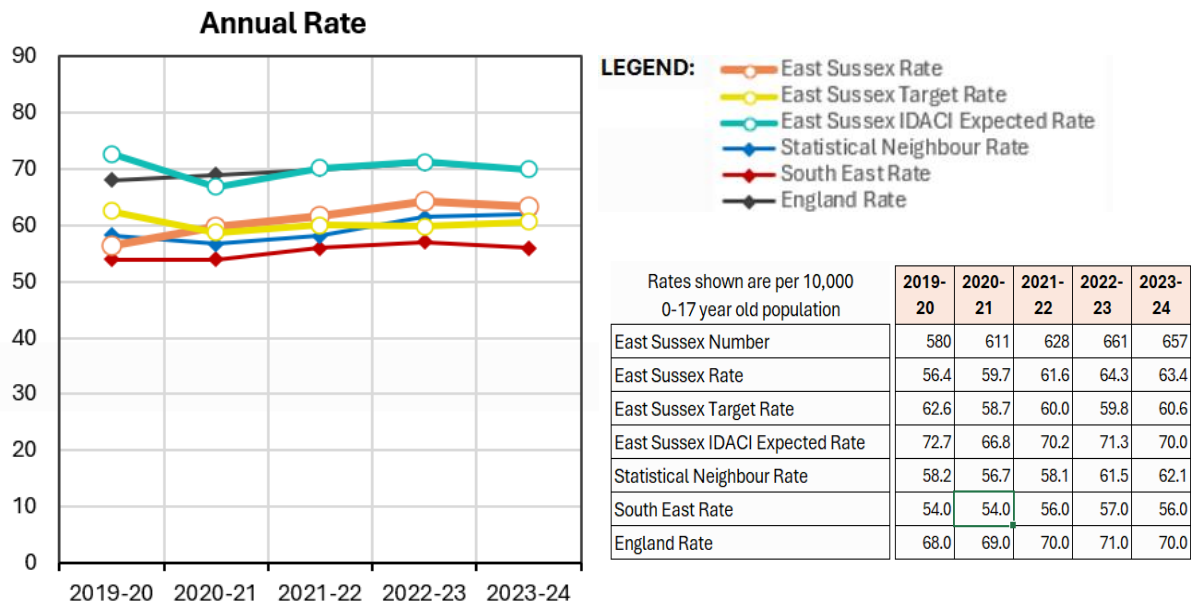
1.1. Services for Looked After Children are predominantly funded from the Children's Services base budget with some additional smaller funding streams supporting specific activity e.g. Virtual School activity from the Pupil Premium Grant and the Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children's grant from the Home Office.

2. Supporting information

2.1. Looked After Children are children in the care of a local authority, typically as a result of concerns regarding their safety or welfare. East Sussex County Council (ESCC) is responsible for safeguarding, supporting, and promoting the welfare of children in its care. This regular report to CPP aims to provide an overview of the most recent data regarding looked after children in ESCC.

2.2. Data found in the charts in this report are drawn as a snapshot on the last day of the month (unless otherwise stated) and some changes occur as data is cleansed within the system. Any changes made to the system will update the data as at the correct date of the activity not the date of entry, therefore the end of year figures produced for the Department of Education 903 collection will show the finalised ESCC figures.

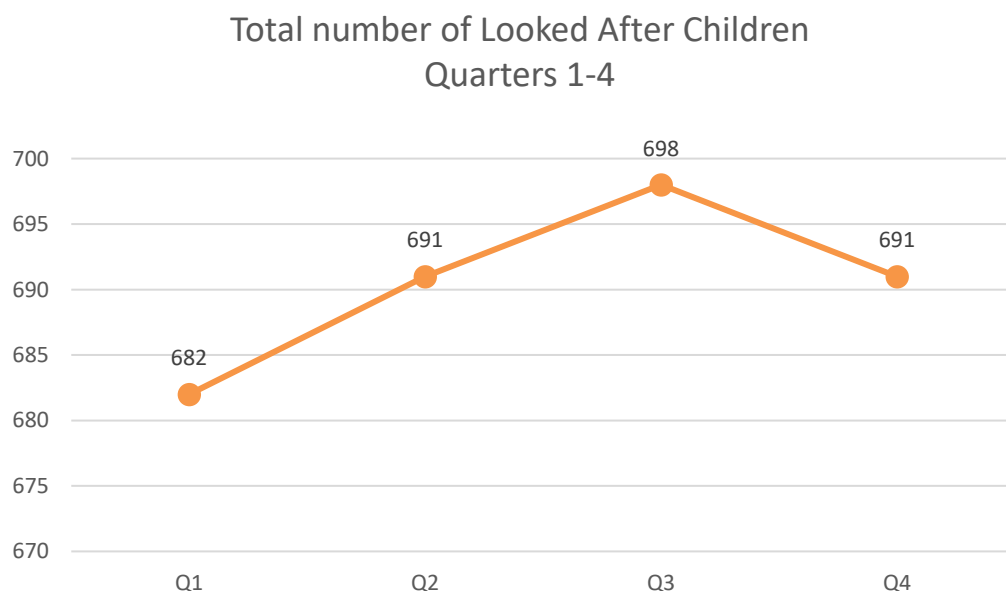
Graph 1: rate of LAC in East Sussex 2020-2024, compared with England, statistical neighbours, and Income Deprivation Affecting Children Index (IDACI).



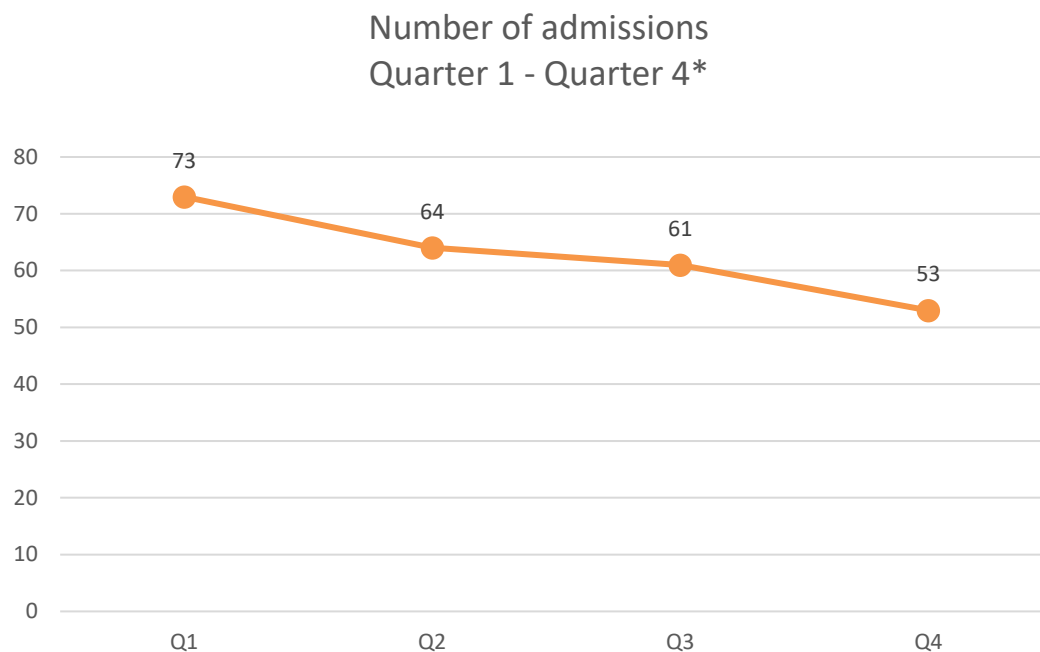
2.3. This is the most current published data available. It is updated through the DfE data collection process and is usually available in the autumn of each year. The graph and data above evidence a gradual increase in the rate and number of looked after children in East Sussex over the last five years. The ESCC performance remains below the national rate for England and IDACI (expected rates based on levels of deprivation). However, it is significantly above the South East rate and slightly above our statistical neighbours. Our focus is on enabling children to live at home, or within their family networks wherever possible. When children do need to come into our care, we aim to ensure that children live in the right placement, for the right length of time.

2.4. Graph 2 illustrates a small decrease in the number of looked after children since the end of Quarter 3, with 691 looked after children (this includes 71 separated children-formerly known as unaccompanied asylum-seeking children) at the end of March 2025 (Q4). It is too early to be sure whether this reduction is a downward trend, but it appears to be moving in the right direction.

Graph 2: Total number of Looked After Children over the last 4 quarters.

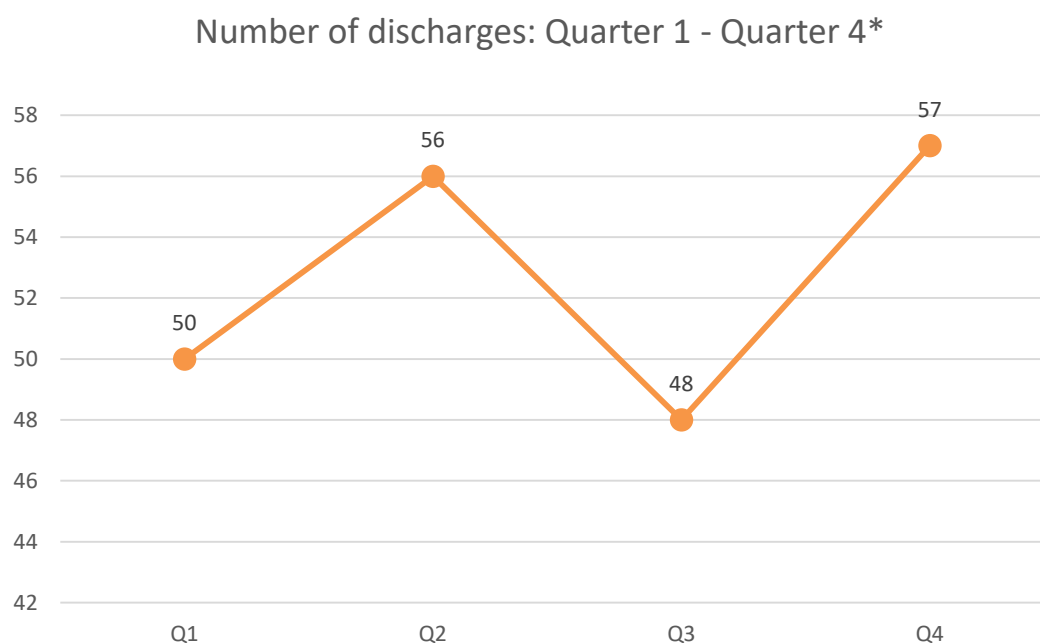


Graph 3: Total number of admissions for each Quarter



2.5. There has been a total of 53 children admitted to care in Q4. The admissions were made up of a small number of sibling groups, children being accommodated under Section 20 of the Children's Act and 12 separated children, 11 being transferred via the National Transfer Scheme (NTS) and 1 was a spontaneous arrival. The gradual reduction in admissions can be attributed to impact of our Connected Families programme which is delivering evidence-based support and interventions to children and families subject to child protection planning. It is also important to note that 17 of these children were placed within their family networks at the point they were admitted to care.

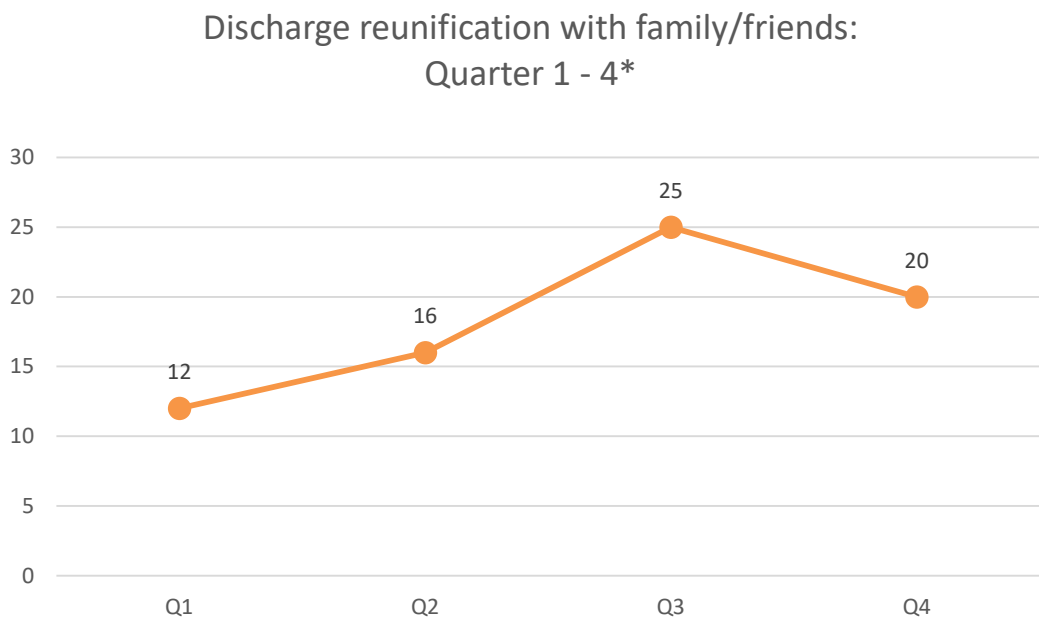
Graph 4: Total number of discharges for each Quarter



2.6. This data represents children who have left care because they have become 18 years old, have had a change in their legal status through being adopted or have had special guardianship, child arrangement or residence orders made, or have returned to their family networks.

2.7. As part of our approach to enabling more children to live safely with their families the service has been focused on supporting children to be reunited with their families or wider network where it is possible to do so. In the last quarter 20 children were successfully reunified with family/friends. Graph five illustrates the number of reunifications achieved this year to date, and although there has been a slight dip in this quarter it is pleasing to see the maintenance of higher the numbers of children where this plan has been achieved.

Graph 5: Number of discharges where Looked After Children were reunified with family and friends each Quarter



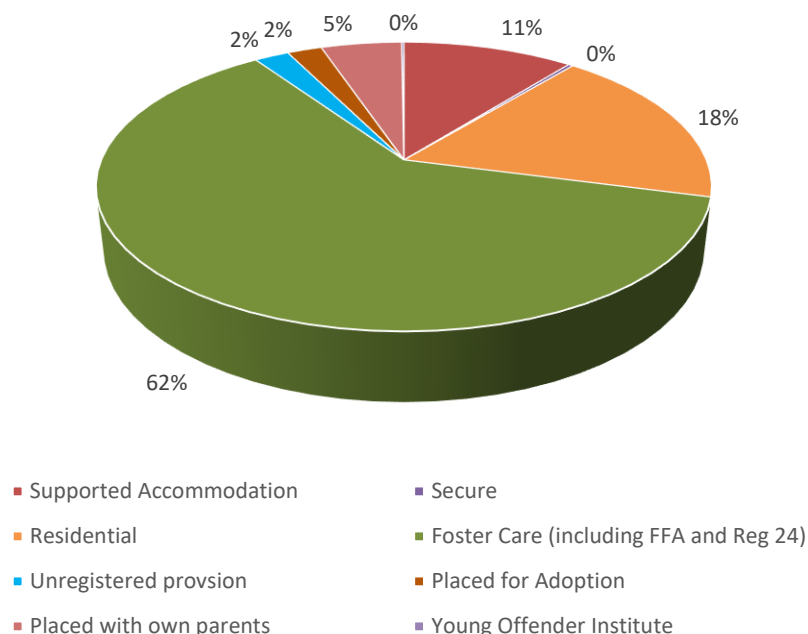
3. Placements

3.1. Children’s Services placement sufficiency aims to ensure that children in care have access to the right accommodation and services in the right places to effectively support east Sussex children, young people, and families.

3.2. Part of our sufficiency strategy is focused on ensuring that we have a wide range of placements to meet the diverse needs of our children and young people, these include foster care (in house and independent fostering agencies), residential children’s home (in house and private children’s homes) supported lodgings and supported accommodation. Decisions about where children live are made with the child’s best interests at the forefront, taking into account their emotional, physical, and educational needs, as well as any specific challenges they may face. Chart 6 provides an overview of the ‘placement mix’ at the end of Q4.

Chart 6: Details of the types of placements that Looked After Children are in at the end of Quarter 4:

Placement types of Looked After Children as at
31.03.2025



3.3. A total of 424 children were living in foster care at the end of March 2025, this is a decrease since the last quarter of 11. However, this still makes up 62% of the total number of looked after children, as the overall number of children in this cohort has decreased. Of that number, 261 (62%) were living with approved ESCC carers which includes 25 who were placed long term with fully approved family and friends' carers. 4 children were placed with foster carers who were also approved adopters as part of the Fostering for Adoption pathway. 100 children were living with external agency carers. There are currently no children placed with Other Local Authority foster carers. At the end of the quarter, the number of children who were living with temporary approved family and friends foster carers was 59 which is a decrease of 9 since the last quarter.

3.4. There were 15 children placed for adoption at the end of March 2025 which is a decrease of 1 since the previous quarter. This is 2% of the total number of looked after children.

3.5. There were 89 young people living in supported accommodation and unregistered provision which is a decrease of 6 since the previous quarter. This is 13% of the total number of looked after children. 83% of those in supported accommodation are in registered provision. 15 children (17%) placed in unregistered provision; the majority of these unregistered placements are where the providers are in the process of registering with Ofsted. Of the 15 unregistered placements there were 4 children that are under 16 years old. These placements are only used in exceptional circumstances where no suitable alternative regulated provision is available. In these circumstances robust risk assessments and monitoring plans are made to ensure children are cared for safely.

3.6. At the end of March 2025, the number of children living in regulated residential children's homes increased from 120 to 125. This represents 18% of all looked after children. Of these 125 children, 19 were living in ESCC run children's homes, and 106 were placed in external residential homes. This quarter then, has seen a decrease in the number of children living in our in-house children's homes and an increase in children living in agency children's homes. Strenuous attempts are made to place children in our in-house provision prior to referring out to an agency placement. There are rigorous negotiations on both quality and price when placement searches are made with external providers. Where children

are placed in external residential homes the service remains committed to step the children down into family arrangements at the right time. The Valuing Care Panel introduced by Impower considers all child with a plan for reunification or step down and works to remove any barriers that may impede the plan being successfully implemented.

3.7. At the end of March there were 2 ESCC children placed in Secure Children's Homes. These children were all placed locally within Lansdowne Secure Children's Home.

3.8. At the end of March there was one child remanded into youth detention accommodation.

3.9. The number of children living at home with their parents whilst remaining subject to a legal order to ESCC has increased from 28 to 35 since the last quarter. This is 5% of all looked after children.

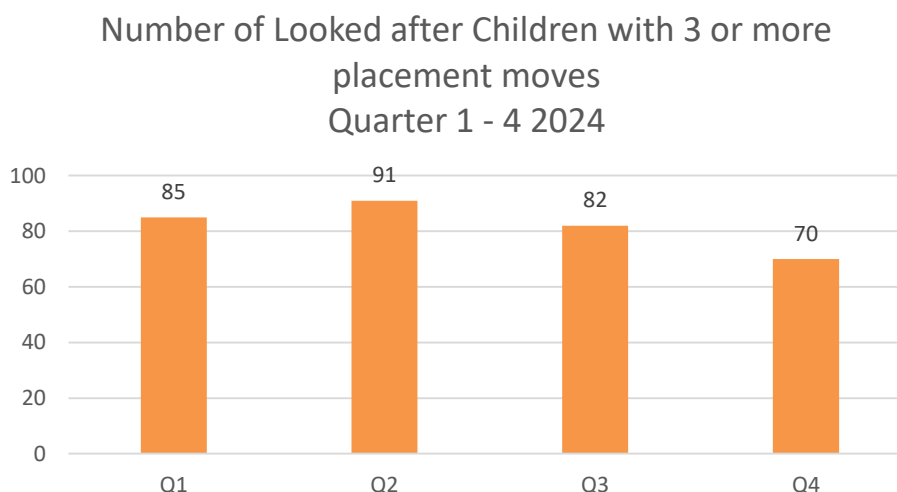
3.10. The improved financial offer that ESCC made to support the recruitment of local foster carers is continuing to drive up our recruitment success. The number of fostering enquiries for Q1 to Q4 is up to 274, as compared to 237 from the same period in 23/24. The number of initial visits increased to 89 this year compared to 45 in the same period last year. The total number of approvals rose to 30 at the end of Quarter 4 exceeding last year's total figure of 26. There are a total of 47 new places approved for this year, which is a net gain of 25 places and 17 household. If you take into consideration that last year's data included the conversion of all supported lodgings providers, then this data shows a very significant upturn in the successful recruitment of foster carers.

The table below shows quarterly figures across the years 2023/24 and 2024/25 for comparison:

	Enquiries	Initial Visits (IV)	Approvals	Places
2023/24 Q1	47	12	3	3
2024/25 Q1	71	20	8	11
2023/24 Q2	70	14	3	4
2024/25 Q2	66	25	4	7
2023/24 Q3	54	8	15	25*
2024/25 Q3	69	18	12	17
2023/24 Q4	66	11	5	6
2024/25 Q4	68	26	6	12

* High figure due to conversions of SL providers

Graph 7: Number of Looked After Children with 3 or more placement moves for each quarter.



**Please note that this data is part of the Quarterly Reporting and not from Live data*

3.11. Graph 7 shows the trend in the number of looked after children with 3 or more placement moves. This is an improving picture for this cohort with fewer children moving between placements more than 3 times. Given the very challenging placement sufficiency issues nationally this is a considerable achievement.

3.12. ESCC fully participates in the National Transfer Scheme (NTS) for separated children. The number of separated children who were looked after was 71 at the end of Q4, a reduction of 6 from the previous quarter. In addition, there were 151 asylum seeking young people who were Care Leavers aged over 18 during this period which is a decrease of 2 from the previous quarter (131 18–21year olds, an increase of 6, and 20 21–25-year-olds a decrease of 8). The numbers of children being referred through the NTS continued at reduced levels in the early part of the quarter but picked up dramatically in March. The Home Office has been processing separated children's asylum claims much more swiftly this year. However, with an increase in the number of negative decisions, there has developed a significant backlog in the appeals process, with them often taking up to 2 years to be heard. The total number of separated children who are care leavers is 216 (this includes under 18's). This makes up 33% of the total number of care leavers in East Sussex, which was 645 at the end of Quarter 4.

3.13. The number of children subject to Child Arrangement/Residence Orders (CAO) was 350, and the number of children subject to a Special Guardianship Order (SGO) was 463. Our rate of children cared for within their family networks under CAOs and SGO's is significantly higher than other areas and demonstrates our commitment to supporting children being cared for within their family networks wherever possible.

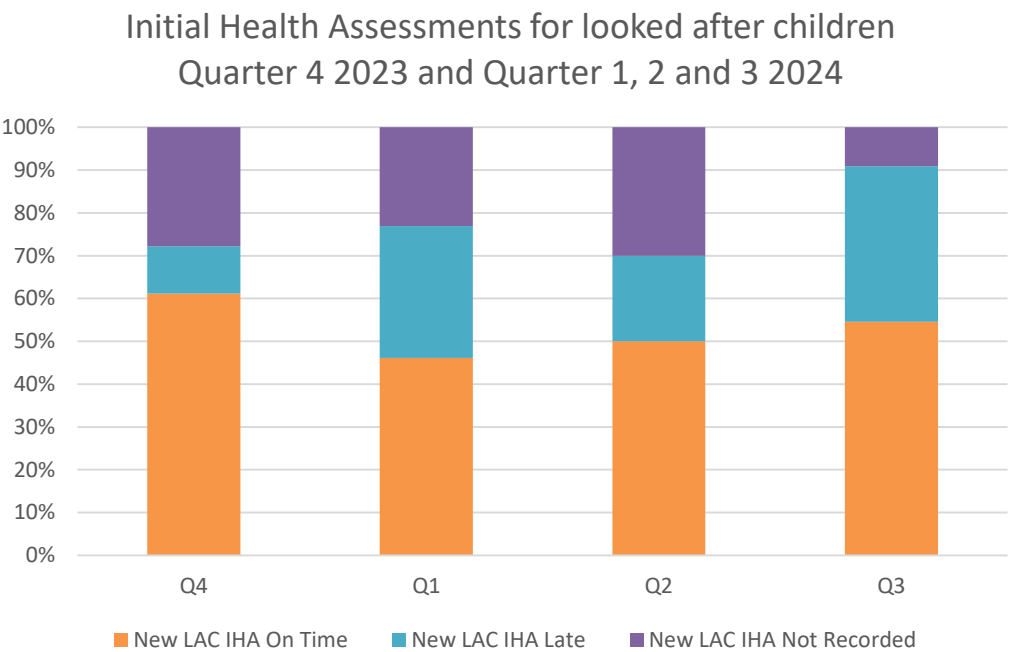
3.14. There were 5 complaints from Looked After Children during this period. 2 of these complaints were assisted by the advocacy service and 3 complaints were made directly by the young people.

4. Health

4.1 All looked after children require an initial health assessment (IHA) within the first 20 days of becoming looked after; and a subsequent review every 6 months after the IHA if they are under 5 years old, and 12 months if they are over 5 years old. These health assessments are used to inform each child's care plan and necessary actions to be taken forward to improve their health outcomes.

4.2 The bar chart (8) below shows the percentage of IHA's undertaken within 20 days, post 20 days, or not recorded. There has been close monitoring of this area of performance this year and it is pleasing to see the improvements made to date, although there continues much to be done in improving the overall timeliness. The primary reason for IHA's being rescheduled was when the first appointment could not be attended by the child, the carer, social worker or parent. These appointments are prioritised and rescheduled, although they can fall outside of the 20 day target. For our children placed outside of the local authority area there can be challenges in accessing IHAs within the 20-day timescale as this requires communication with Looked After Children Nursing teams in those areas. A number of adolescent children decline IHAs. There is a robust system in place to ensure that these assessments are completed as a priority even if they do fall outside the recommended timeframe.

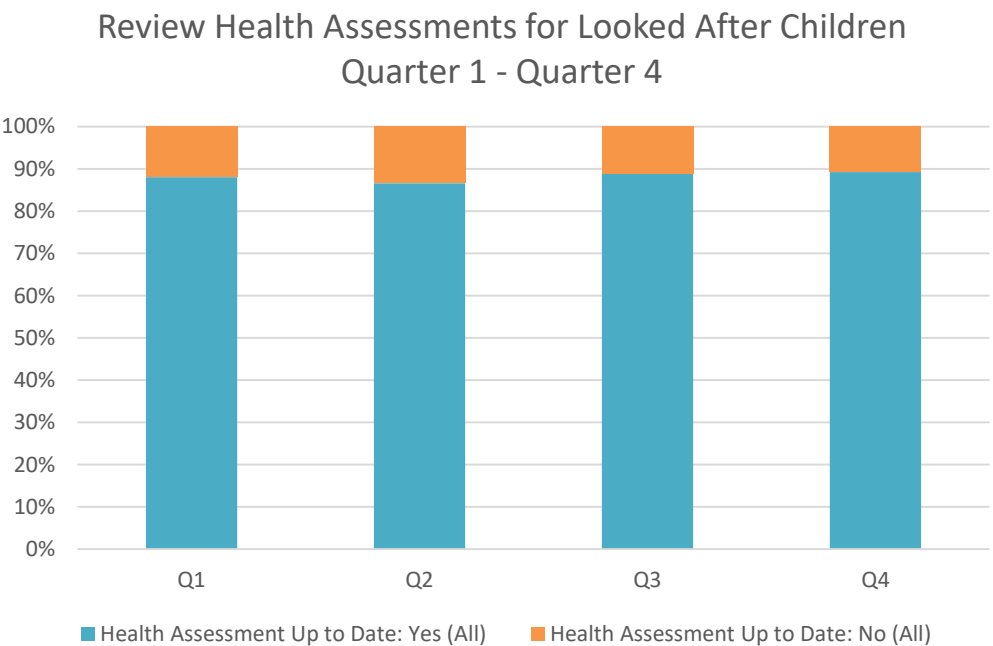
Chart 8: Percentage of Looked After Children with an Initial Health Assessment for Quarter 4 2023/24 and Quarters 1 and 2 and 3 for 2024/25.



**Please note that this Data is obtained from the Locality Dashboard and not from Live data*

4.3 Bar chart 9 below shows the percentage trend of looked after children with an up-to-date Review of their Health Assessment (RHA's). This performance remains strong even though there are a group of older children who chose to decline to take part in their review health assessments at times.

Chart 9: Percentage of Looked After Children with a Review Health Assessment for Quarter 1-4



**Please note that this Data is obtained from the LAC Dashboard and not from Live data*

5. Conclusion and reasons for recommendations

5.1. Whilst the number of looked after children has decreased slightly this quarter, it is too soon to judge will be an ongoing trend. This has been achieved by fewer children being admitted to care and higher numbers being discharged from care during this period. In general, ESCC is not a significant outlier when you consider the England, IDACI and statistical neighbours performance data. The number of children living in fostering and family placements has been maintained at 62%, with an increase in the number of children being reunified and placed with their own parents. The number of children living in supported accommodation has decreased, but there has been an increase in the number of children living in residential care. This increase is showing primarily in children living in agency residential homes which contributes to the significant budgetary pressures faced by the Children's Service. The ongoing pressures in placement sufficiency is largely responsible for this increase particularly for children with complex needs. We will continue to focus on managing demand through earlier support and interventions (particularly through Connected Families) and our Valuing Care approach, aimed at achieving step downs from high-cost residential provision to family placements wherever possible.

CAROLYN FAIR
Director of Children's Services

Contact Officer: Kathy Marriott
Tel: 01273 481274
Email: Kathy.marriott@eastsussex.gov.uk

LOCAL MEMBERS

All

BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS

None

This page is intentionally left blank

Report to: Corporate Parenting Panel

Date of meeting: 17 July 2025

By: Director of Children's Services

Title: Fostering Annual Report

Purpose: To provide an update on the performance of the ESCC Fostering Service.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Corporate Parenting Panel are recommended to note the update on the performance of the East Sussex County Council Fostering Service.

1. Background

- 1.1 The Annual Fostering Report provides information relating to the activity, performance and forward plans of East Sussex County Council's Fostering Service. This report is required under [Fostering Services \(England\) Regulations \(2011\)](#) and [National Minimum Standards \(2011\)](#) and is intended to support elected members and senior leaders to scrutinise the quality of care provided to children and the support provided by the service to our carers.

2. Supporting information

- 2.1 The report sets out the vision for the Fostering Service, alongside data relating to recruitment and retention of carers, our approach to supervision and support, our training and development offer and key priorities for the coming year.
- 2.2 Successes in 2024-25 highlighted in the report include:
- Highest number of enquiries in five years has led to a strong conversion rate of 33% from home visit to approval
 - Net increase of 17 households & 25 places (compared to 23/24 net of 8 households but -1 place)
 - Maintained strength of in-house carer utilisation at 76% on 31/3/25 against national average of 60% for 23/24
 - Payments uplift for ESCC foster carers in line with National Minimum Allowance (NMA) in April 2024- supporting recruitment and retention, improved focus on fostering and wellbeing, increased transfer enquiries
 - Implemented new placements and commissioning structure to continue to improve our home-finding processes for children in our care
 - Launched new digital foster carer handbook and Learning Pool training platform
 - Rebranded promotional collateral and website
 - Continued development of Buddy scheme
 - Launched first Mockingbird Constellation
 - Management and recruitment collaborative events with neighbouring LA's
 - Launched 'Replenish' boxes and workshops to improve our corporate parenting to black and mixed heritage children in care
- 2.3 The priorities for the Fostering Service for 2025/26 included in the report are outlined below:
- Focus recruitment and development of foster carer resource to deliver more flexible, substantive placement options

- Focus on how the Fostering Service can work with Placements & Commissioning to achieve effective step down
- Embed 1st Mockingbird constellation with ambition to open two more constellations by end of 2026/27
- Ensure smooth transition of Placement Support Service to Placement and Commissioning Service and embed flexible, needs led provision
- Work with WSCC and B&H to enhance Regional Fostering Recruitment, Development and Support
- Work to respond to unique needs of Connected Carers
- Launch Fostering Dashboard to improve performance management and analysis
- Audit implementation of the new Supervision Form and digitise this to enhance oversight
- Ensure that Training and Development offer remains relevant for experienced carers and addresses contemporary issues
- Further develop a culture of professional responsibility, improvement and innovation across all staff levels
- Work with ESFCA to ensure appropriate representation of all ESCC foster carers

3. Conclusion and reasons for recommendations

- 3.1 The Corporate Parenting Panel is asked to note the update on the performance of the East Sussex County Council Fostering Service.

CAROLYN FAIR
Director of Children's Services

Contact Officer: Fiona Lewis – Head of Service LAC Provider Services
 Tel. No. 07500109143
 Email: Fiona.lewis@eastsussex.gov.uk

APPENDICES

Appendix 1 – Fostering Service Annual Report

East Sussex County Council Fostering Service



**Annual
Report
2024/25**

Page 81

Appendix 1

**East Sussex
Fostering**

Our Service values

The East Sussex County Council (ESCC) Fostering Service aims to provide a range of safe and stable placements for children who cannot be cared for in their own families, and to ensure that our carers have the dedication, knowledge and skills to help children in the care of the local authority to realise their full potential.

We are committed to working with our professional partners to achieve good outcomes for children and young people who are looked after by East Sussex County Council.

We maintain a consistent dialogue with our staff teams, our carers and care-experienced young people so that our decision-making is relevant and informed across four functions:

Recruitment
&
Assessment

Supervision
&
Retention

Placement
Support
Service

Training
&
Development

Ambitions

- Offer our children and young people safe, stable and caring places to live with as many family-based placements as possible.
- Maintain a strong and respectful partnership with our dedicated foster carers, enabling them to support our young people within a network of enduring and loving relationships and secure attachments.
- Support our children and young people to thrive and achieve their full potential.
- Increased work towards reunification.

Objectives

- To secure sufficient and relevant accommodation for our children's needs within a whole system approach - locally when appropriate and for the right price.
- To increase placement capacity and diversity of carers across the whole county to meet the diverse needs of our children and young people, matching children culturally where possible and always supporting individual identities.
- To recruit, train and retain our foster carers to provide the highest quality of care.
- To increase the number of in-house placements.
- To fully engage in the Local Authority Fostering South East Regional Hub (LAFSE) 12 month pilot scheme.

Outcomes

- Continued respect and support for our foster carers' rights to a family life, ensuring positive long-term working relationships with fewer placement breakdowns.
- More East Sussex children placed in ESCC family environments in their local community, maintaining local connections to improve outcomes and when relevant reunification, reducing time in care.
- Improved collaborative operational working with neighbouring local authority fostering services.

National Trends

The number of mainstream foster care households in England has fallen by 10% over the past three years, despite a rising care population

As of 31 March 2024, there were 33,745 approved non-kinship foster households, down by 1,260 (3.6%) on the year before and by 3,580 (9.6%) since 2021

The number of family-and-friends households (who are approved to care only for specific children) grew for a second consecutive year in 2023-24, from 8,400 to 8,865

However this growth has been far exceeded by the decline in the number of mainstream households, meaning total fostering capacity has fallen from 45,370 to 42,615 from 2021-24, a drop of 6.1% (2,755)

The fall in the number of mainstream fostering households translated into a drop in the number of approved fostering places in 2023-24, from 72,770 to 70,465. This figure has fallen year on year since 2020, when it stood at 78,830.

Meanwhile, the number of filled approved mainstream places, which was stable from 2021-23, fell in 2023-24, from 44,580 to 42,870. This is despite the number of children in care in England having grown by 3,070, to 83,840, from 2021-23, a period during which the children's home sector has grown significantly.

Sector charity the Fostering Network said the declining number of carers was the result of a lack of remuneration, inadequate support from their council or fostering agency and www.seslip.co.uk insufficient respect for their role.

The Department for Education (DfE) pointed to increased investment since 2023 in foster care recruitment through the rollout of regional hubs to support applicants through the process, which will be extended to the whole country in 2025-26.

[https://www.communitycare.co.uk/2024/11/13/number-of\[1\]mainstream-foster-care-households-down-by-10-over-past-three-years/](https://www.communitycare.co.uk/2024/11/13/number-of[1]mainstream-foster-care-households-down-by-10-over-past-three-years/) To read the Ofsted report:
[https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/fostering-in\[1\]england-1-april-2023-to-31-march-2024/fostering-in-england-1-april-2023-to-31-march\[1\]2024](https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/fostering-in[1]england-1-april-2023-to-31-march-2024/fostering-in-england-1-april-2023-to-31-march[1]2024)

Recruitment Statistics

Recruitment	2019/20		2020/21		2021/22		2022/23		2023/24		2024/25	
Enquiries	260		228		200		274		237		276	
Q&A calls	106		95		69		79		70		23*	
Home visits (IV)	68		50		33		43		45		90*	
Approvals H/holds > places	22	39	20	30	14	21	24	40	26	38	30	47
Targets	30	44	30	44	30	44	25	44	26	44	36	50
Conversion												
Enquiry to IV	26%		21%		17%		16%		19%		33%*	
Enquiry to approval	8%		9%		7%		9%		11%		11%	
IV to approval	32%		42%		42%		56%		58%		33%*	

* New 2024/25 ESCC system of removing the Q&A call from the recruitment process to improve response to assessment speed when relevant. This is reflected in Q&A call volume reduction and increase in home visits.

Foster Carers	2023/24	2024/25
Approved households/places	26/38	30/47
Deregistrations households/places	18/39	13/22
Loss/ households/places	+8/-1	+17/+25

Our Successes Included:



- Highest number of enquiries in five years has led to a strong conversion rate of 33% from home visit to approval
- Net increase of 17 households & 25 places
(Compared to 23/24 net of 8 households but -1 place)
- Maintained strength of in-house carer utilisation at 76% on 31/3/25 against national average of 60% for 23/24
- Payments uplift for ESCC foster carers in line with National Minimum Allowance (NMA) in April 2024 - supporting recruitment and retention, improved focus on fostering and wellbeing, increased transfer enquiries
- Implemented new placements and commissioning structure to continue to improve our home-finding processes for children in our care
- Launched new digital foster carer handbook and Learning Pool training platform
- Rebranded promotional collateral and website
- Continued development of Buddy scheme
- Launched first Mockingbird Constellation
- Management and recruitment collaborative events with neighbouring LA's
- Launched 'Replenish' boxes and workshops to improve our corporate parenting to black and mixed heritage children in care

Meeting Our Targets

Our engaging and experienced Assessment and Recruitment team (ART) understand the pressure of a growing population of children in care:

- Supportive of each other in striving to be as progressive, caring and commercial as possible in their practice to achieve the best outcomes for ESCC from enquiry to approval throughout a robust assessment process
- Ambitious targets this year were almost met, surpassing recent years' recruitment achievements in a tough and financially austere marketplace
- Delivering recruitment messages via new, relevant and changing channels to ensure we appear where a diverse range of potential enquirers are searching and consuming information eg. YouTube, Google Ads, ad-hoc community recruitment pop-up opportunities
- Working with internal and external professional partnerships and groups to keep pace with upcoming opportunities, support systems and maintaining practice flexibility when possible. To encourage enquiries through to supporting carers post-approval

Advertising,
branding,
internal/external
comm's & promo
merchandise

Recruitment
Ambassadors,
Buddy scheme,
information
events

Retention events,
Mockingbird,
Young People Who
Foster, support
groups, training

Placement
Support ongoing
relationships and
short breaks offer

From 1 April 2024 to 31 March 2025:

276 new enquiries received

- 106 progressed to assessment
- 27 were closed by service
- 108 were closed by applicant
- 35 were open and being followed up
- Enquiry to approval conversion rate ESCC 11% (compared to LAFSE Region 6%)

13 households offering 22 places were deregistered. Of those:

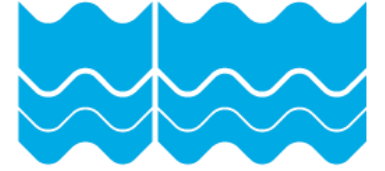
- 1 transferred to another fostering service
- 9 ceased/retired from fostering
- 2 were connected family and friends carers and the child moved
- 1 was following an allegation and presentation to fostering panel

Net gain

With 30 new approved households offering 47 places and 13 existing households offering 22 places deregistered this year, there was a **net gain of 17 households and 25 places**

Fostering Assessment & Recruitment Team
2 Team Managers (=1 FTE)
7 Assessing Social Workers (4 FTE, 3 P/T)*
2 P/T Caseworkers
1 P/T Marketing Officer

** NB 1.6 fte ASWs on secondment/maternity leave*



APPROACHABLE | INFORMATIVE | CREATIVE | RESOURCEFUL | HONEST

Sharing our message
with the community
face-to-face at
targeted events with
support from our
Councillors and Senior
Leadership Team, as well as
offering ongoing, online
information sessions

East Sussex
Fostering

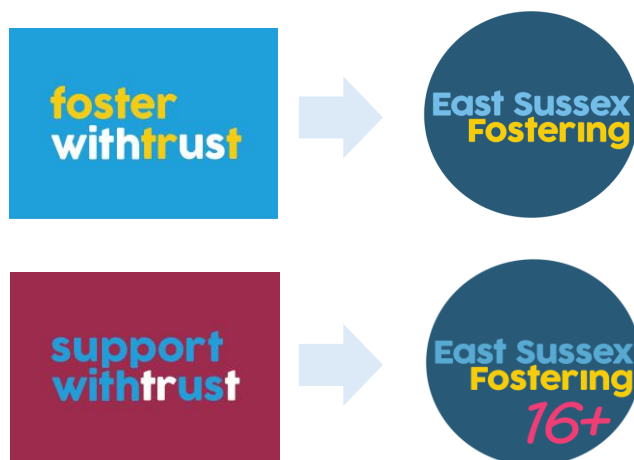


Cost-effective recruitment campaigns developed by a specific fostering marketing professional within the service have increased engagement and following amongst the wider market of potential enquirers, as well as the existing foster carer cohort and staff teams.

We re-branded to include our location and expanded the fostering service colour palette for operational visibility and flexibility

Investment in branded merchandise, marketing collateral and trial of new digital channels has replaced expensive roundabout signage in a refreshed marketing mix including both digital, community and traditional channels eg. Posters, flyers, press releases, radio campaigns as well as organic and PPC (pay per click) campaigns on social media platforms including Facebook, Google Ads, Instagram and YouTube .

Promotional messaging includes a warm and welcoming insight into all types of fostering; its benefits, rewards, commitment and flexibility. It also uses language to prepare enquirers with an understanding of the honest, compassionate, fair and non-discriminatory role of the recruitment team who enquirers will meet at the start of their fostering journey with East Sussex County Council.



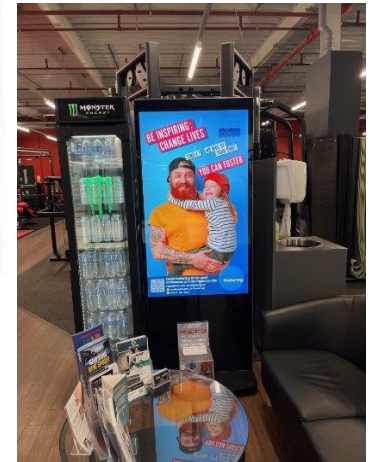
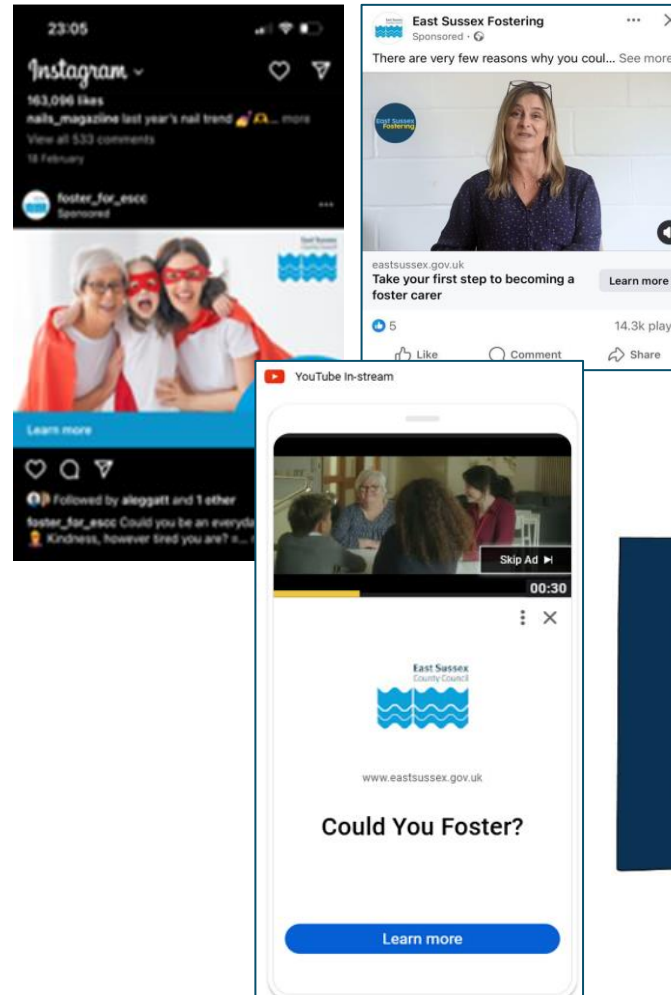
East Sussex
Fostering

Campaigns

Website refresh
with new
branding and
increased
functionality



Multi-platform digital
and traditional
campaigns ongoing



East Sussex
Fostering

Assessment

COMPASSIONATE | PROGRESSIVE | FLEXIBLE
THOROUGH | REALISTIC | INNOVATIVE

- Aim from case allocation to Panel approval is 3 to 4 months; we perform strongly against statistical neighbours and IFAs where 6+ months is typical
- Moved from **Skills to Foster** pre-approval training platform to **Becoming a Fostering Family** as a pilot - more reflective with emphasis on attachments of enquirer. Similar cost to the fostering service
- Recruitment Ambassadors group of diverse and experienced foster carers are available to enquirers can talk to 'real' foster carers for an initial chat before and during the assessment process
- **Valuing Care** tool being built in to the whole fostering service from the outset at assessment stage



Assessment Statistics

2024/25	Enquiries	Progressed to Assessment	Closed by Service	Closed by Applicant	Approvals (households)
Q1	71	27	9	35	8
Q2	65	29	4	32	4
Q3	70	28	2	30	12
Q4	70	22	12	11	6
Total	276	106	27	108	30

Reasons applicants closed their application:

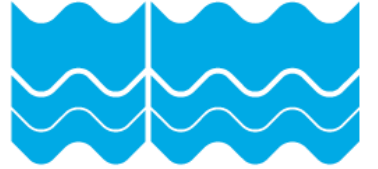
- 3 (AW1) - fostering not as expected
- 1 (AW2) - assessment not as expected
- 26 (AW3) - change in situation (non-financial)
- 78 (AW0) - did not respond to attempts to contact/follow-up enquiry*

*Applicants who progress to assessment and approval often tell us that they have thought about fostering for several years and made previous enquiries. [The Fostering Network](#) reports that 'on average it takes three years between first considering fostering and approval, with the process becoming significantly more rapid the older the foster carer was when they first thought about fostering'.

Approvals

From 1 April 2024 to 31 March 2025, ESCC fostering service gained approval for 30 households offering 47 places (compared with 26 households offering 38 places in 2023/24)

- Of the 30 new households, 27 were mainstream carers, 3 were connected family-and-friends foster carers and 4 were transferring from an independent fostering agency (IFA)
 - Characteristics of the 4 households transferring to ESCC:
 - 2 were approved for parent and child fostering; a recruitment target / key service need
 - 2 were already caring for ESCC children resulting in a saving for ESCC budgets
 - 2 were caring for children from other local authorities resulting in income for ESCC
- 22 allocated assessments were booked for presentation to the fostering panel but unfortunately did not progress. 1 was closed by the fostering service due to a standard of care investigation and report with a transfer application and 21 were withdrawn by applicants with the following reasons:
 - 10 - change in family circumstances
 - 4 - transfer application and decided to remain with IFA
 - 2 - impact on their own children/not right time
 - 4 - fostering not as expected
 - 1 - fostering assessment not as expected



Assessment feedback from foster carers

“ [Our assessing social worker] has been absolutely amazing and has answered every query quickly and been there for both of us throughout the last few months ”

“ The whole experience has been extremely positive from the initial phone call... We were treated with respect throughout and was able to reflect at our own pace ”

“ We appreciated the pace of the assessment process (not rushed) and the timings of the meeting were arranged to suit our diaries ”

“ [We would have liked] more contact with other applicants and more access to foster carers ”

“ I really enjoyed the whole process and already felt like a valued member of your team ”

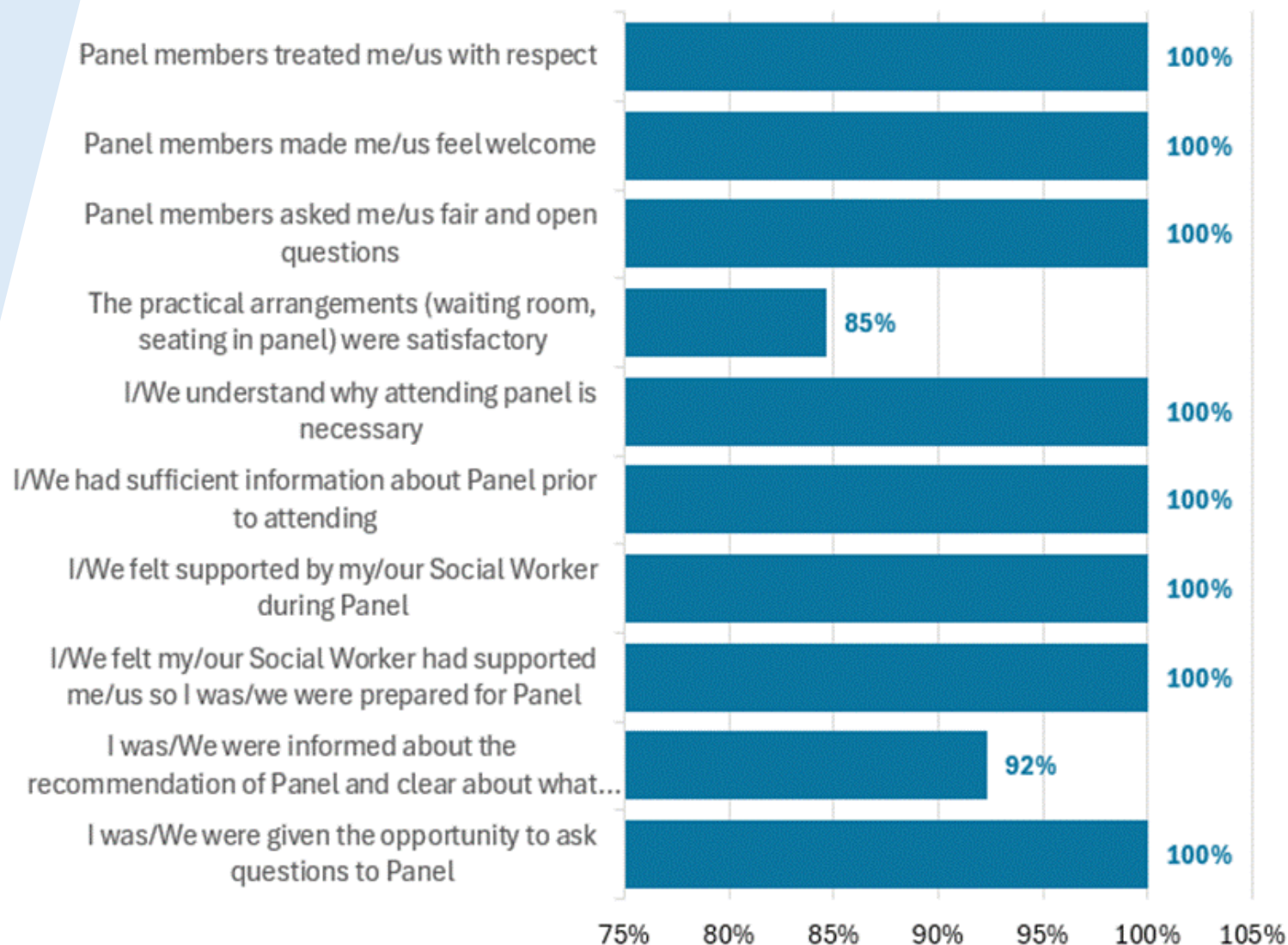
Panel feedback from foster carers

The Assessment Team build positive relationships with prospective foster carers and prepare and support them for Panel.

13 respondents replied to our post panel survey



How respondents found their fostering panel experience during 24/25 (strongly agree/agree)



LOCAL AUTHORITY Fostering SOUTH EAST

ESCC joined a funded Department for Education project to promote recruitment and retention across the South East region and align local authority fostering service practice and process.

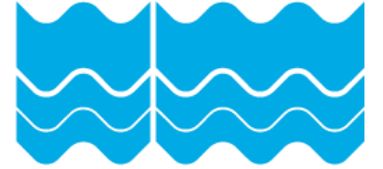
Launched July 2024, this pilot evidenced that ESCC's recruitment and retention processes and outcomes were already of a high standard and benchmarked strongly against neighbouring authorities.

The pilot highlighted the benefits of a more collaborative working relationship with neighbouring LA's from our LAFSE 'sub cluster', namely West Sussex (WSCC) and Surrey County Councils and Brighton & Hove (B&H) City Council.

There were some positives through the LAFSE pilot including some useful workshops for staff and foster carers and late into the pilot there were a couple of broad advertising campaigns promoting local authority fostering.

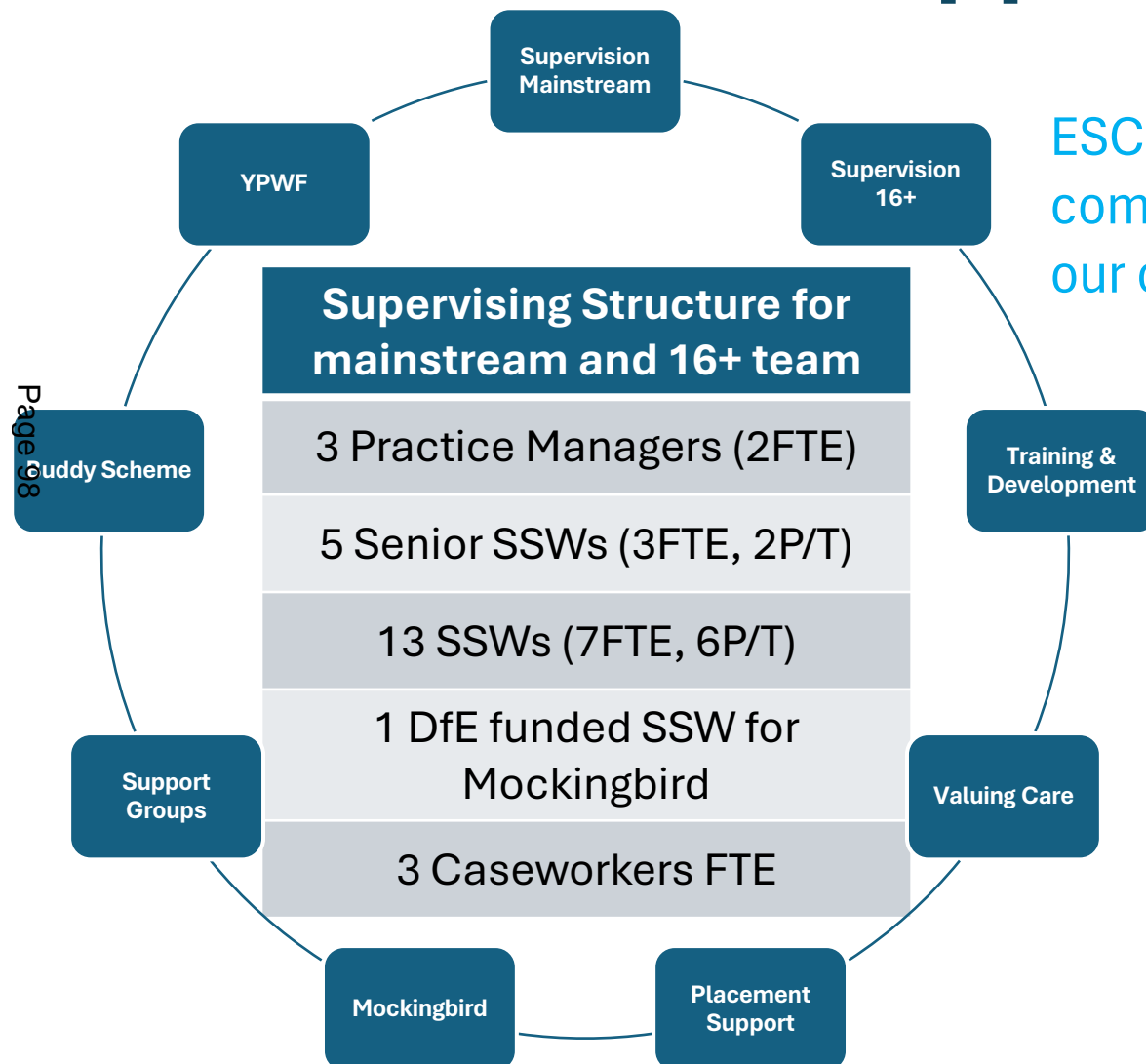
Campaigns and events did not always align with our local offer and it became clear we could achieve more effective results by combining some resources for collaborative projects with neighbouring local authority fostering services which were already working well.

East Sussex
County Council



East Sussex
Fostering

Retention and Support

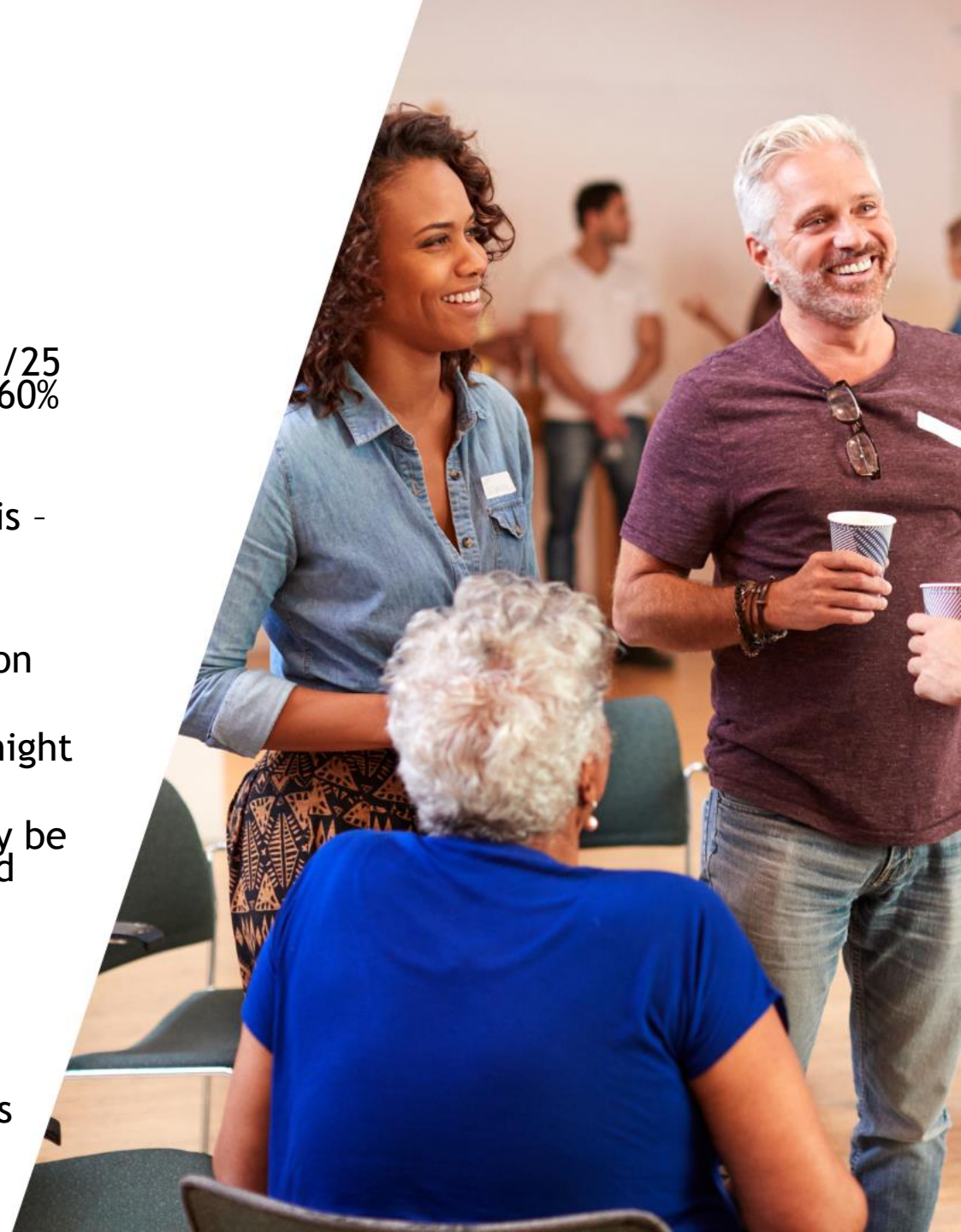


ESCC's supervision and support of its foster carer cohort combines a linked structure of several teams to enable our carers to:

- receive a consistent level of support and care through positive relationships built with their Supervising Social Worker (SSW)
- deliver excellent standards of care
- feel valued, respected and supported
- improve their professional and personal skills and outcomes via the Valuing Care approach
- recommend fostering for ESCC
- experience whole family fostering benefits such as the Young People Who Foster (YPWF) group

Retention and Support

- We place children with both in-house and independent foster carers (IFA). Of all our children placed with foster carers as at 31/3/25, 76% were placed in-house. Benchmarking data for 24/25 is not yet available, but the national average for 23/24 sat at 60% in-house utilisation. (24/25 data will be available as part of 903 return after 30/6)
- Commitment to keep pace with National Minimum Allowance uplifts as defined by The Fostering Network on an ongoing basis - increases are agreed at senior management level
- Specialisms in 16+ and Parent & Child fostering
- 9% (22/245 households) are Connected Carers within supervision caseloads
- Regular events eg 'thank you' summer picnic, #FosterCareFortnight celebrations
- Buddy scheme offers peer support to approved carers who may be experiencing a different situation for the first time. Connected Carers can access Buddy advice and support, and we have one Connect Carer Buddy
- GEM scheme - monthly recognition and award programme for those foster carers who have 'gone the extra mile' which is highlighted in bi-monthly foster carers' newsletter
- Regular cohort newsletters sharing updates and positive stories



16+/Supporting Independence

The 16+/Supporting Independence Team (SIT) works within the fostering service dedicated toward working with teenagers and young people aged 16 and over, including a "Staying Put" scheme for those aged 16-21.

This specialised team focuses on supporting carers to provide placements for young people moving towards independence. The primary goal is to equip young people with the skills and knowledge needed for successful independent living, such as budgeting, cooking, and public transport usage.

260 placement referrals were received by 16+ SIT, with 139 young people finding homes through our in-house resource



16+/Supporting Independence

- In 2024/25, the 16+ SIT supervisor responsibility rose from 39 to 57 fostering households, made up of the following approval types:
 - 17 x Mainstream fostering households
 - 7 x Hybrid carer households (combined approval as foster carers and the previous approval as supported lodgings providers)
 - 15 x 16+ fostering households
 - 5 x Connected Fostering households
 - 11 x Staying Put only arrangements
 - 2 x New approvals & fostering assessments
 - 14 new enquiries from people interested in becoming 16+/ SIT foster carers which led to 2 new approvals. We are currently assessing a further 2 16+ fostering households and engaging with 4 prospective 16+ fostering households.

Marketing activity to support recruitment included:

- Rebranded from Supported Lodgings to 16+/Supporting Independence Team
- New dedicated web page
- Flyers produced
- Social media awareness campaign
- Purchase of stock images
- Newsletter distribution



Foster carers' supervision feedback

“ I was pleased I was able to be supported by [SSW], I am able to be open and honest and welcome her support. ”

“ I always really enjoy working with my SSW and find her so professional and thoughtful in her approach. She is always able to bring a clarity and perspective to situations which is so important especially as sometimes I am too emotionally involved or tired to make clear judgements or have a good overview ”

“ Although we have had a difficult year, I feel we work well with members of the department. We are lucky to have a supportive social worker ”

“ Our SSW has been a pleasure to work with over the past twelve months. She has provided very positive support, and I always look forward to supervision sessions where any concerns can be discussed in an encouraging manner. She is very approachable and has always been forthcoming in sharing any relevant information to help us in our roles as carers ”

Improving Practice

We continue to solicit, review and act on our service user feedback. We send out surveys post panel for assessment and panel experiences in addition to annual review content to inform our direction and decision-making regularly.

- A significant piece of work to update fostering supervision and annual review forms ensures that ESCC is compliant with current legislation and strengthens our contemporary working practice.
- The Valuing Care approach continues to be embedded across the service operationally within assessments and reviews. This aims to support the matching of children with carers and identifies capacity and development needs.

Mockingbird

The set up and launch of Mockingbird was included as part of the Department for Education LAFSE pilot

- The Mockingbird Family Model, creates a familiar network around an experienced fostering household, known as a Hub Home.
- Six to ten families come together like an extended family. Mockingbird families will share experience and understanding, celebrate successes, and support each other through challenging times.
- The Hub Home carers arrange monthly meetings and bring everyone together for social events such as lunches, picnics and fun activities. They also provide a menu of support including sleepovers at the Hub Home, peer support for the carers, and 1:1 support for children and young people in the constellation.



Mockingbird

Working with The Fostering Network on the premise 'it takes a village to raise a child', we believe the ESCC Mockingbird scheme will:

- contribute to long term and ongoing invest-to-save benefits with an efficient use of resources within the self-sufficient Constellation(s)
- improve outcomes for our children with stronger placement stability
- increase foster carer retention, reducing 'burnout' and offer agility in 'stepping in' support
- reduce use of independent agencies and offer opportunities for residential step-down
- support family contact involvement supports reunification
- ESCC have recruited:
 - Liaison Senior Social Worker
 - 1st Hub Home Carer household and 8 Satellite fostering households - supporting 17 children



Placement Support

The Placement Support Service (PSS) continues to work with some of our most vulnerable cared for young people, helping to stabilise their placements and preventing them from breaking down.

- We work out in the community, Knockhatch Adventure Park being a firm favourite, or across our three sites; our caravans in Newhaven, Crowhurst and at Little Dunbar in Hailsham
- We continue to work closely with our Placements and Commissioning team, offering urgent and short-term support
- PSS continues to work with the Virtual School, supporting young people, both cared for or those on the edge of care, who are excluded or on a reduced school timetable
- Our dedicated placement support workers support young adults in the Through Care Team, who may live independently, residentially (in-house) or with an external agency
- We offer activity days in each week of the school holidays, for the Juniors, Intermediates and the Seniors. These range from horse riding, water sports, forest school and rock climbing (see 'real' event photo overleaf)

Placement Support

- 125 Placement Support Packages
- Supporting in-house Parent and Child placements
- 25 young adults supported and oversight of 3 properties
- 146 sessions, supporting 13 young people for the Virtual School
- 14 packages of support ended, several of which moved on to a residential placements, one returned home and 6 transferred to the Through Care Team



Placement Support feedback

FROM PROFESSIONALS

"This placement would not be sustainable without PSS*, he has benefited so much" (CSW)

"It's not just respite, there is a real quality to their work"
(SW LACAMHS)

*Placement Support Service

**Placement Support Worker

FROM CARERS

"It gives them someone else in their support network who is constant and supportive, I cannot speak highly enough of our PSW"**

"Our PSW's are very supportive of the boys and myself. They are brilliant at being consistent and are much valued"

"When managing challenging behaviour, knowing there is a break on the horizon, regardless of when, can really help fuel you to keep going"

"It's a wonderful service and I am extremely grateful for this"



East Sussex
Fostering

YPWF

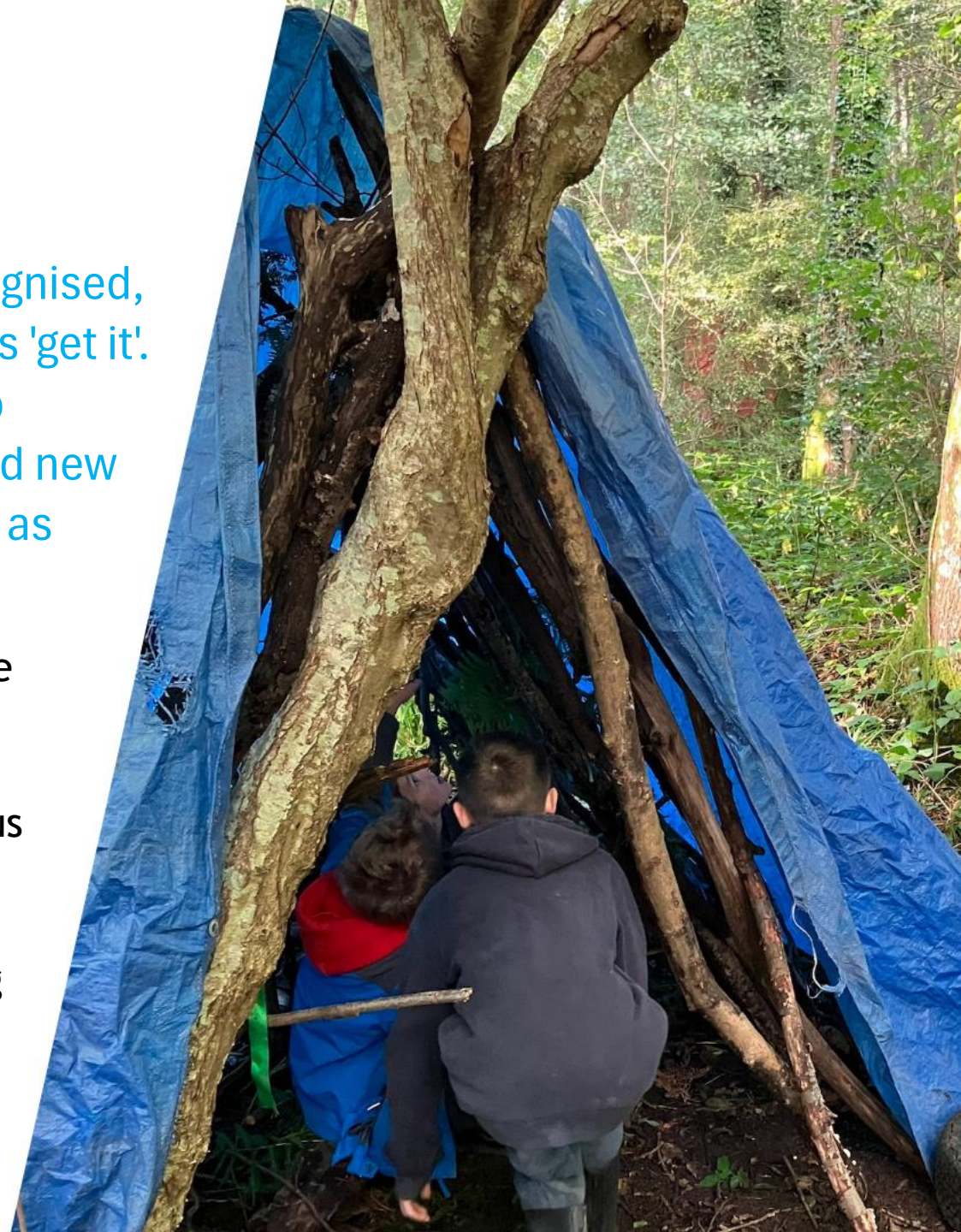
(Young People Who Foster)

We want the children in fostering households to feel recognised, valued and supported. We know not all their other friends 'get it'. The YPWF meet-ups are designed to give them a space to discuss what works well and any concerns. They can build new relationships with other young people who foster as well as with the fostered children in their homes.

Page 109 Membership of YPWF is open to a wide group of young people from 7 to 16 years old. We often have 17-year-olds who continue to attend the sessions too.

Attendees include primarily the children of foster carers, plus grandchildren (4), adopted children (4) and children of SGO or connected carers

Sessions are delivered by a team of 3 or 4 officers depending on the attendance numbers. These include staff from different teams across the service including assessment, commissioning and supervision.



YPWF

A series of events is planned for each year including social activities and learning and support sessions, the topics are often chosen and planned together with the young people.

Attendance levels doubled consistently throughout 2024/25 compared to recent years with new fostering families being encouraged to take part from the assessment stage

Learning and support sessions cover a range of topics:

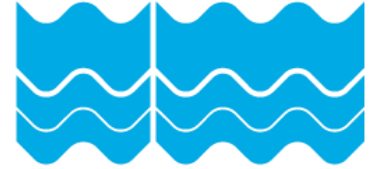
- saying goodbye, positive endings
- supporting and welcoming foster children to settle into their new home
- life lenses work, adding positive experiences to new relationships, balancing scales

Activity days/evenings 2024/25 included:

- Apr24 Learning and support session (8)
- Sept24 Lymley Wood - forest school, obstacle courses, archery (15)
- Nov24 Christmas Meal - social celebration together (20)
- Jan25 Bowling evening (19)
- Mar25 Rock climbing (16)

Development... We are supporting a 17-year-old girl who has been an active YPWF member to become a YPWF mentor. She wants to help plan and run some sessions and develop confidence for herself and the other attendees through her membership experience over the years.

East Sussex
County Council



East Sussex
Fostering

YPWF feedback

“ I just wanted to say a big thank you for letting my daughter join last night; she had such a lovely evening and really made her feel part of something special, which fostering truly is. (carer)”

“ I love YWPF because it's a place where people ask about me rather than the fostered child. It's a time when adults are not talking about the fostered child and what is best for them. I like being around other young people who also foster, not to necessarily talk about it but it's just nice to know. There is an understanding they all have. It's hard to explain to my other friends what fostering is, but I don't have to with this group. I love the activities the most - they are really fun. ”
(YPWF)

“ Thank you for giving them all a great evening. (carer)”

Training and Development

Our bespoke foster carer training is reviewed every year and managed by a dedicated senior social worker within the SSW team

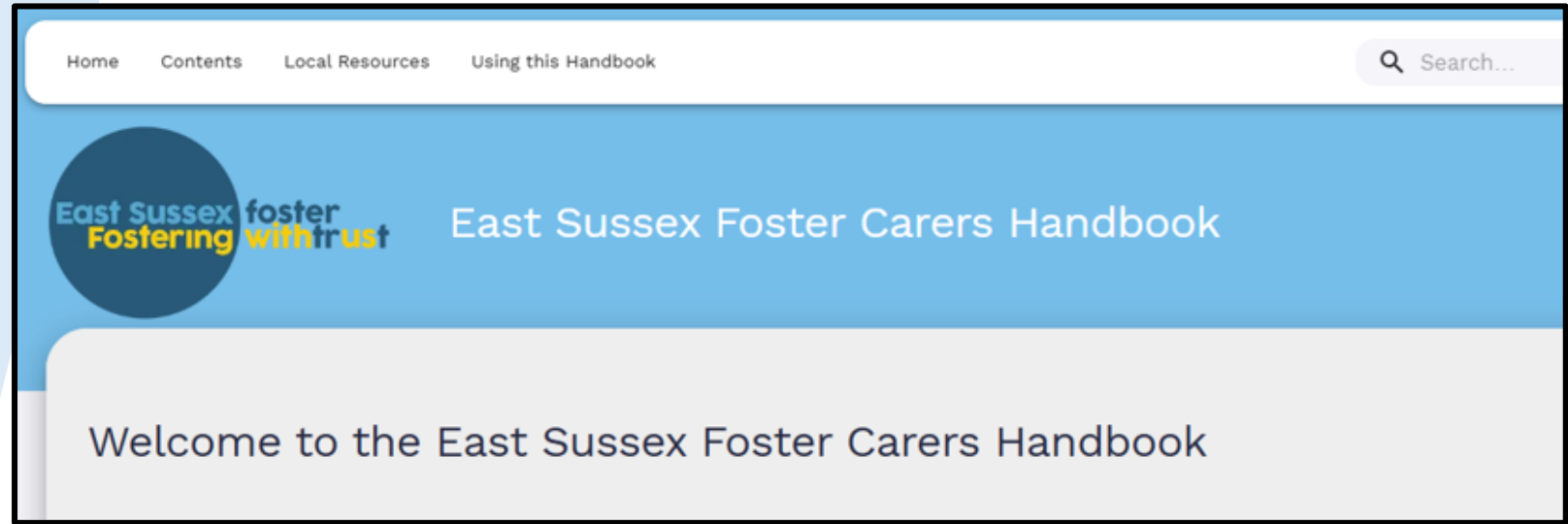
- From April 2024 - March 2025, we ran 71 live training courses for approved carers with 608 places taken up compared to 456 last year - an increase of 33%
- The total number of places taken up by foster carers on all of our training courses this year was 1088 (April 2024 to March 2025)
- Total e-learning courses accessed is 480 compared to 651 last year with access to over 120 courses
- 224 mandatory courses have been completed since Learning Pool's implementation in September 2024
- Accessible lunchtime 'responsive webinars' on topics carers have requested are now 6-weekly and have been attended by 67 foster carers. Topics have included: lying, food, anxiety and self-harm



Training and Development

A significant piece of work completed this year was ESCC's innovative new digital Foster Carer Handbook.

Page 113



New online Foster Carer Handbook

- Launched October 2024 and can be found at <https://eastsussexfch.trixonline.co.uk>
- This houses all updated policies, processes, information and guidance. It is easily accessible and fully searchable to both foster carers and staff
- Includes an 'Anytime Resource Bank' of learning resources including videos, podcasts, books and articles we can add to and update on an ongoing basis

Training and Development

- Support groups are running monthly in 3 locations plus men who foster groups
- Buddy scheme has a growing pool of 20 carers to support peers on specific issues
- Wellbeing events in conjunction with ESFCA from art to reflexology
- Wellbeing workshops to explore the impact of fostering on carers and give language to some common fostering experiences
- Training specific monthly newsletter started January 2025
- Collaboration with neighbouring LAs including the parent and child fostering conference (over 90 attendees), TSDS workshops, and menopause demystified for foster carers

Page 114



ESCC Fostering Service

Page 115
A final word
from
Operations
Manager
Ade Sewell

We have built on advice following the positive Ofsted inspection last year to inform our learning moving forwards as an agile and effective service.



This prompted a review of our supervision documentation and a push to engage with long service carers to increase attendance at contemporary and relevant training sessions. We also engaged in a placement commissioning and support restructure.

We are mindful of the national trend where stranger foster carer recruitment is dominated by short breaks/respite approvals and the need to encourage more enquiries from applicants prepared to be more flexible to meet the needs of the service. The new ESCC remuneration package reflects this need and represents an opportunity for potential carers and existing short breaks/respite carers to focus on fostering and extend their flexibility.

After holding on for us for years to stabilise post-pandemic capacity, we recently lost many loyal, long service carers to retirement. However, recruitment success has enabled us to end this year with a strong net gain and a younger average age within our carer cohort. We have increased specialist parent and child placements and seen an influx of transfers from independent private fostering agencies.

East Sussex
Fostering

ESCC Fostering Service

Achievements

Page 16

The commitment of our foster carers and the teams supporting them continues to deliver an outstanding level of service despite the challenge of budget restrictions in the public sector.

With the highest number of enquiries in five years, a 33% conversion rate from home visit to approval and a net gain of 17 households and 25 places, we look to build on this positive base.



The launch of our first Mockingbird constellation opens up the potential to support our children and fostering families in a new way.

Our Recruitment Ambassadors and Buddy scheme offer a further layer of support to enquirers and approved foster carers as and when they need it.

SSWs have taken over Placement Planning for all children placed with in house foster carers following a successful pilot and review of the template

The refreshed website, Digital Foster Carer Handbook and rebrand of the service ensures local people are more aware of our local offer and existing carers are taking advantage of the flexibility of new assets for training and helpful resources to support them in their unique roles

East Sussex
Fostering

ESCC Fostering Service

Next steps and priorities for 2025/26

- Focus on retention of existing cohort of foster carers developing the flexibility we need as part of our team around the child. Modern fostering means we are preparing children for reunification and/or a return to their familiar networks when possible.
- The stability of our fostering resource must be echoed within our professional network. Our team retention is positive and with the exception of maternity and retirement, our people stay with us, and that continuity supports our carers and all the work we do. Targeted workforce development will further enhance practice.
- The service will continue its development plan for the Placement Support Service to work within the remit of the Placements and Commissioning Team maximising its potential to support complex foster placements.
- Building on existing relationships with WSCC and B&H to align practice, share resources and work more closely in the future whilst maintaining our distinctive identities.
- We will review the Mockingbird programme, continue to work in partnership with the ESCC Through Care team, implement a new 'Tableau' fostering dashboard tool to improve tracking and reporting as well as looking to develop new a GDPR compliant and secure two-way Provider Portal to enhance carer communications.



Priorities 2025 /26

Focus recruitment and development of foster carer resource to deliver more flexible, substantive placement options

Focus on how the Fostering Service can work with Placements & Commissioning to achieve effective step down

Embed 1st Mockingbird constellation with ambition to open two more constellations by end of 2026/27

Ensure smooth transition of Placement Support Service to Placement and Commissioning Service and embed flexible, needs led provision

Work with WSCC and B&H to enhance Regional Fostering Recruitment, Development and Support

Work to respond to unique needs of Connected Carers

Launch Fostering Dashboard to improve performance management and analysis

Audit implementation of the new Supervision Form and digitise this to enhance oversight

Ensure that Training and Development offer remains relevant for experienced carers and addresses contemporary issues

Further develop a culture of professional responsibility, improvement and innovation across all staff levels

Work with ESFCA to ensure appropriate representation of all ESCC foster carers

Report to:	Corporate Parenting Panel
Date of meeting:	17 July 2025
By:	Director of Children's Services
Title:	Adoption South East annual report 2024/5
Purpose:	To provide the Corporate Parenting Panel with a summary of the Adoption South East annual report.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Corporate Parenting Panel is recommended to note the Adoption South East 2024/25 annual report as set out at Appendix 1.

1. Background

1.1 Adoption South East (ASE) is the Regional Adoption Agency delivering adoption services on behalf of Brighton & Hove, East Sussex, Surrey, and West Sussex. This fifth annual report summarises ASE's performance and developments for the year ending 31 March 2025.

1.2 ASE operates under a service hub model with specialist teams in Recruitment, Family Finding, and Adoption Support, supported by a central hub for finance, data, marketing, and project management.

2. Supporting information

2.1 ASE has restructured its service to improve responsiveness and staff satisfaction.

2.2 In 2024/25, ASE placed 82 children with adoptive families, including 22 sibling groups and 20 early permanence placements. Of these, 95% were placed with ASE-approved adopters, reflecting strong internal sufficiency. Recruitment efforts led to 537 enquiries and 64 adopter approvals. ASE also launched the 'Becoming a Family' pilot, enhancing early placement support.

2.3 Adoption Support remained a high-demand area, with over 2000 families accessing services. ASE secured nearly £4 million from the Adoption and Special Guardianship Support Fund (ASGSF) to provide therapy for 1397 children. The Advice Hub handled 637 enquiries, and the Keeping in Touch team managed over 3000 letterbox exchanges and 80 face-to-face meetings. ASE also expanded community-building activities, including playgroups and teen events.

2.4 Panels reviewed 68 adopter approvals and 84 matches, with overwhelmingly positive feedback. ASE continues to prioritise quality assurance and training, including implementation of a nationally recognised framework for transracial placements.

2.5 Complaints were minimal and well-managed, with learning used to improve services.

3. Conclusion and reasons for recommendations

3.1 ASE has demonstrated resilience and adaptability through its restructure and continued service improvements. The specialist hub model has enhanced efficiency and responsiveness, enabling ASE to meet increasing demands in adoption support and maintain high placement rates. ASE has demonstrated strong performance in placing children, supporting families, and evolving its service model to meet modern adoption needs. ASE remains committed to continuous improvement, stakeholder engagement, and innovation in adoption practice.

3.2 Corporate Parenting Panel is recommended to note the Adoption South East 2024/25 annual report as set out at Appendix 1.

CAROLYN FAIR
Director of Children's Services

Contact Officer: Kathy Marriott

Tel. No. 07517 466 601

Email: Kathy.marriott@eastsussex.gov.uk

LOCAL MEMBERS

All

APPENDICES

Appendix 1 – Adoption South East 2024/25 annual report

BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS

None

ADOPTION SOUTH EAST

ANNUAL REPORT
FOR 2024/25



ADOPTION SOUTH EAST

INTRODUCTION

Adoption South East (ASE) is the Regional Adoption Agency (RAA) delivering the adoption functions on behalf of the Local Authorities of Brighton & Hove, East Sussex, Surrey and West Sussex.

This is the fifth Annual Report for ASE. The Adoption Act 2002 s3 requires each Council to continue to maintain within its area an adoption service designed to meet the needs of children who may be adopted, their parents, their first parents and former guardians (the Adoption Service). In this context an adoption agency refers to a local authority under the Adoption and Children Act 2002 s2 (1). ASE delivers the service for four local authority adoption agencies and is underpinned by a legal partnership agreement.

This report meets our obligations under the Adoption National Minimum Standards (2011), the Adoption Service Statutory Guidance (2011) and the Adoption and Children Act 2002 to provide an annual report to each local authority. It is important to note that data and information within this report is accurate as of 31 March 2025.

ASE launched on 1 April 2020. It is led by Head of Service, Michael Wilson, who leads the senior leadership team of ASE. The team comprises of Pascale Davison, Team Manager, Brighton & Hove Council - Lead for Adoption Panels; Jo Elsey, Service Manager, East Sussex County Council - Lead for Adoption Support; Candice Levy, Service Manager, Surrey County Council - Lead for Adopter Recruitment; Michael Wilson is standing in as the Lead for Family Finding and Matching, until a new Lead is recruited to replace Wendy Wood who left earlier this year.

ASE underwent a restructure in 2024/25 and now operates under a service hub model with service managers leading specialist hubs in Recruitment, Family Finding and Adoption Support,

Alongside the three hub teams ASE also has a central hub which employs a finance officer, a data officer, a marketing and communications officer and a project manager.

From April 2024 to March 2025 ASE had 14 new employees start and 18 employees who moved on.

ADOPTION SOUTH EAST IMPACT

82 CHILDREN

Adoption South East has found families for 82 children. This reflects our continued commitment to finding families for the children who need them within time scales that best meet their needs.

64 FAMILIES APPROVED

Recruitment activity in ASE's fifth year generated 542 enquiries from people wanting to know more about adoption which led to us accepting 94 Registrations of Interest (ROI). ASE assessed and approved 64 adopter families in this period.

OVER 2000 FAMILIES ACCESSED ADOPTION SUPPORT

ASE's adoption support and development has continued to provide over 2000 families with different strands of support. This has included assistance via our website; online courses; online and face to face groups; activity days; statutory birth record counselling; birth record information sharing and Keeping in Touch. This year we have provided therapy for over 1000 children and their families with £4 million funding from the Adoption and Special Guardianship Support Fund (ASGSF).

ASE RESTRUCTURE

Last year we reported on our in-depth review of Adoption South East, within which we took stock of how well we had made use of the opportunities provided by regionalisation. Our review processes identified that our structure was working against our continuous improvement as a regional service.

This year we completed a formal consultation process with staff and stakeholders and moved to a new structure which operates three discrete specialist services; Recruitment and assessment; Child assessment and family finding; and Adoption support. Staff were invited to register an expression of interest in the specialism they wished to work in and we were pleased to place 92% of our staff in their first choice.

The new structure went live in September 2024 and this year's staff survey revealed that the majority of staff are positive about the changes that this has made to their working lives, and their capacity to have a positive impact upon the lives of children and adoptive families.

The restructure required considerable change on the part of the ASE staff. They are to be thanked and commended for making those changes with professionalism and clear commitment to delivering impactful and quality services to children and families.

The restructured service now offers the opportunity for a more responsive service which learns more immediately from experience and feedback as we work to increase sufficiency and broaden support for the families we work for and with.

ASE AREAS OF DEVELOPMENT

ASE works in collaboration with Adoption England to develop our approach to adopter recruitment and support. We are part of the national marketing network and the challenges to adopter recruitment that we have experienced in our local region are echoed in the national picture. Throughout the year we have shared life stories, and interviews featuring ASE adoptive families who have featured in the national adoption campaigns. We also collectively promote the national adoption campaign through the local media and our social media channels, as well as ensuring we continue to highlight the need for adopters for children who wait the longest for a family.

In addition to the work we do to increase enquiries and recruitment, we work to enhance the experience of enquirers and applicants to ensure that people have the best chance of completing the process and get the most that they can from it. This has led to a review and redesign of our Stage 1 recruitment process, making use of mystery shopping, market research and feedback from applicants, and learning from other agencies. Importantly, this work has benefitted from the quality assurance activity and learning from the ASE adoption panels and agency decision making processes.

This year we launched 'Becoming a Family' as one of five RAAs in the first cohort of a national pilot. This is supported with research funded by Adoption England which will investigate the impact of this pilot. ASE was part of the national working group that developed the initiative in response to requests from adoptive parents for increased support in the early stages of becoming a family through adoption. This work includes supporting keeping in touch arrangements from the point of matching for adoption, and focussing on adult wellbeing and adjustment to parenting as new parents.

ASE AREAS OF DEVELOPMENT

This year also saw the publication and launch of [AfDit](#), which is a framework for social workers families and children understanding transracial adoption placements. The approach supports all families in understanding the different cultures that come together when an adoptive family is made. ASE are part of the second wave of regional adoption agencies implementing AfDit as an approach to underpin all aspects of adoption social work. The premise of AfDit is not to promote transracial placements but to support them well if they are to take place, and to provide social workers and others with the tools to complete this work with all parts of the child's network.

[Adoption England](#) promotes pan regional working now that regional adoption agencies are established. For ASE, our pan region also includes Adopt South and Adoption Partnership South East, whose central functions are hosted by Hampshire County Council, Kent County Council and East Sussex County Council on behalf of the three separate partnerships.

2024/25 has seen the completion of a regional commissioning review and the assessment of adoption support needs, and this has identified a number of areas of collaboration. The current focus for the pan regional partnership is the development of a staying in touch service for all newly and recently placed adoptive parents through proactive outreach. This will ensure that all families are linked into the universal services as they need to be.

Further work is planned for the coming year to understand and plan for joint working in developing the offer for adopted adolescents and young adults.

FAMILY FINDING FOR CHILDREN

In 2024/25 Adoption South East placed 82 children in new adoptive families and supported them as they adjusted to their new lives together. We placed 60 children as individual children and 22 children were placed alongside their sibling/s.

Of the children placed, five were from Brighton and Hove, 21 from East Sussex, 26 from Surrey and 30 from West Sussex.

Of the 82 children who joined their adoptive families, 20 were placed in Early Permanence Arrangements (23%).

Placement Choice and Sufficiency

We anticipate better outcomes for children who can be placed locally, with families whom we have built relationships and to whom we can commit to ongoing support. We also recognise that for some children, there are insufficient local families to meet their assessed needs.

Those children include children with a diagnosed disability, sibling groups, older children and global majority children. Of the global majority children, children of mixed heritage can wait longer than those children with two black parents. We aim to place at least 80% ASE children with ASE families. The others we place through other agencies.

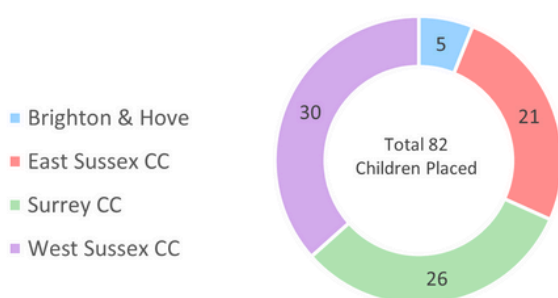


FAMILY FINDING FOR CHILDREN

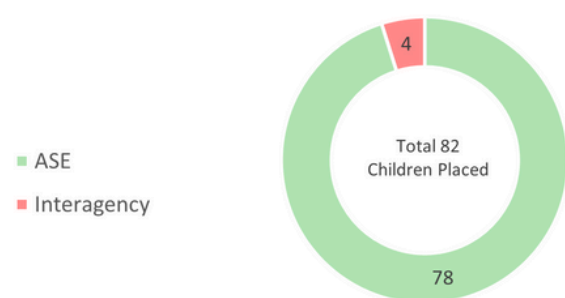
This year, 95% of ASE children joined ASE families. This is largely due to extensive work undertaken over the past three years to broaden our own and prospective adopters' ideas about what a good match might look like. However, it must be acknowledged that our reduced use of interagency placements also reflects a significant drop in the number of approved adopters available from other agencies to meet the steady and significant rise in across the county in the numbers of children with a plan for adoption. There is a national sufficiency challenge with falling numbers of enquiries and approvals and a rising number of children with a plan for adoption and this is beginning to be reflected locally.

When reviewing the work of Adoption South East, it is important to consider whether there are children not placed for adoption within the year who had a plan and for whom we could not find an adoptive family.

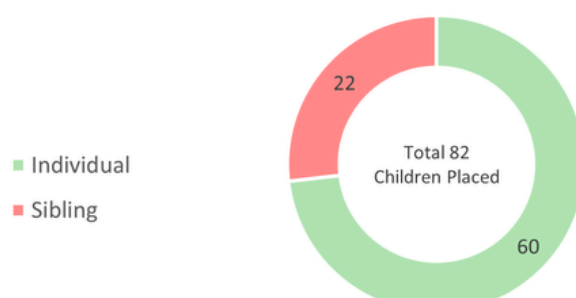
Children Placed 2024-25 - by Referring LA



Children Placed 2024-25 - ASE v Interagency



Children Placed 2024-25 - Individual v Sibling



FAMILY FINDING FOR CHILDREN

Changes to Care Plans

At the beginning of this year, we were family finding for 65 children who were subject to Placement Orders. Over the course of the year, we were successful in placing 40 of those children and another two children were matched but would be placed in the following financial year. We continue to work to find families for 16 of those children and seven of the children had their care plans changed for a variety of reasons.

All seven children who eventually had a change of care plan away from adoption had benefitted from significant family finding activity by ASE workers. In this timeframe, there were 387 families listed as available on the national linking database, [Linkmaker](#), with 816 children listed as needing a family. This is a significant sufficiency gap, which is more pronounced in the North of England, but is nonetheless growing in the South East, limiting the number of adopters that may consider adopting ASE children.

Two of the children had been found adoptive families but the matches did not progress due to limitations on the part of the adopters to understand the children and to respond to them in the way that the children needed. These deficits became apparent during the period of introductions and had not been observed during the matching process.



FAMILY FINDING FOR CHILDREN

Changes to Care Plans (contd.)

One child was placed for adoption in a family who were unable to bond with them and they returned to their previous foster carer.

One of the children had experienced six changes of primary carer before he was referred for family finding at the age of two years and six months. The complexity of his developmental needs was such that whilst we found three potential families for him, they all withdrew due to their worries about his future development. The same was true for one of the children who was referred at age nine months, whose developmental challenges were such that 11 families were considered and all withdrew, concerned at the implications for the child of his genetic heritage.

Another child referred to ASE at two years and six months was able to return to the care of their wider family, and another child aged just under eight years of age at referral had a family finding window set at six months by the Court.

We continue to look for families for the remaining 16 children, alongside those children who were referred for family finding over the course of the year. Nine of those children have active links at the time of writing, including two children already living with likely adopters in an early permanence relationship.

The process takes time for many children given the complexity of their needs however the capacity of many of the approved adopters however, our teams work hard to maintain pace and purpose for all children referred to ASE.

FAMILY FINDING FOR CHILDREN

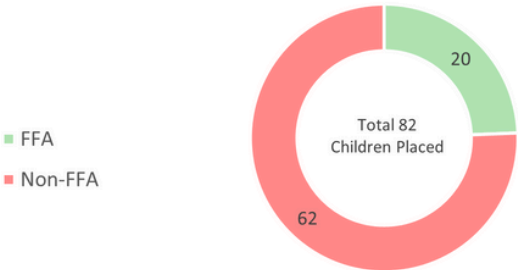
Early Permanence (Fostering for Adoption)

Early permanence places children with approved adopters who act as their foster carers, whilst decisions are being made for them through legal processes. This enables children to experience fewer changes of care and means that they can begin their relationship with their possible future parents at an earlier stage in their lives, rather than waiting in temporary foster arrangements.

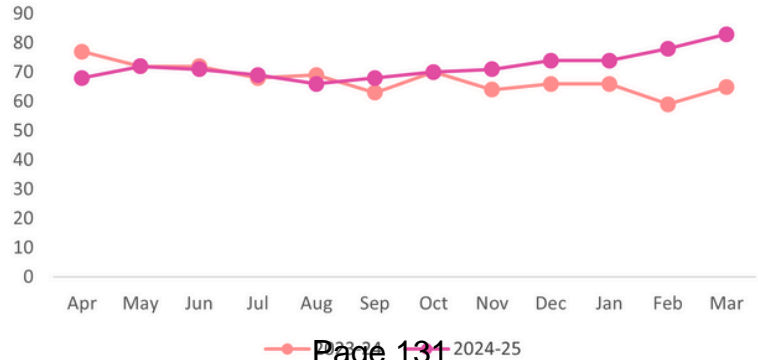
We work collaboratively with our partners to ensure that all children have equality of opportunity for early permanence where this suits their individual circumstances, this means that numbers do vary between the different areas.

This year we placed 20 of our children in Early Permanence arrangements. 11 of those children were placed before their Placement Order was granted, the others were placed post placement order.

Children Placed 2024-25 - FFA v Non-FFA



Children waiting with a Placement Order



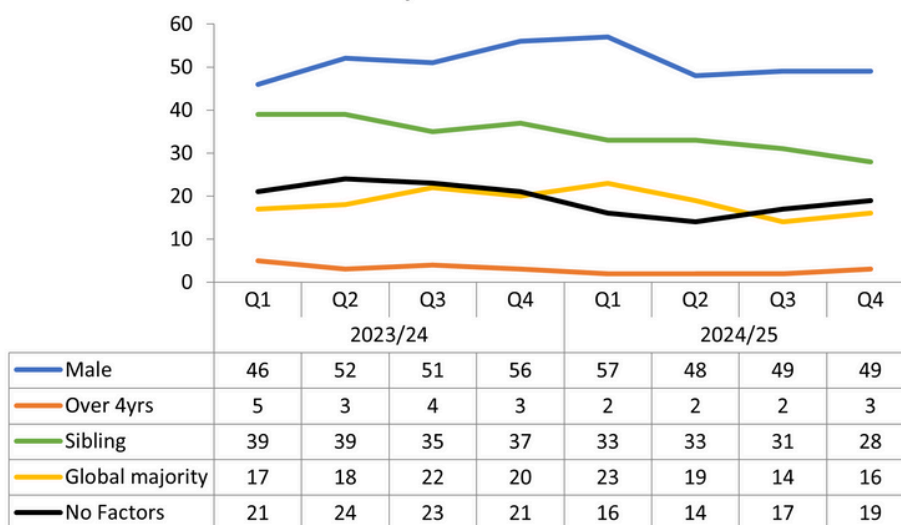
FAMILY FINDING FOR CHILDREN

Timeliness of placing for adoption

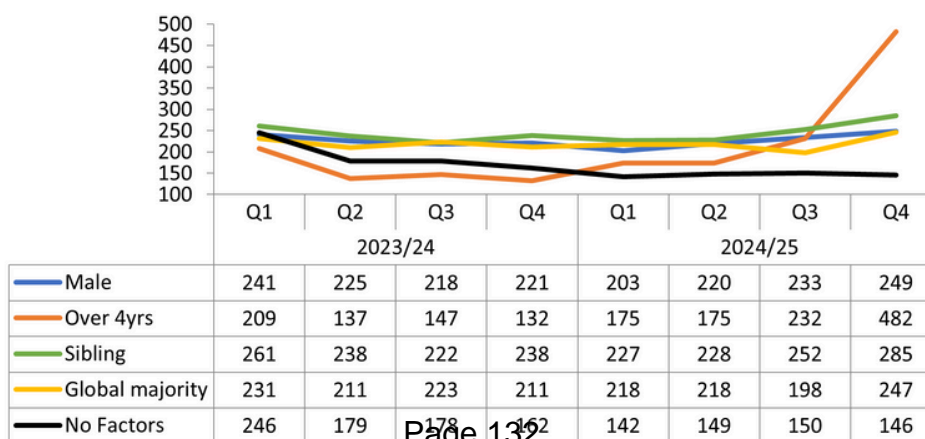
The time it takes once a child has a Placement Order for them to be placed for adoption has varied significantly this year. We have worked hard to refine our family finding processes and the need to do so contributed to the rationale for our service restructure.

We have seen a marked improvement in the average speed of placement for children. However the average timescales vary significantly according to the profiles of particular children and the corresponding availability of adopters.

H. No. Children Placed Adoption in the previous 12 months by DTF factor



G. Time from PO to Placed Adoption by difficult to find families for (DTF) factor - Rolling Year Average for those Placed (days)



FAMILY FINDING FOR CHILDREN

Adoption Orders

Once a child has been placed for adoption and lived with the prospective adopters for ten weeks, they may make an application to the court to adopt their child. Given that the length of time that a court application takes to process typically exceeds a year, the number of adoption orders does not tally with the numbers of children placed in a given year. This year there were 99 Adoption Orders granted by the courts to families with ASE placed children. There were 100 Adoption Orders granted the previous year.

Non Agency Adoption Orders

In addition to the 82 children we have placed for adoption according to the plans made by their Local Authorities, and the seven children we have worked hard but unsuccessfully to find families for, a further 20 children have become the subject of Adoption Orders made by the court. These are non-agency adoptions and include children adopted by their foster carers, those adopted by step parents or co-parents in surrogacy arrangements, and children adopted by British nationals from overseas.



FAMILY FINDING FOR CHILDREN

Meet and Play

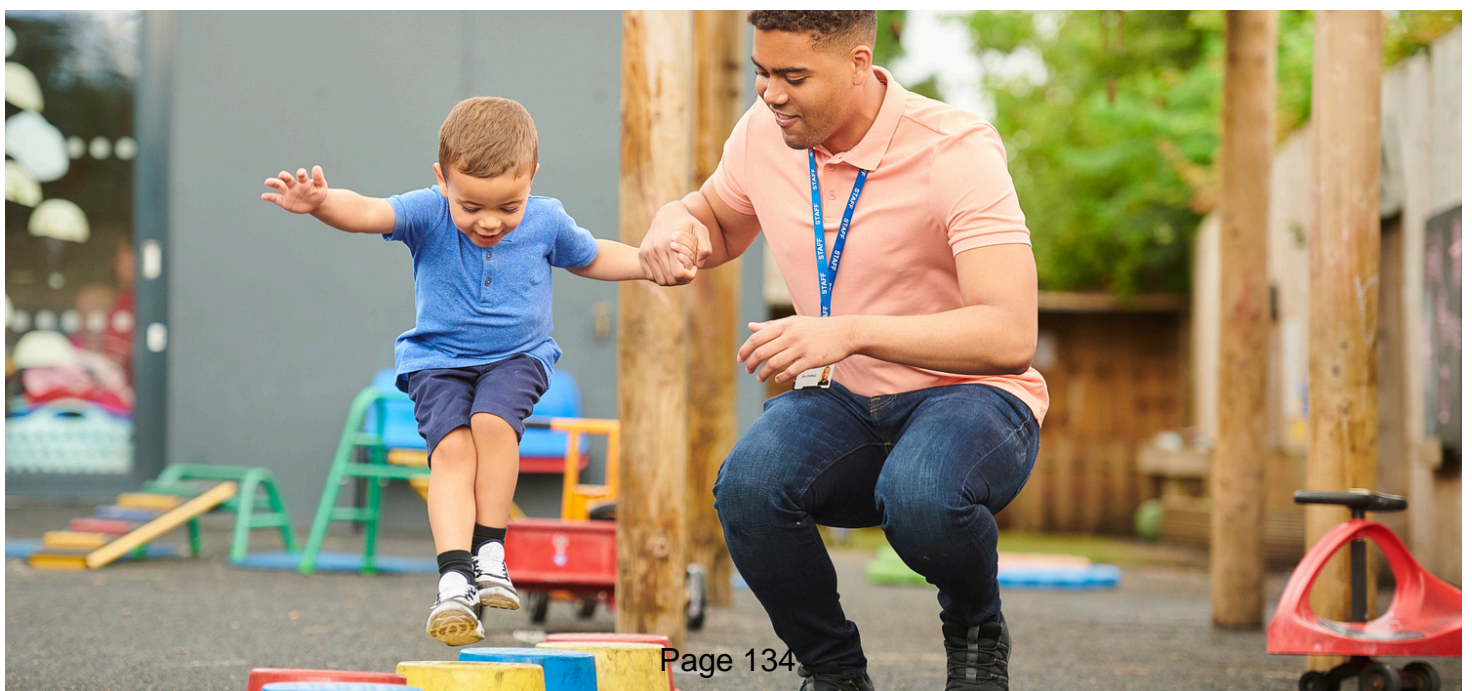
This year we have been pleased to develop our online and in person profiling. Ten children came along to the Meet & Play with their foster carers, and were joined by ten adopter households. There were three girls and seven boys aged from one to five years, including two brother and sister pairs.

It was a really enjoyable event for everyone involved and feedback was positive. Some of the adopter feedback included:

'We enjoyed the opportunity to meet the children and their foster carers. We were made to feel very welcome and supported.'

'The event was really well organised, we were expecting it to feel awkward but the way it was organised made sure it wasn't.'

We progressed two children after event; this highlights the importance of adopter connection to children and how meetings between children, adopters and foster carers can have a positive impact.



RECRUITMENT & ASSESSMENT

Getting the right balance between children and adopters is an ongoing challenge inherent in the system, and in reality our need for adopters changes year on year. Last year we approved a relatively low number of adopters compared with earlier years after a period of very successful recruitment which resulted in some adopters waiting a long time to be matched, and in some cases choosing to withdraw from the process.

Given this low start point and with relatively high numbers of children entering care with likely adoption plans at the start of 2024 we knew that we needed to increase our approval rates this year to maintain sufficiency. To help us approve more adopters we undertook service reviews of some of our processes, taking account of feedback from applicants. As a result, we have now changed our approach to providing initial information to enquirers. This is now done via an online presentation which prospective adopters can watch at anytime, rather than requiring that they book into a scheduled event.

After this a meeting is offered for a more detailed individual discussion, the Ready2Adopt interview. We then provide a detailed report of the meeting and individualised advice to the enquirer.



RECRUITMENT & ASSESSMENT

Feedback from Ready2Adopt interviews:

'Very polite and informative. Made the whole experience very comfortable for us.'

'The social worker was extremely personable and professional, taking our needs into consideration.'

'A good start to the process. The social worker was friendly and informative.'

We have also improved our follow up after the Ready2Adopt interview by assigning a caseworker much earlier in the process. We have learnt that by providing this extra support we are more likely to see a well-considered and timely application. This then sets in place a sense of partnership that will hopefully result in a positive outcome.

We continue to review and extend our training and support offer to ensure that this prepares applicants better for the challenges ahead. Key to this has been the updating of our four day preparation groups, and the decision to deliver these with adoptive parents who can bring their authentic lived experience of adoption to the sessions.



RECRUITMENT & ASSESSMENT

In 2024-25 we have also commissioned more training from Adoption UK for prospective adopters waiting to be matched following approval. This training includes looking at preparing for placement, and therapeutic parenting.

Feedback from our 'Getting Ready for Placement' one day training (compulsory for approved and waiting applicants):

'Very useful and informative to share ideas and hear about lived experience.'

'Really good training and focus with other adopters. Nice to continue this support through the adoption journey.'

This affirms that adopters are finding our comprehensive training package throughout their parenting journey a vital and useful resource. The response of families to the training has been very positive and their feedback continues to inform future commissioning.

Below is some of the feedback from the Trauma Informed Parenting Peer Learning programme. This is offered to families who have a child placed already.

'Great tips to deescalate behaviour at home'

'Lots of practical solutions from an experienced adoptive parent'

"Such a useful course - we can already see that the strategies are making a difference."

RECRUITMENT & ASSESSMENT

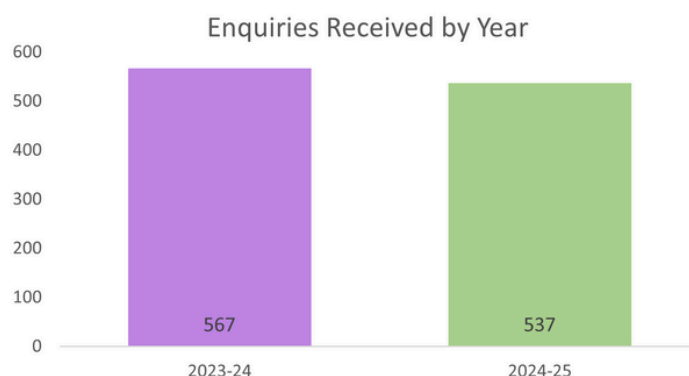
Recruitment outcomes 2024/5

Over the year we received 537 enquiries, slightly fewer than the previous year (567), and we have seen these convert to 64 approvals (a conversion rate of 12%). The enquiries from people wanting to know more about adoption led to us accepting 79 Registrations of Interest (ROIs) which is the official start of Stage 1 of the assessment process for prospective adopters.

Additionally, there were an additional 15 enquiries from the previous year that created 15 ROIs. There were therefore 94 Registrations of Interest made and accepted by ASE in 2024 – 2025.

Following the acceptance of the application the assessment process has two stages, Stage 1 in which we undertake background checks including health assessments and provide four days of preparation.

A review is conducted at the end of the stage and over the year 75 households completed this successfully (reduced from 97 the previous year) and progressed to the second stage of the process.

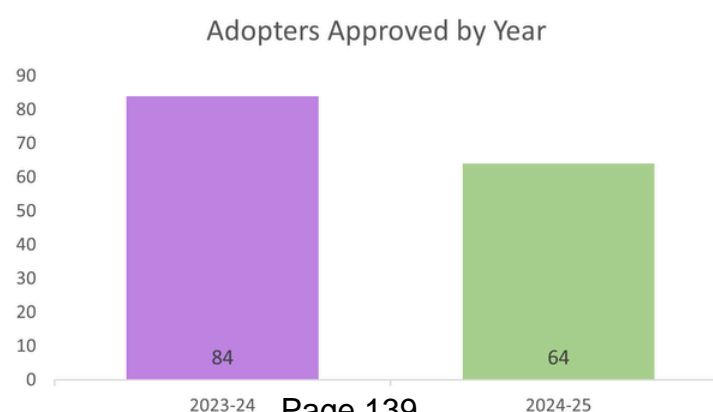
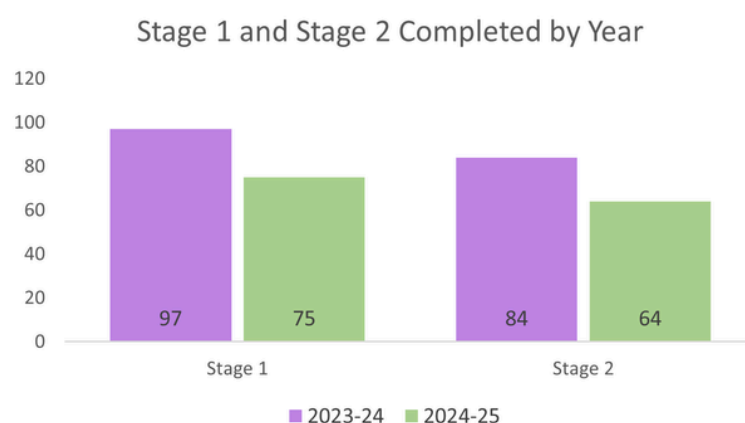


RECRUITMENT & ASSESSMENT

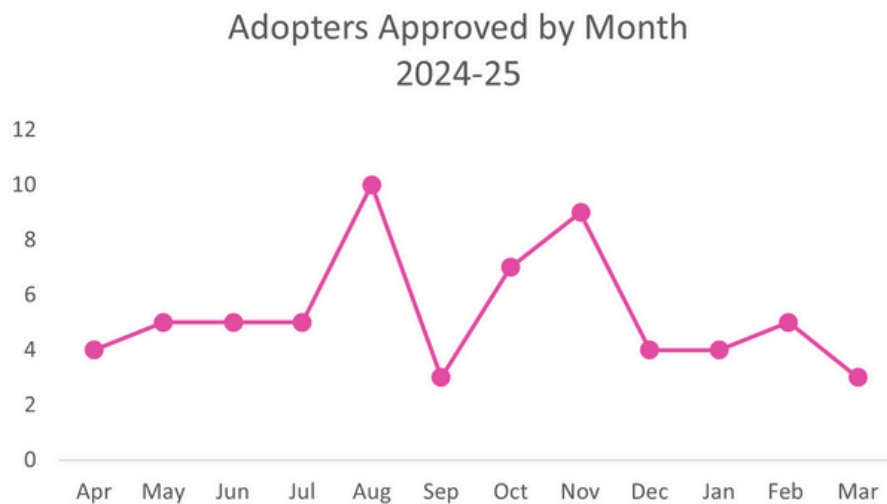
ASE approved 64 households as suitable to adopt this year, dropping from 84 the previous year. There is often as much work, if not more when assessments do not lead to a household being approved as suitable to adopt. This year, in addition to the 64 approvals, there were also two assessments that led to negative recommendations, and 13 assessments where the applicants withdrew before a negative recommendation could be made.

RECRUITMENT & ASSESSMENT

Timeliness of Stage 1 continues to present challenges, not least given that many elements of the process are dependent on other agencies who provide background information. However, the average timescale at the end of the year was four months which is slower than the target of two months. Whilst this is a considerable improvement from previous years we recognise that there is room to make even more progress.



RECRUITMENT & ASSESSMENT



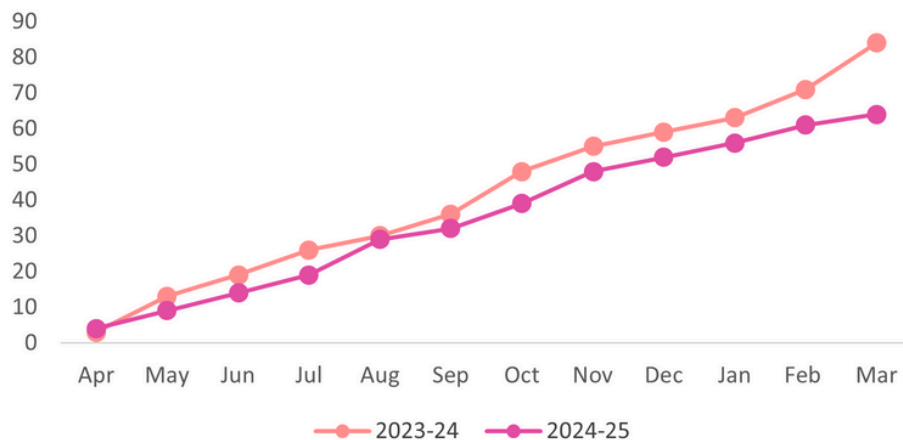
Stage 2 is led by a social worker who completes a thorough assessment of the household which is captured in a comprehensive report (the Prospective Adopter's Report- otherwise known as the PAR) The social worker's recommendation is considered by an adoption panel. This is an independently chaired body that brings a fresh pair of eyes before the Agency takes a final decision.

As with Stage 1 we monitor timescales closely and our current average time is 5.3 months. Taking both stages together and allowing for a short break between stages in most instances the average time from the end of Stage 1 to the end of Stage 2 is 10.5 months. This is significantly longer than the national target (8 months) and is the focus of current service improvement work.

This year we approved 64 families, which offers a potential opportunity for 83 children (based on the estimate that one adoptive family is needed for every 1.3 children as some children are placed with a sibling). This allowed us to place 95% of the children who were placed for adoption, with ASE adopters.

RECRUITMENT & ASSESSMENT

Adopters Approved - Cumulative by Year



51% of adopters approved this year fell within the 40 – 49 age bracket. 33% fell within the 30 – 39 age bracket. Six households fell within the 50 – 59 bracket and six households within the 21 – 29 age bracket (it is not legal to adopt under the age of 21).

20% of ASE placements made were with same sex couples, 72% with mixed sex couples, and 8% with solo applicants. White British and white applicants of other nationalities represent the largest groups at 75% and 15% respectively.

This is broadly representative of the population of the ASE region and of the diversity within the children's group. Proactive use of the interagency budget ensures that global majority children have access to all approved adopters who can meet their needs, as they relate to their ethnic and cultural identities and heritage.

A significant development and investment this year has been ASE piloting the "Becoming A Family" approach to early placement support. This is a national development which aims to ensure that new parents are supported pro-actively when a child is placed with them, and that they are linked in with other families at similar stages of family life.

ADOPTION SUPPORT

Again Adoption Support continues to be an area of significant demand, growth and development within Adoption South East. The restructure of Adoption South East during the later part of 2024 has meant that our focus on aligning adoption support service across the region has continued and we now can provide a service to families living in our area that is consistent, and parents can know what to expect from us. The Adoption Support Hub is divided into three areas, the Advice Hub/Assessment and Intervention Team, The Keeping in Touch Team and the Adults Team.

It is well established that early life adversity has a long term impact on children and this can present with a range of additional and trauma related needs. Children have to make sense of their identities, and their parents are key to supporting them with these tasks. Adults too need to make sense of their identity and might come to us at a later date looking for information about their first/birth family. Consequently, families request support with a broad range of adoption support needs.



ADOPTION SUPPORT

Some of these support needs include:

- Helping children settle within the family
- Talking about and telling children their adoption story
- Living with developmental trauma and how to parent therapeutically in response
- Keeping in Touch with a child's first/birth family
- Navigating a child's relationship with their first/birth family, during their childhood and into adulthood
- Living with child on parent violence
- Significant challenges for children in the school environment
- Significant challenges for parents in navigating school relationships and SEND services and processes
- Moving into adulthood
- Accessing Adoption Records

We continue to prioritise supporting the delivery of outcomes in line with [Adoption England](#)'s main aims which have been informed by the [Adoption Barometer](#) recommendations. Moving all our casework onto one data base (CHARMS) and arranging our services into specialisms has allowed us to have a much more accurate picture of the demand for adoption support and this means we can now plan and organise our services accordingly.



ADOPTION SUPPORT

The Advice Hub

We have now merged all four local duty lines to one Advice Hub. The Advice Hub is aimed primarily for parents and offers up to six sessions with a social worker. The focus is to provide helpful discussions with parents about their child, family life and to think through what support needs there are relating to adoption. We encourage parents to contact us at an early stage rather than waiting until their family feels in crisis and can signpost to the full range of our early help offer, as well as clear signposting to the services that sit outside of ASE.

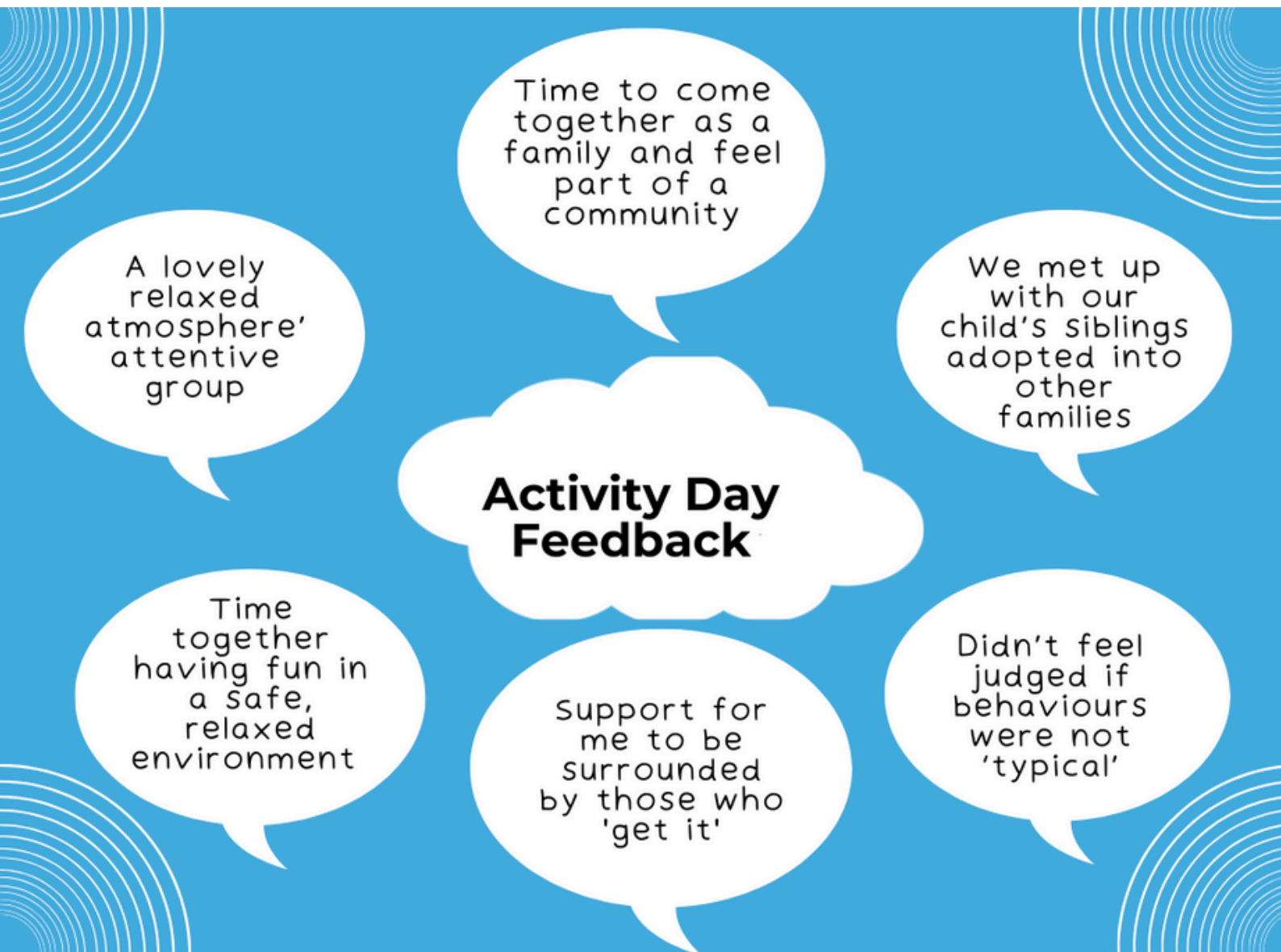
We are aware of the heavy impact upon families with the period of waiting for support after referral. Our advice hub model means that parents are now able to receive support before challenges develop into crises. This year we have received 637 enquires through our Advice Hub. Feedback from parents on this service has been excellent.

The social workers on the hub also offer advice and consultation to professionals working with children who have been adopted, although will only talk about specific children with parental consent.



ADOPTION SUPPORT

ASE continues to host our extremely popular activity days. These are now fully regional with events co-ordinated so that there is something happening somewhere in the ASE region every month. We ran our first teenage event last year and the feedback from this was extremely positive. As a result of our adopter feedback we now have a series of teen events scheduled for the coming year.



Consultation with our adopters has also highlighted the need for a few hours break from childcare. We have been trialling ways to provide day time respite and in 2024/5 we held a number of activities session with a local holiday club provider, [Branching Out](#).

ADOPTION SUPPORT

Approved Provider List and Adoption and Special Guardianship Support Fund (ASGSF)

Requests from parents for therapeutic support continues to make up a significant proportion of our work and in 2024-2025 we secured £3,949,762.72 in funding from the ASGSF for therapy for 1397 children following an Adoption Support Assessment.

The ASGSF funding is provided by a government grant and a delay in agreeing the revenue grant as well as a 40% reduction in the amount for each child which has caused a significant amount of additional work for our social work and business support teams as all applications had to be done again. This uncertainty was very stressful for families and for providers. ASE managers were busy holding this uncertainty while trying to identify which families might mean moved into a crisis. Regular updates were provided to parents and providers via our adopter voice newsletter, website and email.

Unsurprisingly there has been a consequence for the service ASE can provide and we now have a waiting list for new Adoption Support Assessments and can only allocate a social worker to families where the need for an assessment is considered as a high priority.

We have worked closely with our providers on our approved provider list at this time and again communicated this with families via our Adoption Voices newsletter, website and social work team.

ADOPTION SUPPORT

Catching up and Staying Connected Service

Adopt South, Adoption South East and Adopt South East Partnership have worked together to develop and launch a new service for parents who have adopted children. This initial roll out is funded by the Department of Education's Innovation Fund and the three RAAs have committed to embedding the service in their support offer going forward. The evidence of need for this service has been established through research and is clearly outlined as an outstanding need in the [Adopter Barometer](#).

The Service has three distinct services areas:

Being a Family Peer group: Parents can sign up to a monthly on line peer group facilitated by an Adoption Support social worker and our Adopter Voice Liaison. They can attend this group as often as they chose for the first year after their Adoption Order has been granted.

Catching up calls: Parents will be able to opt in to receive a catch up call from the adoption support team, offering advice, signposting and guiding relationships between adopters and the RAA. ASE are looking to employ an adoptive parent to undertake this role and work alongside our existing Adopter Voice Liaison worker.

Focused training offer: Parents can attend training run by AUK aimed at key developmental stages for a child and at key transitions times for them.

ADOPTION SUPPORT

Keeping In Touch (KiT)

The KiT team currently supports just under 1400 children and their families, co-ordinating and reviewing a large volume of post adoption KiT arrangements. Each year they facilitate over 3000 Letterbox exchanges and support approximately 80 face-to-face meetings between adopted children and their first/birth parents and/or significant family members. The team responds to, on average, 90 new KiT referrals per year for children who have recently been placed for adoption; setting up the KiT arrangements and offering advice, guidance and support to the families.

Recent research and national guidance, including work from the [Nuffield Family Justice Observatory](#) (NFJO), has highlighted the importance of modernising post-adoption contact and moving beyond traditional letterbox only, towards more meaningful, flexible face-to-face arrangements – where safe and appropriate. This shift reflects a growing understanding of how KiT supports identity, emotional security and connection for a child to their first/birth family.

As expectations around KiT evolve, the KiT team has required additional professional capacity to assess, facilitate and support these more complex and dynamic arrangements. ASE has continued to invest in this area of Adoption Support and appointed a dedicated team manager in the summer of 2024 who manages the KiT team which is made up of Adoption Support workers and business support officers. We are now in a position to ensure that every family has a named worker who manages the KiT arrangement between them and their child's first/birth family.

ADOPTION SUPPORT

Opportunities to Build Communities

ASE continues to host our extremely popular activity days, which are fully regional with something on every month. We also run ASE playgroups dedicated to providing a safe, supportive and nurturing environment for all parents who are approved to adopt and for children who have been adopted, under Foster for Adoption (FfA) or have an adoption plan in place.

Our playgroups are open to all of these families who reside within the region covered by Adoption South East and are delivered by Adoption Support workers from our KiT team with the aim that this create links between parents and workers they are likely to come across, as well as maintain links with ASE.

ASE Playgroups are free to attend and are designed as flexible, drop-in sessions, allowing families to attend for as long or as little as they wish and with the freedom to decide whether they attend or not on the day. This year we organised these groups to ensure that we have one every day across the region – Monday to Friday.



ADOPTION SUPPORT

Adopted Adults

This year we have responded to 227 enquires via our Adopted Adults hub. Enquiries can come from the adopted person, a birth relative, other agencies or intermediary services. The majority of enquiries come from people who were adopted wanting to view their adoption records.

This service continues to provide an effective efficient and welcoming response to people who request to view their adoption records. The appointment of a senior social worker in this area has driven up standards across the region.

There is increasing awareness of the lifelong impact of adoption on those who are adopted, and a growing focus on the need for agencies to provide a broader range of support than they have historically provided to varying degrees. The pooled budget of the RAA has offered the opportunity to provide groups across the region for adopted adults and to engage with those adopted adults to co-design those groups so that the purpose and culture of the groups are open to all those with lived experience and are not mediated or controlled through the lens of social work.

Following co working between our senior social worker and a steering group of adopted adults we invited organisation tender for a three year contract to provide peer groups for adopted adults across the region. This was a competitive tender and ASE awarded the contract to Family Action. The contract is due to start in June 2025, with the first groups starting soon after.

ADOPTION VOICES

Lara Featherstone, Adoption Voice Liaison, looks back at the last year:

“In 2024/2025 our consultation and two-way communication with our adoption community has continued to grow as more adopters sign up to the ASE mailing list. The circulation of our newsletters increased over the course of this year and we now have over a thousand subscribers. We have continued to circulate a separate newsletter containing our events, groups and memberships.

The ASE team worked hard to provide eight family fun day events for adoptive families catering for those in the primary age range and below (though any age was welcome to attend).

In addition to this we launched a new programme of four events especially for families of secondary school young people, which has proved to be extremely popular.



ADOPTION VOICES

Feedback from the events:

"I enjoyed being around other adopted teenagers, I would like to attend another event"

"It was really, really, really enjoyable throughout my experience throughout my day"

"Would I do it again? Yes I would!"

Bringing a large group of young people together at these events allowed us to consult with the young people directly to inform the next programme of events, which has been planned using their input.

Adopter consultation and feedback continues to highlight how valuable, and valued, these events are. They provide a space for the children and young people to be in the majority, in terms of their adopted status, and to make new friends who have adoption in common.



ADOPTION VOICES

They also give families the opportunity to:

- Help the child/young person know they are not alone in their adoption status, there are lots of other people/families like them/theirs
- Be in a space where everyone understands adoption
- Speak, informally, to ASE social workers and re-connect with social workers who have been a part of their story
- Network with other adoptive families
- And importantly, have fun as a family!

As well as letting our adoption community know about events that we are holding, the newsletters have provided us with a way to share news of other opportunities open to our families from outside organisations. In 2024-5 these have included art workshops, training from the region's Virtual Schools, free tickets to Brighton Festival performances and family music workshops.

ASE has also worked with an outside provider to trial holiday clubs to facilitate fun and networking for our adopted children, at the same time as providing respite for parents. The provider, Branching Out, delivered their usual holiday club programme, which parents paid for, with days allocated specifically for adopted young people.

ASE complimented this delivery by providing staff training on modern adoption issues and by funding a higher staff/child ratio to allow children with higher needs to be able to attend. This model has proved to be very popular and we plan to continue this in the upcoming school holidays.

ADOPTION VOICES

The 2024 ASE's Learning and Development programme has been very successful and has delivered training sessions on a wide range of adoption related subjects. We continuously evaluate feedback to inform the training programme going forward and this resulted in the continuation of the majority of training sessions, as well as the expansion of our Non-Violent Resistance programme going forward into 2025.

We have continued to run an Education Peer support group and have commissioned a FASD Peer Support and Learning Group, and a Therapeutic Parenting support group through Adoption UK. Working alongside other RAAs we started a monthly 'Being A Family' peer group at the end of the year, in response to feedback from adopters that they would like more support from ASE just after they receive their adoption order. This is part of a wider package being rolled out for new adopters.

The 'Meet the Adopters' sessions, which are a statutory part of Stage 1, have now been running for three years. The sessions aim to help prospective adopters think through their adoption journey, with input from those with lived experience. They have been very successful, with fantastic feedback from families.



ADOPTION VOICES

The vast majority of attendees report that the sessions have been helpful in aiding them to think about the adoption journey that will be right for them and has prompted many to want to find out more about adopting siblings; adopting an older child; Fostering for Adoption (FFA), and a variety of modern adoption issues. Prospective adopters told us the Meet the Adopter sessions were useful because:

“You get the reality of the situation from lived experience. To hear the human response to the challenges being an adopter and a parent.”

“As our journey continues, it's always handy to be able to access the experience of people who have been through the adoption process before, and are all at different stages of parenthood with diverse experiences.”

“It was a great experience asking our questions, the volunteers had a wide breadth of experience and different avenues of adoption”



ADOPTION VOICES

We have continued to invite national consultation, via our newsletter, by circulating consultations from Adoption England, Adoption UK, and research institutions, as well as locally from ASE.

I have continued to liaise with local adopter, peer led, groups through their group representatives, meeting them bi-monthly. The Adoption Support manager and Head of Service are invited to these meeting three times a year. This has proved to be an invaluable source of two-way communication with the adopter community.

The adoption support offer in Adoption South East has grown/changed substantially this year with the growth of the numbers of events, collaborations, the introduction of the Advice hub, the start of the Being a Parent group and the changes/consolidation of the Under 5s playgroups across the region. Adopter voice and consultation has played a significant role in shaping the structure of these services.

We have also consulted with adopters, and shared their voices, when working with other partners involved in the provision of services to our families.

We continue to learn a lot from all the consultation with, and feedback from, our adoptive families. We are deeply grateful to the many adopters who take part in our stakeholder engagement, which is used to inform and to shape our services.

PANELS

The main business of the ASE Adoption Panels continues to be to make recommendations to the ASE Agency Decision Maker (ADM) as to the suitability of prospective adoptive applicants and as to the suitability of proposed matches for children to ADMs in our local authority partner agencies. In addition, the adoption panel has a quality assurance responsibility and provides feedback about practice to the social work teams, local authority agency advisers and ADMs in ASE and the local authorities.

There were 62 panel meetings in 2024-2025 which considered recommendations for 68 Prospective Adopter approvals and 84 matches.

All the matches presented had a positive recommendation from the panel and were subsequently agreed by local authority ADMs which indicates that the pre-panel quality assurance process is working well to ensure that all the relevant information is available for panels to reach a recommendation.



PANELS

Of the 68 Prospective Adopter Approvals, two were deferred for further information after panel had considered the reports and of the remaining 66 approvals considered only one was a negative recommendation.

There are key areas where panels have offered advice and quality assurance feedback to the agencies about practice which are noted in the Chairs' Report below.

Feedback from applicants and social workers

The panel service is keen to learn from social workers and applicants attending panel about their experience so that we can continue to improve consistency and transparency in the process.

Feedback has been overwhelmingly positive:

"We were very pleased and thankful for how the panel talked to us and put us at ease during the meeting. It is a daunting experience and all panel representatives were friendly, welcoming and compassionate. We felt, and were pleased, that their questions were focused on the interests of all parties associated with the proposed adoption. Thank you for making our experience so positive."

"The panel were so friendly and welcoming we felt very at ease in what was a slightly unnerving situation! Thank you to everyone."

"Panel was a little late but I was kept informed and so was able to let my applicants know. Panel was very welcoming, and all questions were clear and relevant."

PANELS

While it remains the central focus of panel members that they have a responsibility for the scrutiny of recommendations and will always keep at the forefront the needs of children, the aim is to ensure that those attending panel are well prepared and supported to contribute the information needed to reach a recommendation. Social workers and applicants have indicated that they appreciate themes of the areas that the panel wish to explore further being sent out in advance and that panels also outline the strengths of the applicants alongside the issues needing to be discussed.

Having collated all the feedback, the Panel Service is in the process of finalising information sheets for those attending panel to make clear the panel's role and what they can expect when attending panel meetings. New social workers are also encouraged to take up the opportunity of observing a panel before presenting a recommendation to panel.

Panel membership and developments

This year has seen significant changes with two new Chairs appointed and two new Professional Advisers allocated to this role as part of the reorganisation of ASE into specialist teams. This is alongside a dedicated administration team which is key to the effective running of panels and the continued commitment of independent panel members and Medical Advisers.

This has provided an opportunity to focus on consistency and connection across our three panels so that there is a shared understanding about standards, approach and learning. Our panel chairs now meet regularly together and with the Professional Advisers to agree improvements and to reflect on themes in quality assurance feedback to the agencies.

PANELS

The service will also in future have six monthly business meetings with all panel chairs and members present, rather than individual meetings at separate panels. Business meetings provide feedback on national and agency developments, an overview of progress on cases considered and updates on research, as well as an opportunity to consider how panels are functioning and can continue to improve.

Alongside this the Professional Advisers have now established regular meetings with Child Agency Advisers from the four local authority partners to feed back on identified quality assurance issues, consider best practice and to work collaboratively on ensuring the panel service supports the avoidance of delay in achieving permanence for children. The current focus is on a shared approach to planning for implementation of the new Child Permanence Report across all four local authority areas.



PANELS

Training

ASE held its annual in person Panel training day in January 2025 with a focus on the modernising post adoption contact agenda. This included a presentation on recent research, case law and the outcome of the November 2024 Public Law Working Group. This facilitated a lively discussion about panel's role in exploring contact plans and their option to offer advice to local authority ADMs on proposed contact arrangements when any match is considered.

While the annual training days are well-received and are also an important opportunity for panel members to meet in person, the time commitment and distance make it difficult for all to attend.

The panel service is also aware that panel members bring a wide variety of personal and professional experience to their role and have different learning needs. All panel members have access to CATCH memberships through ASE - this is an online community of information and support which provides a wealth of training and learning resources including webinars, executive summaries, e-learning courses and links to explore further. Panel members are also directed to relevant [BAAF](#) briefings on topics such as the new Child Permanence Report.

Nevertheless, we have identified a need for short 'bitesize' online training sessions which we plan to run twice yearly so that we can update on relevant recent research, legislative and case law changes and practice developments such as the training offered to prospective adopters.

PANELS

Impact of ASE Restructure

Six months into the new structure it is clear that there are real opportunities to improve practice through quality assurance feedback as relevant themes can be focussed on the specialist teams working in a particular area. For example, now that there is a dedicated specialist team completing Prospective Adopter Assessments (PARs), there is regular dialogue with a smaller team about panels' expectations of what is required from assessments.

Examples of this include how work with existing children in families is approached, and what to take into account when assessing and preparing a family to potentially consider a trans-racial placement. There are already indications that as the specialist teams increase their confidence and expertise in a specific area, the consistency and quality of assessments and reports are improving with frequent examples of good practice.



PANELS

Chairs' report

Current panel chairs are Michelle Goode, Yashi Shah and Shirley Robottom. The Panel Chairs have been meeting together this year to support achieving consistency of approach and standards, to bring together quality assurance themes from that can be fed back to agencies and to provide appropriate challenge to ASE.

Children's work

Overall, panel chairs have been able to identify and feed back on examples of excellent practice from child and adoption social workers. While there is still some variation in standards and areas for improvement, the potential for the specialist structure to drive up standards of practice and achieve more consistency is evident.

The Panel Chairs note the continued positive emphasis on Early Permanence with a significant number of matches presented to panel being for children already living with their proposed adoptive families on a Fostering to Adopt basis.

Panel Chairs have proposed that they be involved in recruitment of panel members in future and how this can be achieved is being considered when further recruitment of panel members is required.

Panel Chairs acknowledge that it is difficult to meet all the ADMs individually given the numbers across the local authorities. Therefore the Agency Decision Maker (ADM) will meet with them annually going forward. The ASE Agency Decision Maker will observe each chair's panel to contribute to his lead in their annual appraisals. Local Authority ADMs will be offered the opportunity to observe a panel if they are able to do so.

PANELS

Chairs' report (contd)

It is acknowledged that there is often a lack of clarity in reports to panel about how the risks and benefits of post adoption contact plans and arrangements are assessed and evidenced, and they often do not reflect the current case law and research. In particular, a tendency to resort to formulaic plans of starting with letterbox exchanges with the possibility of review in future. While it is clear this has been a national issue and a complex area of practice as highlighted by the President of the Family Division in his 2024 speeches - hence recent case law and proposals from the [Public Law Working Group](#) - significant improvements do need to be made. It is acknowledged, however, that there is evidence that adoptive families are better prepared and informed about contact and the support offered by the ASE Keeping in Touch service from the point of Preparation groups and throughout the assessment stage.

Areas for improvement

The other main area for improvement is preparation and assessment of adoptive families open to considering trans-racial placements. While there are some examples of good practice there appears to be a lack of confidence and knowledge in this area. Panel Chairs are aware of social workers beginning to use the [AFDIT framework](#) issued by Adoption England to support their assessments (this outlines essential principles and best practices that social workers can employ when working with transracial adoptive families and children) but this still needs to be embedded in practice to be meaningful. It is encouraging that this is a priority area for development for ASE and for the assessment and family finding teams.

COMPLAINTS AND COMPLIMENTS

This year our customer service team have received 34 contacts of which 13 were complaints, three of which were considered under the statutory process. These are typically complaints in relation to Adoption Support (2000 families received adoption support services in the same period). We received 19 enquires which were potential complaints and which we were able to deescalate and resolve for people, and we received one MP enquiry on behalf of an existing complainant.

We received the majority of complaints through our dedicated complaints inbox which indicates that our processes are working for people who wish to complain. Six people have complained about the adoption process and dissatisfaction with our decision making, Four have complained about Keeping in Touch / Contact services and three have complained about Adoption Support.

62% of complaints were not upheld, 31% were partly upheld and 7% were upheld. We saw no escalations of statutory complaints to Stage 2 or Stage 3 this year. There were no non-statutory complaints escalated to the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman. This indicates that complainants are satisfied that their complaint has been appropriately investigated at Stage 1 and that where we have got things wrong, we have been transparent about this and identified where we can learn from complaints.

The maximum time allowed to respond to complaints, as set out in the ASE complaints policy, is 20 working days. Nine complaints (69%) were responded to on time. This reflects that the policy is effective and supportive for all parties and that training and support from our Customer Relations team has a positive impact.

COMPLAINTS AND COMPLIMENTS

The complaints procedure can be accessed on the Adoption South East website [here](#).

Learning and improvement

Throughout the year we record the learning identified from each complaint to build a picture of common themes or trends. Our learning from complaints is vital to our continued efforts to ensure high levels of service and to maintaining positive relationships with the families who use our services and need to be able to trust us. A learning report is produced every six weeks and shared with the Head of Service who then ensures managers are making the changes promised as a result of a complaint. One example arises from 31% of the complaints ASE received being about letterbox contact (Keeping in Touch).

Whilst the numbers of complaints and enquiries were relatively low given the volume of the work undertaken by the team, the issues complained about included, no letters being received, a delay in receiving letters, letters being sent to the incorrect address, and complaints about information shared. The complaints were not all upheld, but some changes were made as a result of the complaints. This included a senior management review of Keeping in Touch arrangements for families, implementation of new processes and training for the team, and the learning informed the restructure of this area of work within the wider service restructure. Additional resources have been allocated to ensure a more efficient, effective and reliable service for all families in order to ensure that we have a solid foundation from which to meet the expanding demands for contact support in contemporary care planning for children.

ADOPTION SOUTH EAST - CONCLUSION

Each year the Annual Report for Adoption South East becomes longer than the last as our focus as a relatively new organisation shifts from our transformation from local services to a operating successfully as a truly regional adoption service. This year has been one of significant change which has likely played some part in the reduced approvals and placements reflected in this report alongside changes in national trends. The work we have reported on this year in relation to Adoption Support demonstrates that there continues to be a rising demand, and that we have continued to meet this both in terms of the number and value of our funding applications for therapy for children and their families, alongside an evolving and increasing offer of other support for families built by adoption.

Further to our service reviews last year, we spent this year preparing for and then moving to our new specialist structure. This is now fully operational and provides a solid foundation for the years ahead and from which to meet the challenges and opportunities set out for us in the modernising agenda in adoption.

Our service restructure has required a considerable amount of work from all involved and has been delivered, in time, within our existing budgets and resources. This has been achieved by our teams in addition to business as usual and has, even in its earliest months, delivered benefits. Early indicators suggest that many of the process issues and barriers in our original structure are now removed or more easily resolved and that our teams experience has improved. Our specialist hub model means that we are now better able to benefit from the creativity and practice initiatives of our ASE staff in each of our service areas now that our energies are not directed at working hard to achieve standard operating processes across four historically different Local Authority workforces.

ADOPTION SOUTH EAST - CONCLUSION

The specialist model provides a solid foundation from which to respond to an evolving adoption landscape and the varied responses by our different stakeholders to those changes. That evolution can now include delivery of a CPD and learning programme for our teams as they now work to shared goals and more clearly articulated common purpose.

Examples of early impact include the regional Keeping in Touch service which now provides an equitable service across the four LA areas with a shared ethos and approach; the increase in our events and activities for adoptive families which are no longer dependent upon capacity in local teams and are now held evenly across the region; and our increased resilience to external challenges. The new specialist adoption service had the opportunity to test its resilience late in the year as the delays by central government in agreeing that the Adoption and Special Guardianship Support Fund would continue for the coming year significantly impacted families and therapy providers causing the anxiety and dissatisfaction reported nationally. Our specialist model enabled us to deliver a proactive and coherent centrally managed approach and a well-coordinated recovery once the fund was confirmed in the new financial year, when our social workers and business support teams had to redo all the work they had had already done as it had become out of date given the delays from the Department for Education.

This year has seen us continue to recruit and approve prospective adoptive parents, find families for children and support significant numbers of those families. Our local performance and experience broadly reflects national trends and is in line with colleague agencies across the South East in relation to adopter recruitment and family finding, and it is considerably greater in adoption support.

ADOPTION SOUTH EAST

CONCLUSION

Our ongoing commitment to supporting families in a range of ways designed to offer support in the way that is wanted and needed is seen in the extended range of activities, events, learning and training, peer groups and community building described in this report.

Next year will see us using our CPD programme for our teams to enhance practice in relation to becoming a family, those early stages of adjustment to new parenting whilst children live with their new parents and families get used to this new stage in their lives. Our work to embed AfDit across the range of our practice will gather pace, and we will be exploring increasingly creative ways to recruit prospective adoptive parents in what is currently a shrinking pool as we see improvements in fertility treatments, uncertainty, for some people, about parenting in any form, an increased felt economic and political instability, and changes to practice in relation to ideas of open adoption within local courts. These are all challenges and circumstances that face any Regional Adoption Agency and we are pleased to have done the work this year to give us the best advantage in meeting and navigating them in the year ahead.

Michael Wilson, Head of Service, Adoption South East



This page is intentionally left blank