



CORPORATE PARENTING PANEL

THURSDAY, 29 JANUARY 2026

10.00 AM PRIORY, ROOM 2F CENTRE BLOCK, COUNTY HALL - COUNTY HALL, LEWES

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

A G E N D A

1. Minutes of the meeting held on 16 October 2025 (*Pages 3 - 8*)
2. Apologies for absence
3. 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.
4. 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.
5. 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.
6. Children's Home Regulations 2015, Regulation 44: Inspection reports for July - September 2025 and recently published Ofsted inspection reports (*Pages 9 - 44*)
Report by Director of Children's Services
7. Any other exempt items considered urgent by the Chair.
8. Corporate Parenting Monitoring Report: Children We Care For (*Pages 45 - 54*)
Report by Director of Children's Services
9. Heading Home update (*Pages 55 - 62*)
Report by Director of Children's Services
10. Language of Care update (*Pages 63 - 72*)
Report by Director of Children's Services
11. Virtual School Annual Report (*Pages 73 - 86*)
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

21 January 2026

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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 16 October 2025.

PRESENT Councillors Kathryn Field, Colin Belsey, Anne Cross,
Sorrell Marlow-Eastwood, Colin Swansborough,
Georgia Taylor and Penny di Cara

ALSO PRESENT Carolyn Fair – Director of Children’s Services
Fiona Lewis – Head of Looked After Children Services –
Provider Services
Sally Carnie – Head of Looked After Children Service –
Operations
Dr Isabelle Hodgson – Designated Doctor – NHS Sussex
Roxanne Clark - Practice Manager – UASC Team
Alex Eves - Practice Manager – UASC Team
Summer Kelly – Governance and Democracy Officer

14. MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON 17 JULY 2025

14.1 RESOLVED to agree as a correct record the minutes of the meeting held on 17 July 2025.

15. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

15.1 Apologies were received for Councillor Bob Bowdler. Councillor Penny di Cara was in attendance as substitute.

16. DISCLOSURE OF INTERESTS

16.1 Councillor Colin Belsey declared a personal, non-prejudicial interest that a family member is employed at Broderick House.

17. URGENT ITEMS

17.1 There were none.

18. REPORTS

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

19. EXCLUSION OF PRESS AND PUBLIC

19.1 RESOLVED to exclude the public and press from the meeting for item 7 (see minute 20) 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.

20. CHILDREN'S HOME REGULATIONS 2015, REGULATION 44: INSPECTION REPORTS FOR APRIL- JULY 2025 AND RECENTLY PUBLISHED OFSTED INSPECTION REPORTS

20.1 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.

20.2 The following points were highlighted to the Corporate Parenting Panel:

- 1) Silver Birches and Lansdowne Secure Children's Home were inspected by Ofsted during August and September 2025. Both homes received a judgement of 'Good'.
- 2) All Homes received visits from their Regulation 44 Independent Person.
- 3) There have been positive developments in recruitment activity for the quarter. This has been particularly relevant to Lansdowne. East Sussex County Council continues to invest in a dedicated recruitment strategy. This has included Employer Branded advertising on Indeed and a rolling programme of Open Days at Lansdowne and The Bungalow.
- 4) Areas of particular focus for the next quarter will include:
 - Opening additional bed capacity at Lansdowne Secure Children's Home
 - Opening Seaside Short Breaks (previously Acorns)
 - Achieving CQC Registration for the Children's Disability Homes
 - Embedding digital case management across all our homes
 - Focus on the experience of staff in our homes and building resilience
 - Drive towards 'Outstanding' across the homes
 - Working with Education colleagues to ensure that all children in our homes are in school or receiving an education which best meets their needs

20.3 Following the discussion, the Panel RESOLVED to note the report.

21. ANY OTHER EXEMPT ITEMS CONSIDERED URGENT BY THE CHAIR.

21.1 There were none.

22. LOOKED AFTER CHILDREN (LAC) STATISTICS

22.1 The Panel considered a report by the Director of Children's Services regarding an overview of quarter 2 data for Looked After Children.

22.2 The following points were highlighted to the Panel:

- 1) Following a consultation with foster carers, it was agreed that the term, Looked After Children would be updated to Children We Care For.

2) There has been a total of 49 children admitted to care in quarter 2, which is a decrease compared to quarter 1 of 7 children. This is an increase of 11 separated children since the last quarter. The overall reduction can be attributed to new initiatives, particularly from the Connected Family Intensive Practice service.

3) A total of 48 children were discharged from care during quarter 2.

4) East Sussex County Council participates in the National Transfer Scheme (NTS) for separated migrant children. The number of separated migrant children who were looked after was 70 at the end of quarter 2, this is an increase from quarter 1.

5) Ultimately, the investment made by East Sussex County Council into initiatives to support children and their families has had a positive impact. This is evidenced in the overall reduction in the number of children we care for, the reduction in children being admitted to care and the increase in children being discharged from care and further increases in children returning to love at home or with family.

22.3 The Panel RESOLVED to note the content of the report.

23. SEPARATED MIGRANT CHILDREN

23.1 The Panel considered a report by the Director of Children's Services, regarding Separated Migrant Children.

23.2 The following points were highlighted to the Panel:

1) Separated Migrant children are unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (UASC) under the age of 18 who arrive in the United Kingdom without a parent or legal guardian and seek asylum in their own right. East Sussex County Council Children's Services have adopted the term Separated Migrant Children in place of Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children to align with the Language that Cares agenda.

2) East Sussex County Council has a specialist Separated Migrant Children's Team which was established in 2017/2018. The team operated as part of the Through Care Service and consists of 5 full-time social workers, 7 personal advisors, 2 case workers and 1 education lead. The team has strong partnership and links with Sussex Police, exploitation team and missing persons teams.

3) Referrals into the service come via the National Transfer Scheme (NTS), this was established to support Kent County Council in distributing responsibility for separated migrant children across the UK.

4) Currently separated migrant children represent 11% of East Sussex County Council's Children We Care For and 33% of the care leaver cohort.

5) There are a number of projects to ensure that Separated Migrant Children feel welcome in the UK, one example being Welcome to UK day.

6) During initial health assessments Separated Migrant Children are signposted to a wealth of further information and advice, such as sexual education and understanding consent.

7) The national discourse surrounding migration has had impact on the wellbeing of some young people within East Sussex, despite this there has also been positive and encouraging examples of community and public support. Partnerships with the police and safer communities teams have helped to strengthen local support strategies.

23.3 The Panel RESOLVED to note the Separated Migrant Children report.

24. LOOKED AFTER CHILDREN SERVICE ANNUAL REPORT

24.1 The Panel considered a report by the Director of Children's Services, regarding Looked After Children Service Annual report.

24.2 The following points were highlighted to the Panel:

- 1) During 2024-2025 a total of 908 children were looked after by East Sussex County Council, an increase of 20 compared to the previous year. At the end of the year there were 688 children in care, 31 more than the previous year.
- 2) Initial and Review Health Assessments remain an area of focus alongside improvement in dental care. Health outcomes for children in care are known to be poorer than for their peers.
- 3) The Children in Care Council and Care Leavers Council continue to offer valuable challenge and represent the Council at regional and national events.
- 4) There has been a focus on Heading Home (reunification within the family network) and building creative care plans in order to help mitigate a pressure on the budget with regard to increased agency residential placements and high-cost placements for children with complex needs.

24.3 The Panel RESOLVED to:

- 1) Receive Annual Engagement Self-assessment reports in place of the Looked After Children Service annual report going forward.
- 2) Note the Looked After Children Service annual report.

25. INDEPENDENT REVIEWING OFFICER (IRO) ANNUAL REPORT

25.1 The Panel considered a report by the Director of Children's Services regarding the Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) Annual report.

25.2 The following points were highlighted to the panel:

- 1) All permanent posts to the Safeguarding Unit were successfully filled, which has eliminated a need for agency staff.
- 2) In order to avoid introducing a new IRO for a single review, some My Voice Matters meetings were cancelled, these were child-cantered decisions and Children supported the approach.
- 3) Audits conducted during the review period included a thematic audit on the Effectiveness of the Missing Children Process showed that most children were offered return home interviews. Safeguarding Managers audited the impact of Midway Reviews, finding positive outcomes and prompting improvements.
- 4) The Safeguarding Unit has strengthened ties with Bede's School in Eastbourne, where several children are boarders. The team also visited the school to better understand the Boarding School project and how the school meets the children's needs.

5) Quality Assurance Monitoring and independent challenge are statutory requirements. 134 Issue Resolutions were raised over the year and 100% were resolved by 31 March 2025. 91% were resolved within 20 working days.

6) Over the year the IRO service has been able to increase the progression of children having their permanency secured through long-term fostering. Review the timeliness of My Voice Matters meetings. Support children staying in contact with people that are important to them. Promote reunification.

25.3 The Panel RESOLVED to note the contents of the Independent Reviewing Officers (IRO) Annual report.

26. OFSTED FOCUSED VISIT REPORT

26.1 The Panel considered a report by the Director of Children's Services regarding Ofsted Focused Visit report.

26.2 The following points were highlighted to the Panel:

1) Ofsted undertook a focused visit under the Inspection of Local Authority Children's Services (ILACS) framework, with particular focus on arrangements for children in need and child protection planning.

2) Ofsted found strengths including, strong senior leadership and corporate support, integrated multidisciplinary support for children and families, a stable and committed workforce and a well-embedded model of practice.

3) One area for improvement included the timeliness of child protection strategy meetings.

4) Ofsted will consider the findings in planning future inspections.

26.2 The Panel RESOLVED to note the update on the Ofsted Focused Visit.

The meeting ended at 11.26 am.

Councillor Kathryn Field

Chair

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

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Committee:	Corporate Parenting Panel
Date:	29 January 2026
Title of Report:	Corporate Parenting Monitoring Report: Children We Care For
By:	Director of Children's Services
Purpose of Report:	To provide Corporate Parenting Panel with an overview of quarter 3 data for Children in Care

RECOMMENDATION:

The Corporate Parenting Panel is recommended to note the content of the Corporate Parenting Monitoring report: Children We Care For.

1. Background

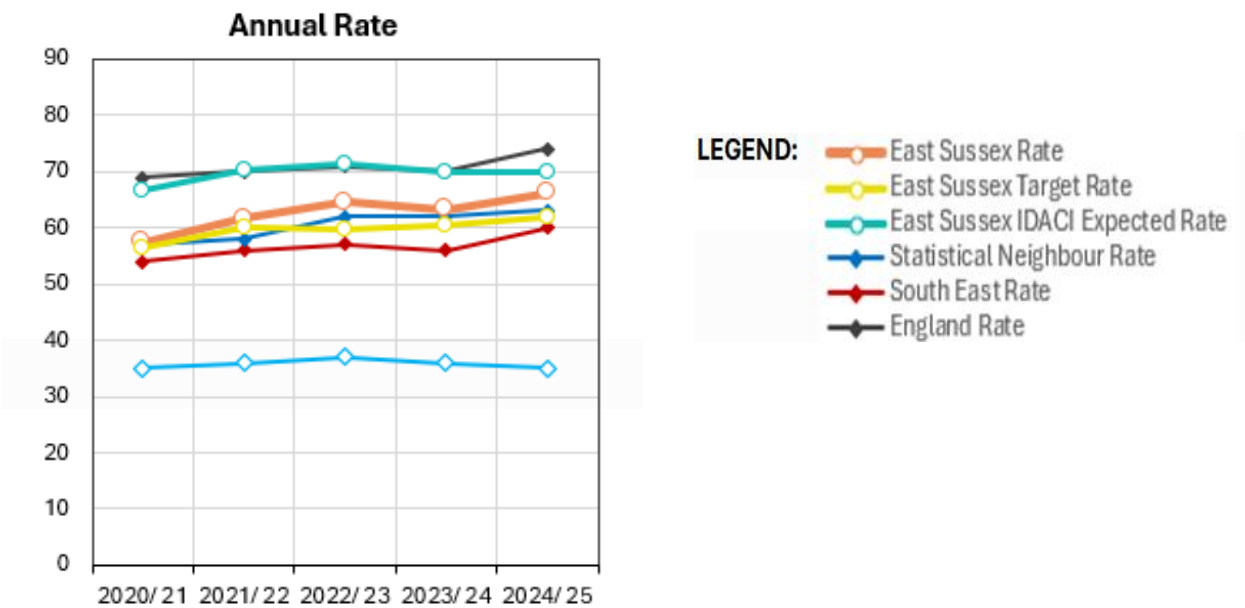
1.1. Children in Care are children who are looked after by a local authority, typically as a result of concerns regarding their safety or welfare. East Sussex County Council (ESCC) is responsible for safeguarding, supporting, and promoting the welfare of children in its care. This regular report to the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

1.2. Services for Children in Care 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 Separated Children's Grant from the Home Office.

2. Supporting information

2.1. The data found in the charts in this report is drawn as a snapshot on the last day of the month within the quarter (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 which may appear slightly differently to the end of quarter figures presented to the Corporate Parenting Panel.

Graph 1: Rate of Children in Care in East Sussex 2020-2025, compared with England, statistical neighbours, and Income Deprivation Affecting Children Index (IDACI).

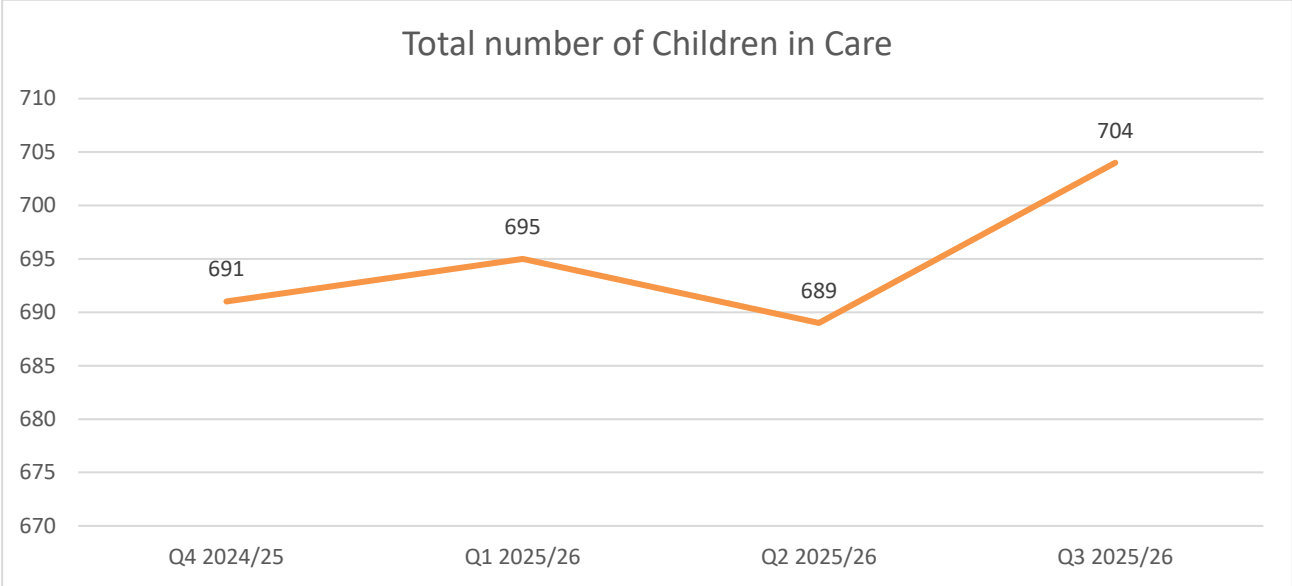


Rates shown are per 10,000 0-17 year old population		2020/ 21	2021/ 22	2022/ 23	2023/ 24	2024/ 25
East Sussex Number		208	249	241	231	242
East Sussex Rate		19.5	24.4	23.5	22.3	23.2
East Sussex IDACI Expected Rate		24.1	27.3	29.3	28.8	28.8
Statistical Neighbour Rate		20.0	23.0	28.0	28.0	32.0
Essex Rate		12.0	15.0	16.0	14.0	13.0
South East Rate		23.0	26.0	28.0	32.0	28.0
England Rate		24.0	26.0	28.0	28.0	28.0

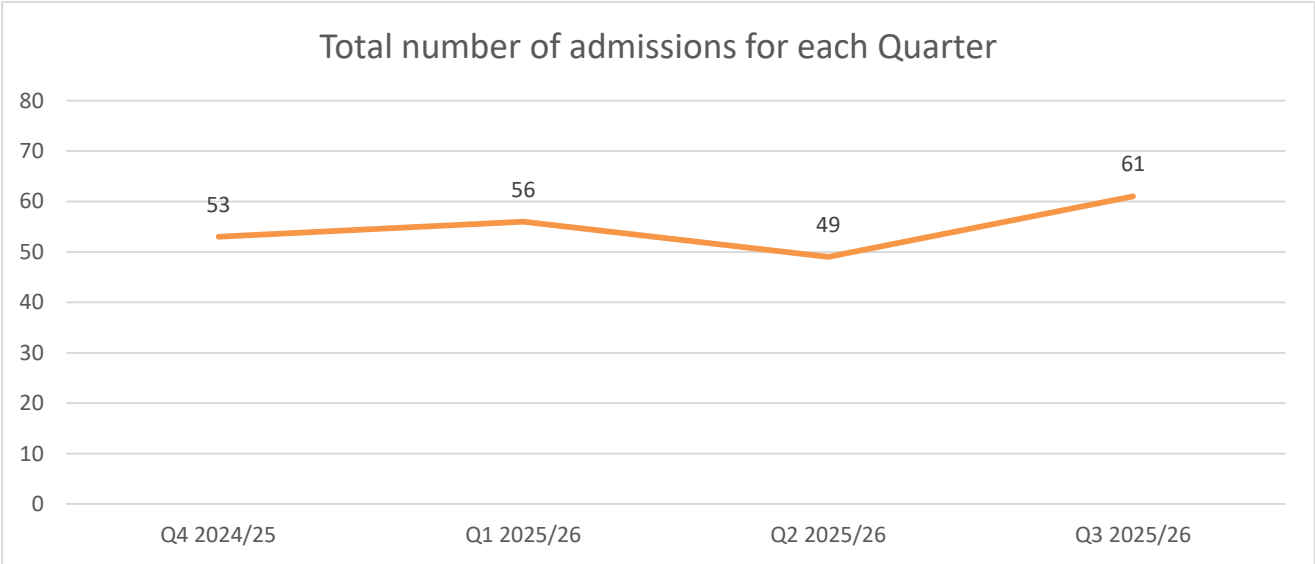
2.2. This is the most current published data available. It is updated through the Department of Education (DfE) data collection process and was published in November 2025. The graph and data above, evidences an increase in the rate and number of looked after children in East Sussex over the last 5 years. The ESCC rate of looked after children remains below the national rate for England and the expected rates based on levels of deprivation (Income Deprivation Affecting Children Index-IDACI rate). However, the rate is above the Southeast rate and slightly above our statistical neighbours. The trend is largely showing the same trajectory as last year and tracking the same pattern as our comparators on the chart. ESCC has invested in a range of demand management approaches and programmes over the last three years and has continued to do so throughout 2025/26. These aim to enable more children to live safely at home or within their family networks, and to improve outcomes for children. These investments have been highlighted previously at Corporate Parenting Panel and include the Valuing Care approach, Foundations and Connected Families (CFIP). In addition, the Heading Home strategy has recently been launched to deliver further planning and support regarding reunification of children in care with their family network where appropriate to do so. Our focus remains on enabling our children to live in the right placement, for the right length of time.

2.3. Graph 2 illustrates an increase in the number of Children in Care since the end of Quarter 2, with 704 Children in Care (this includes 69 separated children who were formerly known as unaccompanied asylum-seeking children) at the end of December 2025 (Q3). This shows a sharp increase from Q2. Data cleansing has identified an error in relation to four children so the actual figure at the end of Q2 was 700 Children in Care at the end of Q3.

Graph 2: Total number of Children in Care over the last 4 quarters.



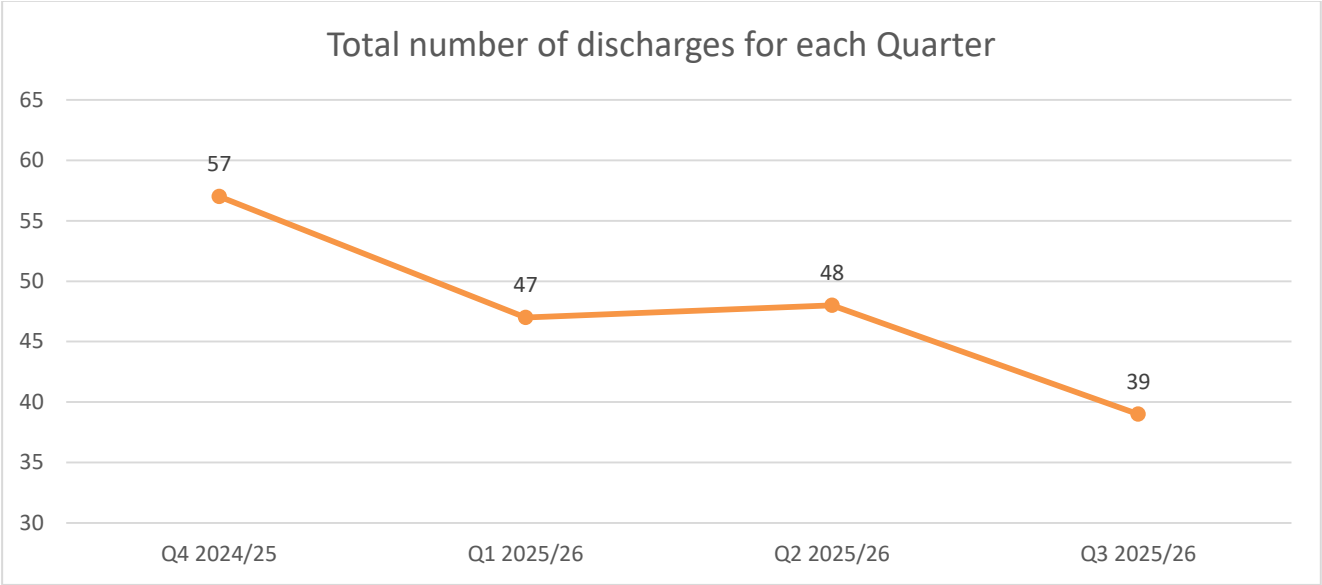
Graph 3: Total number of admissions for each Quarter.



2.4. There has been a total of 61 children admitted to care in Q3 which is an increase on the previous quarter of 12. The admissions were made up of 11 sibling groups in total, 9 sibling groups of 2 or 3 children, a sibling group of 4 children and a sibling group of 5 children. 25 single children and 6 separated children. This is a decrease of 9 separated children since the last quarter. Of this cohort of children admitted to care, 30 were accommodated through Section 20 of the Children’s Act, 6 of which were separated migrant children, 11 were admitted to care through emergency orders, which is an

increase of 2 since the last quarter, and 20 were admitted to care through planned Care Proceedings, which is an increase of 7 since the last quarter. The overall increase in admissions during this quarter can be attributed largely to a combination of factors where there has been an increase of activity across all routes into care, and an increase in the number of larger sibling groups from individual families.

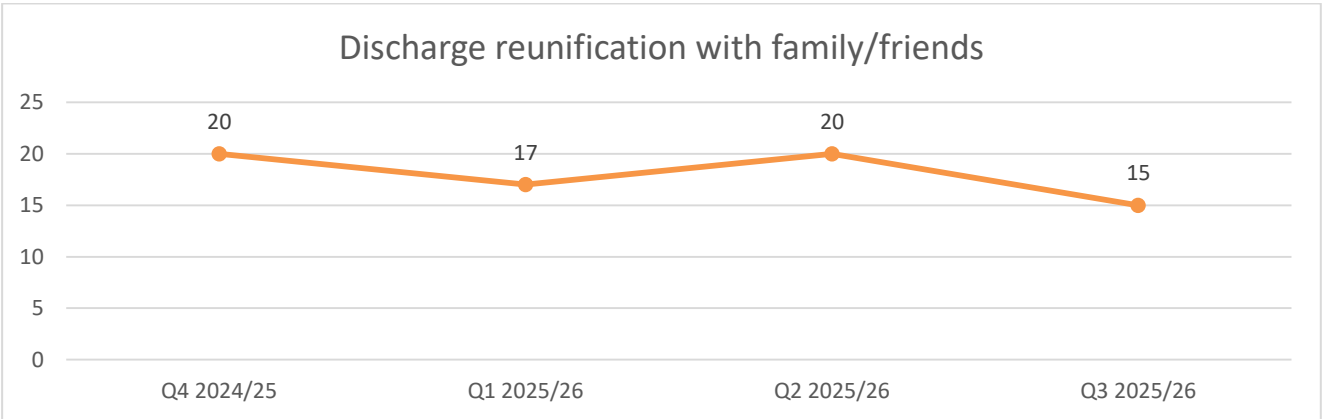
Graph 4: Total number of discharges for each Quarter



2.5. 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, have had special guardianship, child arrangement orders made or have returned to their family networks. A total of 39 children were discharged from care over Q3 (the data error here means this figure should be 43) whilst this quarter has shown a reduction in the number of children being discharged from care. If you compare the year to date for 2025/26 there were 154 discharges, whereas during the same period for 2024/25 there were 87, hence a significant increase in the overall rate of discharges.

2.6. As part of our approach to enable 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, 15 children were successfully reunified with family/friends. This is a slight dip and most likely due to the time of year. Graph 5 illustrates the number of reunifications achieved this year to date.

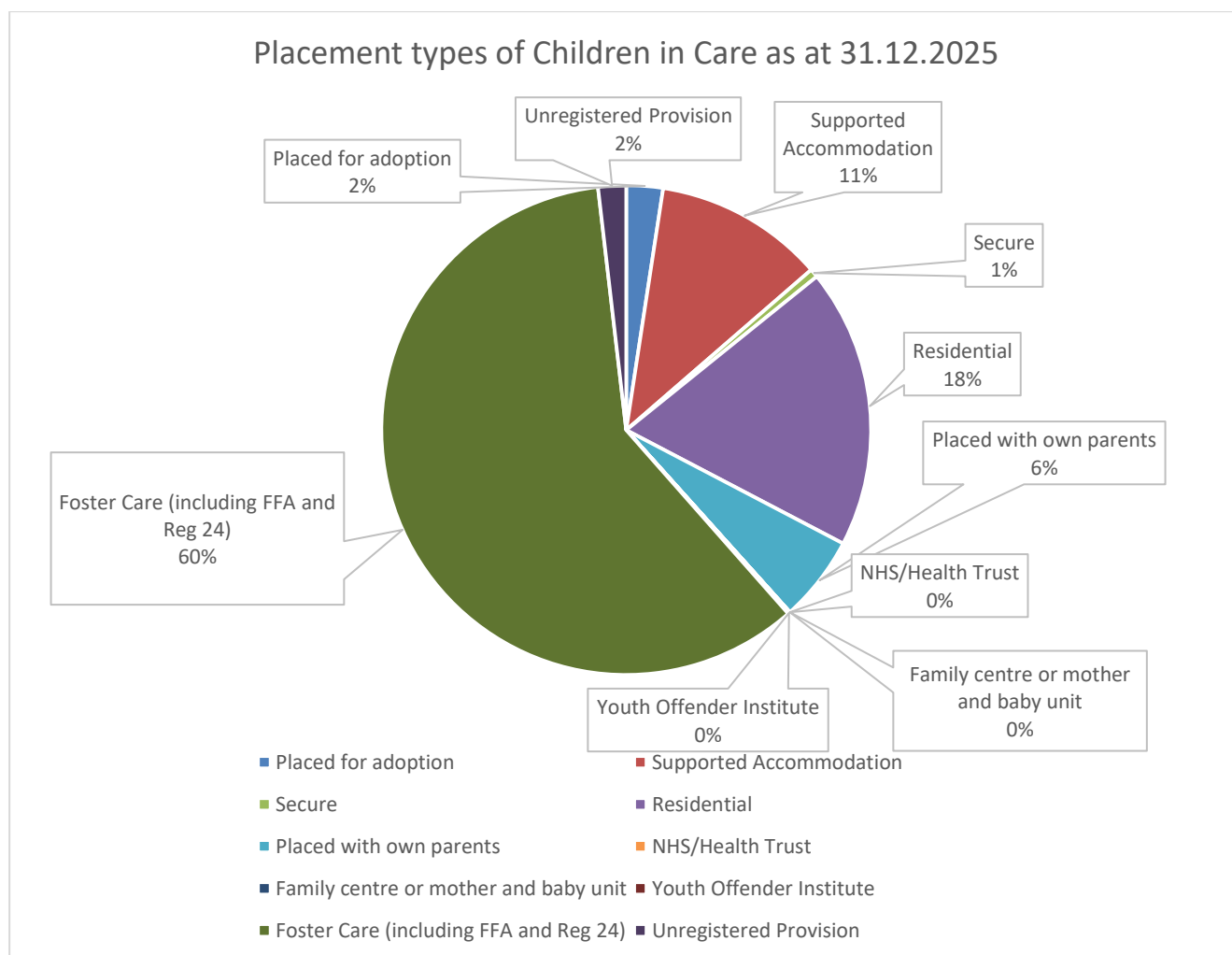
Graph 5: Number of discharges where Children in Care were reunified with family and friends across each Quarter.



3. Placements

3.1. ESCC's sufficiency strategy focuses on delivering a wide range of placements, in the right places, 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. The social work teams work teams, in collaboration with the commissioning service, work together to identify the best possible match for each child and home. Graph 6 provides an overview of the 'placement mix' at the end of Q3.

Graph 6: Details of the types of placements that Children in Care are in at the end of Quarter 3:



3.2. A total of 420 children were living in foster care at the end of December 2025; this is an increase of 7 since the last quarter. However, this continues to make up 60% of the overall total number of Children in Care due to the rise in the overall number of children in care. Of that number, 269 an increase of 6 (64%) were living with approved ESCC carers. This number includes 28 children who were placed long term with fully approved family and friends' carers. Two children were placed with foster carers who were also approved adopters as part of the Fostering for Adoption pathway. 96 children were living with external agency foster carers which is a decrease of one, and one child was placed with another Local Authority foster carer. At the end of the quarter, the number of children who were living with

temporary approved family and friends foster carers was 52 which is an increase of 4 since the last quarter.

3.3. There were 17 children placed for adoption at the end of December 2025 which has increased by 6 since the last quarter. This is 2% of the overall total number of Children in Care.

3.4. There were 89 young people living in supported accommodation and unregistered provision which is an increase of 1 since the previous quarter. This was 13% of the total number of Children in Care. The figure of 92 includes 10 children who were placed in unregistered provision, the majority of which were with providers who were CQC registered, and these arrangements were judged to be the best way to meet the complex health needs of these children. Of the 10 children living in unregistered placements there were two were under 16 years old. The provider they are placed with is awaiting Ofsted registration. Unregistered placements are only used in exceptional circumstances where there is no suitable alternative regulated provision available. In these circumstances robust risk assessments and monitoring plans are made to ensure children are cared for safely.

3.5. At the end of December 2025, the number of children living in regulated residential children's homes decreased from 132 to 130. This represents 18% of all Children in Care. Of these 130 children, 22 were living in ESCC run children's homes which is a decrease of one, and 108 were placed in external residential homes, also a decrease of one. Strenuous attempts are made to place children in families wherever possible and where children are placed in external residential homes the service remains committed to step the children down into family arrangements at the right time. In all cases the commissioning service attempts to place children in our in-house provision prior to referring out to an agency placement. Rigorous negotiations on both quality and price are made when placement searches are made with external providers.

3.6. At the end of December there were four ESCC child placed in a Secure Children's Home. Two children are placed locally within Lansdowne Secure Children's Home and two are placed in external Secure Children's Homes.

3.7. At the end of December there was one child remanded into youth detention accommodation.

3.8. The number of children living at home with their parents whilst remaining subject to a legal order to ESCC has increased from 37 to 40 since the last quarter. This represents 6% of all Children in Care.

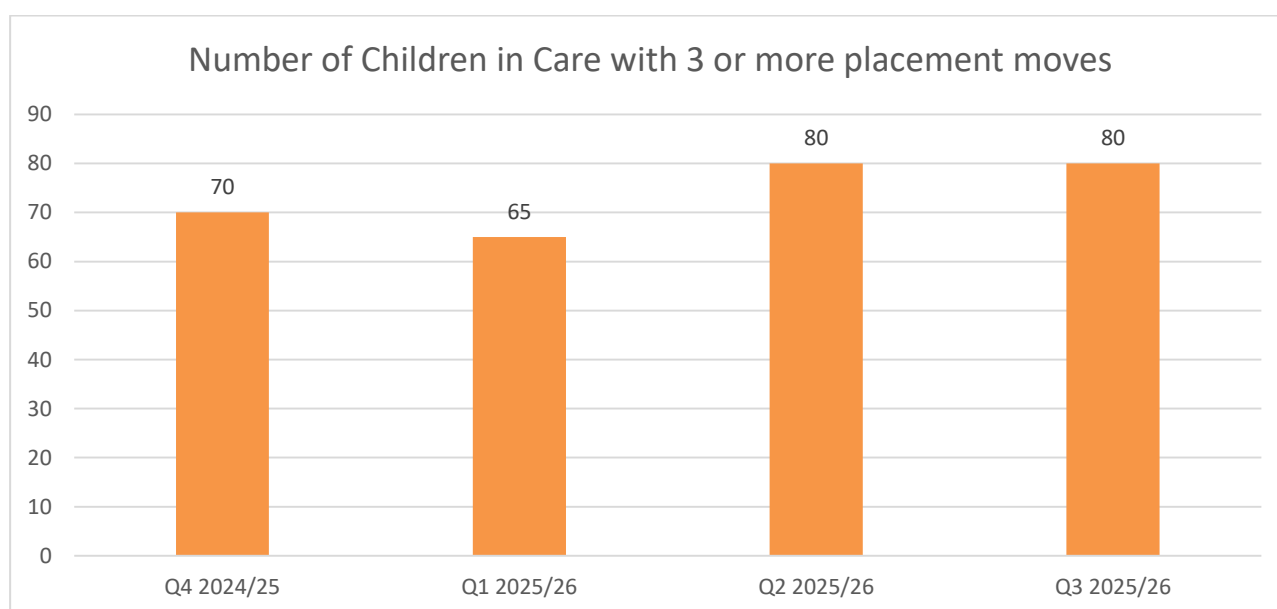
3.9. The improved financial offer that ESCC made to support the recruitment of local foster carers has made a considerable impact on the Fostering Service's recruitment success generally. The number of fostering enquiries over the last 12 months (rolling year) was 228. The number of initial visits over the last 12 months (rolling year) was 65 which is a decrease from last year of 9. The total number of approvals made over the last 12 months (rolling year) was 23, a decrease from last year of six, and new placements was 35. An analysis of the data suggests that there are fewer numbers of potential foster carers making enquiries and being processed through the system, but the calibre of the candidates demonstrates high quality applicants who have been able to step in to foster care swiftly. Table one shows quarterly figures across previous years for comparison:

Table one: Quarterly data on foster care recruitment.

	Enquiries	Initial Visits (IV)	Approvals	Places
2023/24 Q4	66	11	5	6
2024/25 Q4	68	26	6	12
2024/25 Q1	71	20	8	11
2025/26 Q1	56	10	6	10
2024/25 Q2	66	25	4	7
2025/26 Q2	63	20	6	7
2024/25 Q3	70	18	12	17
2025/26 Q3	41	9	5	6

3.10 Graph 7 shows the trend in the number of Children in Care with 3 or more placement moves. This figure has remained stubbornly high for the last two quarters but is reflective of the national sufficiency challenges the sector is facing. Nonetheless, the Children We Care For Service is working tirelessly to reduce these moves to an absolute minimum.

Graph 7: Number of Children in Care 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 ESCC fully participates in the National Transfer Scheme (NTS) for Separated Migrant Children. The number of Separated Migrant Children who were looked after was 69 at the end of Q3, a decrease of one from the previous quarter. In addition, there were 146 Separated Migrant Children who were Care Leavers aged over 18 during this period, which is a decrease of 4 from the previous quarter (124 18–20-year-olds, a decrease of 17, and 22 21–25-year-olds an increase of 13 since the last quarter). This makes up approximately one third of all Care Leavers in ESCC which was 444 at the end of December 2025.

3.12 The number of children subject to Child Arrangement Order (CAO) was 352, and the number of children subject to a Special Guardianship Order (SGO) was 459. 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.

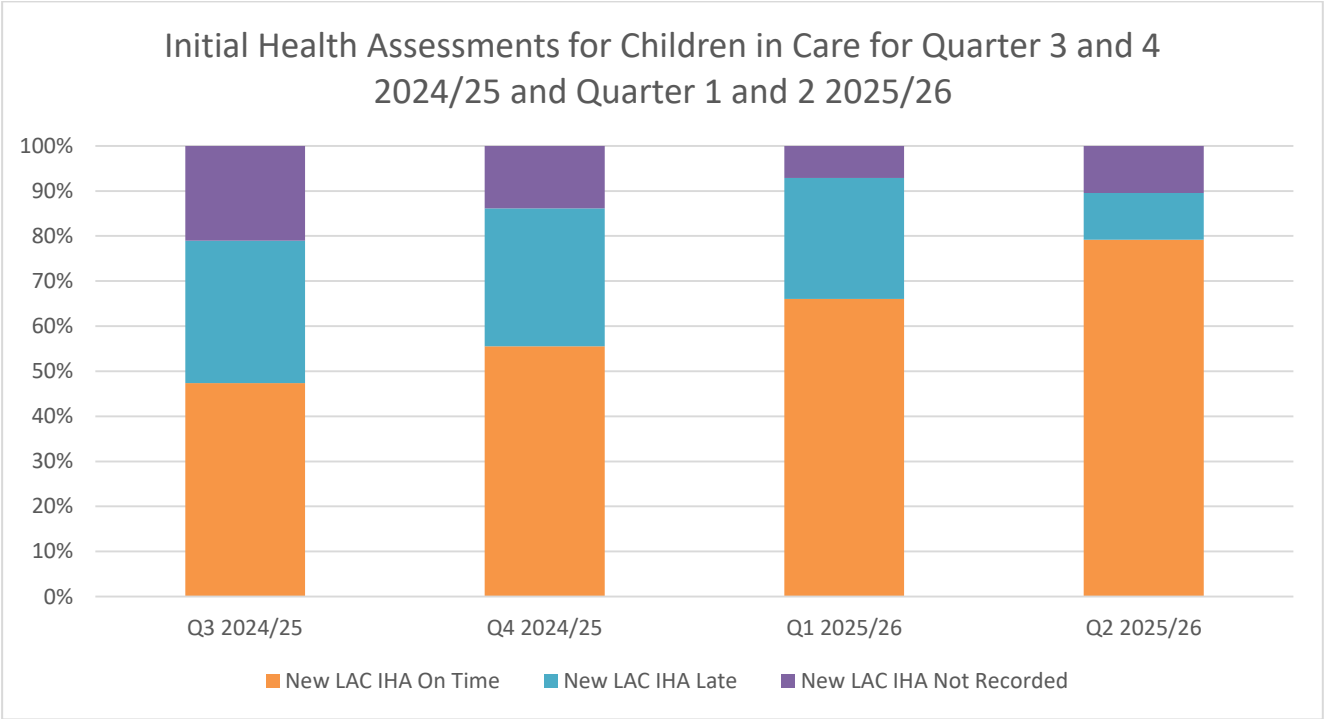
3.13 There was one complaint received from a Child in Care during this period. There were also two complaints received from Care Leavers.

4 Health

4.1 All Children in Care 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 Graph 8 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 very pleasing to see the significant improvements made to date. This is an area of close management scrutiny which will continue to ensure the progress made is maintained.. 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 Children in Care Nursing teams in those areas. A number of adolescent children decline IHAs.

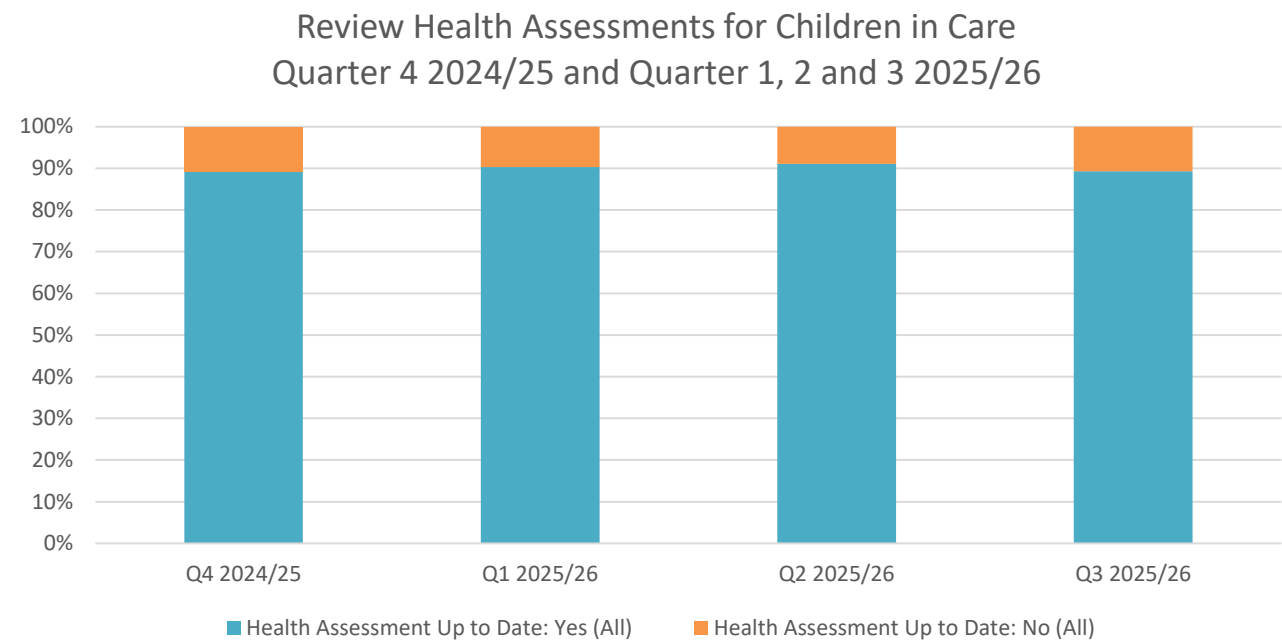
Graph 8: Percentage of Children in Care with an Initial Health Assessment for Quarters 3, and 4 for 2024/25 and Quarters 1 and 2 for 2025/26.



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

4.3 Graph 9 shows the percentage trend of Children in Care 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.

Graph 9: Percentage of Children in Care 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

5.10 This quarter has shown an increase in the overall number of Children in Care largely attributed an increase in the number and size of the sibling groups and a decrease in the number of discharges from care. It is pleasing to see the significant improvement in the overall rate of discharges from care over the last two years and the continued rise in the number of children placed at home through ‘Placed with Parents’ assessments.

5.11 The sufficiency issues that the service is facing, remain extremely challenging and have continued to impact on the number of children who are moving placements three or more times. There has been an overall increase in the number of children who are living in fostering families and a small reduction in the number of children living in Children’s Homes. These figures are small for this quarter, but nonetheless, it is pleasing to see the balance in the placement mix beginning to change. However, with high numbers of children living in Childrens Homes, this remains a key factor in the significant budgetary pressures faced by the Children’s Services department.

5.12 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

Report to: Corporate Parenting Panel

Date of meeting: 29 January 2026

By: Director of Children's Services

Title: Heading Home in East Sussex

Purpose: To update the panel on the development of a Heading Home Strategy and next steps for implementation.

RECOMMENDATION:

The Corporate Parenting Panel is recommended to note the Heading Home in East Sussex update.

1. Background

1.1 The Heading Home Strategy reflects the local authority's commitment to ensuring that where possible and safe to do so we support children to live within their families.

1.2 The presentation draws on learning from national reform, evidence-based frameworks, local practice experience, and the voices of children, care-experienced young people and parents. It sets out a relational, child-centred approach to reunification and family support.

2. Supporting information

2.1 The Heading Home Strategy is underpinned by clear practice principles, including:

- Children at the heart of decision-making
- Connected and relational practice
- Recognising and managing risk as part of good social work
- A whole-system practice shift rather than a single service intervention

2.2 Valuing Care and System Readiness

- The local authority has strong foundations in place, including the adoption of the Valuing Care approach, Reunification Framework, Connected Practice, the Foundations Service, family time approaches and specialist support services.
- A stable and skilled workforce and positive partnership relationships across health, education, Cafcass and the judiciary support implementation.

2.3 Progress to Date and Measuring Impact

Key milestones include:

- Launch of the Heading Home programme in November 2025
- Re-launch of Valuing Care and establishment of Practice Leads
- Workforce development through training, practice drop-ins and learning events
- Family Justice Quality Circle established in December 2025

- Development of an accelerated pathway for discharge of Care Orders impact will be measured through:
 - Outcome tracking and thematic audits
 - Practice observations
 - Lived experience and practitioner feedback

3. Conclusion and reasons for recommendations

3.1 The Heading Home Strategy provides a coherent, evidence-informed framework to support children to remain with, or safely return to, their families, improving outcomes and reducing reliance on long-term care and unsuitable placements.

3.2. Members are asked to note the update and progress to date.

CAROLYN FAIR
Director of Children's Services

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LOCAL MEMBERS

All

APPENDICES

Appendix 1 – Heading Home report/presentation

BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS

None.

What is Heading Home?

Katie Smee Giles, Principal Social Worker

- *"Heading home isn't about returning to where we were it's about growing into who we're meant to be. It begins in the quiet moments after loss, in the courage it takes to keep walking when the road feels uncertain. Home is found in the small acts showing up, forgiving, rebuilding, believing. It's the strength to try again, the grace to begin again, and the love that guides us forward. Because home isn't just a place, it's a transformation. And love, chosen again and again, is what carries us there" - **Expert By Experience Parent***
- *"Think of the thing that you wouldn't usually think of and do it" - **Care Experienced Young Person***



Heading Home Strategy and Action Plan

- **Our Vision**

- Children thrive best in their own families; Heading Home shifts the question from “can they go home” to “how do we support them to remain or return home safely”
- Children at the Heart of Decision Making
- Connected Practice
- Risk is part of our work
- Whole Practice Shift

- **Why Heading Home?**

- Moves away from clinical “reunification language towards relational, child centred practice
- Build on NSPCC Framework, Learning from our Foundations service, practitioner and EBE insight and national reform

How Valuing Care Fits into Heading Home

Valuing Care is the engine that powers Heading Home:

- Needs-led evidence base: consistent assessment and tracking
- Decision-making mechanism: multi-agency VC Panels that identify reunification potential
- Quality & safety: robust, transparent planning linked to HH Framework

Why?

- Best interests of the child: Coming into care may be the right decisions 'for now', but where it is safe, generally children do better emotionally and developmentally within their family networks.
- Improving outcomes and stability: Some children in care experience poorer outcomes and placement instability/unsuitability; supporting children within their family networks can provide greater continuity and suitability.
- Adolescents often start 'voting with their feet' it is far better to support Heading Home with a clear plan and work with parents/carers to achieve successful reunification.



Heading Home Strategy and Action Plan Continued

- **System Readiness**
 - Strong foundations already in place, Reunification Framework, Valuing Care, Connected Practice, Connected Families, Foundations Service, Family Time
- **Workforce and Partnerships**
 - Heading Home Training pathway; Practice Leads; Monthly Drop-ins; relaunch of Valuing Care
 - Strengthened collaboration with health, education, judiciary, Cafcass

Heading Home Strategy and Action Plan

- **Measuring Impact**

- Cross departmental outcomes and tracking; thematic audit; lived experience and practitioner feedback loop

- **Progress to date**

- Launch conference Nov 2025
- Valuing Care re-launch plan in place – **Review March 2026**
- Practice Leads Programme – Running, **Review March 2026**
- Family Justice Quality Circle Dec 25 – working group in place – **Feb 2026**
- Accelerated pathway for discharge of Care Orders in progress – **Aiming for April 26**
- We are starting to see practice shift demonstrated through thematic audits and attendance and engagement at workforce development events

Report to:	Corporate Parenting Panel
Date of meeting:	29 January 2026
By:	Director of Children's Services
Title:	Language that Cares
Purpose:	To present the work undertaken to review the way professionals describe children in our care, highlighting key developments and future plans to the Corporate Parenting Panel.

RECOMMENDATION:

The Corporate Parenting Panel is recommended to note the changes and updates to the Care Service.

1. Background

1.1 Following a review of The Looked After Children service, the term Looked After Children (LAC) has been updated to the Children We Care For service. The new name reflects East Sussex County Council's (ESCC) continued commitment to listening to and valuing the voices of our children and young people across East Sussex.

1.2 The change follows a national move away from the term Looked After Children and the acronym LAC, due to the negative connotations often associated with them.

2. Supporting information

2.1 A dedicated working group and staff consultation was established in Spring 2025 to review the service and team names.

2.2 Following the staff consultation and review, the new terminology was introduced in September 2025.

2.3 The working group are now reviewing more general use of language and will be producing a language and recording policy.

2.4 A service development day is planned. This will provide an opportunity for the Children We Care For service to explore caring and respectful language, recognising the vital role words play in building trust, dignity, and positive experiences in social care."

2.5 Partner agencies, including health, Police, education and the voluntary an community sector to be advised of the changes.

3. Conclusion and reasons for recommendations

3.1 The change in terminology used by ESCC and partner agencies reflects a shift in language that better represents the care, respect, and support we strive to provide.

3.2 It is a positive step forward for the Council, in ensuring our services are shaped by the experiences and perspectives of those who use them.

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LOCAL MEMBERS

All

APPENDICES

Appendix 1: Language that Cares Power point presentation

BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS

None.

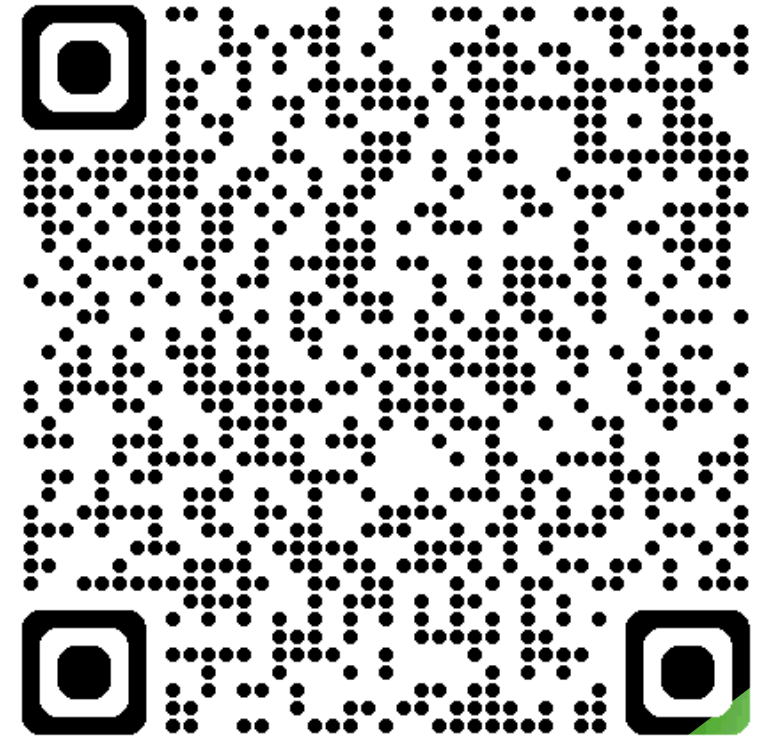
Update for Corporate Parenting Panel

Language that Cares



In 2019, TACT Fostering and Adoption co-produced a report with care experienced young people

- Language that Cares, Changing the way professionals talk about Children in Care.
- A project that challenged the language that professionals use.
- ESCC Children in Care Council were involved in this project.



Why has this language evolved?

Professionals use acronyms as a shortcut to describe their work with children in care. Over time habits have formed in relation to the use of terms such as LAC, contact, placements etc.

The professional quote below explains how language can be used to simplify complex situations and emotions.

“It might be that it gives us a sense of control, reducing a complex situation into something that you can describe neatly and respond to or that it decreases our feeling regarding perceived risk, being able to name a difficulty or threat reduces the danger of an unknowable threat. It can offer a disguise for when we don’t know, or we don’t understand and defends us against an intolerable/unpleasant feeling.”

Language can be a weapon, but it can also be emotional armour.

Young People in Rotherham said:

“The language of care is so mixed up with our everyday language that it is difficult to separate the two. These words that we challenge are used by everyone: foster carers, social workers, teachers, Independent Reviewing Officers, administrators and even children and young people. We should challenge ourselves and challenge people who we hear using them.”



Action in East Sussex

Although East Sussex young people were involved in producing the TACT report, we had not reviewed the language that we use locally for a number of years.

In the summer of 2025, a working group was formed with representatives from across the Children's Service.

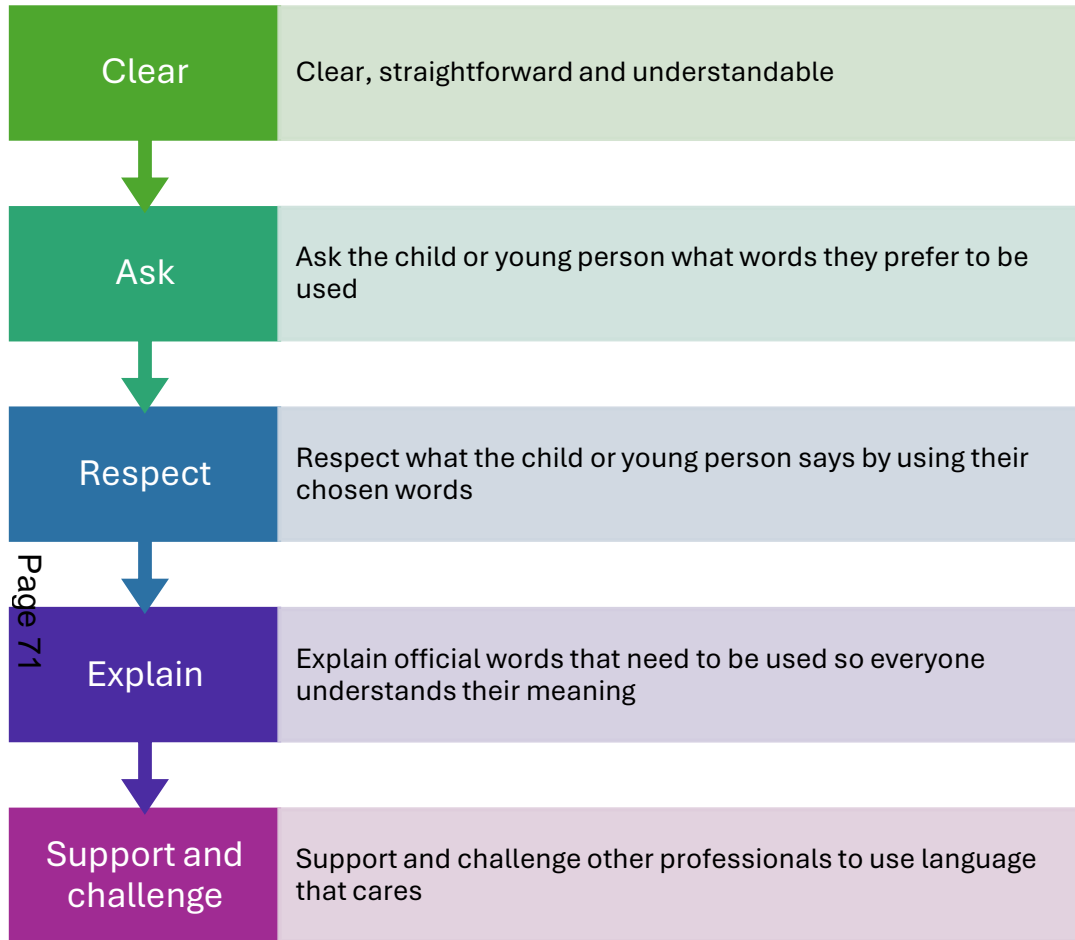
As a starting point the group focussed on a new name for the Looked after Children's Service (LAC) and the teams within it.

Children, young people, staff and foster carers were consulted and asked to vote.

Children we Care for was the most popular option.

New Service and Team names

Level 1	Level 2	Level 3
Children We Care For Service	Children We Care For Business Support	
	Children We Care For Management Team	
	Adoption South East	
	Children We Care For Fostering Service	Fostering Recruitment and Hub Fostering Support and Training Supporting Independence Team (16+)
	Children We Care For Home Finding and Commissioning Service	Children We Care For Home Finding and Commissioning Children We Care For Connection and Support Team
	Children We Care For and Family Time	Children in Care - East Children in Care - Central Children in Care - West Children in Care - Family Time
	Children We Care For Through Care and Separated Migrant Children	Through Care Separated Migrant Children
	Children We Care For Residential Children Homes	Children We Care For - Brodrick House Children We Care For - Hazel Lodge Children We Care For - Homefield Cottage Children We Care For - Silver Birches
	Children We Care For - Lansdowne Secure	
	Children We Care For Disability Residential Homes	Children We Care For - Seaside Short Breaks Children We Care For - The Bungalow
	Virtual School	



In 2026 the working group will focus on more general use of language, using principles outlined by the young people from Durham County Council.

Next Steps for
Corporate Parenting
Panel to facilitate the
use of new language
amongst elected
members.

Next Steps for Children's Services

Produce a Language
and Recording Policy –
co-produced with
young people.

Continue to embed
the name of service
and teams, especially
with partners.

Start using different
language and others
will follow.

A service development
day.

Report to:	Corporate Parenting Panel
Date of meeting:	29 January 2026
Report by:	Director of Children's Services
Title:	Virtual School Annual Report 1 September 2024 - 31 August 2025
Purpose:	To outline the performance of the Virtual School between 1 September 2024 and 31 August 2025

RECOMMENDATION:

The Corporate Parenting Panel is recommended to note the contents of the Virtual School Annual report 1 September 2024 – 31 August 2025.

1. Background

1.1 The Virtual School supports the education of children in care. It is not a building, and children and young people do not attend. They remain the responsibility of the school where they are enrolled.

1.2 The Virtual School works in partnership with the child or young person's educational setting and their social worker, parents and carers. The Virtual School supports the child or young person to fulfil their potential at all stages of their education. This gives them the best opportunity to be successful in their adult lives.

1.3 The Virtual School Report is contained within Appendix 1.

2. Budget Implications

2.1 The Virtual School is funded through a combination of the Pupil Premium grant, Children with a Social Worker grant and the base budgets within Children's Services. We continue to direct the funding to support the best possible educational outcomes for Children in care (CIC) and children with a social worker as well as children previously looked after and those in Kinship care, by effective use of available resources.

3. Conclusion and Reasons for recommendation

3.1 The annual Virtual School report enable the Corporate Parenting Board to scrutinise educational outcomes, identify risks, and fulfil its responsibility to improve life chances for looked after children.

3.2 The Corporate Parenting Panel is recommended to note the contents of the report paying particular attention to the extension of duties.

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Local Members:

All

BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS:

None

Appendices

Appendix 1 Virtual School Report 2024/25

Virtual School Report Academic Year 2024/2025

1. Introduction

1.1 During this period the Virtual School (VS) focused on the delivery of support to ensure the best possible outcomes for children in care (CIC) and to promote the education of previously looked after children.

1.2 The VS worked in partnership with schools, social workers, local authority services, carers, and parents. All interventions were designed to meet the objectives above and used an evidence-based approach, incorporating national research and local quantitative and qualitative data.

1.3 In addition the Virtual School developed its extended duties requirement to promote the education of children with a social worker or who had ever had a social worker from ages 0 to 18. From September 2024 this has included promoting the education of children in Kinship care. This work is not yet statutory.

2. Children in care (CIC)

2.1 Last summer (July 2025) the Virtual School was supporting 463 school aged children, 224 post 16 students and 34 nursery aged children. This was a total of 721 children and young people, but numbers fluctuated throughout the year. This was a slight increase on the previous year.

2.2 23.16 % of our school aged children have an EHCP for special educational needs and 14.1% attended special schools. 14% of our school aged children were placed in schools outside East Sussex compared to 15% last year.

2.3 In July 2025, there were 119 separated young people (Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children) in years 7 to 13, 21 of whom were of school age.

2.4 The VS was responsible for the management and administration of the Pupil Premium Grant (PPG) for CIC. In the budget year 2024- 2025 each CIC was allocated £2,570 funding from the PPG, this was pooled to ensure the best outcomes for our children as outlined in 1.1 and according to the school priorities. Pupil Premium funding for PCIC was also £2,570 but is held by the child's individual school.

2.3 The principal areas of spending were staffing, home to school transport, alternative provision, inclusion projects in schools, tuition, and services to schools e.g. Educational Psychology (EP) and English as an Additional Language (EAL) Services. We also funded a full-time Extended Support Assistant as part of the SEND Targeted Support Services and an EALs co-ordinator.

2.4 The Virtual School employed a Head Teacher (VHT), four full time equivalent (fte) Education Officers (Caseworkers with supervisory and additional responsibilities), one 0.6 fte Advisory Teacher, 4.8 fte caseworkers and a 0.5 fte Education Support Assistant. The Advisory teacher leads on teaching and learning, training and, with the Headteacher, on extended duties.

2.5 In addition, two Personal Advisers (PAs) were funded to work within the Through Care Service. One PA focused on working with young people who are not in education,

employment, or training (NEET) and on increasing youth participation; the other on supporting the education of separated migrant children (SMC).

2.6 We funded a VS Extended Support Assistant who worked within the East Sussex Team Around the School Service (TASS) and provided intensive support in school for 4-6 weeks enabling the school to carry out longer term planning.

2.7 We fund 1.5 days a week of a Youth Employment Service (YES) worker who starts working with students in year 10 and provides more intensive information, advice and guidance to young people who do not yet have a clear pathway into education, employment or training.

2.8 Last year we funded a Care to Work co-ordinator (0.2 fte) who sits within the Employability and Skills Team.

2.9 The VS also employed casual intervention teachers of which ten worked with us on a regular basis. These teachers offer individual tuition, mainly in English and maths to our children in care cohort.

2.10 Last year two new members of staff joined our Business Support Team on a job share basis.

2.11 The VS team has remained largely constant. Our Extended Duties Adviser, who was employed on fixed term contract to lead our work on children with a social worker, secured a secondment and then a permanent post with the Inclusion and Alternative Provision Team. In response, we implemented small changes within the team to increase capacity. This which included promoting Katherine Davies to an Education Support Officer.

2.12 Caseworkers in the VS had an average caseload of between 80 and 100 CIC each depending on the numbers of CIC and other priorities within the service. Education Support Officers also have a supervisory role and provide advice and information to social workers, school staff, staff from other services, parents of adopted children and kinship carers.

3. Personal Education Plans

3.1 Personal Education Plans (PEPs) remained critical to raising educational outcomes for our children. Any applications for Pupil Premium funding are made via the PEP. Last year we introduced and embedded our new ePEP system. There has been lots of training and tweaking along the way, but this is now well established.

3.2 In July of 2025, 100% of PEPS had taken place, 94.32% were recorded, 0.41 % were current and 5% were overdue. PEPs are also uploaded to LCS.

3.3 PEP quality audits over the last year rated 74% PEPs as green overall (good or better), 23% as amber overall (satisfactory) and therefore 97% as satisfactory or above and 2.37% as 'need for improvement'. This is a 5% improvement on last year but is also an audit of all PEPs rather than the sample that has previously been audited.

3.4 We worked with the Through Care Team, post 16 providers and young people to develop a post 16 PEP designed to inform and be informed by Pathway planning.

3.5 Audit findings have been used to inform planning. Strategies to improve the quality of PEPs have included individual discussions with designated teachers, caseworker modelling

within PEP meetings, newsletter articles, and a focus within professional development sessions.

4. Outcomes

4.1 These statistics cover the attainment of pupils who took assessments in summer 2025. The statistics remain provisional and will be updated with revised data as produced by the DFE. Last year this data was not available until May 2025. Cohorts vary from year to year, and all have their own stories. Along with the small size of the cohort, this means that year-on-year comparisons must be treated with caution.

4.2 Key Stage 2 provisional data suggests that outcomes are higher than last year in reading, writing, maths, and GPS. They are in line with national and regional CIC results and slightly higher than both in maths. Thirty-seven percent of the cohort had an EHCP, and another 24% were on the SEND register. This is higher than national CLA data for year 6 (30% EHCP and 33% SEN Support).

		Reading	Writing	Maths	GPS
East Sussex CIC	2019 (before COVID)	25.0%	37.5%	45.8%	
East Sussex CIC	2024	30.0 %	25.0%	15.0%	20%
East Sussex CIC	2025	44.8	41.4	48.3	44.8%
National CIC	2025	52	45	47	48%

4.3 Key Stage 4 data for children in care remains provisional, and there are no national or regional comparators. There were some good individual achievements. Students achieved level 9s in photography and Persian and Distinctions in BTEC sport and business. Also, 7s in Art, Computer Science, Science and DT, and 6s in History, Drama and Theatre.

Attainment 8 and Progress 8 headline measures will be verified later in the year. Data collected internally shows a small increase in the percentage of young people achieving a level 5 in English and maths and in English or maths but a small decrease in level 4 in both subjects. There is no national comparable data yet available.

Results %	E and M 5+	E or M 5+	E and M 4 +	E or M 4+
2025 results day (out of 60)	5 (3)	18.33 (11)	11.66 (7)	28.33 (17)
2024 (out of 33)	3	18	15	27
2019 (before COVID)	4.2		8.1	

4.4 Post 16. Students achieved A levels or equivalent in Biology, Psychology, Criminology, IT, Gaming, Computer Science Photography and Marketing

4.5 Eleven of our young people have gained university places.

4.6 Others have worked hard to achieve their core GCSEs and a range of level 1 and 2 vocational courses.

5. Exclusion and Suspensions

5.1 The Virtual School worked with schools and Local Authority services to ensure that there were no permanent exclusions of CIC last academic year. This included the funding of a range of interventions including additional adults, alternative provisions, and placement support.

5.2 47 CYP (10.60%) received one or more suspensions since September 2024. This is a 1% decrease on last year. National data is not yet available, but Autumn/ Spring data suggests that we have more CIC pupils receiving suspensions than nationally. The main reason for suspensions is 'persistent disruptive' behaviour, followed by verbal abuse to adults. This is significantly higher than the national data and continues to be an area of focus, working in partnership with schools and the Education Division and Teams Around the School.

5.3 The VS worked with all schools to support children who were in crisis to avoid exclusion where possible. This included funding Educational Psychologist consultations, Extended Support Assistant classroom support and Alternative Provision.

6. Attendance and Admissions

6.1 At the end of the year (July 2025) there were seven young people of school age recorded as NEET. Six of these young people were year 11 separated migrant YP who had arrived in the UK after February 2025. The VS funded a language course at ESCG for 6 weeks at the end of the academic year.

6.2 There were another 16 school aged children Awaiting Placement. This means that they have not yet been allocated a school but do access interim provision. All but two of these young people have an EHCP and ten are placed out of county. This reflects the challenge of finding special school placements across the country. The young person who does not have an EHCP has a high level of SEMH needs and is accessing Alternative Provision but has not been offered a school place. We asked the Secretary of State to direct.

6.3 The VS tracks attendance of school aged CIC weekly. This enables us to identify any attendance issues and intervene at an early stage. Most of our cohort have good attendance, those that have lower attendance do so for a variety of reasons, most often linked to emotional wellbeing.

6.4 Overall attendance data for children in care for one year as of March 31st, 2025, was 90.2% which is slightly below the national CIC (91%) and the same as last year. For our whole CIC cohort attendance was 88.61. East Sussex has a focus on improving attendance across all schools.

6.5 Persistent Absence (less than 90%) was 20.7 % which is slightly higher than national CIC (20%) but an improvement on last year (26%).

6.6 Severe Persistent absence (less than 50%) was 5.8 % compared to 6% national CIC.

6.7 Most of the absence is authorised and the main type is illness. The other main type is 'other.' This code is used when a child or young person is unable to attend because they have moved.

6.8 The percentage of Children in care (CIC) participating in education, training, or employment (EET) at (Year 12) and (Year 13) (March 2024) was 85% for year 12 and 78% for year 13. This includes children or young people who are awaiting a special school place and have an interim education package. We are working with NEET individuals, in partnership with YES to secure appropriate provision.

6.9 Evidence from YES casework shows positive outcomes for young people. One young person was in care and educated out of area and became NEET on return to East Sussex. YES worked with the VS, Through Care Team, Assessment and Planning and colleges to explore options. The young person secured employment with training.

7. Interventions - Teaching and Learning

7.1 The Virtual School agreed 468 funding requests for tuition last academic year. This included blocks of 12 sessions arranged by the Virtual School, EALs tuition, school-based

tuition where schools used their own tutors and online providers. Over the year 216 children and young people received tuition.

7.1.1 Most tuition is provided by our own tutors, but we also use private tutoring companies, both locally and nationally. 68% of tuition last year was face-to-face tuition. Online tuition continued for those where it was effective and efficient.

14 secondary age young people accessed Academy 21 online lessons, attending English and maths lessons every day.

7.1.2 All tutoring sessions have targets. 100% of young people achieved at least one target and partially met the others. 60% of the young people achieved all three targets. 99% of children and young people reported that their confidence against their targets had increased

7.1.3 Verbal feedback on tutoring is positive: **DT to tutor:** I just wanted to let you know, **B** received the highest maths score in her class, and she is also moving up a set. I just wanted to share the great news!

7.2. Language and Literacy

7.2.1 Literacy development remains a key focus of our work. Children in school years reception to Year 6, receive a book parcel. Last year we sent out 742 book parcels. These were sent out in 4 parcels; one of which was provided by the charity Prospero. The number of book parcels has been reduced because of reduced funding.

7.2.2 Our literacy focus group has produced guidance on a trauma informed approach to literacy and organised catch up literacy training for carers.

7.2.3 Our language focus group is asking schools to assess all our pupils in year 4 and is ensuring that all PEPs have a focus on language.

7.2.4 We recognise the challenge for children who do not have a school when they first move home. Last year, we ensured that all residential settings received a home learning pack so that they could support children's education from day one. The pack includes a variety of resources including on-line English and maths programmes.

7.2.5 We offer residential homes support to deliver ASDAN (an education awarding organisation) course. Last year young people completed 'Life Skills Challenges' in chairing their own PEP, Minecraft, planning a charity event, wildlife, and photography.

7.2.6 Last year we changed the format of our transition work with children joining reception, as take up for the annual Summer School had been low. This reflects the strengthening in transition work across the Local Authority; many of our children are involved in transition organised by the schools they are going to join. Instead, we visited families on request, so that we were able to have detailed discussions with carers.

7.3. Alternative Provisions (AP)

7.3.1 Partnerships between the VS and local providers continued throughout the year. These organisations delivered services to young people who were struggling to manage school or who were awaiting a school place. The focus of all provision is a positive re-integration into full time school.

7.3.2 We had 94 requests for Alternative Provision for 56 young people. There is an ongoing increase in the request for AP.

7.3.3 We worked with 21 different Alternative Providers covering a range of subjects and activities including working on a farm, martial arts, forest skills, and music.

7.3.4 We ask that schools set clear targets for AP and that providers rate engagement.

- 100% of the young people achieved at least one target and partially met the others
- 75% of the young people achieved all three targets.
- 77% of sessions children or young people's engagement was rated excellent
- 18% of sessions children or young people's engagement was rated good

8. Participation, enrichment, and aspiration

8.1 In October 2024 the Children in Care Council (CICC) presented to a group of professionals at an event around the views of looked after children. Representatives began their presentation by asking the audience to think about the word - *listening* and asked us to think about what that word means to us? They then told us that *they think listening has 3 parts:*

1. *Listening to what has been said.*
2. *Hearing what we are saying or communicating.*
3. *And then acting on it.*

8.1.2 The event was attended by Local Authority staff from care, health and education, school representatives, and foster carers.

8.1.3 Young people and staff led activities designed to explore findings from previous child voice surveys. This led to the creation of a series of 'We Will' Statements which have been shared with colleagues across the service, and which inform all our work with schools. See appendix 1.

8.2 The Children in Care Achievement Awards took place at Bedes School in October 2024, and we were delighted that Jacqueline Wilson returned to present the awards. Ninety-five children and young people were nominated in the categories of educational achievement, positive contribution, personal achievement and skills and talents.

8.3 In March, we held our Achievement Awards for our younger cohort. 22 children took part in an arts session and visited Bede's School Zoo before receiving their awards from Carolyn Fair. It was wonderful to hear of so many achievements linked to learning.

8.4 Our annual Autumn Film School was held over two days In October 2024. Participants learnt to plan, shoot, and edit short films at the Depot cinema in Lewes.

8.5 In the Autumn term we also took a group of young people to watch 'Il Turco in Italia' at Glyndebourne Opera House.

8.6 During the Easter break, young people visited Brighton University Engineering department for the day and took part in robotics activities.

8.7 The Virtual School organised a one-day film making event with Benbow Arts Centre, part of the Bright Foundation Trust (an arts education charity). The event was for separated migrant young people and was attended by those with first languages of Vietnamese, Kurdish Sorani and Farsi.

8.8 In April 2025 we arranged for a group of separated migrant children to spend a week at Jamie's farm. The farm made a film of the week which evidences the friendship that

developed and the enjoyment the young people had. Jamie's Farm has raised money to jointly fund this event.

9. Working in partnership

9.1 We continued to work strategically with partners in the local authority to develop mental health and emotional wellbeing support. We were involved in planning the ISEND Mental Health and Emotional Wellbeing conference which took place in Summer 2025.

9.2 The Virtual School attends LACAMHs monthly referral and case discussion meetings to support partnership working between health, care, and education. Last year we were also able to link MHEW teams in schools with LACMHS to ensure our children and young people have access to all levels of support.

9.3 The Youth Employability Scheme (YES) offered a universal service to all young people from year 10 and worked intensively with those who required more support in identifying future pathways. YES, staff worked in partnership with the Through Care Team and Virtual School caseworkers.

9.4 Our post 16 work has continued to develop. Our post 16 termly meetings are well attended by colleges, trainers, University staff, YES workers and the Through Care Team. This ensures that looked-after children and care leavers are always a focus. We have been able to develop the post 16 PEP with college colleagues such that they are better integrated with college and care systems and work for young people.

9.5 Last year we focussed on removing barriers to access to Widening Participation (WP) activities. We were also pleased that 15 young people attended the Uni and U event at Sussex University. This event launched a Widening Participation (WP) programme for 12- to 18-year-olds.

9.6 Our Care to Work group met three times a year to explore the opportunities available to Care leavers and how best to ensure that they were able to access these opportunities. Also, to develop employment and training opportunities from both within and outside the LA. The group consists of staff from across departments e.g. HR, Employability and Skills and Procurement. We have continued to work with the John Lewis Partnership and with Balfour Beatty (BB). We have had our first young person employed by BB and others have attended employment events.

9.7 We also work closely with the Educational Psychology Service who have supported the team and provided consultation on children who are struggling in school.

9.8 We have worked in partnership with the Fostering Placement Team to ensure that we are able to start planning for education as soon as possible when a child moves out of East Sussex.

9.9 We continue to work closely with the Assessment and Planning team to support our children with EHCPs in county but also to set up processes that reduce the chances of drift and delay when children with EHCPs move out of county.

9.10 We continue to fund an Extended Support Assistant within the Team Around the School Team (TASS) as well as time with TASS advisers and practitioners. This enables us to offer more intensive short-term support to children who are struggling to manage school.

9.11 Our work with the English as an Additional Language (EAL) Service is embedded. Our EALS co-ordinator has been able to develop our work with separated migrant children and has been supporting this cohort within NEET group sessions.

9.12 We have continued to work with CLASS to promote literacy and language support for our children and to ensure that, as a team, we are up to date with understanding the needs of our cohort and are knowledgeable about the support available.

9.13 Last year we presented at the 'East Sussex Nurture network' meeting organised by TASS. We focussed particularly on the use of assessment to support a trauma informed approach in schools.

9.14 As part of Children we Care for service, we meet regularly with managers of other parts of the service so that education is an embedded part of all care planning and that the VS can be responsive to wider issues within the service.

9.15 The Headteacher attends Valuing Care meetings to ensure that education supports and is supported by wider care planning. Valuing care meetings are multi agency meetings held to support care planning and remove barriers to a stepdown from high-cost placements and towards heading home.

9.14 We work with Adoption Southeast and neighbouring Virtual Schools to support the education of adopted children across the region. We are currently looking at training on attendance for Adoption SE staff to ensure that they are aware of the education support available in each Local Authority.

9.15 The VS continued to work closely with Bedes school as part of the Springboard boarding project. Five students attended Bedes last year. A further student joined in September 2025. Bedes continues to offer our students a high level of academic and pastoral support. Placement at Bedes enables young people to remain with carers and has supported young people to return home.

10. Training

10.1 The Virtual School delivered and organised a range of training last academic year. Training focused on developing staff understanding of the needs of children in care, including attachment and trauma, on the role of the designated teacher and on effective personal education planning. Training was provided for designated teachers, foster carers, and social workers.

10.2 Training has been very well received with 100% of participants saying that they found the courses delivered by the Virtual School very useful or useful.

10.3 The Empowerment Approach, delivered by Changing Chances (CC), is a research-based approach designed to support children and young people to develop the skills they need to succeed at school and in adult life. CC previously delivered training on the Empowerment Approach to all East Sussex maintained residential homes. CC have continued to provide ongoing support to all residential home staff and have identified champions within the homes who are working to embed the approach into children's individual plans. The Virtual School also offers a monthly drop-in session to support this work.

11. Extended Duties and Strategic Partnerships

11.1 Since September 2021 Virtual School Heads have had a non-statutory strategic duty to promote the educational outcomes of all children with a social worker; a cohort of children who have poorer outcomes in all areas.

11.2 In September 2024 the role was extended to include children in Kinship care. The Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill will make this role statutory, ensuring that every local authority must have a dedicated officer (VS) to champion the educational outcomes of these Children, helping to improve their school attendance, engagement, and overall achievement.

11.3 The extension of the Virtual School Head role to children with a social worker includes:

- raising awareness and improving visibility of the needs of this cohort.
- increasing schools' and social workers' understanding of the educational needs of these children by delivering training on areas such as trauma-informed practices, care experience, and effective interventions and strategies to improve educational outcomes.
- helping kinship carers navigate the education system, manage behaviour, and address issues such as exclusions and admissions.

11.4 The Virtual School worked closely with other Local Authority services to develop policy and practice across East Sussex. This strategic work focusses on children in care as well as the cohorts we support as part of our extended duties. For example, Virtual School staff attend Inclusion Partnerships meetings and TASS meetings where possible. Both groups support the inclusion of vulnerable students, including all the cohorts included in the extended duties.

11.5 We met with the Designated Safeguarding Leads Network and have started to attend SENCo hubs.

11.6 The Virtual school is represented within the transformation developments. The Headteacher is part of the Family Network and Kinship Care Workstream group and will start attending the Family Help working group meetings with a view to ensuring effective partnership working within the transformations.

12. Extended Duties Training

12.1 We reviewed and developed our education series of webinars for social workers on key issues including attendance, suspension and exclusions and SEND. All webinars have been recorded and are promoted within the care teams.

12.2 In the last year, we have worked with colleagues in Early Help to ensure that the content is relevant and accessible to their teams.

12.3 We delivered training to new social workers as part of their induction.

12.4 We visited individual social care teams to promote our service, so they are more able to support the educational needs of those on their caseloads.

13. Information and Advice

13.1 We provided advice and information to social workers, other support services, schools, parents of adopted children and kinship carers. Between January and July 2025, we responded to 50 formal requests for information and advice. These were mainly from parents of adopted children, social care, and other East Sussex services. The remainder were from other Virtual Schools, Kinship carers, and school staff.

13.2 We joined our first Kinship carers support group to listen to their concerns and offer general advice

13.3 We have worked met with the Family and Friends Team to look at information on kinship available to schools and continue to offer education advice to the service.

14. The wider National context

14.1 The Virtual Head Teacher (VHT) collaborated with the national cohort of VHT's on a range of national priority areas. Last year ML chaired the Southeast Virtual School group and will go on to be the Southeast regional rep.

14.2 The VS Head Teacher and Designated Teacher from Bedes School are members of the Broadening Educational Pathways Programme Expert Advisory group. The invitation was in recognition of the well-established partnership between Bedes and East Sussex which has been in existence for 10 years.

15 Governor priorities for the Virtual School 2024/25

15.1 To further improve the educational and wider outcomes for Looked After children.

15.2 To improve educational outcomes, including attendance and attainment, for children and young people with a social worker, previously looked after children, and children in kinship care through partnership working across the LA, training and information and advice.

15.3 To improve outcomes for post 16 children in care and care leavers.

15.4 To increase the knowledge and understanding of the social care system by education staff and education by care.

15.5 To develop further partnership working between social care and education to the benefit of all vulnerable groups.

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