

Committee: **Corporate Parenting Panel**

Date: **24 April 2024**

Title of Report: **Looked After Children (LAC) Statistics**

By: **Director of Children's Service**

Purpose of Report: **To update the Panel on changes in the last quarter**

Recommendations: **The Corporate Parenting Panel is recommended to comment on and note 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.

2. Supporting information

2.1 Data found at Appendix 1 is drawn as a snapshot on the last day of the month 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) figures. This quarter has seen a decrease in the overall number of Looked after Children from 671 on the last day of December 2023, to 655 on the last day of March 2024. This equates to an overall decrease of 16. The decrease has resulted from a strenuous focus on reunification work with children and their birth families, and discharges from care into Special Guardianship, Adoption and Child Arrangement Orders. The sufficiency of any placements either in-house, or in the independent sector though, continued to be extremely challenging. The national shortage of fostering placements in particular, have shown no sign of improvement. However, the improved financial offer that ESCC has made to support the recruitment of local foster carers is showing early signs of success with 16 new applicants currently being processed. Nonetheless the over reliance on residential placements continues to place significant pressure of the Childrens Services budget. This is a national picture and was recognised in an Education Parliamentary Committee which took evidence from the Local Government Association and representatives from a number of Local Authorities on the 26 March 2024.

2.2 A total of 338 children were living in foster care at the end of March 2024, which is an increase of 9 since the last quarter. This represents 52% of our overall LAC population (excluding those under kinship carers). Of that number, 235 were living with approved ESCC carers (36% of our overall LAC). This is a slight increase of 2 from the previous quarter. 5 children were placed with foster carers who were also approved adopters as part of the Fostering for Adoption pathway, this is an increase of 2 since the last quarter. 94 children were living with agency carers, this has increased by 3 since the previous quarter. In addition, there was 1 child placed with another Local Authority foster carer, this has reduced by one since the last quarter. There was also 1 child placed in a Foster to Adopt placement with an agency adopter that is not part of the Regional Adoption Agency. There were 16 children placed for adoption at the end of March 2024 which is a decrease of 3 since the previous quarter.

2.3 There were 95 young people living in supported housing options, homes or hostels, which is a decrease of 5 since the previous quarter. The introduction of a new Ofsted regime for the regulation of this type of provision in October 2023 appears to have bedded down locally with very little loss of

provision. The figure of 95 also includes 6 children who were either under the age of 16, or who were placed in unregistered provision. 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.

2.4 At the end of the quarter, the number of children who were living with kinship foster carers, decreased significantly from 77 to 67 a total of 10 children.

2.5 The number of children living at home with their parents whilst remaining subject to a legal order to ESCC, also decreased from 30 to 27. Planning for placements of this sort is always monitored rigorously to mitigate any risk factors. Agreement and authorisation for this type of placement is given at a senior level, unless it is court mandated.

2.6 At the end of March 2024, the number of children living in regulated residential children's homes has decreased slightly to 108, a total decrease of 3 in the quarter. This represents 16% of all looked after children. 17 children were living in ESCC run children's homes, which is the decrease of 3, and 91 were still placed in external residential homes. Exhaustive 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. Wherever possible ESCC attempts to find family-based placements for our children either within their own networks or with foster carers. Where this is not possible and external residential homes are commissioned, there remains a commitment to step the children down into a family arrangement at the right time.

2.7 At the end of March 2024 there were 3 ESCC children placed in external Secure Units. An increase of 2 since the last quarter.

2.8 At the end of December there were 0 children remanded into youth detention accommodation.

2.9 At the end of December there was 1 child placed in a Family Centre or Mother and baby units.

2.10 ESCC fully participates in the National Transfer Scheme (NTS) for Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children (UASC). The number of UASC was 78 at the end of March, which is a decrease of 4 from the previous quarter. In addition, there were 133 Asylum Seeking young people who were Care Leavers during this period, which is an increase of 20 (121 aged 18-21 and 12 aged 21-25).

2.11 The number of children subject to Child Arrangement/Residence Orders increased from 348 to 350, an increase of 2, and those children subject to a Special Guardianship Order increased from 470 to 472, an increase of 2.

2.12 There were no complaints from any Looked After Child during this period.

3. Conclusion and recommendations

3.1 It is very pleasing that there has continued to be an overall reduction in the number of Looked after Children during this period. In addition, there have been more children living in fostering family placements this quarter and a small reduction in those living in residential or supported housing options. However, the children who have remained in care continue to have some complex needs and require high levels of skilled care. The Looked After Children's system has continued to be very pressurised during this period with the national and local shortage of care placements, although there are grounds for optimism in the upturn in fostering enquiries and recruitment locally. It is to the credit of the ESCC duty placement service that they have continued to find Ofsted or Care Quality Commission (CQC) registered placements for the majority of our Looked After Children.

3.2 The Corporate Parenting Panel is recommended to comment on and note the report.

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LOCAL MEMBERS

All

BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS

None