

Report to: Cabinet

Date of meeting: 10 December 2024

Report by: Director of Children's Services

Title: Looked After Children Annual Report 2023 - 2024

Purpose: To outline the performance of the Looked After Children's Service between 1 April 2023 - 31 March 2024

RECOMMENDATION:

Cabinet is recommended to note the report.

1. Background

1.1 The Annual Report is attached as Appendix 1. In December 2023 Ofsted undertook an inspection of East Sussex local authority children's services. The experiences and progress of children in care was judged to be 'Outstanding', and the experience and progress of care leavers, to be 'Good'. Inspectors highlighted that children 'come into care at the right time, after all family options have been explored' and that our 'children in care are well cared for and live in homes that meet their needs'. Our social workers were found to 'support children exceptionally well', and care leavers 'benefit from enduring and trusted relationships with workers who support them well'.

1.2 Nationally the number of looked after children has continued to rise. During the course of 2023-24 a total of 888 children were looked after by ESCC (an increase of 23 compared to the previous year). At the end of the year there were four less children in care than the previous year, at 657 in total. Whilst it is positive that this figure stabilised, our rate of looked after children is of a significantly higher number than 2 years ago at 64 per 10 000 compared with 60 per 10 000 in 2020-21. The presentation of many of these children showed a rise in the levels of complexity both in terms of their mental health, neurodiversity, poor school attendance, behaviours that challenge and complex family dynamics.

1.3 30% of this cohort identified as being of a minority ethnic background or of mixed heritage. 118 were unaccompanied asylum seeking children (UASC) and 157 unaccompanied asylum seeking Care Leavers (CLs) aged 18+. 41 young people came to ESCC through the National Transfer Scheme and the remainder were spontaneous arrivals via Police involvement or directly from Newhaven Port. The home office hotels that accommodated UASC in East Sussex were closed in August/September 2023 following a High Court ruling that deemed them unlawful (East Sussex County Council were party to proceedings).

1.4 The annual report highlights that there has been an ongoing reduction in the number of children placed in foster care (in house, kinship or with independent fostering agencies) and a significant increase in children placed in agency residential children's homes. Since 2021 there has been a 4% reduction in foster care placements, and, however a 60% increase in the use of agency residential homes. This continues to be reflective of the significant and ongoing national sufficiency challenges regarding the sourcing of all placement types. There were a limited number of occasions when children were placed in unregistered provision for short periods of time as a consequence of the shortage of regulated placements. These arrangements were subject to robust risk assessments and carefully monitored. The 'Use of Resources' on page 121 (within Appendix 1) gives a very clear indication of the financial impact of the change in placement split.

Many of the children with the most complex needs were placed in our in-house children's homes/fostering placements due to the independent sector being unable to meet their needs.

1.5 The overall ESCC performance remained largely stable with very little significant movement. There were improvements in performance in adoption timeliness, and the numbers of children adopted, looked after children (LAC) with 3 or more placement moves, the percentage of care leavers 19-21 in employment, education and training, and in suitable accommodation. Areas where performance declined included the percentage of looked after children who have been in care for over 2.5 years who have stayed in the same placement for 2 years, and the percentage of children placed outside the LA and these highlight the ongoing placement sufficiency challenges.

1.6 Adopt South East (ASE) placed 104 children with their adoptive families during this timeframe (an increase of 20 children from 2022-3) and of these children, 15 were from East Sussex. ASE performed well and was ambitious to achieve adoption for all children with an adoption care plan in the face of high levels of complexity. ASE delivered support to over 300 families across East Sussex over the course of the year and achieved 237 applications to the Adoption and Special Guardianship Support Fund, for therapeutic support for parents and children.

1.7 ESCC Fostering Service was able to recruit 26 new fostering households, creating 38 placements (a net increase of eight households). However, a number of our longstanding carers have retired. Recruitment has become increasingly challenging and remains the highest priority for the service both in terms of children's outcomes and the financial challenges. A refreshed marketing strategy was launched in 23-24, together with a new payment structure which allows ESCC to be far more competitive in terms of fostering payments with neighbouring local authorities and independent fostering agencies. The service has played a proactive role in the development of the South East regional fostering hub, which seeks to promote local authority fostering across the region. Embedded within the Fostering Service is the Placement Support Service which has proved critical to maintaining children's placements in house. Foster carers highly value this service which has delivered placement stability support to 134 children over the course of the year, as well as support for emergency placements, and for children excluded from school or on reduced timetables.

1.8 The Children in Care Council (CiCC) and Care Leaver Council (CLC) were very active during this time representing children and young people's views both locally and nationally. Our CiCC were awarded second place in Coram Voice's national participation award, in recognition of the impact of their work locally and nationally.

1.9 The ESCC children's homes delivered high quality care to our LAC with the majority being judged as good or outstanding by Ofsted. Significant improvements have been achieved across our children's disabilities homes which support some of our most challenging disabled children. Lansdowne Secure Children's Home reopened in January 2024, with a new management structure, new high quality education offer, and improved health support.

1.10 The physical and mental health of our LAC was closely scrutinised by the Children and Young People's Health Oversight Board and the Strategic Operational Health Group. LAC and Care Leavers were identified as a group who should be included in the NHS Core Plus 5 cohort to ensure their health needs were prioritised across all services. The LAC Annual Report identifies a further improvement in the timeliness of the completion of initial health assessments (IHA) and the review health assessments (RHA).

1.11 ESCC Virtual School (VS) led by the VS Head Teacher, continues to be very active in relation to promoting the educational outcomes for LAC, for those children with a Social Worker (extended duties), those children previously in care (adopted) and those young people aged 16+ in FE provision via the 16+ pupil premium.

1.12 The service has co-produced the 'Local Offer' with our care leavers and is working to extend the corporate parenting role across partner agencies. The updated Local Offer was published on the ESCC website and details the extensive support available to CLs in ESCC.

1.13 Overall, the increase in LAC numbers, levels of complexity and sufficiency and financial challenges prompted ESCC to engage Impower, a Consultancy specialising in Children's Services. They have a proven track record in assisting Local Authorities to deliver improved processes specifically through an approach called Valuing Care, this has focused on analysing current capacity and ensuring the right placements for the right child at the right time. The Valuing Care approach is being embedded across the service and a programme of work is underway through the South East Regional Commissioning Co-operative to deliver improved placement forecasting, sufficiency, market engagement and management, maintaining strong outcomes for children and young people and reducing the financial burden of children's placements to the local authorities.

2. Budget Implications

2.1 The services for Looked After Children (LAC) are supported via core funding from the CSA budget, a small proportion of the Dedicated Schools Grant and by the Pupil Premium for additional education support for children.

2.2 The level of overspend (£27million) is attributed to the increased numbers of children in care, and the placement mix, which as described has seen a reduction in the number of children supported through fostering and a significant increase in those placed in agency residential children's homes.

2.3 This level of overspend is unsustainable for ESCC. The service is responding to these challenges through a range of initiatives detailed in the report which aim to manage demand through improved earlier intervention, particularly through the corporate investment in Connected Families. Our focus is on supporting children and families to enable them to live safely within their family network. In addition, ESCC worked with the consultancy IMPOWER during 2023-4 in a three phased programme, to better understand the needs of our children and young people, improve financial forecasting and demand modelling, deliver invest to save proposals and adopt the Valuing Care approach across the LAC service. As part of these developments a refreshed recruitment strategy was developed for foster carers and additional capacity created within the commissioning service to improve market management. These programmes are already showing impact in reducing demand in key areas and achieving cost avoidance, however these achievements are current being offset by high cost placements for children with the highest complexity of needs.

2.4 The priorities identified for the service for 2024-5 are focused on further developing high quality care and support for looked after children and care experienced young people, whilst delivering further improvements in market management and placement sufficiency locally and through the South East Regional Commissioning Co-operative and Fostering Hub, Department for Education programmes developed as a result of the governments' 'Stable Homes, based on Love' strategy.

3. Recommendations and Reasons for them

3.1 Cabinet is recommended to note the contents of the report.

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Local Members: All

BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS: None

List of Appendices

Appendix 1 - LAC Annual Report 2023 – 2024