

Report to: Cabinet

Date of meeting: 16 December 2025

By: Director of Children's Services

Title: Annual Looked After Children (LAC) report 2024 - 2025

Purpose: To outline the performance of the Looked After Children's Service between 1 April 2024 and 31 March 2025

RECOMMENDATION:

Cabinet is recommended to note the report.

1 Background

1.1 The Annual Report is attached as Appendix 1.

2 Supporting information

2.1 During the course of 2024-25 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. This increase was driven mainly by fewer numbers of children leaving care, and children remaining in care for longer.

2.2 We have continued to see high levels of complex presentation across children's mental health, neurodiversity, behaviours that challenge and complex family dynamics. These needs intersect with poor school attendance and/or children who are not able to access a suitable school place.

2.3 28% of the children in our care identified as being from an ethnic minority or mixed heritage background. 128 were separated migrant children under the age of 18 and 193 separated migrant care leavers aged 18+. 44 children came to us through the National Transfer Scheme, and the remainder were spontaneous arrivals via police involvement or directly from Newhaven Port.

2.4 We continue to find family-based homes for most children in our care and have seen very positive activity across fostering recruitment. 2024-25 saw the highest number of fostering enquiries in five years and a strong conversion rate of 33% from home visit to approval. This led to 30 new fostering households being approved in 2024/25 with 47 places, which resulted in a net increase of 17 fostering households and 25 places. Of all our children living with foster carers as at 31 March 2025, 76% were placed in-house, significantly higher than the national average for 2023/24 of 60% in-house utilisation.

2.5 However, in line with national and regional trends we are placing more children in agency residential placements and more of these placements are located outside of the county. This movement is driven both by the increase in children's complex presentation and a national shortage of fostering households. This means that some children who could be

placed with foster carers are living in residential children's homes which is a trend that we are working hard to reverse.

2.6 Significantly fewer children have experienced 3 or more placement moves during the year, this reflects careful matching and the skilled support provided to carers. Our in-house fostering service and commissioning team provide critical oversight to ensure the quality and sustainability of homes for our children.

2.7 Adoption South East placed 82 children for adoption in 2024-25, 21 of these were from East Sussex which was an increase of 6 children on the previous year.

2.8 Our in-house Residential Children's Homes, Children's Disability Homes and Lansdowne Secure Children's Home have been working closely together to align practice and share expertise. In 2024-25 we increased occupancy across all homes and are caring for children with increasingly complex needs. All homes are currently rated 'Good' by Ofsted.

2.9 Health outcomes for children in care are known to be poorer than for their peers. In East Sussex we work closely with Health colleagues to address this inequality. Initial and Review Health Assessments remain an area of focus alongside the improvement in dental care. Immunisation data available at the time of writing indicates that 81% of children had received their expected vaccinations, however this is being further scrutinised as we believe the actual figure to be higher. Our Looked After Children Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (LACAMHS) offers valuable consultation and informs the therapeutic model in our residential children's homes. Completion of Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaires (SDQs) has shown significant improvement following the introduction of a new process. In 2025-26 we will be working with Public Health to address learning from the 'My Health My School' survey.

2.10 The voice of children, young people, their families and the people who care for them continue to sit at the heart of our service. The Children in Care Council and the Care Leavers Council offer valuable challenge to us all whilst also supporting with interviews and representing our council at regional and national events.

2.11 Children's Social Care is responding to pressures across the system to ensure that families are supported at an early stage and that where children are in care, they live locally, with carers who can meet their individual needs and who support them to 'head home' where this is safe. We continue to embed the Valuing Care approach which is helping to shape conversations with children's networks and bringing energy to care planning. The Placements and Commissioning Service is bringing increased challenge alongside positive market engagement and working with the Regional Care Cooperative to support sufficiency.

3. Conclusion and reasons for recommendations

3.1 Overall performance is encouraging, remaining consistent despite the demand pressures. However, the increase in agency residential placements, particularly high-cost placements for children with complex needs is putting unsustainable pressure on the budget. The service is attempting to mitigate this through robust scrutiny of costs, a focus on Heading Home (reunification within the family network) and building creative care plans whilst maintaining a focus on children's needs and delivering safe services. Children's Social Care Reform and Regionalisation offer exciting opportunities to develop practice and share skills.

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

CAROLYN FAIR

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LOCAL MEMBERS

All

BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS

None.