

Report to: Cabinet

Date of meeting: 12 December 2023

Report by: Director of Children's Services

Title: Annual Progress Report of Looked After Children's Services
1 April 2022 – 31 March 2023

Purpose: To outline the performance of the Looked After Children's Service between 1 April 2022 - 31 March 2023

RECOMMENDATION:

Cabinet is recommended to note the report.

1. Background

1.1 The Annual Report is attached as Appendix 1. It was presented to and discussed at the Corporate Parenting Panel on 28th October. Some additional information regarding the budget for looked after children has been added to this version of the report.

1.2 During the course of 2023-23 a total of 865 children were looked after by ESCC. At the end of the year there were 33 more children in care than the previous year, 661 in total. This was, in part, due additional Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children (UASC) and fewer children being discharged from care during this period. 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 and complex family dynamics making reunification more difficult to achieve.

1.3 31% of this cohort identified as being of a minority ethnic background or of mixed heritage. 112 were UASC and 106 UASC were Care Leavers (CLs) aged 18+. 35 young people came to ESCC through the National Transfer Scheme and the remainder were spontaneous arrivals via Police involvement or directly from Newhaven Port. In addition, the Home Office opened a number of asylum hotels which resulted in 60 referrals to age assess young people who claimed to have had their age incorrectly assessed at the point of entry.

1.4 The annual report identified that there was a shift in the type of placements used with fewer children being placed in foster care (in house, kinship or with independent fostering agencies) and an increase in children placed for adoption, placed with parents, placed in supported 16+ accommodation, with a very significant increase in children placed in agency residential children's homes. This was reflective of the significant and ongoing national sufficiency challenges where 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' slide (slide 39) 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 dips in performance regarding Strengths and Difficulty Questionnaires (SDQ) completion, adoption timeliness, looked after children (LAC) with 3 or more placement moves and the completion of dental checks. Each of these areas were closely analysed and an action plan developed to address the issues. There was though, good performance across the Care Leaver indicators with significant improvement in relation to education, employment and training (EET) and suitable accommodation.

1.6 Adopt South East (ASE) placed 84 children with their adoptive families during this timeframe and of these children, 19 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.

1.7 ESCC Fostering Service was able to recruit foster carers and offer placements during this period, however a number of our carers have retired and recruitment had become increasingly challenging given the extremely competitive nature of the market, both from the independent sector and from neighbouring authorities. The recruitment of foster carers was, and remains, the highest priority for the service both in terms of children's outcomes and the financial challenges. Keeping pace with foster carer allowances in the region is critical to a successful recruitment strategy. 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

'Amazing service, I don't think we would have coped without it at times'.

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 including a one to one session with the then Education Secretary, Nadhim Zahawi.

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. Children with disability homes though, had a particularly difficult year caring for some of our most challenging disabled children.

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 identified a gradual 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, was 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 introduction of an inspection sub judgement by Ofsted led the Through Care Team (TCT) and UASC service to review the Local Offer and 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. This work is currently underway. The LAC service is focussed on improving sufficiency, improving market engagement, maintaining performance and reducing the financial burden of children's placements to the local authority. (See slide numbers 40 and 41 for the priorities)

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.

3. Recommendations and Reasons for them

3.1 The Corporate Parenting Panel has reviewed and agreed the contents of the report. 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 2022 – 2023