

**Report to:** People Scrutiny Committee

**Date of meeting:** 15 July 2024

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

**Title:** Children's Services work with IMPOWER

**Purpose:** To provide an update on Children's Services work with consultants IMPOWER, focused on cost effective and outcome focused children's care arrangements

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## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

**1) For the People Scrutiny Committee to note the progress and early impact of the interventions, investments following work with IMPOWER in 2023.**

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### **1. Background**

1.1 Like other local authorities, East Sussex County Council (ESCC) is experiencing significant financial pressures due to rising demand, supply constraints (looked after children's placements) and as a result, increasing costs.

1.2 IMPOWER is a consultancy that works exclusively with the public sector with a focus on improving outcomes for people by transforming public services. IMPOWER works with frontline staff across the system to identify opportunities to enhance outcomes. Over the last five years IMPOWER has worked with over 30 local authorities to improve outcomes for children and families and reduce costs. It worked with 12 Local Authorities specifically using the 'Valuing Care' approach.

1.3 This report provides an update on the progress of the interventions and investments proposed through the work with IMPOWER and early impact.

### **2. Supporting information**

2.1 IMPOWER worked with ESCC between May 2023 and January 2024. The work was focused on placement sufficiency and enhancing our ability to secure the right care for the right child for the right length of time. The first phase of work focused on better understanding the needs of looked after children in East Sussex and associated pressures in the system and identifying opportunities to do things differently to enhance the existing offer in East Sussex.

2.2 IMPOWER presented a detailed analysis of children and young people's needs in East Sussex and associated placement cost pressures in July 2023, as well as the identification of opportunities within a first cohort of children and young people with complex needs using the Valuing Care approach. IMPOWER worked closely with teams and individuals within Children's Services and Finance to develop a set of proposed interventions and investments to realise the opportunities identified to reduce cost and improve outcomes for children. The proposed interventions included needs driven changes to care and support using the 'Valuing Care' approach, a coordinated drive to improve foster carer recruitment

and retention, and enhanced market management and commissioning to match the current market reality.

### **3. Valuing Care**

3.1 Valuing Care is an approach to practice and commissioning which gives focus to children's needs, strengths, aspirations and outcomes. This allows better conversations around how care can meet needs and a stronger connection between needs and costs. The approach developed by IMPOWER, in partnership with a number of local authorities, has delivered demonstrable impact on children's lives, from improving how commissioners find the right care and support for children, to helping find family homes for more children that need them.

3.2 Between May and September 2023 IMPOWER supported Children's Services to identify two cohorts of children (153 children) and worked with social workers to develop Valuing Care profiles with these cohorts. These focused on looked after children's strengths and needs, rather than behaviours and risks.

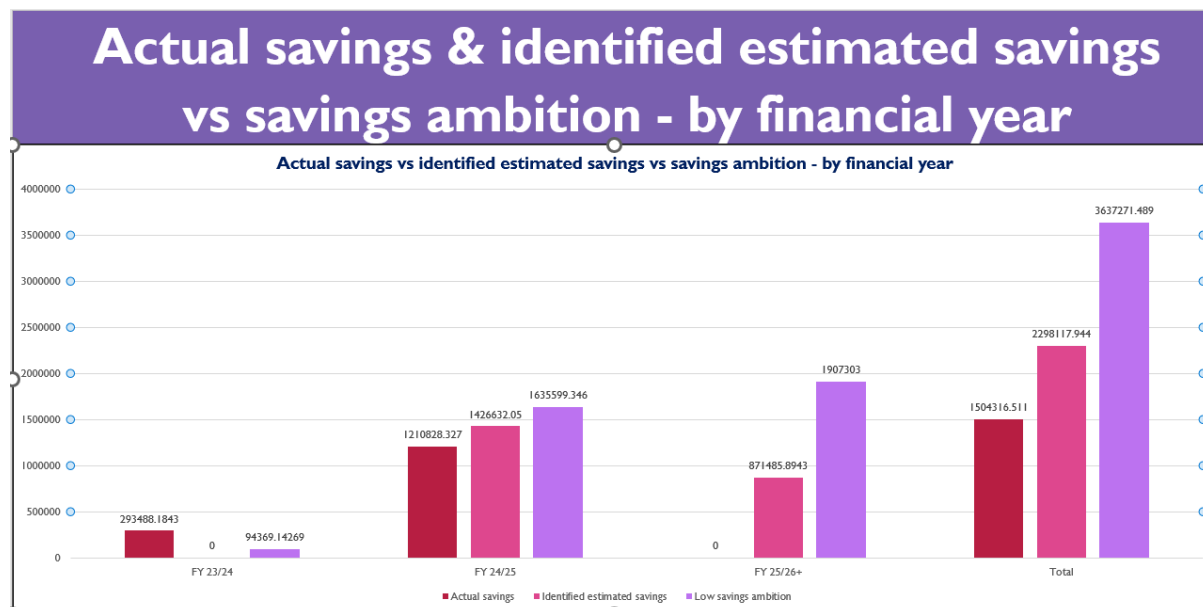
3.3 A weekly multi-agency Valuing Care panel was established in October 2023, chaired by the Assistant Director for Early Help and Children's Social Care. The panel reviewed each child's Valuing Care profile, to understand whether the current placement was the most appropriate for the child's needs and where it was considered that improvements could be made, the panel developed high level plans and directed resources to facilitate change for children. Examples included reviewing opportunities for children to move from unregistered provision to regulated children's homes and moving children from external residential children's homes to ESCC homes and supporting children into foster care support. Where it was identified that a reunification with family may be possible, the panel focused on the resources and work required to achieve progress and remove barriers. All actions from the panel were monitored and progress tracked through the looked after children's teams and reported to senior managers.

3.4 Following the initial two cohorts, the Valuing Care approach is being rolled out to the whole service and embedded within our 'My Voice Matters' reviews. The Valuing Care panel now meets bi-weekly. The profiles are being used to inform and enhance placement finding, internally and externally for our children, particularly those with the most complex needs, who are often in the most costly placements. Commissioners are using the approach to work with providers improving placement matching, ensuring providers are clear about individual children's needs and the outcomes we are seeking to achieve, to monitor progress and right size packages of support.

3.5 Children do not need to be reviewed at the panel in order to achieve a move or step down/reunification home. Those that do come to the panel are where additional multi-agency support is likely to be required to achieve significant change, or resources allocated. To date, 54 children have been reviewed through the multi-agency panel. Nine children have been supported to move to a placement better suited to their strengths and profile of needs (including two children who have been supported to return their families). A further 20 children have active plans on track to enable them to move to more appropriate placements that will support improved outcomes.

3.6 Rigorous tracking has been established to closely monitor the associated financial impact of any placement changes. As part of IMPOWER's work with the service, a savings ambition of £1.7m was identified as being achievable by the end of 24/25, and a further £1.9m for 25/26, by stepping down identified children in care to a more appropriate care provision. Following the progress made at the Valuing Care panels, estimated savings totalling £2.3m have been identified between 24/25 (£1.4m) and 25/26 (£0.9m).

In addition to this a further £1.5m of savings have been actualised over the same period (£0.3m in 23/24 and £1.2m in 24/25), as the graph below demonstrates.



#### 4. Improving foster care recruitment and retention

4.1 Recruitment and retention of our highly valued ESCC foster carers is a key priority for Children’s Services. Through a multi-channel strategy, and with insights from new research with IMPOWER, we have identified and planned the most effective routes to drive quality enquiries to recruit both experienced foster carers and new fostering applicants to ESCC. Wellbeing and recognition schemes have also enhanced loyalty and retention within our existing cohort of carers.

4.2 IMPOWER’s work with the service on looked after children’s trajectories and budget forecasting supported the development of a business case for further investment in ESCC foster care rates. Our foster carers provide high quality and best value care for our children, and we strive to support as many of our looked after children to be placed with our foster carers. In February, ESCC agreed to an additional investment of £1.6m in our in house foster carers as part of 24/25 budget setting. The new payment structure and revision of maintenance payments was introduced to foster carers for implementation from 1 April 2024, with commitment for payments to keep pace in line with the National Minimum Allowance. ESCC is now more competitive in terms of payments with neighbouring local authorities and Independent Fostering Agencies, encouraging more new applications, transfers and supporting retention of the existing cohort.

4.3 ESCC is joining forces with 19 other South East local authorities, as part of a Department for Education programme to launch a new regional fostering hub, with a shared goal to recruit and support more foster carers for our communities’ children. The virtual hub will complement existing recruitment activity across the region from July 2024 onwards.

4.4 To ensure the ESCC brand stands out amongst other local authorities’ fostering services and Independent Fostering Agencies, the service has refreshed our fostering logo. The service has also developed a 16+ fostering offer (previously called Supported Lodgings), maintaining the identity of the specialist support service for our older children.

4.5 Other marketing activities include launching ESCC foster care on Instagram, (alongside existing social media presence on Facebook and X) to increase followers and share in a younger market, and sponsored adverts through Google, ensuring online search presence, essential in a crowded marketplace. Through using ESCC corporate channels, the service is achieving exposure across the county (e.g. advertising on Council Tax mail out, ESCC website, promoting ESCC foster care through District and Boroughs, Corporate Parenting Panel, Lead Member networks).

4.6 Our fostering website was relaunched in June 2024. It is continually updated with content on the web pages and social media profiles with paid and organic posts and campaigns ([Fostering | East Sussex County Council](#)).

4.7 The service offers live online 'virtual' information sessions and a schedule of community recruitment pop-up locations with team members and 'Vinnie-the-Van' at high footfall locations. It has an active radio advert campaign targeting recruitment for diverse, parent and child and adolescent placement applicants.

4.8 In 2023/4 the service saw 26 new ESCC foster homes (38 new placements). The impact of the enhanced recruitment campaign and new foster carer rates is being seen in the first quarter of 24/5, with an increase of 47% in the number of enquiries compared to the same quarter last year, and 116% increase in approvals of new carers.

4.9 The retention of our foster carers is critically important, and the service is continuing to invest providing the right support to our carers informed by their feedback. We deliver personal development opportunities and wellbeing support for all carers, supervision (individual and pod based) with Senior Social Workers, a team around the child approach, including placement-based support and respite, numerous specialist support groups, including fostering buddy schemes, 'Men who Foster', Children who foster, peer groups, an annual foster carer thank you picnic and our GEM awards.

4.10 Through the South East Fostering Regional Hub, we have secured funding to develop Mockingbird in 24/5. The Mockingbird model involves foster carers being part of a group with other foster carers who are described as satellite foster homes. They are supported by a central hub home which provides resources and support to the satellite homes. This model has been highly effective in retaining foster carers and in many cases supporting them to provide care for children with more complex needs.

4.11 As part of the Valuing Care approach we have created a Valuing Care profile for each of our fostering households, including an up to date skills review. The use of the Valuing Care profile for children and for foster carers has already seen an improvement in matching processes with our carers and we are looking to roll this out to ESCC Children's Homes.

## **5. Enhanced Market Management and Commissioning**

5.1 IMPOWER's initial analysis identified the opportunity to strengthen the commissioning capacity and expertise within Children's Services, given the challenges within the placement market locally and nationally (detailed in the Competition and Markets Authority report [Children's social care market study final report - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#)).

5.2 An ESCC £203k investment in the commissioning functions within the looked after children's service in 2024/5 is enabling greater challenge to the quality and cost of all

placement types and is ensuring ESCC is part of all relevant frameworks to manage the market with other local authorities. The focus on enhancing relationships with providers has included extensive work with supported accommodation providers, who are now required to register with Ofsted. The impact of this work means that only one provider has not registered with Ofsted, which has maintained our placement sufficiency for our 16/17 year olds.

5.3 The commissioning team are trialling the use of the Valuing Care profile with a number of local providers ahead of a wider roll out in the autumn.

5.4 The Government's 'Stable Homes Built on Love' strategy for Children's Social Care, recognises the challenges of placement sufficiency and the dysfunctional market currently in place in England. The Department for Education is running two regional Pathfinders to pilot Regional Commissioning Co-operatives. The South East region was successful in bidding for one of the pathfinder projects and has been awarded a grant of £1.95m of revenue funding and up to £5m of capital funding for the 19 authorities in the region. ESCC is part of the SE project and will play a key role in shaping future delivery of this key development in children's services.

## **6. Conclusion and reasons for recommendations**

6.1 This report summarises the work of IMPOWER with ESCC Children's Services in 2023, and the progress achieved to date to improve outcomes for our children and achieve a reduction in placement costs through new ways of working and investment in key areas of the service. Whilst significant progress has been achieved in the last 12 months financial pressures in relation to looked after children remain critical.

6.2 Children's Services is focused on demand management through earlier intervention, multi-agency specialist intervention with families to enable children to live safely within their own families and where children do need to come into our care, ensuring we are providing the right care, at the right time for the right children, at the best value to the public purse.

6.3 The People Scrutiny Committee is asked to note the progress achieved through Children's Services work with IMPOWER, the savings achieved so far and the ambition to increase recruitment and retention of ESCC foster carers and enhance our market management through the investment in commissioning capacity and expertise in Children's Services.

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