

1 February 2012		ITEM 7
Children's Services Overview & Scrutiny Committee		
CHILDREN IN CARE		
Report of: Barbara Foster, Head of Care & Targeted Outcomes		
Wards and communities affected: All	Key Decision: Yes	
Accountable Head of Service: Barbara Foster, Head of Care & Targeted Outcomes		
Accountable Director: Jo Olsson, Director of People Services		
This report is Public		
Purpose of Report: To advise members of the current children in care and the issues arising from the council's responsibilities.		

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report summarises the information about Thurrock's looked after children and their placement services. It demonstrates that there has been a steep rise in the numbers of looked after children (also reflected in nationally). The whole service is shortly to be formally inspected including, Safeguarding and Child Protection Services as well as Children in Care, fostering and adoption services. Please see the attached Appendix A, Looked After Child Strategy, as agreed by the Corporate Parenting Group.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- a) Members are asked to note the content of the report
- b) Members are asked to continue their support to the Corporate Parenting Group
- c) Members are asked to continue their support to the Children in Care Council.

1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 Children who come into the care of the local authority are those who are the most vulnerable and at risk of harm when all other interventions have been unable to generate sufficient positive change.

- 1.2 There is no single reason for children being in care. Disabled children may be looked after because their disability requires such a high level of support that their needs can only be met in a highly specialist residential resource. Otherwise, a range of social problems including poverty, poor parenting poor mental health and drug and alcohol misuse are common background features. Research has shown that isolation from external family support is a strong factor – a child with a particular set of parental disadvantages may come into the care system whilst another child with the same disadvantages will have their needs met by aunts, uncles and grandparents without any statutory service being involved.

2. THURROCK'S LOOKED AFTER CHILDREN

- 2.1 At the time of writing, there are 243 children and young people who require the care of the Local Authority, this includes Unaccompanied Asylum Seekers (UASC), which account for less than 10%. Numbers have steadily increased the comparative figures in April 2011 were 218. A similar trend is being reported across the country. The national trend is confirmed by CAF/CASS (Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service) who describe a 10% increase in care proceedings in comparison with last year.
- 2.2 More than half (59) of the children who have come into care this year are 10 years old or younger (of which 15 are less than a year old). Another 53 were 11 years or older. A striking feature is that many of these children are from large families who have been known to the service for many years. The racial groups of these children reflect the Thurrock child population, with 69 being White British and Other white groups and black and ethnic minorities making up the remainder.
- 2.3 The Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000 sets out local authority duties towards young adults who have been in care. We have 7 care leavers not in education, employment or training at the time of writing, (every effort is being made to change the situation). We have 10 young people currently studying for degrees.
- 2.4 The performance on other individual indicators shows strength as well as areas for development. 14 children have had more than 3 placements in the year up to December. Last year this happened to 12.4% of the care population as against the England rate of 11.3% and the statistical neighbours of 10.8%. Placement stability is measured for children who have been in care for more 2.5 years and in the same placement for 2 years, this was 59.6% in Thurrock, 68.6% in England and 68.1% for the statistical neighbours. Current figures stand at 77% and it is hoped that the year will end with an improved result. The Corporate Parenting Group have had already heard that last years school results show strong improvement and that Thurrock is performing well on Health Assessments.

3. STAFFING AND RESOURCES

- 3.1 The attached chart (Appendix B) shows the staffing of the social work services for looked after children.
- 3.2 There will be an inspection of the Adoption Service commencing on 6.2.12, the first such inspection since January 2008.
- 3.3 The Thurrock Fostering Service is particularly strong and versatile and makes a major difference to the service budget by providing so many versatile in-house placements. The major issue for fostering team is a national shortage of foster carers, which places all fostering organisations in a highly competitive situation. Whilst financial support to foster-carers is not in itself the major motivation, Thurrock is currently paying significantly lower financial rewards to foster carers than those recently raised by Essex County Council. The difference, depending on the individual children involved, could be as much as £1000 per month. In Thurrock, our foster-carers are currently setting up their own local Foster Care Association. This process has been assisted by our membership of the Fostering Network.
- 3.4 Thurrock has a unique team which supplements the in-house placements by providing some additional activities. These include the supervision of contact between children and family members, some direct “life story work” to help children understand their circumstances and some leisure activities for those teenagers whose problems prevent them joining mainstream youth clubs and their equivalents.
- 3.5 Where children require a specialist placement or where the demand has exceeded the in-house capacity, it is necessary to go to the market to purchase either residential care or additional fostering placement. The unpredictable nature of this need means that this is probably the most volatile budget in local government. At present, we have twenty-seven children in residential placements (eleven because of serious disabilities), and sixty in Independent Fostering Placements. We anticipate that the budget will overspend by around £1.3 million.
- 3.6 The Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy figures show that Thurrock is in the area of low spending authorities on services. (Please see Appendix C attached)

4. THE CHILDS VOICE

- 4.1 The wishes and feelings of looked after children are integral to every point of interaction with them. Staff and foster-carer appraisal consider this. A further safeguard is that every child must have an Independent Reviewing Officer – that is, a qualified social worker of substantial experience who is independent of the case-holding service. Independent Reviewing Officers presented their Annual Report to the Corporate Parenting group, Appendix D attached. All of the council’s staff and carers will be part of the inspection of Safeguarding and Looked After Children which is anticipated to take place this year.

4.2 The children and young people themselves have their Children in Care Council which has been running since November 2009. Last year, our level of participation by young people was tested by our request to the National Voice (a voluntary sector organisation for young people in care) undertake a LILAC Inspection – Leading Improvements for Looked After Children. This was reported to Overview and Scrutiny and we have invited LILAC to return to re-inspect us on those standards which we did not meet and have implemented some of their recommendations. These included asking Open Door to independently co-ordinate the Children in Care Council which commences in January.

4.3 Looked after children must be assisted to make complaints and the council has a specialist post for these and other complaints covered by the Children Act 1989. The service to advocate for any children and young people who have issues to raise is provided by Open Door. Over the last year we have received 5 complaints from young people and we were able to resolve these at the first stage with the help from the Advocacy Service.

5. **CONSULTATION (including Overview and Scrutiny, if applicable)**

5.1 None

6. **IMPACT ON CORPORATE POLICIES, PRIORITIES, PERFORMANCE AND COMMUNITY IMPACT**

6.1 The council's responsibilities for children in care are unique and sit at the heart of all priorities.

7. **IMPLICATIONS**

7.1 **Financial**

As described this report links closely with Early Intervention Strategy and there may be further changes for the council as this is developed

Implications verified by: Michael Jones
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7.2 **Legal**

There are no legal implications arising from this report

Implications verified by: Lindsey Marks
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7.3 **Diversity and Equality**

As is implied in the body of this report, the Looked After child protection reflects the general demographic child population for Thurrock, therefore, there are no immediate implications but the service must be constantly monitored on an equalities basis.

Implications verified by: **Samson DeAlyn**
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7.4 **Other implications (where significant) – i.e. Section 17, Risk Assessment, Health Impact Assessment, Sustainability, IT, Environmental**

To be determined

8. **CONCLUSION**

For information.

BACKGROUND PAPERS USED IN PREPARING THIS REPORT:

- Monthly Performance Data

APPENDICES TO THIS REPORT:

- Appendix A- Looked After Children Strategy
- Appendix B - Staffing (Social Work Services for LAC)
- Appendix C – CIPFA, Summary of 2010/11 Estimates, Gross Cost of 'Children Looked After' per Child, per week
- Appendix D - Independent Reviewing Officers Annual Report and Quarterly Report Update

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