

Thurrock: A place of opportunity, enterprise and excellence, where individuals, communities and businesses flourish

Corporate Parenting Committee

The meeting will be held at **7.00 pm** on **29 October 2015**

Committee Room 1, Civic Offices, New Road, Grays, Essex, RM17 6SL

Membership:

Councillors Susan Little (Chair), Bukky Okunade (Vice-Chair), James Baker, Clare Baldwin, Leslie Gamester, James Halden, Steve Liddiard and Joycelyn Redsell

Natalie Carter, Thurrock Open Door Representative
Christina Day, Children in Care Council
Jackie Howell, Chair, The One Team, Foster Carer Association
Sharon Smith, Vice Chair, The One Team, Foster Carer Association

Substitutes:

Councillors Robert Gledhill, Cathy Kent, Andrew Roast, Graham Snell and Kevin Wheeler

Agenda

Open to Public and Press

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1 Apologies for Absence	
2 Minutes	5 - 12
To approve as a correct record the minutes of the Corporate Parenting Committee meeting held on 18 June 2015.	
3 Items of Urgent Business	
To receive additional items that the Chair is of the opinion should be considered as a matter of urgency, in accordance with Section 100B (4) (b) of the Local Government Act 1972.	
4 Declaration of Interests	

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Queries regarding this Agenda or notification of apologies:

Please contact Jenny Shade, Senior Democratic Services Officer by sending an email to Direct.Democracy@thurrock.gov.uk

Agenda published on: **21 October 2015**

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DECLARING INTERESTS FLOWCHART – QUESTIONS TO ASK YOURSELF

Breaching those parts identified as a pecuniary interest is potentially a criminal offence

Helpful Reminders for Members

- *Is your register of interests up to date?*
- *In particular have you declared to the Monitoring Officer all disclosable pecuniary interests?*
- *Have you checked the register to ensure that they have been recorded correctly?*

When should you declare an interest *at a meeting*?

- **What matters are being discussed at the meeting?** (including Council, Cabinet, Committees, Subs, Joint Committees and Joint Subs); or
- If you are a Cabinet Member making decisions other than in Cabinet **what matter is before you for single member decision?**



Does the business to be transacted at the meeting

- relate to; or
- likely to affect

any of your registered interests and in particular any of your Disclosable Pecuniary Interests?

Disclosable Pecuniary Interests shall include your interests or those of:

- your spouse or civil partner's
- a person you are living with as husband/ wife
- a person you are living with as if you were civil partners

where you are aware that this other person has the interest.

A detailed description of a disclosable pecuniary interest is included in the Members Code of Conduct at Chapter 7 of the Constitution. **Please seek advice from the Monitoring Officer about disclosable pecuniary interests.**

What is a Non-Pecuniary interest? – this is an interest which is not pecuniary (as defined) but is nonetheless so significant that a member of the public with knowledge of the relevant facts, would reasonably regard to be so significant that it would materially impact upon your judgement of the public interest.

Pecuniary

If the interest is not already in the register you must (unless the interest has been agreed by the Monitoring Officer to be sensitive) disclose the existence and nature of the interest to the meeting

If the Interest is not entered in the register and is not the subject of a pending notification you must within 28 days notify the Monitoring Officer of the interest for inclusion in the register

Unless you have received dispensation upon previous application from the Monitoring Officer, you must:

- Not participate or participate further in any discussion of the matter at a meeting;
- Not participate in any vote or further vote taken at the meeting; and
- leave the room while the item is being considered/voted upon

If you are a Cabinet Member you may make arrangements for the matter to be dealt with by a third person but take no further steps

Non- pecuniary

Declare the nature and extent of your interest including enough detail to allow a member of the public to understand its nature



You may participate and vote in the usual way but you should seek advice on Predetermination and Bias from the Monitoring Officer.

Vision: Thurrock: A place of **opportunity**, **enterprise** and **excellence**, where **individuals**, **communities** and **businesses** flourish.

To achieve our vision, we have identified five strategic priorities:

1. Create a great place for learning and opportunity

- Ensure that every place of learning is rated “Good” or better
- Raise levels of aspiration and attainment so that residents can take advantage of local job opportunities
- Support families to give children the best possible start in life

2. Encourage and promote job creation and economic prosperity

- Promote Thurrock and encourage inward investment to enable and sustain growth
- Support business and develop the local skilled workforce they require
- Work with partners to secure improved infrastructure and built environment

3. Build pride, responsibility and respect

- Create welcoming, safe, and resilient communities which value fairness
- Work in partnership with communities to help them take responsibility for shaping their quality of life
- Empower residents through choice and independence to improve their health and well-being

4. Improve health and well-being

- Ensure people stay healthy longer, adding years to life and life to years
- Reduce inequalities in health and well-being and safeguard the most vulnerable people with timely intervention and care accessed closer to home
- Enhance quality of life through improved housing, employment and opportunity

5. Promote and protect our clean and green environment

- Enhance access to Thurrock's river frontage, cultural assets and leisure opportunities
- Promote Thurrock's natural environment and biodiversity
- Inspire high quality design and standards in our buildings and public space

Minutes of the Meeting of the Corporate Parenting Committee held on 18 June 2015 at 7.00 pm

- Present:** Councillors Susan Little (Chair), Bukky Okunade (Vice-Chair), Leslie Gamester, Steve Liddiard and Joycelyn Redsell
- Christina Day, Children in Care Council
Jackie Howell, Chair, The One Team, Foster Carer Association
Patricia Perolls, Designated Nurse
Sharon Smith, Vice Chair, The One Team, Foster Carer Association
- Apologies:** Councillor James Halden
Natalie Carter, Thurrock Open Door Representative
- In attendance:** Andrew Carter, Head of Children's Social Care
Paul Coke, Service Manager (Children & Families)
Simon Shardlow, Interim Service Manager
Matthew Boulter, Principal Democratic Services Officer
Jenny Shade, Senior Democratic Services Officer
-

Before the start of the Meeting, all present were advised that the meeting may be filmed and was being recorded, with the audio recording to be made available on the Council's website.

The Chair observed that Councillors James Baker and Clare Baldwin were absent.

The Chair thanked past and present Committee members for their contributions.

1. Minutes

The Minutes of the Corporate Parenting Committee, held on 12 March 2015, were approved as a correct record.

2. Items of Urgent Business

There were no items of urgent business.

3. Declaration of Interests

No interests were declared.

4. Terms of Reference

The Corporate Parenting Committee Terms of Reference were noted.

5. Information on Recent External Placements for Young People

Paul Coke introduced the report which set out a range of issues regarding the placement choices made for Looked After Children and information on external placements.

With particular reference to the budget forecast the officer reported to the committee that the budget for 2015/16 for external placements was £7.8 million. Plus an additional payment of £500,000 would be received from the Primary Care Trust.

Members asked for further explanation on Connected Carers, the officer clarified that this is when a child is placed with either a family member or friend. It was also noted that Connected Carers were assessed exactly the same way as a foster carer would be.

Andrew Carter further clarified that the budget overspends of £590,259 did not take into account the monies still to be received from Central Government for asylum seekers which totalled £450,000. The Chair asked for clarification of whether monies received from government covered the full cost of the placement. Andrew Carter confirmed that the government only paid a proportion of the costs depending on the age of the child and this would not cover the whole cost of placements.

Councillor Redsell asked for clarification on what 16 years of age and above semi-independent placements meant. The officer clarified that this was not a foster placement but where the child could live in their own rented property with the support of the Agency, the young person would work independently or be trained with the view of moving into independency. The young person placements were staffed which meant that the child would not be left alone at any time whilst in placement alone.

The Chair asked for clarification on ratings used for residential placement providers. Andrew Carter confirmed that the ratings followed the Ofsted framework and were categorised as Outstanding, Good, Adequate or Requiring Improving.

Councillor Okunade asked for the total number of recruited approved foster carers in Thurrock. The officer confirmed that this information is available and also the number of potential foster carers in assessment. The officer recommended that these figures be referred back to the Corporate Parenting Committee in September 2015.

RESOLVED

That the members of the Committee scrutinize the efforts made by officers to choose appropriate resources for Looked After Children, including our more difficult to place children.

6. Care Leavers Progress

Paul Coke introduced the report to Members which set out the information on the progress of care leavers, the new initiatives put in place to address some key issues and data that gave an overview of Thurrock's performance against Thurrock's statistical neighbours and the national average.

The members asked the officer for clarification on the "Staying Put" an arrangement which came into force on 1 April 2014; the officer stated that this was an arrangement which enabled care leavers to remain with their former foster carers after they turn 18 years of age.

The Chair asked for clarification on the development of Clarence Road. The officer confirmed that this was a new project which had acquired four beds (units) to be used specifically for care leavers who were supported by aftercare support workers and Family Mosaic. The officer clarified that the length of stay was assessed individually but the average stay would be six months to a year. The Committee recommended that this item be brought back to the Corporate Parenting Committee in December 2015 for review.

Councillor Redsell asked for clarification on when care leavers moved from their placements where they moved to. The officer stated that the expectation would be to move them into social housing or council accommodation with fully independent living. The care leavers would be given priority with a Band 3 but would still be required to follow the established bidding and application processes.

Councillor Redsell asked for further clarification on Universal Credit. The officer confirmed that this was introduced in March 2015; applications would be received from young people leaving care who were currently seeking employment. The officer confirmed that work was in hand with the housing benefit to get the rent element of the payment to be paid directly to the landlords. The amount paid will be based on individual circumstances.

All members recognised that to ensure homelessness the emphasis must be on children getting employment and having the support of corporate parenting.

Christina Day asked for clarification on the difference of payments for those care leavers going to university and those undertaking an apprenticeship. Andrew Carter will report back on the payment process and advise the committee at the next Corporate Parenting Committee.

Andrew Carter stated that Thurrock were one of the top local authorities for care leavers being in employment. The 30% figure of those care leavers not in employment included those who have a disability which enables them to work or train.

RESOLVED:

- 1. Imbed the new ways of working such as the senior practitioner within the After Care Team and the Employment Worker, plus the development of new partnerships (see 2.2.3, 2.2.4 and 2.2.5).**
- 2. Monitor and review the staying put arrangements and the development of Clarence Road (2.2.14).**
- 3. Monitor the effects and impact of Universal Credit on our care leavers.**
- 4. Ensure the new Pathway Plan is incorporated within Local Children Safeguard and used by all staff within the next 3 months.**

7. Child Sexual Exploitation & Missing Children

Andrew Carter introduced the report to Members which provided information on the actions currently being taken to identify and support victims of child sexual exploitation and also disrupt the activities of those seeking to exploit children. He also thanked the members for bringing this high priority topic back to committee and updated the members on the number of recorded missing children. A discussion took place that concentrated on internet safety.

The Chair asked the co-optee members for their feedback. Jackie Howell referred to the Digital Parenting publication and stated how important it was for the looked after child to know who to trust.

Sharon Smith stated that they had received some excellent training from Essex Police.

Jackie and Sharon both confirmed that they have undertaken the child exploitation training and the committee agreed that children were more computer savvy than the adults.

Councillor Liddiard asked the officers if social media could be used to spread the word about safety. The officer stated that the council have actioned the recommendations from Children in Care Council and discussed with social workers the link to 'This Is Abuse' which could be found on the Local Safeguarding Children's Board web site.

Councillor Redsell asked the officer what the schools were doing to raise e-safety and awareness rising campaigns. The officer confirmed that schools in Thurrock were embracing this well with organised parent events but it was noted that not all parents want this intervention.

The Youth Safeguarding Ambassadors through Andrew Carter asked the members if they would like to visit a school and see what is involved in their role.

RESOLVED:

- 1. The Corporate Parenting Committee will continue to review the actions of the council to address Child Sexual Exploitation and Children Missing from Care.**
- 2. Scrutinise the implementation and development of targeted preventative and self-protection programme on child sexual exploitation for looked after children.**
- 3. Consider the learning from the Jay report, Casey report and LGA, Tackling Child Sexual Exploitation: A Resource Pack for Councils and ensure that Thurrock Council effectively discharges its function as a corporate parent.**

8. Children In Care Pledge Update Report

Paul Coke introduced the report which set out the current proposals and recommendations in respect of the Pledge. The Officer also thanked the Children in Care Council for all the work carried out on this Pledge.

The Members were referred to the amendments made and confirmed how necessary it is for social workers to work in partnership with young people.

The Chair asked for clarification on how the monitoring was carried out of young people having their own bank accounts and passports. The officer stated that monitoring was currently undertaken and feedback on figures will be referred back to the Corporate Parenting at the December 2015 committee.

A particular reference was made about the importance of memory books and how these are used for children in care.

Officers recommended that the Pledge be referred back to the Corporate Parenting Committee for an update in March 2016.

RESOLVED:

- 1. That members will support the amended proposals to the Pledge.**
- 2. That members will support the development of the Pledge leaflet in a suitable style that can be given to all looked after children and young people and that it is available for those that become looked after in the future.**
- 3. That members will agree that the Pledge is monitored and reviewed by the Children in Case Council (CCG) on a yearly basis.**
- 4. That members will support the publicising of the Pledge through the Council's website and the Looked After Children's website.**

9. Work Programme

Councillor Liddiard asked for an item to be added to the work programme on the cost of children's social care services in comparison with other authorities. The Chair agreed that this would be a good idea and asked for agreement to have it included onto the work programme. Councillor Okunade questioned what the use of this would be to the committee. Councillor Liddiard confirmed that although he knew the services he did not know the costs and having this comparison would help with the understanding of service spends. Members of the committee were in agreement to this and the topic would be added to the September 2015 work programme.

Councillor Gamester also raised his concerns that no Budget costings were present and agreed that a comparison with other authorities would be informative.

Democratic Services advised that since the publication of the agenda a number of amendments to the work programme had been proposed, which along with the amendments agreed earlier in the meeting, included:

- That an update on Children Services Budget in comparison with other Boroughs be added to the work programme for September 2015.
- That an update on Looked after Children those that currently having Bank Account and Passports for December 2015.
- That an update on Clarence Road be included in the Housing for Care Leavers topic on the work programme for December 2015.
- That an update on the Children in Care Pledge be referred to the Committee in March 2016 for review.

Members were in agreement with the proposed changes to the work programme, following which the Chair requested that an updated work programme be circulated to the Committee and officers following the meeting.

All members and officers agreed that the use of acronyms would not be used in reports or minutes.

The Chair advised members that she would not accept any reports in future for items to note in order for elected members to drive forward the improvement of the service.

RESOLVED:

That the work programme be noted, subject to the amendments detailed above.

The meeting finished at 8.37 pm

Approved as a true and correct record

CHAIR

DATE

**Any queries regarding these Minutes, please contact
Democratic Services at Direct.Democracy@thurrock.gov.uk**

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10 September 2015	ITEM: 5
Corporate Parenting Committee	
Recent External Placements for Young People	
Wards and communities affected: All	Key Decision: Non-Key
Report of: Paul Coke – Service Manager, Through Care Services	
Accountable Head of Service: Andrew Carter, Children’s Social Care (CATO)	
Accountable Director: Carmel Littleton, Director of Children’s Services	
This report is Public	

Executive Summary

This report updates members of the Committee on a range of issues regarding the placement choices made for looked after children and invites scrutiny to further improve practice.

As corporate parents it is important that the committee are able to satisfy themselves that children and young people are receiving high quality placements that support good outcomes and provide value for money.

1. Recommendation(s)

1.1 That the members of the Committee continue to challenge the provision of placements for looked after children to ensure that placements are of a high quality, promote good outcomes and are value for money.

2. Introduction and Background

2.1 Reports for previous meetings of the Corporate Parenting Committee have provided elected members with some detailed information about the placement choices being made by officers for looked after children. These reports have included information on new external placements made in the period immediately preceding them and commented on a number of the presenting issues which influence decision making.

2.2 The period covered in this report is 28/05/2015 – 04/08/2015. There were 21 new entrants into the system.

2.3 The numbers in age groups entering and ceasing care are as follows:

AGE GROUP	ENTER	CEASE
0-5	3	1
6-11	4	2
12-15	6	0
16+	8	1

2.4 As of the 4 August 2015 we had 297 looked after children (0-17). The comparative figure for the previous period is in brackets

Age of child	In house Fostering	Independent Fostering	Residential	Other	Total by age
Under 1	4 (3)	5 (7)			9 (10)
1 – 5	15 (13)	11 (9)	0 (1)	2 (4)	28 (27)
6 - 11	30 (34)	28 (28)	4 (2)	1 (4)	63 (68)
12 – 15	34 (27)	38 (38)	21(2)	4 (22)	97 (89)
16+	18 (17)	24 (22)	17 (3)	41(40)	100 (82)
Total by provision type	101(94)	106 (104)	42 (8)	48 (70)	297 (276)

2.5 The total number of children and young people in foster placement is 207, 69.7% as opposed to 70.6% in the last report.

2.6 It is important to define what is meant by ‘In-house fostering’, ‘Independent Fostering’, ‘Residential’ and ‘other’. These definitions are governed by how we classify these categories by Placement Type and Placement Provider. The categories are defined by national government and how we report as part of a data return each year.

2.7

	In House Fostering	Independent Fostering	Residential	Other
Placement Type	All children and young people placed with foster carers & adopters	All children and young people placed with foster carers & adopters	All children and young people placed in: Children’s homes Residential Care Home Residential School	All children and young people placed: With parents or family Independent living YOI/Prison
Placement Provider	Provision owned by Local Authority	Provision is: private or voluntary/third sector	Provision is: Own provision Private Voluntary/third	Provision is: Parents or others Other public

			sector	provision Local Authority Private Voluntary/third sector
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3. Issues, Options and Analysis of Options

- 3.1 As you can see the percentage of children and young people in foster placement has remained relatively stable over the last two reported periods, but there has been a slight rise in the number of Independent Fostering Agency placement. Thurrock Council has entered into a Service Level Agreement with Essex County Council to increase the number of available local authority placements, increase placement choice and achieve increased value for money. Essex County Council has a large pool of foster carers in certain age groups and Thurrock Council is now able to refer to Essex County Council for placements (that are more cost effective) rather than seek these via Independent Fostering Agencies.
- 3.2 The numbers in residential and other establishments have now evened themselves out, but it is clear there has been a significant rise in the number of children 16+ placed in residential and other provision. There is a regional and national shortage of foster carers for adolescents and particularly those with complex behaviour. We are actively working with providers to increase the pool of adolescent placements and are focusing our in-house recruitment campaign on this area.
- 3.3 There has been an increase in this period of those young people aged 12 – 17 becoming looked after (14).
- 3.4 Of the 14 young people becoming looked after in this period, a third are unaccompanied asylum seeking children (UASC). There is no direct correlation between the recent situation in Calais and the increase in unaccompanied minors at this stage. We continue to monitor the trend in relation to unaccompanied children locally and across the Eastern Region.
- 3.5 A knock on effect of the current situation with UASC across the region is the finding of appropriate placements for those coming into care, which has at times been a challenge. The current funding formula for UASC is under review and the Association of Directors of Children’s Services has been negotiating with central government given the pressures that increasing numbers of UASC can place on local authority budgets.
- 3.6 The local authority continues to scrutinise and challenge where necessary all placements through the Placement Panel. The Head of Service has to approve all residential placements and there are a number of other Panels

that ensure management oversight is consistent throughout the process, such as Threshold Panel, which addresses the request for children and young people to come into care, chaired by the Head of Service, Children In Need and Children Looked After surgeries, chaired by the Head of Service or respective Service Managers that ensure there is no drift.

- 3.7 A particular focus in the Looked After Children's Surgeries is those cases where rehabilitation home is the primary plan. This will enable the Department to manage these cases, ensure there is no drift and use the forum for challenge where appropriate. This will also ensure our through put of children and young people increases, but more importantly the right children/young people remain in our care.
- 3.8 The department continues to focus on the most expensive residential placements to ensure the plan is fit for purpose and the service we are receiving is of good quality and value for money. The department is working with colleagues in commissioning to look at how we better commission and procure placements. The aim is to reduce the reliance on spot purchased placements wherever possible, and ensure high quality placements that are cost effective.
- 3.9 Joint funding arrangements continue to be reviewed to ensure that effective funding is in place from partner agencies such as Health. Changes in the health funding arrangements are likely to continue to put increasing pressures on the placement budget.
- 3.10 At the previous Corporate Parenting Meeting on the 18 June 2015, it was requested that Officers explore whether or not comparative data can be provided in terms of cost of placements.
- 3.11 Officers have extensively explored the issue of comparative data and there is no publicly published data that would allow Officers to provide Members with meaningful comparisons between one local authority and another. Officers continue to explore possible solutions to this in order to meet the request from Members.

4. Reasons for Recommendation

- 4.1 It is hoped that members of the Committee will continue to find this information useful in developing their understanding and scrutiny of the issues involved. Officers accept there is a very real challenge in balancing the need to find the best possible placement option for children and young people, whilst simultaneously working within the financial resources available.

5. Consultation (including Overview and Scrutiny, if applicable)

- 5.1 None

6. Impact on corporate policies, priorities, performance and community impact

6.1 None

7. Implications

7.1 Financial

Implications verified by: **Sean Clark**
Head of Corporate Finance

The numbers of looked after children in this report have increased. The number of children/young people in residential and other placements has also increased. This inevitably will have an impact on cost, and from this report the Officers are addressing this by scrutiny of the residential placements. It is also important to acknowledge how volatile the business is in terms of numbers of looked after children. The latest budget report to Cabinet assumes that these costs will be contained within the overall budget envelope but will continue to be monitored closely.

7.2 Legal

Implications verified by: **Lindsey Marks**
Principal Solicitor, Children's Safeguarding

It is important to note that whilst the Local Authority is clearly planning on scrutinising all residential placements it also has to be aware of its duties under the Children Act 1989, which must be the focus on the best interest of each child, especially when exploring placements.

7.3 Diversity and Equality

Implications verified by: **Natalie Warren**
Community Development and Equalities Manager

When scrutinising the residential placements the Local Authority must ensure it also considers the needs of each individual child/young person, which includes their religious, language and disability to ensure these placements meet all their needs on a holistic level.

7.4 Other implications (where significant) – i.e. Staff, Health, Sustainability, Crime and Disorder)

Placements have to also take into consideration the experience and quality of staff, health and safety issues within each placement and that all the providers used are aware of their duties within the Crime and Disorder legislation.

Providers whether regulated or not must also be aware of their responsibilities when it comes to child protection issues.

- 8. Background papers used in preparing the report** (including their location on the Council's website or identification whether any are exempt or protected by copyright):

Not applicable

- 9. Appendices to the report**

Not applicable

Report Author:

Paul Coke

Service Manager, Through Care

Children's Services, Care and Targeted Outcomes

10 September 2015	ITEM: 6
Corporate Parenting Committee	
Adoption Report Outlining Process and Performance	
Wards and communities affected: All	Key Decision: To consider the report in line with regulation 25.6 of the National Minimum Standards
Report of: Simon Shardlow, Service Manager, Placement & Support Service	
Accountable Head of Service: Andrew Carter, Head of Care and Targeted Outcomes	
Accountable Director: Carmel Littleton, Director of Children’s Services	
This report is public	

Executive Summary

This report fulfils the requirement of 25.6 of the National Minimum Standards for Adoption, which is:

- 25.6 The executive side of the local authority, the voluntary adoption agency’s/ Adoption Support Agency’s provider/trustees, board members or management committee members:
- a. receive written reports on the management, outcomes and financial state of the agency every 6 months;
 - b. monitor the management and outcomes of the services in order to satisfy themselves that the agency is effective and is achieving good outcomes for children and/or service users;
 - c. satisfy themselves that the agency is complying with the conditions of registration.

This report updates the report previously presented in March 2015, and updates members on the Committee on activity over the last six months and is for information and committee scrutiny in line with the above expectations.

1. Recommendation

- 1.1 **The members of the Corporate Parenting Committee are asked to consider this report in line with the above regulations (25.6 of the National Minimum Standards for Adoption 2011).**

2. Introduction and Background

- 2.1 The work of the Fostering, Adoption and Placement teams is central to the provision offered to Thurrock's Looked After Children and operates to deliver one of the key objectives of the Children and Young Peoples Plan, "Objective CYPP (PWN) 3.3. Deliver outstanding fostering, private fostering & adoption; develop & maintain excellent services for children in care".
- 2.2 The work of the teams helps to meet a fundamental requirement for fulfilling our Corporate Parenting responsibilities, namely wherever possible to seek a permanent substitute family home for Looked After Children for whom there is no potential for reunification with their birth family.
- 2.3 In the main, children who are recommended for adoption will have been removed from their birth parents as a result of likely or actual significant harm. They will have been made the subject of Care Orders. During the legal process, a Care Plan, ratified by the Court, will have determined that it is in the child's best interests to be placed for adoption. As part of the court process the court also reviews the Adoption Support Plan agreed by the Local Authority to ensure that it will meet the child's needs. Children placed for adoption are increasingly likely to have more complex needs, or be part of a sibling group, resulting in increased support packages. In England the average age of a child at the point of adoption in 2013-2014 was 3 years and 5 months; 80% of adopted children were below the age of 5 and it took on average 594 days from entering care to being placed (down from 656 days in 2012/13). From the most recent Adoption leadership quarterly returns in 2015 improving to 533 days.
- 2.4 Occasionally, babies are 'relinquished' by their parents at birth for adoption, when they (with counselling and help) come to the conclusion that they are unable to offer a stable home to that child. Within the last year we have progressed one such relinquished child in Thurrock.
- 2.5 Thurrock was previously part of an Adoption Consortium with Southend and Havering, formed in 1999, which extended the capacity of all three agencies to provide adoptive parents to children who need adoption. As previously reported in March 2014, Havering announced a formal withdrawal from the Consortium.
- 2.6 We subsequently made an agreement with Southend to continue with our partnership arrangement for the immediate future, but have both acknowledged that as a formal Consortium we cannot sustain this arrangement and have therefore agreed to formally end the Consortium.
- 2.7 In light of the above, and also the Government Regionalisation agenda which sets out the ambition of seeking local authorities to regionalise to perform the significant functions of the adoption agency working in groupings that involve a minimum of 200 children, Thurrock Council is initially going into partnership with Coram Capital specifically for Coram to undertake our recruitment and assessment of adopters' function.

- 2.8 The proposal to work with Coram over the next three years will realise the benefit of grant money made available to Voluntary Adoption Agencies to form such partnerships and this arrangement offers both flexibility in its contractual design to respond to emerging needs and review as well as the benefit of developing services which we recognise Thurrock children will benefit from, such as Coram's experience in developing fostering to adopt placements.
- 2.9 Current proposals, as stated within the Government Regionalisation agenda, will mean the implication for Thurrock is that we will need to decide over the next year how we go into a fuller regional partnership to fulfil the responsibilities under this agenda for the remaining significant functions of the agency which are family finding, matching, and post adoption support (not step parent adoption or inter country adoption). If the current Education and Adoption Bill is passed (later this year) the Government will in future have the power to direct those local authorities not deemed to be making sufficient progress in forming regional adoption agencies.
- 2.10 The Adoption and Children Act 2002 (the Act) is the principal piece of Legislation governing adoption in England and Wales. It has been in force since 30th December 2005, and has been amended by other legislation since 2002, most recently being the Children and Families Act 2014.
- 2.11 In May 2015 the Government also released funding for the Adoption Support Fund (2015/16 budget - £19.3 million) available to local authorities. This fund will support the permanence of Adopted children with emerging therapeutic needs and subject to review of impact. Thurrock has 22 families for which we are in the process of seeking support from this fund (subject to eligibility) for therapy.
- 2.12 Line management of Adoption falls within the remit of the Service Manager – Placements and Support
- 2.13 Since the last report to Committee in March 2015 monthly adoption and permanency tracking meetings have also been put in place to ensure that all children's permanence plans are routinely overseen by the Head of Service (Agency Decision Maker) on a monthly basis. This meeting also constitutes membership from the Independent Reviewing team and Legal services.

STAFFING

- 2.14 The staffing complement of the Adoption Team consists of one Team Manager (Agency), and four full time equivalent Social Worker/Senior Practitioner posts. The Team is almost up to full strength, with a vacancy of effectively one day.
- 2.15 The existing staffing is at full establishment; following on from a successful secondment arrangement and agreement to extend this Family Finding post, which has helped mitigate issues with staff illness. Due to the Governmental focus on Adoption and regionalisation this post has been extended as we prepare for the proposed partnership with Coram Capital and will be reviewed

regularly to ascertain if it is viable to retain this extra capacity as we enter into transition and post transition arrangements.

- 2.16 Following the resignation of the Adoption Team Manager in July 2014 the stability of the team was affected, but this also provided an opportunity to review whether it would be helpful to look at alternative management arrangements such as developing this within our Coram partnership. However in order to make sure that the work of the team continued, we continue to have a very capable Agency Team Manager who also acts as our agency advisor. This not only maintains and promotes our commitment to ongoing development, but benefits us by allowing for potential flexibility in developing further structures within adoption and our Coram partnership.
- 2.17 There is one full-time adoption administrator who provides both day to day administrative support to the team, as well as being the administrator for the Adoption Panel. Adoption work is very heavily regulated and adherence to timescales is critical. Additionally one part time administrator has been agreed over a 3 month period to embed the administration of special guardianship allowance budget.

EXTERNAL SCRUTINY, CHALLENGE AND PERFORMANCE

- 2.18 As reported previously, Thurrock Adoption Service was inspected by Ofsted in February 2012, and received an overall judgement of Good. Nevertheless a number of recommendations were made to improve the service, and an Action Plan was developed to address these.
- 2.19 In late 2013 Ofsted launched a new framework for inspection of Children's Services under which there will no longer be separate inspections of the Adoption Service. Instead the new arrangement is that there will be a specific sub-judgement within the overall report on the effectiveness of the local adoption service. To date we have not received such an inspection.
- 2.20 The current government has maintained its intention to heighten the profile of adoption as a means to provide permanent care since the publication of "An Action Plan for Adoption: Tackling Delay" in March 2012, which introduced the concept of "Adoption Scorecards". These set out specific thresholds against two indicators with clear minimum expectations for timeliness of actions in the adoption system.
- 2.21 The stated intention is to raise these thresholds incrementally over a four year cycle. Local authorities are expected to return key performance data to the Department of Education on a quarterly basis which will then be consolidated into comparative national data on an annual basis, known as the "Inspection Scorecard". Local authorities who fail to meet the thresholds will be expected to explain their performance to central government.
- 2.22 The current targets are as follows:

- **A1:** average time between a child entering care and moving in with its adoptive family, for children who have been adopted. The target for the three year period April 2012 to March 2015 was 16 months or 487 days, with a **target of 426 days** (14 months) by the end of March 2016.
 - **A2:** average time between a local authority receiving court authority to place a child and the local authority deciding on a match to an adoptive family. The target for the three year period April 2012 to March 2015 was 4 months or **121 days** and remains the same target expected as at the end of March 2016.
- 2.23 The last report to Committee in March 2015, covering the three year period showed improved performance against the previous three year cycle, although there remained a gap between performance and the target. Our **A1** performance against the 2011-2014 target of 547 days **was 710 days** (or approximately 23 months); last year's performance (June 14 - June15) has reduced to **557 days (18 months)**.
- 2.24 Within the same report in March 2015 against the **A2** target of 152 days it was then reported as **244 days** (or approximately 8 months) which, within the current performance, is **now averaging 208 days (6.8 months)**.
- 2.25 Thurrock submits its quarterly performance to the Adoption Leadership Board (ALB) and the most recent analysis of trends in all local adoption agencies indicated a 50% drop in Agency Decision Makers (ADM) decisions and a 52% decrease in Placement Orders being granted.
- 2.26 There have been 11 Adoptions from the 2015 cohort within the last 6 months and there are 8 children who are currently subject to placement orders already placed and awaiting adoption orders.
- 2.27 As of 4.8.15 we have only 2 children who have placement orders for whom we are actively family finding, and who are not linked, matched or placed for adoption.
- 2.28 In 2013-2014 the average length of care proceedings for Thurrock Council was 44 weeks and in 2014-2015 (to date) the average length of care proceedings has been 21 weeks (below the 26 weeks national requirement). All of this adds to an improving picture in terms of timeliness.
- 2.29 For the recruitment of prospective adopters we are now expected to meet the 2 Stage Process introduced nationally in 2013, with both stages completed within six months of receiving a formal request to begin Stage 1. This remains a challenge to meet consistently. However, the national picture is that there are more adoptive households approved than there are available children and this applies equally in Thurrock, where there are eleven households awaiting identification and matching of appropriate children. We have a further seven households in stage 2 and a further two in stage 2 on hold. The challenge for all authorities is finding appropriate adopters for slightly older and more

difficult to place children. As we enter our Coram partnership the implication will be for those in stage 2 how we successfully manage a transfer of arrangements with the least disruption and continue to target adopters for those children deemed harder to place.

BUDGETS

- 2.30 The current overall budget was reduced to just over £1.3 million for 2015-16. Previously budgets had been reduced with the intention that the reduction would be achieved through lower expenditure on Special Guardianship Allowances. Unfortunately it has not been possible to contain the expansion of these Allowances, as Courts have frequently chosen this form of Order as a means to conclude Care Proceedings, with an expectation that the authority will provide an allowance. This will undoubtedly create overspend in this area this year. However we also need to balance the demands on this budget against the alternative costs that would accrue for the authority if these children remain looked after.
- 2.31 Measures have been identified to strengthen the working relationships between the Adoption Team and Customer Finance and monitoring processes are being strengthened to ensure the right payments are always made at the right time.
- 2.32 Additional financial pressures had arisen from central government decision to equalise the Inter-Agency fee charged between Local Authorities and/or Voluntary Adoption Agencies to £27,000. This fee covers the cost of procuring an adoptive placement from another authority. Potentially this is also a source of income as well as expenditure, but Thurrock's relatively small geographic area, and the size of the team in terms of assessing capability, means we are likely to remain net purchasers rather than sellers in the period ahead. On the 8th July 2015 the Department of Education confirmed that funding will be made available for local authorities (£30 million) to recover the cost of any inter agency fee for children whom authorities have found more difficult to place (defined as over the age of 5, disabled, sibling groups, Black and Ethnic minority children and those waiting for more than 18 months).
- 2.33 The remainder of the budget remains largely taken up by salary costs, with some additional expenditure required for the provision of the Adoption Panel, Medical Reports, DBS checks, post-adoption support groups, Ofsted fees.

PANEL

- 2.34 The Panel Chair is now embedded and continues to provide "critical friend" challenge about our current practices, which has been extremely helpful, and he is keen that we improve the efficiency of the administration of the Panel as well as developing robust medical advice and reports. The current Agency advisor is the Adoption team manager; the model previously in place was to employ an external individual to add a greater level of scrutiny and QA to our performance. Whilst an independent voice is generally considered a valuable

contribution the current arrangement from within our own resources allows us the flexibility we require whilst embarking on a transition period as we form our working partnership with Coram.

3. Issues, Options and Analysis of Options

- 3.1 We now need to plan and respond to the Regionalisation agenda in terms of how we can form an effective region to perform the remaining functions of the adoption agency and as yet no decision has been taken regarding this and discussions are on-going. The options in future will be in likelihood to either further develop our partnership with Coram or form a partnership with neighbouring authorities.

4. Reasons for Recommendation

- 4.1 To ensure that members of the Committee have made due note of the work of the service in line with the collective corporate parenting responsibilities to provide oversight of the service.

5. Consultation (including Overview and Scrutiny, if applicable)

Not applicable.

6. Impact on corporate policies, priorities, performance and community impact

- 6.1 The content of this report is compatible with Health and Well Being Strategy Priority 12: *Provide outstanding services for children in care and leaving care*

7. Implications

7.1 Financial

Implications verified by: **Sean Clark**
Head of Corporate Finance

Within the Coram partnership there is the opportunity to improve outcomes for children and adopters whilst achieving better economies of scale. By entering into a grant agreement there is the flexibility to alter the annual costs should demand reduce or change significantly thus reducing financial risks to the Council. As well as improved outcomes for the child reducing the waiting time for adoption has the potential to significantly reduce the costs of interim placement arrangements.

7.2 Legal

Implications verified by: **Lindsey Marks**
Principal Solicitor Children's Safeguarding

There are no immediate legal implications arising from this report, although it should be noted that a consequence of certain Court of Appeal and High Court judgments over the last year has been to make Courts apply greater pressure to ensure all options within birth families have been exhausted before they will grant a Placement Order in Care Proceedings. It remains to be seen whether this will have long term impact on the numbers of children becoming available for adoption.

Any decision to pursue the joint venture described above will need to take into account the need to ensure that all the current regulatory requirements will continue to be met.

7.3 Diversity and Equality

Implications verified by: **Natalie Warren**
**Community Development and Equalities
Manager**

The significant Diversity and Equality implications arising from the report relate to the on-going difficulty of finding adoptive placements for "hard to place" children, such as children with developmental delay, sibling groups and some Black and Ethnic Minority Children. We also recognise that older children may also benefit from adoptive placements, but overwhelmingly prospective adopters wish to adopt younger children. We therefore need always to balance the rights of children to have us pursue any possible options, with the need to avoid raising false expectations by persisting with plans that have no realistic prospect of success. These are challenges for all local authorities, and are not particular to Thurrock.

However we do recognise that Thurrock has a changing ethnic profile, and we need to be alert to the need to ensure that our future recruitment of adopters takes this into account.

7.4 Other implications (where significant) – i.e. Staff, Health, Sustainability, Crime and Disorder)

Not applicable.

8. Background papers used in preparing the report (including their location on the Council's website or identification whether any are exempt or protected by copyright):

Members may wish to refer to the previous report to the Committee presented in March 2015.

9. Appendices to the report

Appendix 1 - Adoption Leadership Board headline measures & Business intelligence (Qtr. 3 14/15 update) June 2015

Appendix 2 - Inter-agency Fee Funding letter Dept. of Education dated 5.8.15

Appendix 3 - Link for information - www.familylaw.co.uk/adoption-myth-buster-re-b-and-re-b-s

Report Author

Simon Shardlow

Service Manager, Placement and Support

Care and Targeted Outcomes



Department
for Education

Adoption Leadership Board headline measures and business intelligence

Quarter 3 2014 to 2015 update

June 2015

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Summary

Adoption Leadership Board (ALB) Headline Measures

2,960 children waiting at 31 December 2014

This is a 37% decrease from 31 March 2014 when there were 4,680 children waiting with a placement order not yet placed with an adoptive family.

Child timeliness has improved

In 2013-14, the average number of days between entering care and placement was 594 days, an improvement from 656 days in 2012-13. Latest quarterly data suggests there has been a further improvement to 533 days. At 216 days, the average number of days between placement order and match in 2013-14 was a slight improvement on 2012-13. However, the latest quarterly data suggests that this has increased to 241 during quarter 3 2014-15.

Adopter timeliness is declining

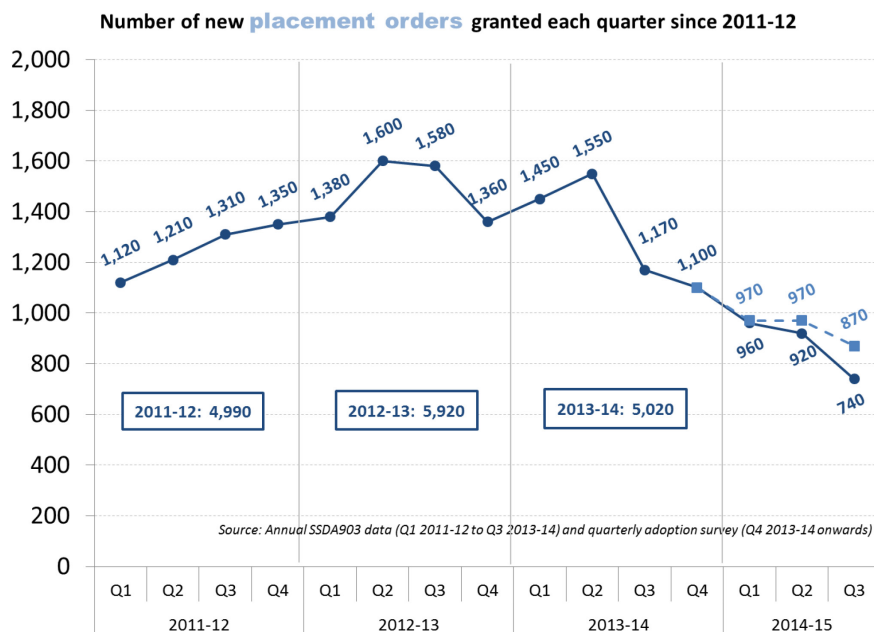
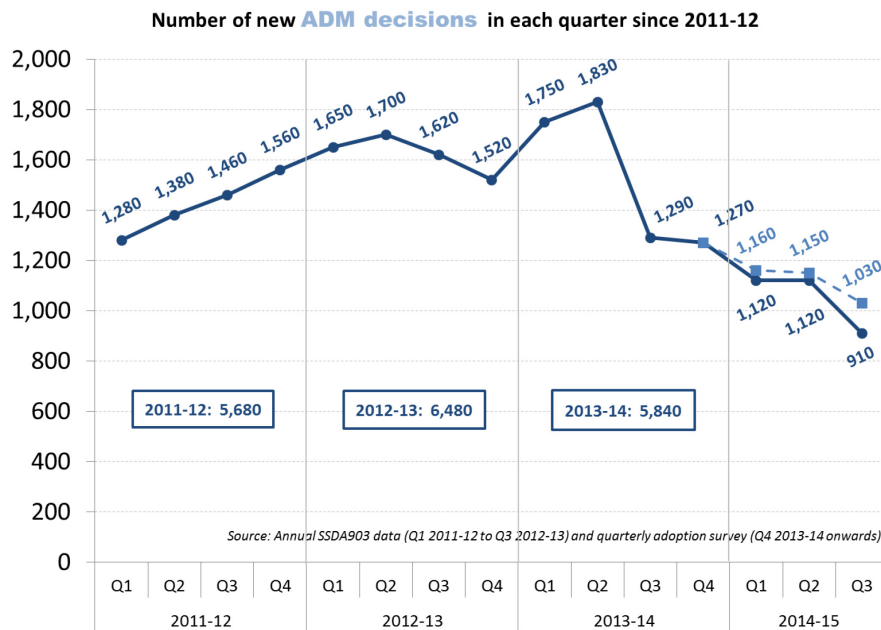
The latest quarterly data suggests timeliness is beginning to decline. In quarter 2 2013-14, 50% of approvals made by local authorities were made within 6 months of registration, while in quarter 3 2014-15 this has more than halved to 23% of registrations. The timeliness of matches has also declined. In quarter 4 2013-14, 80% of matches were made within 6 months of approval, compared to 68% in quarter 3 2014-15.

Other Key Headlines

New ADM decisions and placement orders granted have fallen

Quarterly data suggests that the number of new decisions has continued to fall from 1,830 in quarter 2 2013-14 to 910 in quarter 3 2014-15, a decrease of 50%. The number of new placement orders have also continued to fall from 1,550 in quarter 2 2013-14 to 740 in quarter 3 2014-15, a decrease of 52%.

The charts below show the number of ADM decisions and placement orders over time. The estimated figures on the charts are based on the uplift seen in previous quarters when local authorities revise their figures the following quarter.



3,740 children adopted in quarters 1 to 3 2014-15

2013-14 saw the highest number of adoptions from care since the current data collection began in 1992, with 5,050 children adopted from care. Quarterly data suggests that the number of children adopted fell slightly between quarters 2 and 3 (from 1,270 to 1,200).

Adopter approvals and registrations have decreased

Registrations to become an adopter have decreased by 24% from 1,340 in quarter 2 2014-15 to 1,020 in quarter 3 2014-15. The number of adopter families approved for adoption has decreased by 3% from 1,240 in quarter 2 2014-15 to 1,200 in quarter 3 2014-15. Our most recent estimate for the “adopter gap” suggests that the gap has closed, and we now have more adopters than children waiting. However, there are still 2,600 children with a placement order not yet matched and the relevance of this measure assumes that matching is working effectively.

New 2 stage process

Approvals made via the new process were 5 weeks quicker than those approved via the old process in the first three quarters of 2014-15.

Data Sources

New data This document has been updated with new data from the ALB quarterly survey providing information on children and adopters in the third quarter of 2014-15 (October to December 2014).

SSDA903 data Local authorities provide data on their looked after children using the SSDA903 collection. Data are collected from all local authorities. The information is collected at child level and includes information about the child's characteristics and their dates for each stage of the care process, including adoption. The data goes through thorough quality assurance and local authorities are able to update their historic data annually. We therefore view this as the most robust source of information on adoption. It is used to produce the Looked After Children statistical first release (SFR) and the Adoption Scorecards. The most recent data covers the year ending 31 March 2014. The SFR can be found [here](#).

ALB quarterly survey From quarter 4 2013-14, responsibility for quarterly surveys transferred (from the DfE for local authorities and the CVAA for voluntary adoption agencies) to the ALB. The ALB collection form includes new variables, the biggest change being that adopter data is requested at adopter level (previous collections asked for this aggregated to agency level). This was also the first time voluntary adoption agencies were asked for the same adopter information as local authorities.

In quarter 1 2014-15, all agencies provided a return; in quarter 2 2014-15, six local authorities and one voluntary adoption agency did not; in quarter 3 2014-15, six local authorities and two voluntary adoption agencies did not. In quarter 1 2014-15, the response rate for the child level section of the return was 100% and so national and regional figures on adoptions are based on full returns. Estimates have not been made for the two missing local authorities in quarters 2 and 3 2014-15. The response rate for the adopter level section of the return was 95%, 97% and 96% respectively in quarters 1, 2 and 3. Therefore national and regional figures on adopters include estimates made for non-responses. Estimates are made by scaling to the regional level based on the number of adoptions in each LA during 2013-14 (from the SSDA903 data).

Ofsted data Ofsted publish annual data on the recruitment of adopters and the children placed with them. Data is collected on both local authority recruitment and voluntary adoption agency recruitment. We include information on adopter timeliness taken from this collection in this document. Data relating to 2013-14 was published in November.



Department
for Education

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To: Directors of Children's Services
Lead Members responsible for adoption services
CEOs of Voluntary Adoption Agencies
Adoption Agency Decision Makers
Adoption Agency Managers

5 August 2015

ADOPTION: INTER-AGENCY FEE FUNDING

The Minister for Children and Families, Edward Timpson, wrote to you on 8th July to inform you that a further £30m has been made available for the adoption reform programme. The letter set out that this money is for central payment of the inter-agency fee, for targeted groups of children. He promised that the Department would write again to confirm the arrangements for accessing this funding. I am writing to you now to set out the purpose of the funding, eligibility, and how to claim.

Central payment of the inter-agency fee will help to improve the chances and timeliness of adoption for children. The Department will reimburse LAs with the cost of the fee to ensure that there are no financial barriers to finding the right adoptive parents.

The scheme is designed to enable placements that would otherwise not be made, and to speed up placements by removing sequential decision making. This new money means that local authorities will be freed up to consider all possible matches for harder to place children immediately, across the whole country.

Which children will be eligible for central funding?

Any inter-agency placements made for 'harder to place' children (defined below) during the period from 8th July 2015 until 31 July 2016, will qualify for reimbursement.

This scheme is targeted specifically at 'harder to place' children, who we know need access to the biggest possible pool of adopters. These are the children

who will benefit most from national searching. Therefore, the new funding will cover placements of children in the following groups:

- **Children who have been waiting for 18 months** or more since entry to care by the time of placement;
- **Children who are aged five or over** at the time of placement;
- **Children who are in a sibling group** of two or more and placed as siblings at the time of placement;
- **Children who are from a Black and Minority Ethnic background** (using the same definition as per the Adoption Leadership Board data collection, SSDA903 and Children in Need census guidance¹); and
- **Children who are disabled** (using the same definition as for the Adoption Leadership Board data collection, SSDA903 and Children in Need census guidance¹).

Monitoring and evaluation

The Department will be monitoring patterns in receiving and placing LA agencies and VAAs to make sure that the inter-agency fee funding claimed is valid. We are also developing plans to evaluate the effectiveness of the scheme. Our aim will be to understand the most effective approaches to family finding for harder to place children, and to understand the extent to which removing the financial barrier that the inter-agency fee can create has changed behaviours. We will share details with you when these plans have been finalised. We would expect any fieldwork required to commence in the autumn.

How agencies might use the new funding

The central payment of the inter-agency fee provides agencies with an exciting opportunity to think widely about the kind of adopters who may be available anywhere in the country, approved by any agency, for harder to place children, without financial considerations playing a part. It also offers an opportunity to use the funding to offset some of the cost of a bespoke package of support. We would particularly like to see agencies using the inter-agency fee funding in conjunction with the Adoption Support Fund to facilitate matches and offer support packages at the point of match, which can become active once the Adoption Order is made. We know that a clear offer of support and defined package can give some adopters the confidence to look after a child with additional needs, so we hope agencies will use the two schemes to complement each other in this way.

There are many examples of innovative practice among VAAs in helping to find and support a placement, and this scheme is an opportunity for

¹ Further guidance is available at: <https://www.gov.uk/children-in-need-census>

authorities who have perhaps not traditionally used VAAs to do so more, at no cost. For example:

- Caritas Care recently matched adopters with two children with complex needs, providing ongoing therapeutic support and sessions with their trauma specialist.
- PACT recently supported the placement of a sibling group with complex needs by providing adopters with training in Theraplay techniques, a 12 week parenting course, and partnership with the Great Ormond Street Hospital.
- Adoption Matters provides potential adopters with extensive support including Theraplay techniques and life story work.
- The “It’s All About Me” (IAAM) service works with VAAs and LAs to find families for harder to place children and provides intensive assessments and expert support to make this work.

A contact list for all VAAs is attached at Annex A.

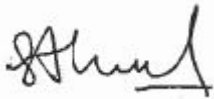
How to take part in the scheme and claim the funding

Local authorities will be able to claim money spent on inter-agency fees in arrears. This letter contains the following annexes to enable agencies to reclaim inter-agency fees:

- **Grant Funding Letter** - In order to confirm that agencies would like to take part in the grant funding scheme, **all agencies should sign and return page 3 of the accompanying grant letter to the Department at:** Inter-agency Fee Grant Claims, Department for Education, Level 1, Sanctuary Buildings, Great Smith Street, London SW1P 3BT.
- The information required to claim funding should be submitted on a quarterly basis, at the same time as the Adoption Leadership Board statistics. LAs should complete the **Grant Claim form template** on p4 of the accompanying grant funding letter and also complete the **separate evidence template** and send these to: Inter-Agency Fee Grant Claims in Adoption Policy, Department for Education, Level 1, Sanctuary Buildings, Great Smith Street, London SW1P 3BT.
- **Frequently Asked Questions** - We have also attached a Frequently Asked Questions Briefing. Any further questions should also be sent to: Inter-Agency.FEE@education.gsi.gov.uk

As a result of the reform programme and the hard work of agencies across the country, the average time it takes to place a child with a new family has been falling. This is important progress. However, adopted children still take an average of 18 months to find a loving home, so there is clearly more improvement to be made.

There are almost 3,000 children who are currently waiting for an adoptive family to be found for them. Every one of these children waiting to be adopted deserves to have the same opportunity to be move into a loving home as quickly as possible. As research has shown us, unnecessary delay is detrimental to the child's wellbeing and can lead to a greater chance of later placement breakdown. Therefore, I hope that all agencies use the opportunity presented by this funding to ensure that family finding is not constrained by local boundaries, and all of the children waiting are found families as quickly as possible.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Emily Whitehead', with a horizontal line under the last name.

EMILY WHITEHEAD
Deputy Director, Adoption and Family Law
Department for Education

Contact details for VAAs

- **Action for Children** (Nationwide) - 01923 361 500
<https://www.actionforchildren.org.uk/what-we-do/adoption/>
- **Adopters for Adoption** (Nationwide) - 0800 5877 791
<http://www.adoptersforadoption.com/>
- **Adoption Focus** (West Midlands) - 0845 519 0539
<http://www.adoption-focus.org.uk/>
- **Adoption Matters** (North West) - 01244 390 938
<http://www.adoptionmattersnw.org/>
- **Adoption Plus** (based in Buckinghamshire) - 01908 218 251
<http://www.adoptionplus.co.uk/>
- **After Adoption** (Nationwide) - 0161 830 1974
<http://www.afteradoption.org.uk/>
- **ARC Adoption** (North East) - 0191 516 6466
<http://www.arcadoptionne.org.uk/services-for-las/>
- **Barnardo's** (Nationwide) - 07920 286 660
<http://www.barnardos.org.uk/fosteringandadoption.htm>
- **Caritas Care** (North West) - 01772 732313
<http://www.caritascare-iadopt.org.uk/>
- **CCS Adoption** (South West) - 0845 122 0077
<http://www.ccsadoption.org/>
- **Coram** (Cambridgeshire, London and Kent) - 020 7520 0300
<http://www.coram.org.uk/>
- **DFW Adoption** (North East) - 0191 386 3719
<http://www.dfw.org.uk/>
- **Faith in Families** (East Midlands and South Yorkshire) - 0115 955 8811
<http://www.faithinfamilies.org/>

- **Families for Children** (South West) - 01364 645 480
<http://familiesforchildren.org.uk/>
- **Family Care** (East Midlands) - 0115 960 3010
<http://www.familycare-nottingham.org.uk/>
- **Family Futures** (London) - 020 7354 4161
<http://www.familyfutures.co.uk/>
- **It's All About Me** (Nationwide) - 01480 409309
<http://iaamadoption.org/>
- **Inter-country Adoption Centre** (London) - 020 8449 2562
<http://www.icacentre.org.uk/>
- **New Leaf Adoption** (Yorkshire and Humberside) - 0800 096 0410
<http://www.newleafadoption.co.uk/>
- **Nugent Care** (North West) - 0845 270 3531
<http://www.nugentcare.org/adoption>
- **PACT – Parents & Children Together** (South East and London) - 0118 938 7600 - <http://pactcharity.org/>
- **SSAFA** (London) - 020 7463 9326
<http://www.ssafa.org.uk/help-you/currently-serving/adoption-military-families>
- **St Francis' Children's Society** (based in Buckinghamshire) - 01908 572 700 - <http://www.sfcs.org.uk/>
- **TACT** (Nationwide) - 0208 695 8111
<http://tactcare.org.uk/>
- **Yorkshire Adoption Agency** (Yorkshire, Humberside and East Midlands) - 01302 638337 - <http://www.yorkshireadoptionagency.org.uk/>

10 September 2015	ITEM: 7
Corporate Parenting Committee	
Independent Review Officer Annual Report 2014-15	
Wards and communities affected: All	Key Decision: None
Report of: Neale Laurie – Service Manager Safeguarding and Child Protection	
Accountable Head of Service: Andrew Carter – Head of Children’s Social Care	
Accountable Director: Carmel Littleton – Director of Children’s Services	
This report is Public	

Executive Summary

This report is the annual summary of activity undertaken by the Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs) 2014-15 who provide Independent Scrutiny of the Department’s care plans for all the Children Looked After by Thurrock Council. An Annual Report of the Independent Reviewing Service for Children Looked After is required in the guidance arising from the Adoption and Children Act 2002 section 118 which amended Section 26 of the Children Act 1989. This report also provides information on the role of the Independent Review Officers and update on the Statutory Review Services activity for Children Looked After.

1. Recommendation(s)

- 1.1 The role of the Independent Reviewing Officers is a statutory responsibility and therefore it is recommended that the Corporate Parenting Committee continues to monitor the activity of the IROs and request any further information it requires in its scrutiny role.**
- 1.2 Members are asked to consider and adopt “Areas for development” contained within Section 4 of this report for continued improvement of this service.**

2. Introduction and Background

- 2.1 The Independent Review Officers’ (IRO) service is set within the framework of the updated IRO Handbook, linked to revised Care Planning Regulations and Guidance which were introduced in April 2011. The responsibility of the IRO has changed from the management of the Review process to a wider**

overview of the case including regular monitoring and follow-up between Reviews. The IRO has a key role in relation to the improvement of Care Planning for Children Looked After (CLA) and for challenging drift and delay.

- 2.2 Every Child Looked After should have a named IRO to provide continuity in the oversight of the case and to enable the IRO to develop a consistent relationship with the child. The child's Care Plan must be completed by the Social Worker within 10 working days of the child becoming Looked After and the IRO must be named in it. Thurrock has met this requirement during this reporting period, with most young people being allocated an IRO within 24 hours of being notified that they have come into care.
- 2.3 The IRO has two clear functions: to chair the child's review and to monitor the child's case on an ongoing basis. In order to provide ongoing monitoring, the draft Independent Reviewing Officers, Statutory Guidance recommended that IROs should have caseloads of approximately 50 children. Following representations from local authorities regarding resources, the final version of the statutory guidance has changed this to 50-70 cases. During this period, this has continued to be manageable; however this has been achieved by the employment of an additional reviewing officer, above the establishment of 4 reviewing officers.
- 2.4 IROs must spend time with the child before each review, to prepare them for the meeting and to be satisfied that that the child has been properly consulted about any proposals for their future. IROs regularly meet and remain in contact with young people, either face to face, by phone, text or sometimes email. IROs are expected to either have the skills or access to specialist input so that they can establish the views of children with communication difficulties or complex needs. All of the IROs are highly experienced social workers, who work hard to achieve the above expectations.
- 2.5 The participation of children and young people in their reviews is good (see table at 3.12) but is an area that we are determine to continually innovate and improve. Our ambitious target is to secure 100% participation of those of an age to participate.
- 2.6 Advocacy services are also used to ensure their voices are included.
- 2.7 IROs have the authority to adjourn meetings if they are not satisfied that the review has all the information necessary to make a rounded judgement about the viability of the child's Care Plan and whether any proposals are in the child's best interests. If the review is adjourned, it must be completed within 20 working days. On occasions it is necessary to hold reviews as a series of meetings, this ensures that all the parties and information is available and considered.
- 2.8 Referral by an IRO of a case to CAFCASS (Children and Families Court Advisory Service) should no longer be seen as a last resort but can be considered at any time. Consultations have taken place, however it has not

been necessary to refer a Thurrock case to CAFCASS during this reporting period. The interface between the IROs and Guardians continues to strengthen with joint meetings scheduled to assist with communication and relationships.

- 2.9 The team also leads on Children's Participation, monitoring and tracking all Children Looked After (CLA).
- 2.10 There is an expectation that the IRO service scrutinise the care planning and are actively taken forward with more robust tracking and challenge.
- 2.11 IROs continue to monitor cases highlighted as at risk of drift and continue to use the escalation protocol, managing the greater number of escalations at the Manager level, which leads to a quicker resolution of the issue.
- 2.12 IROs are continuing to work in partnership with the Children in Care Council. The Team, in conjunction with the Children in Care Council, has developed an alert card, to be used at times when a young person is worried about their safety and is unable to raise this with their carer.

3. Issues, Options and Analysis of Options

- 3.1 The IRO team is made up of 1 senior and 3 IRO Full Time posts (with an additional temporary full time IRO).
- 3.2 The core team of IRO's has remained stable during this financial year however as mentioned additional resource has continued to be provided to meet increased demand.
- 3.3 The team is supported by 78 hours administration support via Serco. Capacity issues have been a challenge due to long-term sickness of an administrator.
- 3.4 At the end of 2014/15 there were 283 children (71.6 per 10,000 children) in care. This represents 0.7% of all children and young people in Thurrock and is a decrease of 2 children from 2013/14. From the total number of children in care at year-end, 41 were recorded as Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children (UASC), there were 32 recorded as UASC, 2013/14.
- 3.5 Of the total 671 reviews, 640 were completed on time this represents a performance of 95.3% completed on time which is significantly above the English and Statistical Neighbour data at 90.5% and 90.6% respectively.

3.6 Ethnic Origin of Children Looked After at 31st March 2014

White British	175
Traveller of Irish Heritage	3
Gypsy/Roma	10
Mixed white/Black Caribbean	4
Mixed white/ Asian	2

Mixed white/ African	3
Any other white background	9
Any other mixed background	11
Pakistani	1
Any other Asian background	20
Caribbean	1
Any other black background	5
Any other ethnic group	15

TOTAL : **283**

- 3.7 The IRO's within the care plan explore issues of diversity and ensure they are addressed appropriately where necessary.
- 3.8 Culturally sensitive and appropriate placements are identified for children and young people. Interpreters, signers and communicators are routinely used to identify and meet young people's linguistic and communication needs both within the care planning and review process.
- 3.9 The Department provides a dedicated team for young people with a disability and reviews are conducted in a manner that is sensitive to their communication methods, to enable participation where possible, for example, signing or picture/computer input.
- 3.10 Recognition of young people's ethnicity is also promoted, for example through the use of the Travellers Welfare Service to ensure that services are reviewed within a culturally appropriate framework.
- 3.11 As the population of children who are looked after has fluctuated over the period caseloads have varied between 70 and 85. This is set against a recommended 50-70 within the IRO Handbook. Additional capacity has been maintained within the IRO service to manage this and the service is currently over establishment by one full-time IRO.
- 3.12 IROs average between 35 - 50 Reviews in any given month, a mix of first Reviews and subsequent Reviews. All Reviews are booked by the administration of Plans and Reviews to ensure that an IRO is available within timescale and also acts as the allocation process for new work.
- 3.13 IROs continue to represent the service on a number of strategies.
- 3.14 Disruptions of long term and placement breakdown and other meetings related to children in care are carried out by IROs.
- 3.15 Caseload for IRO - The size of caseload alone does not indicate the workload for each IRO; this is also based on the number of Out of Borough placements(68% as of 31st March 2015), large family groups, disability, UASC, Pathway Plan reviews for 18 year olds, Section 85 (Young people in

Hospital for three months plus) and since December 2012, Young People in remand.

- 3.16 There has been a steady increase in young people attending their reviews and positively participating in them. IROs have been told to actively seek the views of children who do not wish to attend their reviews and to see what would assist in getting them there. There have been a number of cases where the IRO has supported the young person in chairing their own review or setting their own agendas.

Participation	Number of Reviews
Child aged under 4 at the time of the review	145
Child physically attends and speaks for him or herself	280
Child physically attends and an advocate speaks on his or her behalf	10
Child physically attends but does not speak for him or herself, does not convey his or her view symbolically (non-verbally) and does not ask an advocate to speak for him or her	9
Child does not attend physically but briefs an advocate to speak for him or her	41
Child does not attend but conveys his or her feelings to the review by a facilitative medium	121
Child does not attend nor are his or her views conveyed to the review	65
Grand Total	671

- 3.17 Parents' active participation continues to improve with an average of 77% of parents being involved in reviews either through attendance, completing a consultation booklet or meeting the IRO separate to the review meeting.
- 3.18 Distribution of completed review 'Outcomes' and reports remains a significant challenge and does not always meet the required timescale, with around only 41% being completed within 20 working days of the review. Within current resources this remains a significant pressure. Within the wider changes to the Council's administrative support structures (ending of the SERCO contract) the service is scoping processes to potentially include administrators supporting the IROs with this task to improve performance.
- 3.19 IROs complete 98.5% of their first reviews in a series of meetings to ensure we meet timescale.
- 3.20 IROs continue to be mindful of the need to ensure that statutory review 'Outcomes' (Decision / Recommendation Sheets) and 'Reports' are accessible to children and parents. Attention is therefore paid to avoiding unnecessary jargon and producing documents using plain English.

3.21 IROs continue to review the written care plans and comment on the quality in the review. The quality of care planning varies and IROs continue to work with the Social Work teams around expectations.

3.22 Dispute resolution and escalation

The department has a dispute resolution protocol.

3.23 The cases of concern process is in place to both record escalations to Senior Managers as well as looking at those cases resolved at a lower level between IRO/Practice Managers/ Managers.

3.24 In total 61 cases have been raised by IROs with the biggest majority being dealt with at SW/Team Manager level. Eight at Service Manager level and two at Head of Service level. The Head of Service has taken a personal over view of all missing young people including those who are looked after.

Areas escalated have included:

- Drift and delay in the progression of individual care plans
- Case recording
- Education and health issues
- Management oversight
- Transition planning
- Changes to care plans without the notifications to IRO
- Quality of mental health services

3.25 The challenge of Child Sexual Exploitation is particularly relevant to the role of the IRO, especially for those young people placed out of borough. IROs have been working hard with the operational staff to recognise those at risk and to ensure that risk assessments are completed and plans put in place to minimise the risk. This is an increasingly challenging aspect of the work.

3.26 The IRO service is represented at Children Looked After Surgeries, which are chaired by the Head Of Service. This provides further scrutiny of the care plans and challenges any drift.

3.27 The IRO role is not to identify the resources needed to meet a young person's needs but to ensure that those resources utilised match the needs of the young person and are of a high quality.

3.28 IROs challenge when the placement fails to address the young person's needs. An alert is raised and consultation is undertaken with the fostering manager to resolve the issues.

3.29 The processes involving the Fostering teams are working well and have improved as has the communication between IROs and Fostering through the sharing of the information.

- 3.30 The issue relating to a move from regulated placements (Ofsted registered and inspected residential or fostering agencies) to unregulated placements (having no formal registration requirements) has been carefully considered and it is clear the IRO should be made aware immediately there is any suggestion that the young person's plan is such a move. 16+, semi-independent placements that are unregulated can provide a valuable resource but need to be appropriately monitored to ensure that the quality of care is of a high standard. In the absence of a formal Ofsted rating it is vital that the IRO scrutinises the quality of any such proposed placement provision.
- 3.31 "Staying Put" gives young people in foster care the option of remaining in the carers' homes post 18. This enables them to continue to mature and develop independence skills with the support of the carer before choosing to live independently. IROs have taken an active role in promoting the "Staying Put" Policy where it is appropriate.
- 3.32 The role of the IRO is very specific and whilst line managed through the Department it is a role which should provide challenge and scrutiny of the Council in regards to its care plans and services to individual young people. In order to maintain independence and peer support, links have been established with colleagues in the Eastern Region, which also provides some level of benchmarking across the region.
- 3.33 Things young people have said about IROs / Social Care:
- "I would like to share a description about L (social worker), as her client. I started cooperating with L since 2014, since then I have become more active in education, socialising and leisuring. Because I see that she's very talent in her position and taking her responsibility very seriously. That's why I became very active with her and when I see she works very honestly with me."
- "She (carer) is amazing and my LAC reviewing officer is amazing too!"
- "Summer 2014, I was in care and wanted to return home, my social worker and team made it happen."

Areas for Development

- 3.34 IROs to continue to raise awareness of the possibilities for sexual exploitation amongst Thurrock's looked after population; especially those placed out of the borough, and ensure that appropriate risk assessments and actions are undertaken.
- 3.35 The Plans and Reviews service continue to work on improving the timeliness of minutes being completed, without loss of quality.
- 3.36 IROs continue to actively challenge the service in all areas of CLA and formally raise disputes where these matters are not resolved within a satisfactory timescale.

- 3.37 The IRO service to continue to raise the rate of participation for children and young people in their reviews and care planning. Young people (16+) to be offered the opportunity to chair their own review with the support of the IRO where appropriate.
- 3.38 IROs to be mindful of the implications of the increase of UASC in the looked after population and to ensure that the quality of care planning and standards reflects the individual and collective needs of this group of children.

4. Reasons for Recommendation

- 4.1 To improve service development and provide scrutiny.

5. Consultation (including Overview and Scrutiny, if applicable)

None

6. Impact on corporate policies, priorities, performance and community impact

- 6.1 As a statutory service the performance of the IRO service is a key part of the Council's responsibilities for Looked After children and ensuring it fulfils its duties.

7. Implications

7.1 Financial

Implications verified by: **Sean Clark**
Head of Corporate Finance

The additional appointment of a fulltime IRO, to meet the volume pressures has impacted upon the budget creating an overspend for 2015/16, equivalent to a full time salary. It is predicted that this post is likely to be required in the short to medium future; therefore plans are being explored to make arrangements for a fixed-term contract to reduce agency costs.

7.2 Legal

Implications verified by: **Lindsey Marks**
Principal Solicitor, Children's Safeguarding

Section 118 Adoption and Children Act 2002 introduced the concept of Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs). The Children and Young

Persons Act 2008 extends the IRO's responsibilities from monitoring the performance by the Local Authority of their functions in relation to a child's review to monitoring the performance by the Local Authority of their functions in relation to a child's case as set out in sections 25A - 25C of the Children Act 1989. The intention is that IRO's should have an effective independent oversight of the child's case and ensure that the child's interests are protected throughout the care planning process. The IRO Handbook provides clear guidance on the IROs' role in and processes around the case review:

7.3 **Diversity and Equality**

Implications verified by: **Natalie Warren**
Community Development & Equalities
Manager

The IRO's within the care plan explore issues of diversity and ensure they are addressed appropriately where necessary.

Culturally sensitive and gender appropriate placements are identified where necessary and appropriate. This is particularly relevant to the increase of unaccompanied asylum seekers. Interpreters are routinely used to identify and meet their needs both within the care planning and review process.

The Department provides a dedicated team for young people with a disability and reviews are conducted in a manner that is sensitive to their communication methods, to enable participation where at all possible, for example, signing or picture/computer input.

Recognition of young people's ethnicity is also recognised for example the inclusion of Travellers Welfare Service for some young people.

7.4 **Other implications** (where significant) – i.e. Staff, Health, Sustainability, Crime and Disorder)

None

8. **Background papers used in preparing the report** (including their location on the Council's website or identification whether any are exempt or protected by copyright):

None

9. **Appendices to the report**

None

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Children's Services

**Corporate Parenting Committee
Work Programme
2015/16**

Dates of Meetings: 18 June 2015, 10 September 2015, 3 December 2015, 3 March 2016

Topic	Lead Officer	Date
Placement Updates of Care Packages	Paul Coke / Andrew Carter	18 June 2015
Care Leavers Progress	Paul Coke	18 June 2015
Missing Children & Child Sexual Exploitation	Andrew Carter	18 June 2015
Children In Care Pledge Update Report	Natalie Carter / Paul Coke	18 June 2015
Placement Updates of Care Packages	Paul Coke	10 September 2015
Achieving Permanence/Adoption Report	Simon Shardlow	10 September 2015
Independent Review Officer Report	Neale Laurie	10 September 2015
Budget Update (include comparison on costs with other local authorities)	Andrew Carter	10 September 2015
Placement Updates of Care Packages	Paul Coke	3 December 2015
Housing for Care Leavers (include update on Clarence Road)	Andrew Carter	3 December 2015
Education Results of Looked After Children	Keeley Pullen	3 December 2015
Update on Bank Accounts/Passports held by Looked After Children	Andrew Carter	3 December 2015
Placement Updates of Care Packages	Paul Coke	3 March 2016

Health of Looked After Children	Paul Coke / Patricia Perolls	3 March 2016
Children in Care Council and the voice of the child.	Opendoor/CIC Council	3 March 2016
Children In Care Pledge Update	Paul Coke / Natalie Carter	3 March 2016