

Thurrock - An ambitious and collaborative community which is proud of its heritage and excited by its diverse opportunities and future

Corporate Parenting Committee

The meeting will be held at **7.00 pm** on **5 September 2018**

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

Membership:

Councillors Joycelyn Redsell (Chair), Graham Hamilton (Vice-Chair), Qaisar Abbas, Abbie Akinbohun, Barry Johnson, Steve Liddiard, Sue MacPherson and Luke Spillman

Gregg Brown, Open Door
Jackie Howell, Chair, The One Team, Foster Carer Association
Joseph Kaley, Children in Care Council
Sharon Smith, Vice Chair, The One Team, Foster Carer Association

Substitutes:

Councillors Gary Collins, David Potter, Sue Shinnick and Lynn Worrall

Agenda

Open to Public and Press

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1 Apologies for Absence	
2 Minutes	5 - 10
To approve as a correct record the minutes of the Corporate Parenting Committee meeting held on 6 June 2018.	
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	

5	Children's Social Care Performance	11 - 22
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Queries regarding this Agenda or notification of apologies:

Please contact Kallum Davies, Democratic Services Officer by sending an email to Direct.Democracy@thurrock.gov.uk

Agenda published on: **28 August 2018**

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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.

Our Vision and Priorities for Thurrock

An ambitious and collaborative community which is proud of its heritage and excited by its diverse opportunities and future.

1. **People** – a borough where people of all ages are proud to work and play, live and stay
 - High quality, consistent and accessible public services which are right first time
 - Build on our partnerships with statutory, community, voluntary and faith groups to work together to improve health and wellbeing
 - Communities are empowered to make choices and be safer and stronger together

2. **Place** – a heritage-rich borough which is ambitious for its future
 - Roads, houses and public spaces that connect people and places
 - Clean environments that everyone has reason to take pride in
 - Fewer public buildings with better services

3. **Prosperity** – a borough which enables everyone to achieve their aspirations
 - Attractive opportunities for businesses and investors to enhance the local economy
 - Vocational and academic education, skills and job opportunities for all
 - Commercial, entrepreneurial and connected public services

Minutes of the Meeting of the Corporate Parenting Committee held on 6 June 2018 at 7.00 pm

Present: Councillors Joycelyn Redsell (Chair), Graham Hamilton (Vice-Chair), Qaisar Abbas, Barry Johnson and Steve Liddiard

Gregg Brown, Thurrock Open Door Representative
Jackie Howell, Chair of The One Team, Foster Carer Association
Joseph Kaley, Children in Care Council
Sharon Smith, Vice Chair of The One Team, Foster Carers Association

Apologies: Councillors Abbie Akinbohun and Angela Sheridan

In attendance: Sheila Murphy, Assistant Director Children's Care and Targeted Outcomes
Janet Simon, Strategic Lead, Looked After Children
Keeley Pullen, Head Teacher for the Virtual School
Kallum Davies, 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.

1. Minutes

The Minutes of Corporate Parenting Committee, held on 7 March 2018, were approved as a correct record.

2. Items of Urgent Business

There were no items of urgent business.

3. Declaration of Interests

Councillor Liddiard declared a non-pecuniary interest in respect of Agenda Items 5 through to 7 as he was a foster carer.

4. Information on recent External Placements for Young People

Janet Simon, Strategic Lead for Children Looked After presented the report which provided an update on and an overview of placement activities in the period of 2017/18.

The officer highlighted key areas of the report and informed members that there had been a reduction in the number of looked after children this year and that this was largely attributed to the reduction in Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children (UASC) remaining in borough.

The officer explained that this period had continued the consistent decrease in UASC placed in Thurrock and that this is due to the Eastern Region Protocol. The Eastern Region Protocol sees local authorities allocated an “.07” number, which determined the number of UASC that can reasonably be accommodated in borough, and as Thurrock was above this number, further UASC were distributed amongst the neighbouring local authorities.

She further briefed the Committee that:

- The majority of Children Looked After were in foster care placement, and a focus had been placed on the recruitment of additional foster carers.
- There had been stabilisation in the use of residential placements and an emphasis had been placed on the review of the suitability of these placements and whether the needs of the young people could be better met in foster care.
- The service was continuing to work closely with the Finance Team to keep costs within budget and ensure value for money.

The Chair questioned why only 11 young people “stay put” in placement and commented that this number seemed low. The officer stated that the service actively encouraged young people to stay in placement however it was not always appropriate for them to do so. She further explained that a common factor was the desire for independence in the age group but agreed that she would like to see an increase in this figure and this was being looked into by the Permanency Panel.

The Chair stated that independence was a desire across the board for this age group, however the majority of non-looked after young people could not afford independent living and were therefore remaining in the family home much longer.

The officer agreed with this assessment and expanded on the efforts her team made to encourage “staying put”. She highlighted the “Pathway Plan” which looked at the skills required for living independently and also noted that all looked after young people should have savings as part of their plan. The officer further added that foster carers are encouraged to educate their charge in skills through chores such as cleaning and laundry.

The officer stated that with regard to facilitating the permanency of placement, young people should be challenged on their vision of independent living, and provided a “reality check” around the difficulties they will face. She explained that the benefit afforded to such young people amounts to £57.90 and educating young people about having to manage such a tight budget was a key means to encouraging them to stay in placement.

Councillor Hamilton questioned whether £57.90 was the sum total afforded to young people leaving care or if this was separate from Housing Benefits. The officer clarified that young people would receive Housing Benefit and Council Tax Support in addition to this amount, but the £57.90 would need to cover all utility bills and general costs of living.

Councillor Abbas questioned why if some foster carers were able to take more than one young person, these carers were not given more than one. The officer explained that often it can be detrimental to the children or young people currently in the placement to introduce another before they are settled and the effects of this were a consideration before placing an additional young person. She also added that there were occasions where it was not appropriate to mix some young people such as where there had been trauma or additional support needs.

The Chair thanked the Strategic Lead for Children Looked After and moved to the recommendation that members noted the report.

RESOLVED:

The Corporate Parenting Committee noted the report.

5. Briefing Note - Attainment of Children Looked After 2017 Validated Data

Keeley Pullen, Head Teacher for Virtual Schools introduced the briefing note explaining that it had been historically presented based on indicative data, however she was now able to present the information based on validated data provided by the Department for Education.

The officer stated that overall Thurrock's Children Looked After (CLA) had performed better in all areas compared to the 2016 validated data. When comparing Thurrock CLA to a range of other CLA groups for national, regional and the top 5 closest statistical neighbours, Thurrock's pupils performed better. She added that this demonstrated an improvement in outcomes for our most vulnerable pupils with very good rates of progression.

The officer stated that Thurrock CLA had performed better in Progress 8 and Attainment 8 when compared to other CLA groups. The gap against Non-Looked After was closing, however, this was still an area for improvement.

Councillor Hamilton questioned whether the term "cohort" in the reports referred to a population sample. The officer clarified that the figure was the actual number of pupils.

Councillor Hamilton asked what the dates were for the Academic Year. Pullen The officer stated that the Academic Year ran from 1 September to 20 July this year, although the latter date varied slightly each year.

The Chair thanked the Head Teacher for Virtual Schools for the briefing and noted its contents.

6. Social Care Development Plan: CLA Progress Report

The Strategic Lead for Children Looked After introduced the report, providing a summary of the Children Looked After service and highlighted key areas within the service.

The officer explained that focus was on the recruitment, approval and training of foster carers who are willing to offer placement to children looked after while maintaining and expanding the capacity of existing foster carers. This was being achieved by working with the Communications Team to reach interested residents in the borough. She added that as an extension of this there was also a focus on increasing the number of children looked after staying in placement after turning 16.

The officer clarified to the Committee that “private fostering” was when a child under the age of 16 (under 18 if disabled) was cared for by someone who was not their parent or a 'close relative'. This was a private arrangement made between a parent and a carer, for 28 days or more. Close relatives were defined as step-parents, grandparents, brothers, sisters, uncles or aunts. She advised that there was an awareness campaign and action plan for private fostering and this had seen an increase in the number of notifications received as well as general enquires. This allowed for an assessment to be completed by the service which focused on the needs of the child and the identified private foster carer.

The officer stated that there was an important emphasis on the voices of children looked after and that their opinions and wishes were consistently considered at all stages.

The Chair thanked the officer and asked to see more evidence in future reports of the opinions and wishes of the children looked after influencing decisions as this would benefit Members as Corporate Parents. The officer agreed to bring this item back to the next meeting of the Committee as an opportunity for children looked after to present their views on their placements and make their thoughts known to the Members.

The Chair questioned if in addition to support groups provided to foster carers, if there were any made available to parents whose children had been moved into care. The Strategic Lead agreed to look into this and bring the item back at the next meeting of the Committee, stating that there was counselling available however there was a low uptake of the service. She added that the service was looking into gathering feedback from parents following the process of their children becoming looked after to assess what the parents had learnt. This was with a view to “breaking the cycle” and helping parents develop the skills and understanding to care for their children in the future.

RESOLVED:

The Corporate Parenting Committee noted the report.

Councillor Liddiard leaves the meeting (7.48pm)

7. Children's Social Care Performance

Sheila Murphy, Assistant Director for Children's Services introduced the report, explaining that Thurrock had experienced a high level of demand placed on its statutory social care service for children, and considerable work had been undertaken by the department in managing this demand. This had seen a reduction in the number of contacts and referrals; easing the demand pressure of children becoming looked after and children being placed on a child protection plan.

The officer reported that all indicators had shown improvement and the service was coming in line with statistical neighbours.

Councillor Hamilton questioned what was considered to be a statistical neighbour. The officer explained that they were local authorities around the country which were identified as being similar to Thurrock in terms of size and demographic.

Councillor Hamilton asked who specifically were our statistical neighbours. The officer stated that Medway, Bexley, Havering, Dudley, Telford & Wrekin, Swindon, Southend, Sheffield, Peterborough and Derby were Thurrock's Statistical Neighbours.

RESOLVED:

The Corporate Parenting Committee noted the report.

8. Work Programme

Councillor Johnson requested a report be added to the Work Programme covering the current and projected spend in the area on Children's Services. The Assistant Director of Children's Services agreed that the report would cover placement costs and a broad overview of spend on Children Looked After.

Councillor Redsell asked that her earlier request for a record of the views and wishes of children looked after be added to the Work Programme. The Assistant Director agreed this will be added.

The meeting finished at 7.55pm.

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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5 September 2018	ITEM: 5
Corporate Parenting Committee	
Children’s Social Care Performance	
Wards and communities Affected: All	Key Decision: Non-Key
Report by: Jackie Groom – Strategic Lead, Performance, Quality Assurance and Business Intelligence	
Accountable Assistant Director: Sheila Murphy, Assistant Director Children and Families	
Accountable Director: Rory Patterson, Corporate Director, Children’s Services	
This report is Public	

Executive Summary

Thurrock continues to experience a high level of demand placed on its statutory social care service for children. Considerable work continues in the service in managing this demand through improving its early intervention service and managing the front door (MASH) more effectively. There has been a reduction in the number of contacts and referrals; easing the demand pressure of children becoming looked after and children being placed on a child protection plan. This is a considerable improvement, given the high rate of child protection plans in previous years.

An area of focus is the number of children that have been adopted in 2017/18. Seven children were adopted, which is similar to previous years. This position is below Thurrock’s comparator group of 30 children being adopted.

1. Recommendation(s)

That members note the areas of improvement in Children’s Social Care and work undertaken to manage demand for statutory social care services.

2. Introduction and Background

This report provides a summary of Children’s Social Care performance. It highlights key demand indicators such as number of contacts, benchmarking data and key performance indicators.

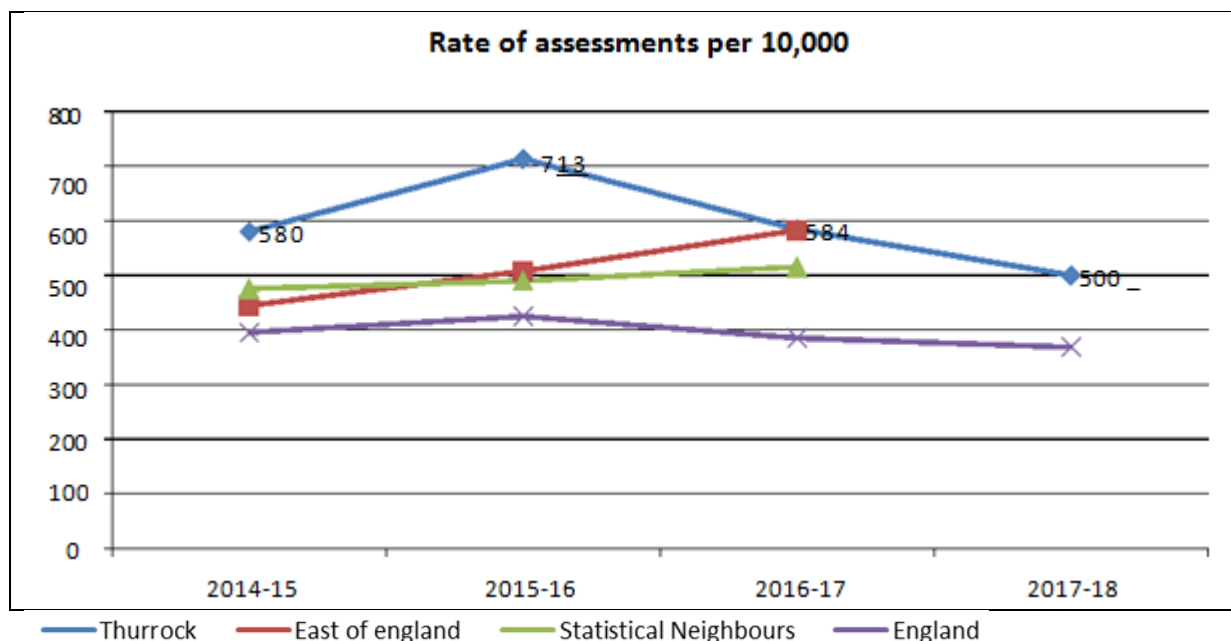
Thurrock produces a number of data sets and performance reports to meet its internal and external reporting requirements. It is essential that one version of performance information is used by the whole system; from case workers to the Senior Management Team.

The data in this report is from the latest performance digest (July 2018), regional benchmarking data and national data sets. This data has been presented and discussed with the Social Care Senior Management Team and the Corporate Director’s Performance Group.

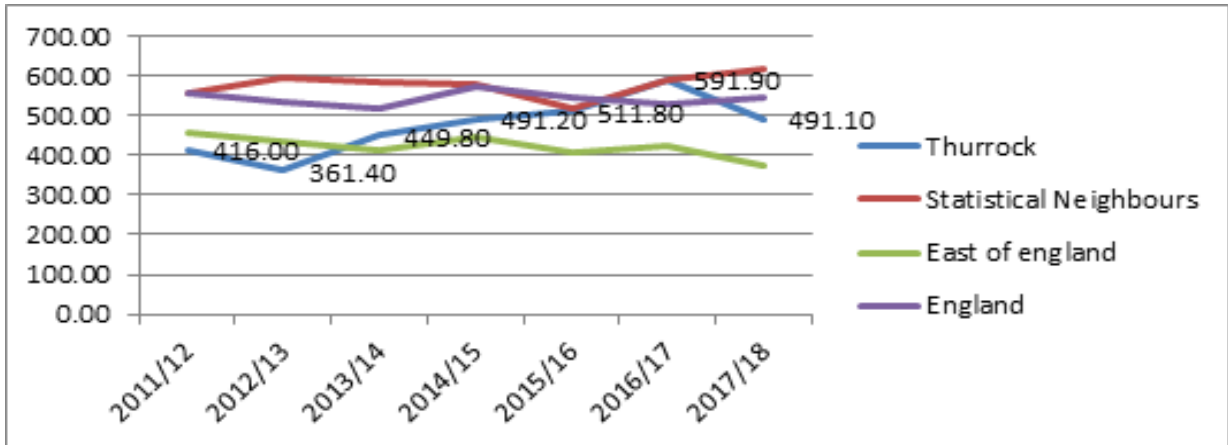
3. PERFORMANCE

3.1. Contacts and Referrals

Thurrock is managing its demand placed on the front door (MASH) of Children’s Social Care well. Good progress has been made in reducing the rate of referrals and assessments. In 2015/16, Thurrock had one of the highest assessment rates at 713 per 10,000 of the child population. This has been reduced to 500 per 10,000 of the child population. Thurrock has also reduced its referral rate from 592 in 2015/16 to 491 in 2017/18.

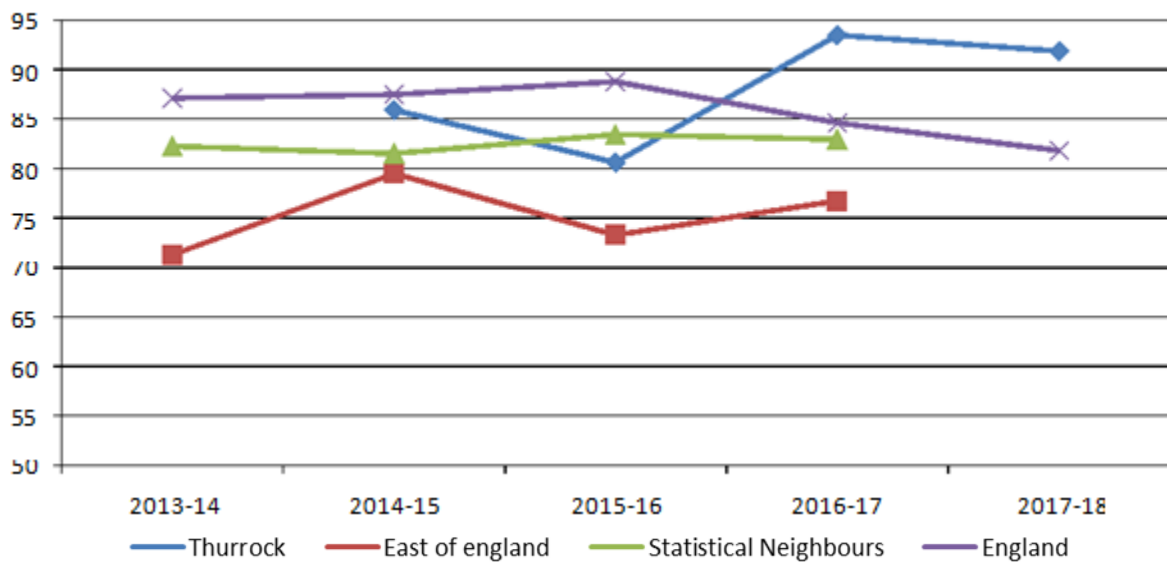


Rate of Referrals per 10,000

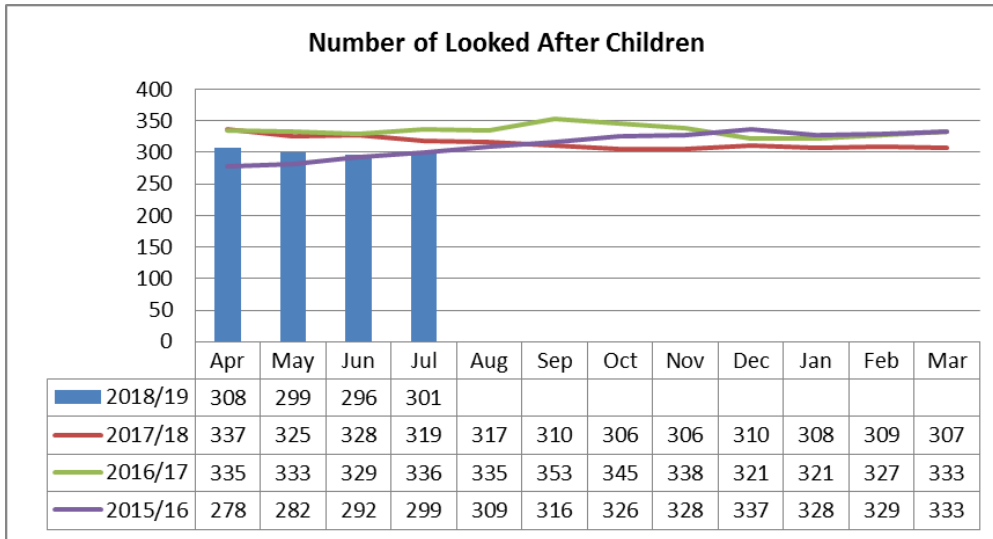


Thurrock is one of the best performing authorities in completing its assessments within timescale. It also has a low percentage of repeat referrals. The front door of Social Care is being managed efficiently and work undertaken by the service to reduce demand is reflected in the data.

Percentage of assessments completed within 45 days

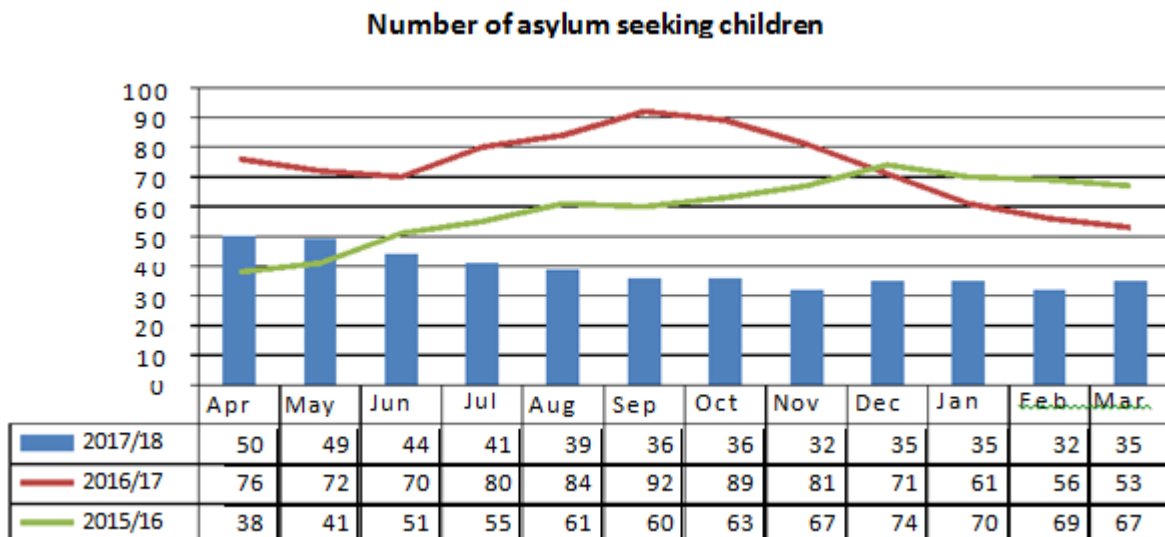


3.2. Looked After Children

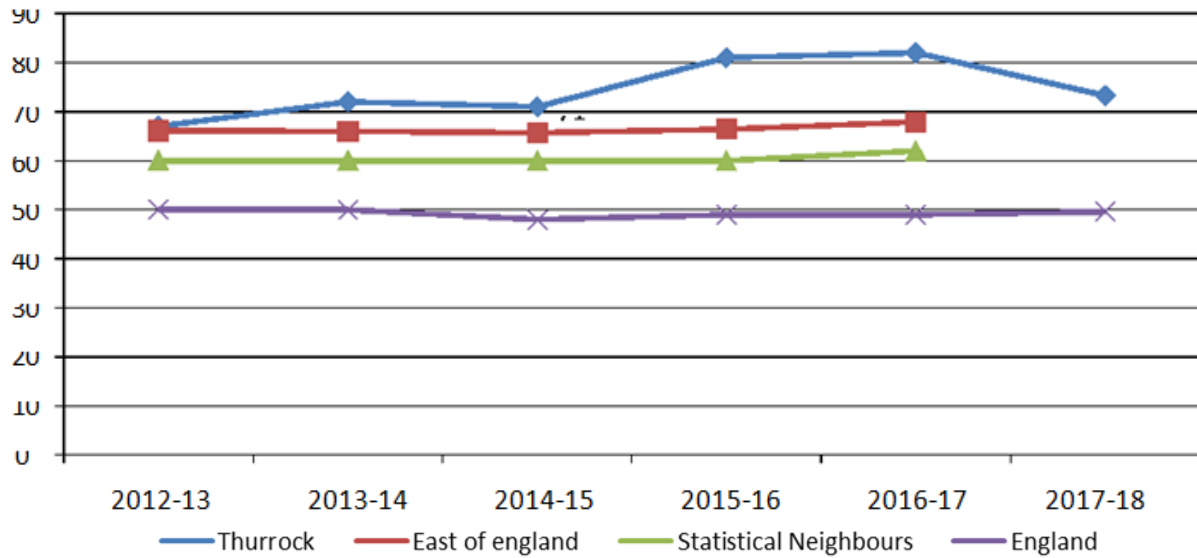


Number of CLA	2011/12	2012/13	2013/14	2014/15	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	Jul 18
Thurrock	210.00	240.00	260.00	285.00	285.00	335.00	345.00	301.00
Statistical Neighbours	361.50	376.50	374.00	375.50	379.50	384.00	392.50	-
East of England	6410.00	6420.00	6300.00	6350.00	6150.00	6340.00	6460.00	-
England	65510.00	67070.00	68070.00	68820.00	69500.00	70450.00	72670.00	-

In July 2018 the number of Looked after Children (LAC) reduced by 34 from the year end figure for 2017/18 (345 to 301). This is partly as a result of the reduction in asylum seeking children reducing to 35 in March 2017/18 from 53 in the same month 2016/17



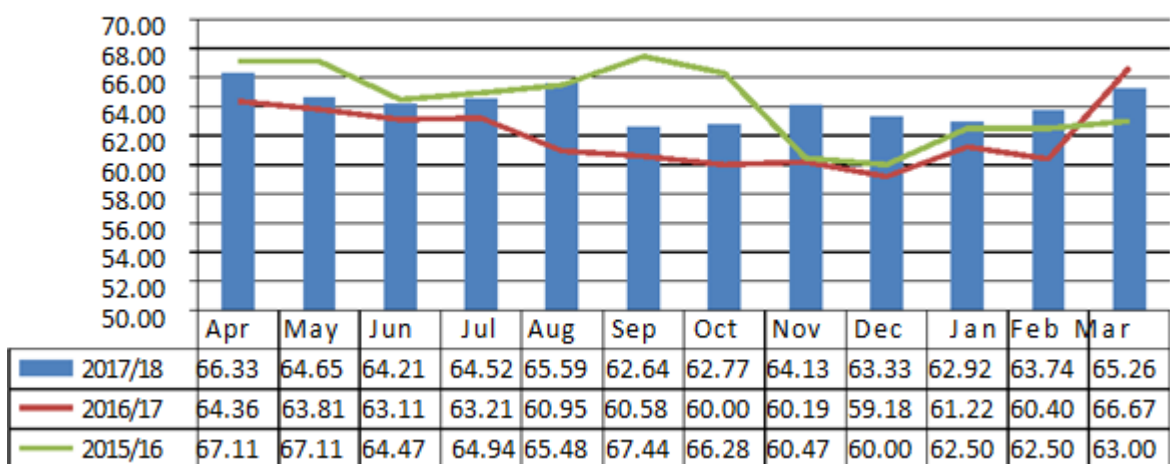
Rate of looked after children



Thurrock is closing more Looked after Children cases than its comparator group and the East of England average. Given the high rate of Looked after Children this is a good position and helped to reduce the rate from 82 per 10,000 of the child population in 2016/17 to 73 per 10k of the child population in 2017/18. The service continues to monitor all new looked after cases ensuring correct thresholds are being applied and children are only being looked after where necessary.

3.3. Placements - Long Term Stability

Long term stability of placements (%)



Looked after Children are in the following placements:

- Residential Children’s Homes – 20
- Parent & Child Residential Assessment Placement - 1

- Independent Fostering Agency Placements – 107
 - Parent & child placement – 0
- In-house Foster placements – 122
 - Parent & child placement – 0
- 16+ Supported Accommodation – 18 (excluding UAS)

Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children - 35

- Independent Fostering Agency Placements – 17
- In-house Foster placements – 8
- 16+ Supported Accommodation – 11

There has been a reduction in the number of Children Looked after from March 2017 to April 2018. This has included a reduction in the number of unaccompanied asylum seeking children down to 35 from 53 in March 2016.

Thurrock's rate of children looked after in 2017/2018 was 73 children per 10,000 of the child population which is a reduction from the previous year. This remains high in comparison with statistical neighbours which saw an average of 62 children per 10,000 for England as a whole and 64 per 10,000 for authorities which are statistically similar to Thurrock. (Comparison figures are based on the 2017 results, the 2018 results will not be available until the autumn of 2018).

The impact on placement stability relates to the increasing complexity of children's needs shown by a rise in care orders. The number of children requiring three or more placements had been steadily increasing, until this year when the trend was halted and there was a 2% reduction, this is through improving practice.

Factors which greatly affect placement stability include the amount of planning before a child comes into care and the quality of the matching of the placement to the child's needs. Where children come into care in an emergency, the initial placement choice is more likely to be determined by availability rather than need and there is a higher risk of the placement breaking down.

Placement stability is strongly correlated to the progress that children and young people make in care, as moves caused by placement breakdown can negatively impact on a young person's sense of worth, emotional resilience and is disruptive to developing friendship and support networks and educational achievement. A key support to placement stability through scrutiny of placement plans is through the work on the Independent Reviewing Officer function. Placement stability in Thurrock is at 11.65% in comparison to the England and statistical neighbour averages of 10% and the IRO service will continue to monitor this area carefully.

Fostering

Current focus is on the use of in-house foster placements as opposed to independent fostering agencies through our recruitment programme. Current performance as of August 2018 for in-house fostering provision is as follows:

Area (As at 31st July 2018 for 2018/19 Financial Year)	Number	Position
Number of new carers approved	3	2 mainstream & 1 connected
Number of mainstream fostering applications at various stages	7	
Number of current fostering households	102	Which equates to a net increase of 10 this financial year

Placements - 2017 to 2018

Placement Group	No of Young People	Social Care Cost	Grant Income	Social Care Cost Net of Grant
In-house Fostering	98	£2,150,746	-	£2,150,746
Independent Fostering Agency (IFA)	172	£4,104,239	-	£4,104,239
Residential	56	£4,144,224	-	£4,144,224
Supported Accommodation 16+	57	£1,369,222	-	£1,369,222
Care Leavers 18 +	-	£1,470,682	-£551,287	£919,395
Total		£13,239,113	-£551,287	£12,687,826

The service continues to monitor placements through the various multi-disciplinary panels, such as the Placement and Accommodation Panel, which is chaired by the Assistant Director of Children's Services, and the High Cost Placement Meeting, chaired by the Corporate Director of Children's Services. Focus of the budgetary situation features as part of placements and the teams work hard to provide placements that are fit for purpose and cost effective. The Corporate Director and other Senior Managers are working closely with the Finance Department; ensuring placements are of good quality, that we get the best value from each placement and that we plan the transition of our young people when appropriate to accommodation that is suitable for their needs and age.

3.4. Number of Child and Young Person in Care Reviews

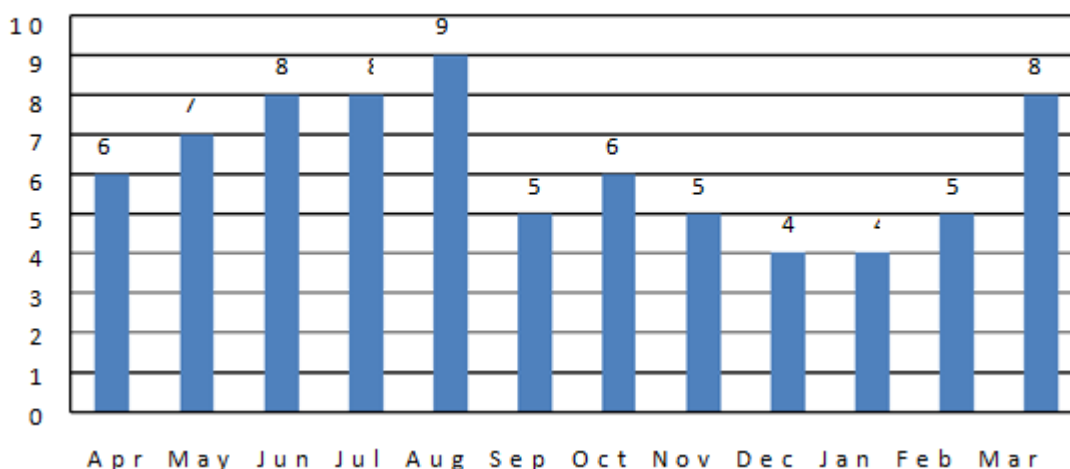
Due in Month	Apr-17	May-17	Jun-17	Jul-17	Aug-17	Sep-17	Oct-17	Nov-17	Dec-17	Jan-18	Feb-18	Mar-18	Year To Date
Total Due	67	82	60	64	68	65	64	58	61	61	26	74	750
Total Held	67	82	59	63	64	62	62	53	52	58	22	63	707
Total Held In Timescale	62	79	50	53	55	59	60	52	47	52	19	54	642
Percentage of 'Total Due' Held In Timescale	93%	96%	83%	83%	81%	91%	94%	90%	77%	85%	73%	73%	86%
Due in Quarter	Q1 209			Q2 197			Q3 183			Q4 161			
Average % of 'Total Due' Held In Timescale	91%			85%			87%			77%			

During the performance year April 2017 – March 2018, the Independent Review Officer service conducted a total of 707 reviews, which is a slight increase on the number of reviews conducted the previous year. The performance, in respect of reviews being held in timescale, fluctuated during the year, being as high as 96% in May of 2017 and as low as 73% in March of 2018. The average for the year was 86%.

Improving the timelessness of reviews is a key objective in 2018/2019 to achieve performance of between 92% and 95%, which will be in line with statistical neighbour best performance.

3.5. Looked After Children Missing

No missing from placement

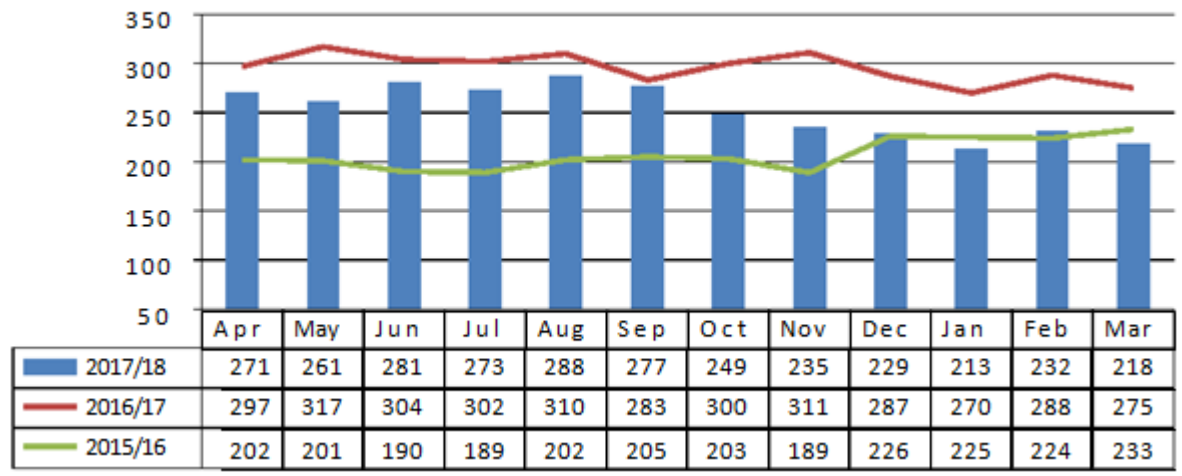


Thurrock had 8 Looked After Children with missing episodes for placements in March 2018. First quarter figures for 2018/19 show an improvement on last year:

	April	May	June
2018/2019	6	4	6
2017/2018	6	7	8

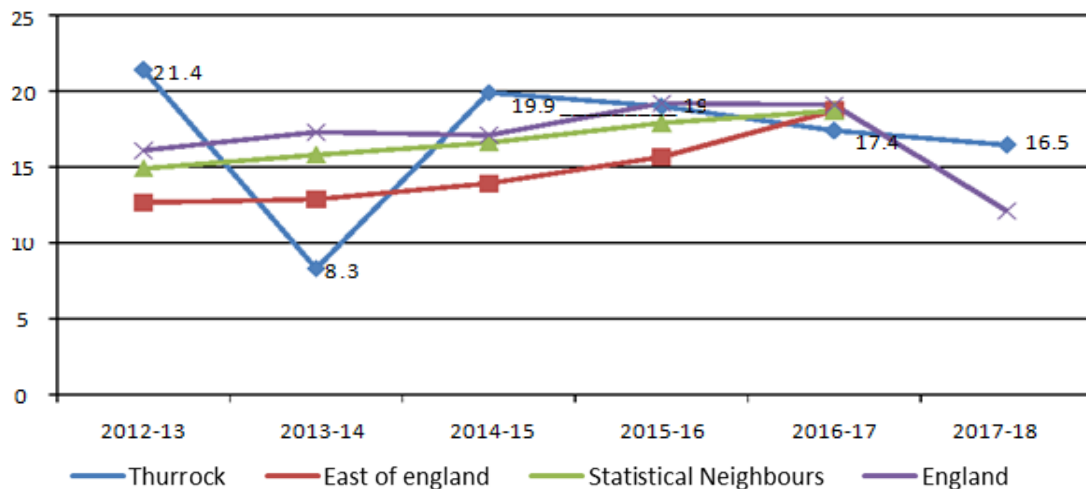
3.6. Children on a Child Protection Plan

Number of children on a child protection plan



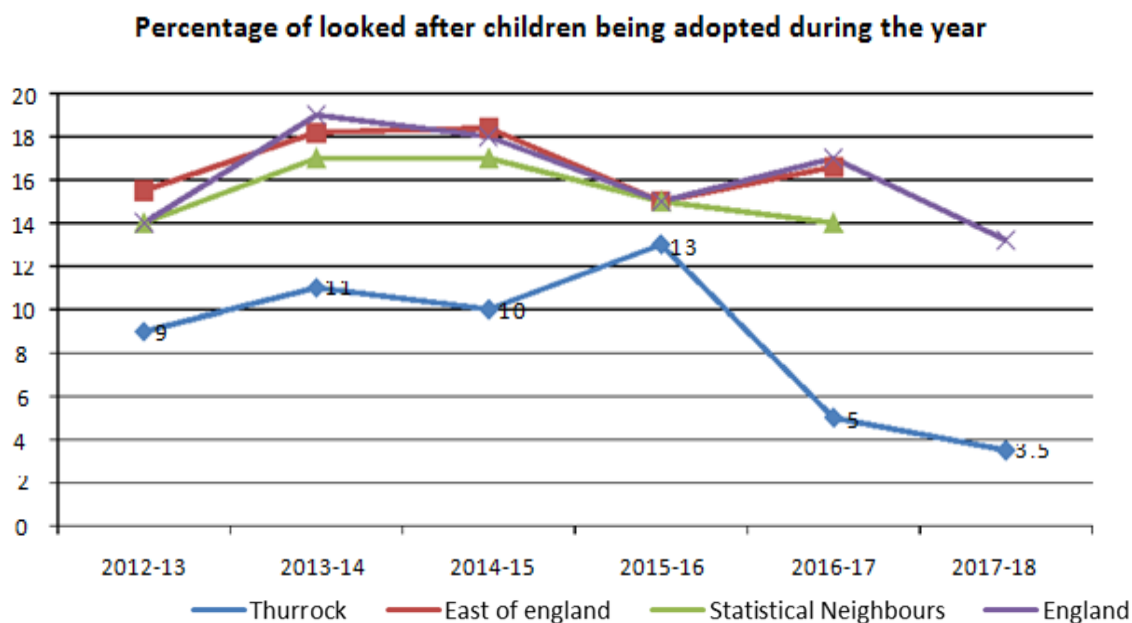
The number of children on a Child Protection Plan has reduced by 57 (**March 2017: 275 March 2018: 218**) in comparison to the same position last year. This is attributed to a reduction in the number of Child Protection Plans being started this financial year (**2016/2017: 329 2017/2018: 231**). Given the previous high rate of Child Protection Plans this is good performance.

Percentage of children subject to CPP for 2nd or subsequent time



Thurrock's percentage of children subject to a 2nd or subsequent time on a Child Protection Plan has reduced to 16.5%. This is below our comparator group. The service will continue to monitor the re-plans to ensure only children that are suitable are taken off a Child Protection Plan.

3.7. Adoptions



There were 7 adoptions completed in 2017/2018, this is against a statistical neighbour average of 30 adopted children. 7 is lower in comparison to performance achieved in 2015 where 13 children were adopted. A significant factor for this performance has been changes to case law which has stressed that adoption should only be used as a last resort where no other order will do.

3.8. Care Leavers (aged 17 to 21)

The percentage of care leavers in education, employment and training has improved to 61.5%. This is below the target of 70% and 2016/2017 position (61.9%). Similarly, the percentage of care leavers in suitable accommodation has also reduced to 78.6%. This is below the position reported in 2016/2017 (85.3%).

The realignment of the aftercare service into the Inspire Youth Hub has seen a significant improvement in the number of young people in education employment and training. The On-Track Thurrock Programme continues to offer a bespoke programme to ensure that care leavers can access education, employment and training. We have had considerable success with this and the figure is currently at 61.5% we recognise that this is below the very ambitious target of 70% but we are significantly above the Eastern Region at 53.1%.

For many of our care leavers we provide our recently judged outstanding Prince's Trust programme which is a way in which we enable young people to build confidence. We actively seek apprenticeship opportunities for our care

leavers and continue to provide a range of support programmes to enable them to engage fully in the local communities in which they live.

Housing remains one of the key challenges for young people who are Leaving Care, to address this we have further developed the Head Start Housing Programme – which will look to support care leavers into a HMO. This will provide a holistic approach to supporting young people in both sourcing and sustaining tenancies. We recognise that one of the key barriers relating to this is budget management and to address this we have developed a budgeting programme to ensure that young people can manage finances.

The current position shows that we have 1.1% of care leavers in unsuitable accommodation – the rest of the data relates to young people who have gone missing from the LA – a significant percentage of these are made up of our unaccompanied asylum seeking young people and this is recognised nationally as an issue.

3.9. Inspection of Local Authorities Children’s Services (ILAS)

The Inspection of Local Authority Children’s Services (ILACS) framework, for Children’s Social Care, started in January 2018. Under ILACS, local authorities are required to share their self-evaluation at the annual engagement meeting with Ofsted. Thurrock has completed and shared with Ofsted its self-evaluation as part of the annual conversation on the 9th May 2018. An Ofsted focused visit is expected before the end of 2018.

4. Reasons for Recommendation

- 4.1. Corporate Parenting Committee to note and comment on current performance position.

5. Consultation

N/A

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

None

7. Implications

7.1. Financial

Implications verified by: **Michelle Hall**
Management Accountant

N/A

7.2. Legal

Implications verified by: **Lindsey Marks**
Deputy Head of Legal Social Care and Education

N/A

7.3. Diversity and Equality

Implications verified by: **Natalie Warren**
Strategic Lead – Community Development and Equalities

N/A

7.4. Other implications

N/A

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)

N/A

9. Appendices to report

None

Report Author:

Jackie Groom

Strategic Lead – Performance, Quality Assurance and Business Intelligence Strategy, Communications and Customer Services

5 September 2018		ITEM: 6
Corporate Parenting Committee		
Independent Reviewing Officer Annual Report		
Wards and communities affected: All	Key Decision: Key	
Report of: Brian Relph, Interim Head of Safeguarding and Quality Assurance		
Accountable Assistant Director: Sheila Murphy Assistant, Director Children and Families		
Accountable Director: Rory Patterson, Corporate Director Children's Services		
This report is Public		

Executive Summary

The purpose of this report is to meet the statutory requirement for the Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) Manager to produce a report for the scrutiny of the Corporate Parenting Committee, established by the IRO Handbook (2010).

This report covers the period from 1 of April 2017 until the 31 of March 2018. Some of the data sets vary slightly from those published by children's social care due to minor variations in the timeframe for data capture.

1. Recommendation(s)

For the Corporate Parenting Committee to note the IRO Annual report 2017 - 2018 and the recommendations in the report.

2. Introduction and Background

The appointment of an Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) for a child or young person in the care of the Local Authority is a legal requirement under s.118 of the Adoption and Children Act 2002

The IRO has a number of specific responsibilities, including:

- promoting the voice of the child
- ensuring that plans for looked after children are based on a detailed and informed assessment, are up to date, effective and provide a real and genuine response to each child's needs;
- making sure that the child understands how an advocate could help and his/her entitlement to one;

- offering a safeguard to prevent any ‘drift’ in care planning for children looked after and the delivery of services to them; and
- monitoring the activity of the local authority as a corporate parent in ensuring that care plans have given proper consideration and weight to the child’s wishes and feelings and that, where appropriate, the child fully understands.

During the reporting period, the IRO service has remained very stable with no changes in personnel. The Service continues to comprise of five, permanent Independent Reviewing Officers.

IRO Case Loads

	2015	2016	2017	2018
Average Case Load	56	67	67	61
Case Load Range	58 - 62	62 -67	60 - 68	62- 65

During the performance year April 2017 – March 2018, the IRO service conducted a total of 707 reviews, which is a slight increase on the number of reviews conducted the previous year. The performance, in respect of reviews being held in timescale, fluctuated during the year, being as high as 96% in May of 2017 and as low as 73% in March of 2018.

Children participated in person or through an advocate or by another means in 71% of their reviews (excludes Children under 4 years of age). In 13% of reviews the child or young person did not attend or send their views.

Profile of Children and Young People in Care in Thurrock

Section 7 of the main report provides a detailed analysis of the characteristics of children moving through the care system in Thurrock.

Key points from this are:

- There has been a reduction of the number of children in care
- There has been a reduction in the number of Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking children
- There are more boys looked after in Thurrock than girls
- The ethnic distribution of children looked after has not changed significantly in the past three years
- There has been a significant reduction in the use of Voluntary Accommodation (Section 20 CA1989), which is positive
- We have improved the stability of placements
- Most children looked after live within 20 miles of their home address
- We need to increase the number of children achieving permanency through adoption or special guardianship

One of the key functions of an IRO is to oversee the needs and rights of every young person in the care of the Local Authority.

The IRO Service recorded 67 completed dispute resolutions which is where the IRO challenged children services about an aspect of practice. These challenges were about the following issues.

Number	Area of Practice Raised
11	Pathway Plan for child leaving care not completed
2	Permanency Plan for the child was not robust enough and had to be changed
24	Report had not been prepared for the review meeting
3	An issue regarding the plan for the child's education had to be addressed
3	Child's Health Assessment needed to be completed to address a specific issue
1	An SGO application needed to be made for the child (case drifting)
2	Specific Assessment for the child had not been completed
3	There was a concern that the placement was not meeting the child's need

The Children in Care Council was asked to provide feedback on the IRO service and made the following points

- Individual IROs were seen to be child centred and committed to their young people
- Young People said they trusted their IRO
- For some young people the IRO was the most consistent person – *“I’ve had her all the time I’ve been in care “*
- One young person felt their IRO was a good advocate – *they got things done!*
- Young people wanted more contact with their IRO
- Young people wanted to be able to talk to their IRO between reviews
- Some young people didn’t see the point in going to reviews
- Some young people felt they got told off at reviews
- They act as independently as possible and are not afraid to challenge other professionals on behalf of their young people.
- IRO’s don’t follow up on recommendations and chase up Social Workers actions until the following LAC Review and often nothing has been done within the six months between the reviews. It would be good if they could do this between reviews.

In preparation of the IRO Annual Report an Audit was undertaken of LAC reviews (30 cases) by the Interim Head of Safeguarding and Quality Assurance.

Key issues from the Audit

Current IRO practice was variable although there were some good examples and some very good recording of children's views and wishes; this was not always consistently found.

Practice issues, which need to be addressed

- Review Minutes not written up in timescale - some IROs were completing their write ups on time and in some cases within 2 days of the review, others were not completing them until a few Week before the next review
- Child Participation was only recorded in detail in a minority of reviews
- Quality of recommendations - in some reviews there were clear child focussed recommendations. In a number however here were too much reliance on stock phrases, or simply statements such as - continue to monitor contact
- Challenge to care planning - some cases showed robust and well thought out challenge. However in a minority of cases where planning was weak and care plans lacked focus and direction there was insufficient challenge.

3. Issues Options and Analysis of Options

None

4. Reasons for Recommendation

- 4.1 To inform members of the work of the independent reviewing officer service during 2017-2018. The report also updates members with the recommended work plan for the IRO service during 2018 – 2019

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

N/A

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

N/A

7. Implications

7.1 Financial

Implications verified by: **Michelle Hall**
Management Accountant

There are no financial implications associated with this report.

7.2 Legal

Implications verified by: **Lindsey Marks**
Deputy Head of Legal Services Social Care and Education

Section 118 Adoption and Children Act 2002 introduced the concept Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs). Since 2004 all Local Authorities have been required to appoint 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 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: **Roxanne Scanlon**
Community Engagement and Project Monitoring Officer

Although there is no direct Diversity or Equality Implications arising from this report, the overall improvement plan should have a positive impact on children and young people

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

N/A

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):

- N/A

9. Appendices to the report

Appendix 1 - IRO Annual Report 2017-2018

Report Author:

Brian Relph

Interim Head of Safeguarding and Quality Assurance

Children's Services

**Thurrock Children's Services
Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO)**

ANNUAL REPORT

2017 -2018

Author: Brian Relph

Date: 6th August 2018

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9. Next Steps for the IRO Service: 2018-2019

1. Introduction and Purpose of the Annual Report

1.1 The purpose of this report is to meet the statutory requirement for the IRO Manager to produce a report for the scrutiny of the Corporate Parenting Board, established by the IRO Handbook (2010).

1.2 Following presentation to the Thurrock Corporate Parenting Board, Overview and Scrutiny and the Thurrock Safeguarding Children's Board, this report will be placed on the Council website as a publically accessible document.

1.3 Where possible, this Report refers to Children Looked After (CLA). Such use reflects the views and wishes of children and young people about their own identity and the way in which they prefer to be referred to by professionals.

2. Reporting Period

This report covers the period from 1st of April 2017 until the 31st of March 2018. Some of the data sets vary slightly from those published by children's social care due to minor variations in the timeframe for data capture, and the uploading of data onto various systems.

3. The Legal, Statutory and National Context of the IRO Role

3.1 The appointment of an Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) for a child or young person in the care of the Local Authority is a legal requirement under s.118 of the Adoption and Children Act 2002.

3.2 In March 2010 the IRO Handbook was issued, providing Local Authorities with statutory guidance on how the IROs should discharge their duties. Significantly, the Handbook stated:

The IRO has a new role conferred upon them to monitor the child's case as opposed to monitoring the review, effectively monitoring the implementation of the Care Plan between reviews (at para. 3.74)

The Handbook goes on to state that the primary role of an IRO is:

To ensure that the care plan for the child fully reflects the child's current needs and that the actions set out in the plan are consistent with the local authority's legal responsibilities towards the child (at para. 2.10)

3.3 In discharging this role, the Handbook notes (at para. 2.14) that the IRO has a number of specific responsibilities, including:

- *promoting the voice of the child*

- *ensuring that plans for looked after children are based on a detailed and informed assessment, are up to date, effective and provide a real and genuine response to each child's needs;*
- *making sure that the child understands how an advocate could help and his/her entitlement to one;*
- *offering a safeguard to prevent any 'drift' in care planning for children looked after and the delivery of services to them; and*
- *monitoring the activity of the local authority as a corporate parent in ensuring that care plans have given proper consideration and weight to the child's wishes and feelings and that, where appropriate, the child fully understands*

4. Local Context – Thurrock Council as a Corporate Parent

As a Corporate Parent, the Council is ambitious to ensure that children achieve their best possible outcomes while in the care of the authority, and that all children are helped to find a long term permanent home.

The IRO service plays a key role in monitoring and supporting plans to achieve this ambition.

5. Thurrock Council IRO Service

5.1 During the reporting period, the IRO service has remained very stable with no changes in personnel. The Service continues to comprise of five, permanent Independent Reviewing Officers, all of whom are experienced and authoritative social work practitioners with social work management experience.

5.2 All five IROs working for the Service are qualified Social Workers registered with the Health and Care Professionals Council and subjected to regular Disclosure and Barring enhanced checks. All have relevant and appropriate skills, bringing to the role specialist knowledge and experience, including Children's Social Care safeguarding management. All have substantial experience of effective direct work with children and young people.

5.3 There are 4 female and one male IRO and 60% of IROs are from non-white backgrounds, ensuring young people in our care can be allocated to IRO's across a range of ethnic groups.

5.4 All five of the IROs are independent of Thurrock Social Care and are not involved in preparation of children in care plans or the management of children in care cases or have any control over resources allocated to a case.

5.5 During the reporting period the IROs were line managed by the Service Manager for Safeguarding and Quality Assurance.

6. IRO Caseloads and Services Performance.

IRO Case Loads

	2015	2016	2017	2018
Average Case Load	56	67	67	61
Case Load Range	58 - 62	62 - 67	60 - 68	62 - 65

6.1 The average IRO case load increased from 56 individual children in 2015 to a high of 67 children in 2016 and 2017, but has since reduced to an average of 61 children in 2018.

6.2 In 2016 - 2017, due to illness, changes in working arrangements (one IRO was given a lighter case load) within the service, and an increase in Unaccompanied Asylum seeking children case loads did vary, and at a high point three of the IROs were carrying up to 80 cases for a couple of months. Additionally, from February to June 2018 one IRO was on long term sick leave which meant that case load had to be carried by the remaining IROs.

6.3 To contextualise the caseloads, the IRO handbook suggests that an average IRO caseload should be between 50 - 70 children and young people for a full time post (FTE). However, the average IRO caseload is a crude indicator of the work undertaken by the IROs, as children and young people's circumstance and situations vary in complexity, and in distance which needs to be travelled to placements. Children who are recently accommodated, placed at distance, involved in care proceedings or have placement disruption require a higher level of scrutiny and oversight than children who are in long term settled foster placements. There additionally needs to be enough flexibility in the service to respond to peaks in demand and associated workload, whilst maintaining a focus on quality and oversight.

Number of Child and Young Person in Care Reviews

Due in Month	Apr-17	May-17	Jun-17	Jul-17	Aug-17	Sep-17	Oct-17	Nov-17	Dec-17	Jan-18	Feb-18	Mar-18	Year To Date
Total Due	67	82	60	64	68	65	64	58	61	61	26	74	750
Total Held	67	82	59	63	64	62	62	53	52	58	22	63	707
Total Held In Timescale	62	79	50	53	55	59	60	52	47	52	19	54	642
Percentage of 'Total Due' Held In Timescale	93%	96%	83%	83%	81%	91%	94%	90%	77%	85%	73%	73%	86%
Due in Quarter	Q1 209			Q2 197			Q3 183			Q4 161			
Average % of 'Total Due' Held In Timescale	91%			85%			87%			77%			

6.4 During the performance year April 2017 – March 2018, the IRO service conducted a total of 707 reviews, which is a slight increase on the number of reviews conducted the previous year. The performance, in respect of reviews being held in timescale, fluctuated during the year, being as high as 96% in May of 2017 and as low as 73% in March of 2018. The average for the year was 86%. Factors which affected performance related to:

- The IRO service not being notified early enough that children had become looked after and so there was a delay in booking the 1st review meeting.

- Changes of social worker and communication problems, which meant that a date for the next review had been set by the previous social worker but actions had not been carried forward by the new social worker and so the review had to be rescheduled
- Problems on the day of the review, social worker, carer, or report not available and so the review had to be cancelled
- The IRO report of the previous meeting had not been completed in a timely way and so there was a delaying in acting on recommendations leading to the review being rescheduled

Improving the timelessness of reviews is a key objective in 2018/2019 to achieve performance of 92%– 95%, which will be in line with statistical neighbour best performance. To achieve this all of the points above will need to be addressed.

Children and Young People’s Participation in Reviews:

Participation	Total
PN1 Child attended & spoke for self	332
PN6 Child not attended, views sent	122
Not Recorded	105
PN0 Child aged under 4 at time of meeting	85
PN7 Child not attended & did not send views	83
PN5 Child not attended, advocate briefed with views	12
PN2 Child attended - advocate spoke	5
PN4 Child attended without contributing	4
PN3 Child attended - gave views non verbally	2
Grand Total	750

Children participated in person or through an advocate or by another means in 71% of their reviews (excludes Children under 4 years of age). In 13% of reviews the child or young person did not attend or send their views.

The IRO services key function is to promote the child’s voice within their review and for those children and young people who have not directly been involved in their review the reasons are always closely scrutinised. During 2017-2018, reasons given for non-attendance related to – older children making an informed choice that they did not wish to attend their reviews, illness affecting the child’s ability to participate and in some cases the child not being able to attend the meeting due to their behaviour. In these circumstances the IROs work closely with the connected network of the young person to gain as full a picture of the child’s life as possible.

The level of child participation is lower than would be expected and during 2018-19 the service will review methods for encouraging child participation with a view to significantly increasing the level of child participation.

Completion of Review Reports

On completion of the child’s review the IRO is expected to complete a report on the children’s social care computer system. The report provides a note of the review and its discussions and the recommendation made by the review. During January

and February 2018, an audit of the system found that a number of reports had not been completed in a timely manner by the IRO. A tracking system was introduced to monitor performance in this area and set targets for improvement. The target has been set at the IRO uploading their review report within 20 working days from the review and this will be closely monitored and reported on during 2018 - 2019 to ensure improvement.

The use of Feedback and Consultation Forms

The IROs have generally received positive feedback from young people. Key comments from young people have been

- The IRO has been a consistent person in their life and has followed them through care
- They have advocated for them

Although consultation forms are sent out prior to all reviews and IRO's are using feedback forms with young people, the results need to be more systematically used to ensure they drive service improvement. An objective for 2018 - 19 will be to involve young people in the redesign of consultation and feedback forms and also to look at the possibility of using different communication methods such as texting or the MOMO app.

7. Profile of Children and Young People in Care in Thurrock

Numbers of Children in the care of Thurrock

	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
Number	284	284	333	334	308
Rate per 10,000	68	68	79	80	74
UASC	25	39	64	55	32
Adopted	12	13	7	9	7

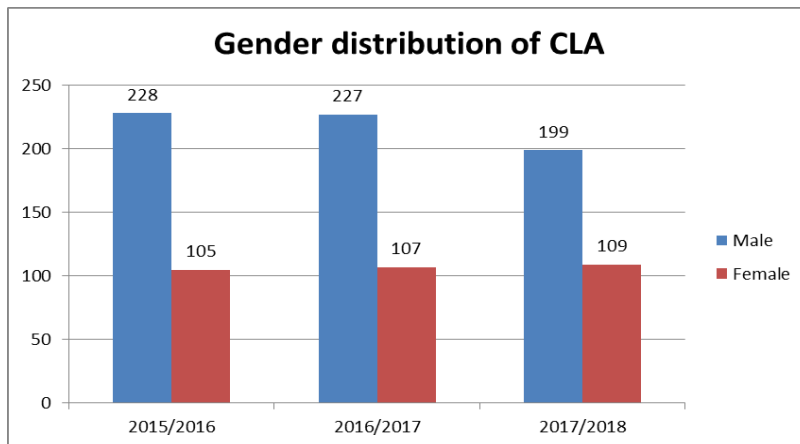
There has been a reduction in the number of children Looked after from March 2017 to April 2018. This has included a reduction in the number of unaccompanied asylum seeking children down to 32 from 64 in March 2016.

Thurrock's rate of children looked after in 2018 was 74 children per 10,000 of the child population which is a reduction from the previous year; but remains high in comparison with statistical neighbours which saw an average of 62 children per 10,000 for England as a whole and, 64 per 10,000 for authorities which are statistically similar to Thurrock. (Comparison figures are based on the 2017 results, the 2018 results will not be available until the autumn of 2018)

There were 7 adoptions completed in 2017/2018, which is lower in comparison to performance achieved in 2015 where 13 children were adopted. A significant factor for this performance has been changes to case law which has stressed that Adoption should only be used as a last resort where no other order will do. The implications for the IRO service are that although children looked after numbers are lower than last

year and therefore case loads are manageable, IRO's will need to carefully consider permanency planning for children and be alert to the potential for drift.

Gender of Children and Young People in Care:



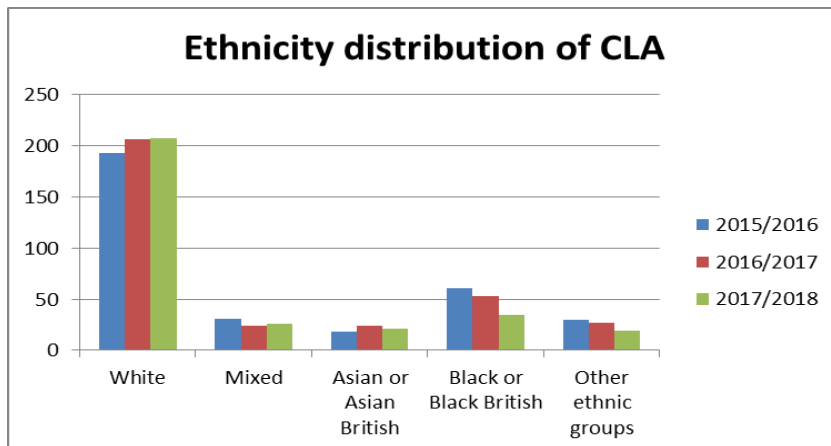
Over a three-year period the gender distribution of children looked after in Thurrock is interesting. The number of girls has remained fairly constant; the number of boys has reduced in this year, partly reflected in the reduction of Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children.

There is still a higher proportion of boys looked after, factors which can be affecting this relate to issue such as youth offending, aggression and non-school attendance, all of which put boys at higher risk of coming into care.

Ethnicity of Children and Young People in Care:

The ethnic profile of Thurrock

	Thurrock Council	England
White British	80.91%	79.75%
All non-White British	19.09%	20.25%
All black, African , Caribbean and black British	7.82%	3.47%
All Asian and Asian British	3.77%	7.82%



The number of children looked after in Thurrock from a white background has remained relatively stable over the past three years, once you allow for the changing numbers of children looked after, there has been a decline in the number of Black or Black British children and children from other ethnic groups.

Children from Asian/Asian British backgrounds represent 8% of the children looked after in Thurrock as opposed to 3.7 % of the total population of the area and Black/Black British children represent 10% of the looked after population as opposed to being 7.82 % of the total population.

There has been a positive reduction in the number of Black/Black British children in the past year. There are also a significant number of other ethnic groups, which include a number of children from Eastern Europe.

Identity is a core factor considered within the dimensions on developmental need (Care Planning Guidance 2015). This domain concerns the child's growing sense of self as a separate and valued person. It is important for a child who is in care to know who s/he is and where s/he has come from, and also to understand, as far as s/he is able, why s/he is being cared for away from home. Race, religion, age, gender, sexuality and disability all contribute to a child's sense of identity, as well as feelings of belonging and acceptance by family, peer group and wider society, including other cultural groups. The importance of understanding who we are and where we come from is recognised in good social work practice, for example through undertaking life story work or other direct work.

It may be difficult to translate the concept of identity into specific actions for social workers, carers and other practitioners, which can be set out in a care or placement plan. Nevertheless enabling a child to develop a positive self-concept and self-esteem is another basic task of parenting, which usually happens naturally in families but may be more difficult in a care context.

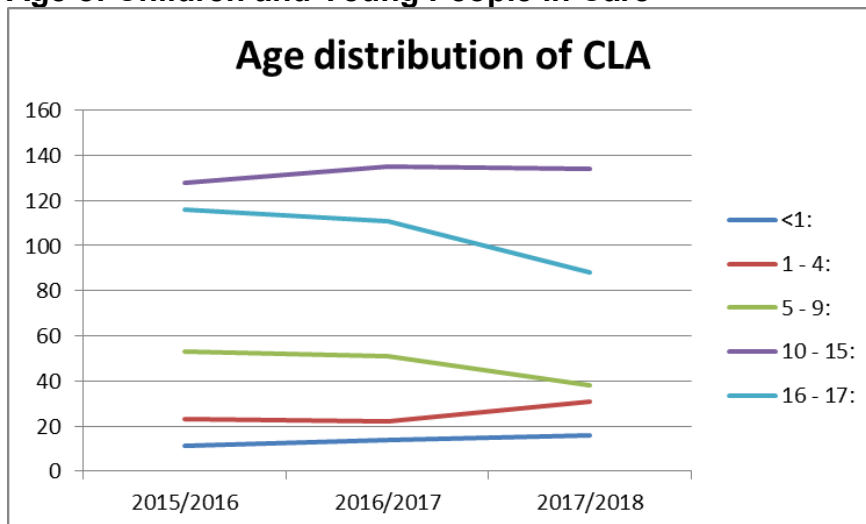
Racial and cultural identity is an important aspect of identity for many Children Looked After. Dual and multiple heritage children are over-represented in the care system nationally and in Thurrock represent 7% of the looked after population. In Thurrock only 2% of the population were registered as dual heritage in the 2011 census. A child in this situation will need to have his/her sense of racial and cultural identity not only preserved but positively promoted. The assessment of each individual child's needs alongside the child's own views will determine the actions

which should be put into the care plan to ensure that s/he is able to develop a strong sense of identity and self-esteem. This will act not only as a strong protective factor against unhealthy risk taking behaviours, but enable the child to maximise his/her talents. Disabled children may also need particular help in developing a positive sense of identity in the face of negative public stereotypes about disability.

The Care Planning, Placement and Case Review (England) Regulations 2010 set out the information, which must be provided in the placement plan [regulation 9 and Schedule 2]. The carer will need to know about the child’s family, his/her race, religion and culture, the language spoken at home and any disabilities or other special needs.

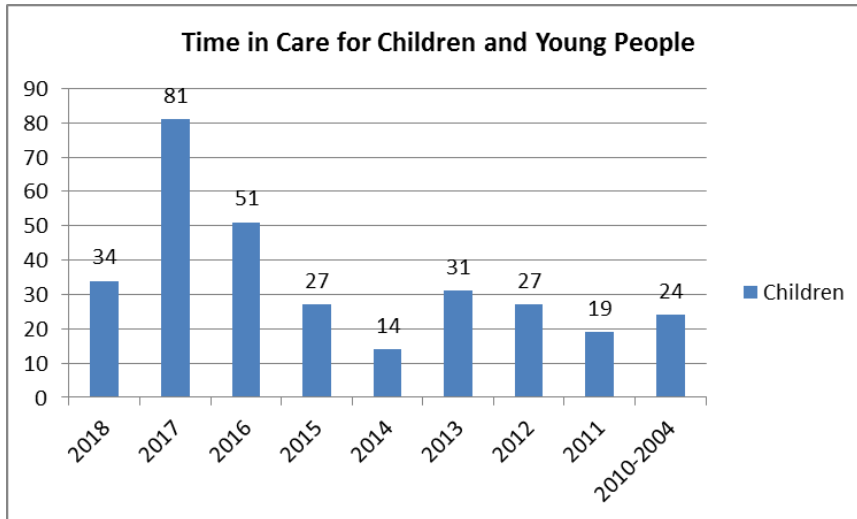
The challenge for IROs and the service has been in ensuring appropriate matching for children seeking placements and in making recommendations for how a child will be supported in the placement. An action for 2018 - 2019 will be to audit the impact of reviews on this vital area of work.

Age of Children and Young People in Care



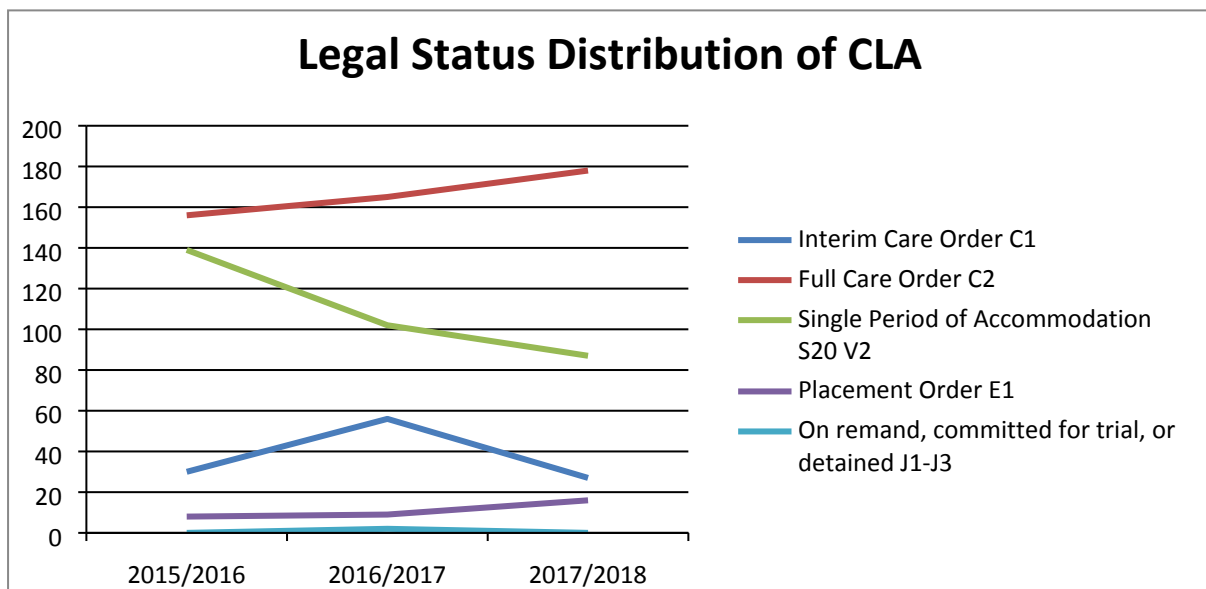
There has been an increase between 2016/17 and 2017/18 in the number of children under one (4 more children) and between one and 4 (10 more children), permanency planning will need to ensure that these children are progressed speedily through the care system, and could lead to a rise in the number of children seeking SGO’s and Adoption in 2018-19. There has also been a reduction in the number of 16-17 year olds which relates to fewer young people remaining in care until they reach 16 and 17 and fewer older children being brought into care.

Time in Care for Children and Young People



The graph above shows the distribution of children according to when they came into care. From this we see that 166 children came into care in the last three years and are still being looked after. There is a significant drop in the number who are still in care who came in during 2015 and 2014, this is to be expected as the majority of children who were brought into care between four and five years ago should have been helped to find long term permanent care either through returning to their family, an SGO arrangement or adoption. The remaining children who came into care more than 5 years ago are likely to be in the long term care of the authority until they reach 18. The challenges for the IRO service are in ensuring that there are effective permanency plans for all children and ensuring cases do not drift. There is also a need to work with long term foster carers to explore whether an SGO would be more appropriate for a child who may have been in placement for over five years.

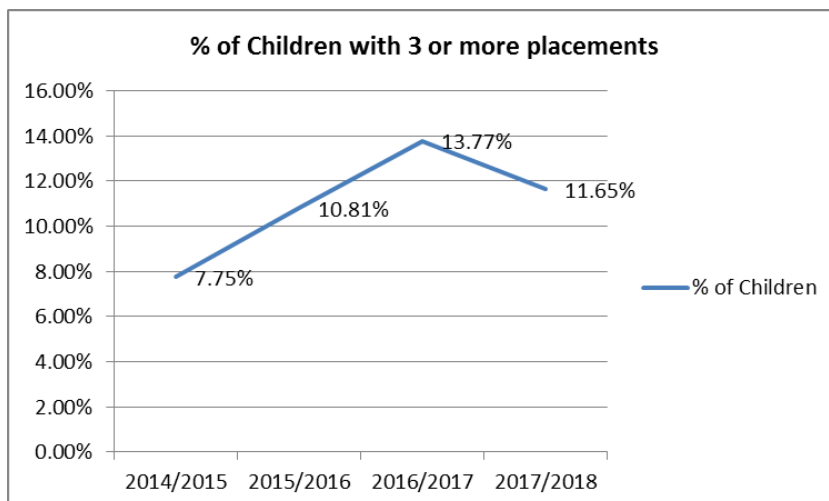
Legal Framework for Children in Care.



There has been a significant reduction in the use of section 20 voluntary accommodations over the past three years. This could relate to the legal judgement by the former president of the family division justice Munby that advised local

authorities against using section 20 for over 6 months without a clear plan for reunification or where a care order may be more appropriate. It could also relate to further diversion work in respect of requests for care for adolescents. The number of children subject to care orders has continued to rise over the past three years (12% increase) in line with the national trend which has seen a 14% increase in care proceedings overall. The out turn for 2017/18 from CAFCAS has indicated the first year when applications fell by 2.7%, and so there may be a further reduction in proceedings in 2018/19. The current situation though is that the majority of children looked after by Thurrock are subject to legal orders which can be seen as good practice. The challenge for the IRO service is to ensure that assessments are accurate and care plans properly reflect the complexity of need.

Placement Stability of Children and Young People in Care.



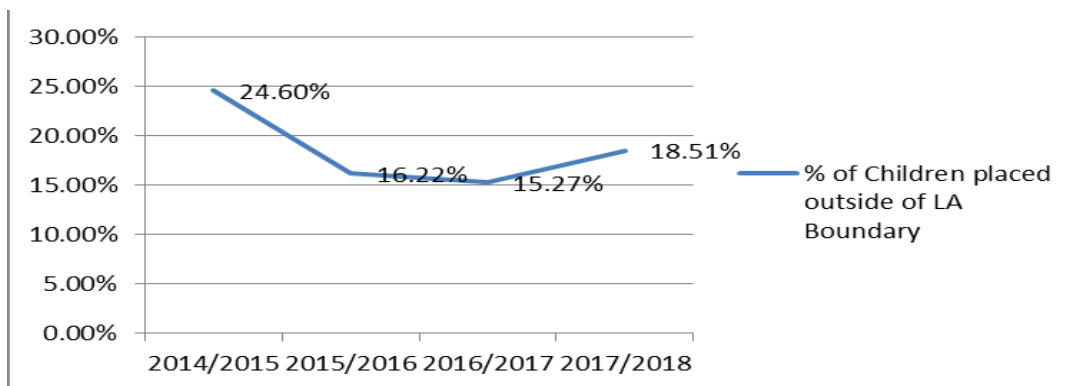
The impact on placement stability relates to the increasing complexity of children’s needs as shown by the rise in care orders. The number of children requiring three or more placements had been steadily increasing, until this year when the trend was halted and there was a 2% reduction, this is improving practice. Factors which greatly affect placement stability are the amount of planning before a child comes into care and the quality of the matching of the placement to the child’s needs. Where children come into care in an emergency, the initial placement choice is more likely to be determined by availability rather than need and there is a higher risk of the placement breaking down.

Placement stability is strongly correlated to the progress that children and young people make in care, as moves caused by placement breakdown can negatively impact on a young person’s sense of worth, emotional resilience and is disruptive to developing friendship and support networks and educational achievement. Therefore

a key role of the IRO is to support placement stability through scrutiny of placement plans. Placement stability in Thurrock is at 11.65% in comparison to the England and statistical neighbour averages of 10% and the IRO service will continue to monitor this area carefully.

Placement Location of Children and Young People in Care

Percentage of children placed more than 20 miles from their home address

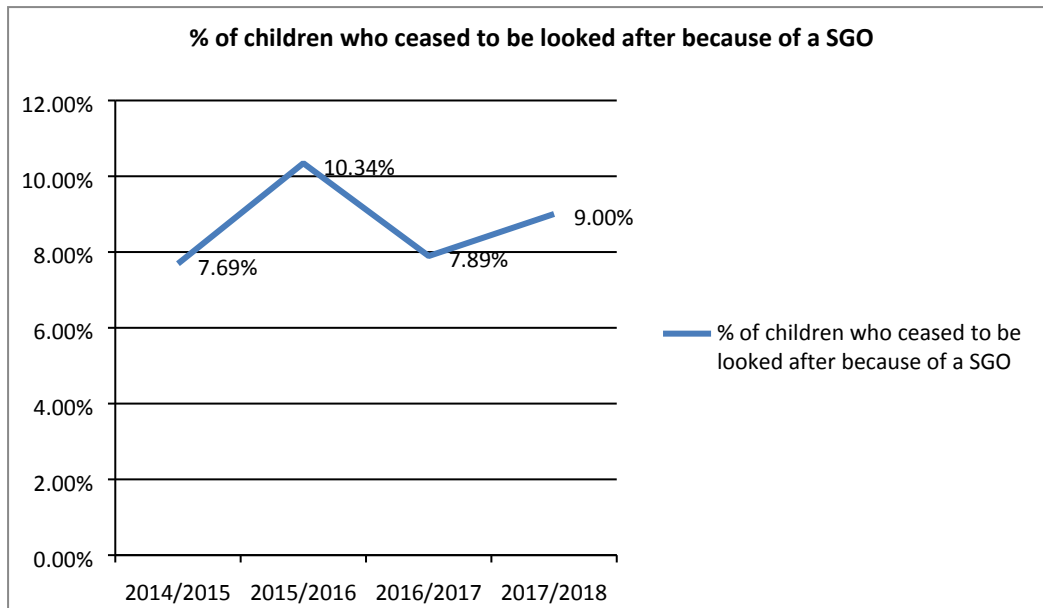


The above summary chart is showing the percentage of children placed more than 20 miles from their home address. The service recognises the need for every effort to be made to place children as close to their home and community as possible so far as is consistent with their need to be safeguarded, or to have access to specialist therapeutic services.

The IRO service have highlighted that for a small minority of children in care who have complex needs and extreme behavioural support needs there are very limited local options for appropriate placements, and these children are often those which end up placed at distance. The IRO service will monitor these placements closely to ensure that any opportunity to bring them closer to home is taken.

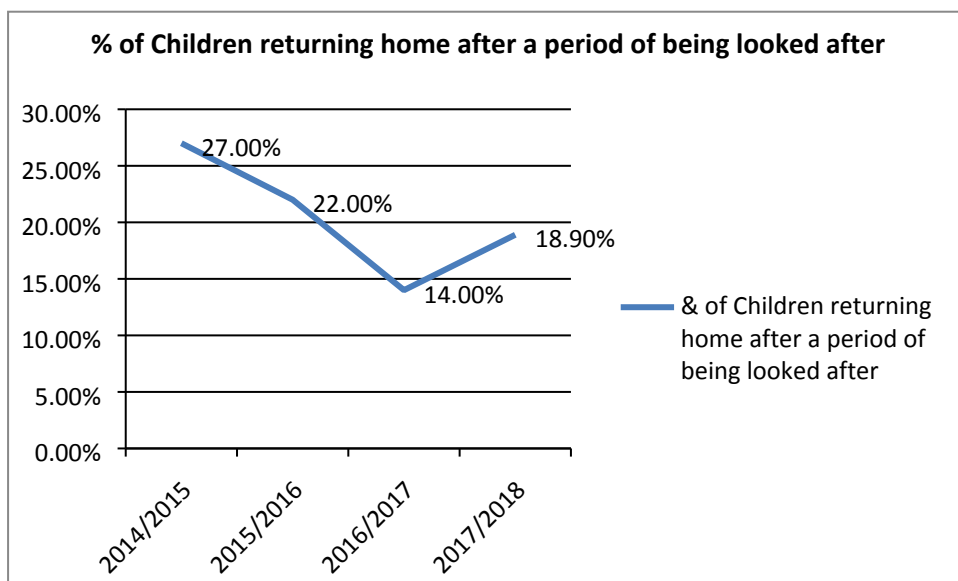
Use of Special Guardianship

A special guardianship order (SGO) is an order appointing one or more individuals to be a child's 'special guardian'. It is a private law order made under the Children Act 1989 and is intended for those children who cannot live with their birth parents and who would benefit from a legally secure placement. It is a more secure order than a child arrangements order because a parent cannot apply to discharge it unless they have the permission of the court to do so, however it is less secure than an adoption order because it does not end the legal relationship between the child and his/her birth parents. The Adoption and Children Act 2002 introduced Special Guardianship and Special Guardianship Orders.



Special Guardianship Orders can be used in care proceedings when looking at placing the child away from parents with friends or family members and offer a child a more “normal” childhood experience. They are also used to convert long term fostering arrangements, again the reason is the child is not subject to the formal statutory reviewing procedures, and provides for a higher degree of commitment from the carer and a better chance of long term permanency for the child. In Thurrock 9% of children left care through special guardianship as opposed to 11% in the Eastern Region, and 12% nationally. We need to consider if we could make more use of special guardianship, and the reviewing service will need to carefully look at plans to identify the possibility of using special guardianship.

Returning home from care



This graph allows us to consider how care is being used in Thurrock with the aim of working with parents to return their child to their care. This figure neatly maps

against the previous graph which showed 80% of children are subject to care orders. We can see from the graph that 19% of children last year returned to their parents care, and the majority of these did so between their 16th and 18th year. The issue here is the use of local authority care is increasingly happening where there are high risk issues, formal legal proceedings are required and the child or young person is increasing less likely to return home. It would be worth considering this hypothesis and auditing reunification plans to see how successful they have been.

8. IRO Service impact on the outcomes for children and young people.

Dispute resolutions and escalation

One of the key functions of an IRO is to oversee the needs and rights of every young person in the care of the Local Authority. This responsibility is outlined in the Care Planning, Placement and Case Review (England) Regulations 2015 and IRO Handbook 2010. Every child in care has an Independent Reviewing Officer appointed to ensure that their Care Plan fully reflects their needs and that the actions set out in the plan are consistent with the Local Authority's legal responsibilities towards them as a child or young person in care.

An IRO will ensure that the wishes and feelings of the child are given due consideration by the Local Authority throughout the whole time the child is in care and will monitor the performance of the Local Authority in relation to the child's case. On occasions this means that it will come to the attention of the IRO that there is a problem in relation to the care of a child or young person, for example in relation to planning for the care of the child, or the implementation of the plan or decisions relating to it, resource issues or poor practice by the Social Worker. When this happens the IRO is required to seek a resolution.

It is acknowledged that the resolution of disputes can be time consuming and can create tensions between the IRO and the Local Authority. Nevertheless, the child's allocated IRO is personally responsible for activating and seeking a resolution, even if it may not be in accordance with the child's wishes and feelings if, in the IRO's view, it is in accordance with the best interest and welfare of the child, as well as his or her human rights. In compliance with the IRO Handbook 2010 there is in place a formal Dispute Resolution Process whilst acknowledging and giving primacy to informal resolution where possible.

Thurrock's IRO's manage most disagreement and challenge very effectively and on an informal basis. More often than not, discussion with social workers and their managers is effective in achieving the progress required. That said, achieving a culture of effective challenge is difficult and success is ultimately rooted in confident and respectful professional relationships. At its best, challenge is perceived as helpful and supports professional learning and development which social workers and managers take forward in other cases and elements of their practice.

A Dispute Resolution Process is only effective if IROs, social workers and managers all perceive it to be effective and this remains an area which requires further and continued monitoring.

Formal Disputes Raised 2017-2018

The IRO Service recorded 67 completed dispute resolutions which were about the following issues.

Number	Area of Practice Raised
11	Pathway Plan for child leaving care not completed
2	Permanency Plan for the child was not robust enough and had to be changed
24	Report had not been prepared for the review meeting
3	An issue regarding the plan for the child's education had to be addressed
3	Child's Health Assessment needed to be completed to address a specific issue
1	An SGO application needed to be made for the child (case drifting)
2	Specific Assessment for the child had not been completed
3	There was a concern that the placement was not meeting the child's need

Feedback from the Children in Care Council

The Children in Care Council was asked to provide feedback on the IRO service and made the following points

- Individual IROs were seen to be child centred and committed to their young people
- Young People said they trusted their IRO
- For some young people the IRO was the most consistent person – *“I've had her all the time I've been in care “*
- One young person felt their IRO was a good advocate – *they got things done!*
- Young people wanted more contact with their IRO
- Young people wanted to be able to talk to their IRO between reviews
- Some young people didn't see the point in going to reviews
- Some young people felt they got told off at reviews
- *They act as independently as possible and are not afraid to challenge other professionals on behalf of their young people.*
- *IRO's don't follow up on recommendations and chase up Social Workers actions until the following LAC Review and often nothing has been done within the six months between the reviews. It would be good if they could do this between reviews.*

It is positive that young people appear to value their IRO's and want more contact with them. During 2018-2019 the service will implement mid-point reviews, where IRO will make contact with their children and the placement to monitor the progress of plan and build their ongoing relationship with the young person in between reviews.

Audit Activity

In preparation of this report an Audit was undertaken of CLA reviews (30) by the Service Manager safeguarding and Quality Assurance.

Key issues from the Audit

Current IRO practice is variable although there were some good examples and some very good recording of children's views and wishes; this was not always consistently found in the cases audited.

Practice issues, which need to be addressed

- Review Minutes not written up in timescale - some IROs were completing their write ups on time and in some cases within 2 days of the review, others were not completing them until a few weeks before the next review
- Child Participation was only recorded in detail in a minority of reviews
- Quality of recommendations - in some reviews there were clear child focussed recommendations. In a small number however there were too much reliance on stock phrases, or simply statements such as - continue to monitor contact
- Challenge to care planning - some cases showed robust and well thought out challenge. However in a minority of cases where planning was weak and care plans lacked focus and direction there was insufficient challenge from the IRO.

9. Next Steps for the IRO Service: 2018 - 2019

- 1. Implement IRO review minutes tracker and ensure all reviews to be on the system within 20 working days of the meeting**
- 2. Complete workshop with IROs and team managers on improving the quality CLA reviews**
- 3. IROs to complete development project with children in care council on child participation. IROs to review training needs on child participation. Aim to raise the level of participation in reviews to 90%**
- 4. Introduce compliance audit of all CLA reviews to monitor and ensure minimum practice standards (In place as of 1st July 2018)**
- 5. Review the dispute resolution procedure and tracking mechanism (Completed and implemented from 1st August 2018)**
- 6. Complete Audit of reunification plans**
- 7. Complete review of potential SGO cases – in conjunction with Permanency Panel**
- 8. Redesign of consultation and feedback forms and also to look at the possibility of using different communication methods such as texting or the MOMO app.**
- 9. Follow up audit of CLA reviews January 2019**
- 10. Deliver a set of practice standards for the IRO's by October 2018**
- 11. Develop and implement – midpoint reviews for all children looked after by December 2018**

Work Programme

Committee: Corporate Parenting

Year: 2018/2019

Dates of Meetings: 6 June 2018, 5 September 2018, 15 January 2019, 6 March 2019

Topic	Lead Officer	Requested by Officer/Member
6 June 2018		
Information on Recent External Placements for Young People	Janet Simon	Officers
Briefing Note – Attainment of Children Looked After 2017 Validated Data	Keeley Pullen	Officers
Social Care Development Plan: CLA Progress Report	Sheila Murphy	Officers
Children’s Social Care Performance	Sheila Murphy	Officers
Work Programme	Democratic Services Officer	Standard Item
5 September 2018		
Annual Report on the Health of Looked After Children	Paula Gregory	Members
Children’s Social Care Performance	Sheila Murphy	Members
IRO Annual Report for 2017/18	Brian Relph	Officers
Children in Care Council Update	Children in Care	Officers
Work Programme	Democratic Services Officer	Standard Item
15 January 2019		
Children in Care Council Update	Children in Care	Officers
Virtual School Annual Report	Keeley Pullen	Officers
Placement Update of Care Packages	Janet Simon	Officers

IRO Annual Report	Neale Laurie	Officers
Work Programme	Democratic Services Officer	Standard Item
6 March 2019		
Placement Update of Care Packages	Janet Simon	Officers
Work Programme	Democratic Services Officer	Standard Item
New Municipal Year		