

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 **25 January 2024**

Committee Room 2, Civic Offices 3, New Road, Grays, Essex, RM17 6SL.

Membership:

Councillors Paul Arnold (Chair), Vikki Hartstean (Vice-Chair), Adam Carter, John Cecil, Georgette Polley, Cici Manwa and Augustine Ononaji

Wendy Caswell, Chair, The One Team, Foster Carer Association
Jackie Enifer, Vice-Chair, Thurrock One Team Foster Care Association
Representative

Substitutes:

Councillors Gary Collins, Jack Duffin, James Halden, Sara Muldowney and Sue Shinnick

Agenda

Open to Public and Press

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1 Apologies for Absence	
2 Minutes	5 - 8
To approve as a correct record the minutes of the Corporate Parenting Committee meeting held on 5 th September 2023.	
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	CiCC (Children in Care Council) Presentation	9 - 14
6	Children's Social Care Performance 2023-24	15 - 34
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Queries regarding this Agenda or notification of apologies:

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

Agenda published on: **17 January 2024**

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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 5 September 2023 at 7.00 pm

- Present:** Councillors Paul Arnold (Chair), Vikki Hartstean (Vice-Chair), Adam Carter, John Cecil, Georgette Polley, Cici Manwa and Augustine Ononaji
- In attendance:** Janet Simon, Assistant Director, Children's Social Care and Early Help
Dan Jones, Strategic Lead, Looked After Children
Luke Froment, Service Manager After Care
Clare Moore, Strategic Lead for the Youth Offending Service and Prevention
Liz Shields, Service Manager Adoption Service
Carley Banks, Children in Care Council
Tina Russel, Assistant Director SET CAMHS and Partnerships
Kenna-Victoria Healey, Senior Democratic Services Officer
-

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

11. Minutes

Members discussed the minutes from the previous meeting held on 18 July 2023 and sought that it be noted Members had an in-depth discussion on Initial Health Assessments under the Children's Social Care Performance item.

12. Items of Urgent Business

There were no urgent items of business.

13. Declaration of Interests

Councillor Carter declared an interest in that a relative assisted with the Christmas Care Leavers Dinner.

14. Children's Social Care Performance 2023-24

The Assistant Director for Children's Social Care and Early Help presented the report found within the agenda.

Members discussed and noted the figures relating to Initial Health Assessments (IHA) highlighting their frustration that there appeared to be a 30% reduction in IHA being completed within the recommended timeframe and yet NELFT had been provided with additional funds to assist with the IHA. The committee heard that the reasons for assessment not heard on time

could be down to ensuring forms had been correctly completed to meet the needs of the child.

The Committee requested to be kept updated on the performance of IHAs.

RESOLVED

- 1. That members note improvements and good practice and areas for improvement and development in Children's Social Care and note the work that is undertaken to ensure good and improving performance.**
- 2. Members provide challenge and support to the service to continually promote good outcomes for children.**

15. Joint Housing Protocol for Care Leavers

The Strategic Lead for Looked After Children presented the report found within the agenda.

Throughout discussions the following were discussed:

- A care leaver could stay with a placement once turning 18 years old, if agreed with the Foster Care.
- Additional support was able to be provided via the Head Start Housing scheme and Aftercare Team.
- Advice and support were offered and provided by the Aftercare Team for Care Leavers such as financial advice.

Members heard how as part of the Council's statutory duty, Officers kept in touch with Care Leavers offering support in finding suitable accommodation whether that be privately renting or as part of the Head Start Housing scheme.

RESOLVED

- 1. For the Committee to note the statutory duties of the Local Authority to support young people in obtaining suitable accommodation and how we plan to meet these duties.**
- 2. For the Committee to have oversight of the joint protocols and be involved in the ongoing review of delivery across Children's Services and Housing Services**

16. After Care Service Report

The Service Manager After Care introduced the report found within the agenda.

During discussions the Committee heard there were currently 28 personal advisers within the Aftercare Team, with an additional 3 roles to be recruited too. It was commented that retention of staff was important so be able to provide continuity for Looked After Children as support was on offer and provide until the young person reached 25 year old.

Members were advised officers had worked hard to develop a care leaving form which enabled young people leaving care to give their feedback on the service, which in turn assisted with helping officers to improve the service. It was explained how annual events were held such as summer BBQs, which allowed young people to meet other care leavers and gave the opportunity to seek support if they wished.

The Chair of the Committee thanked Officers for their commitment to the young people they were supporting.

RESOLVED:

- 1. That the Members of the Committee are informed about Thurrock's Aftercare service and the support offered to Care Leavers.**
- 2. Members of the Committee promote Corporate Parenting.**
- 3. Members to provide feedback and challenge to the service in meeting its duties and achieving good outcomes for our young people.**

17. Report on Transitions to Adult Services for Care Leavers and Children in Care

The Strategic Lead for Looked After Children presented the report found within the agenda. During discussions it was acknowledged that Officers hoped to fill the current vacancies by the end of the year.

Members heard how young people met their personal adviser at 16 years old, this gave the opportunity to be able to build a relationship with them before they became a care leaver. It was mentioned Officers were mindful of the number of professionals there could already be in a young person's life and so this was taken into account when introducing them to their personal adviser.

RESOLVED:

Members of the committee review the work of the CLA Service and Preparing for Adulthood Team in meeting the Council's role as a Corporate Parent. In relation to the work done for Children in Care and Care leavers to transition to Adult services where it is appropriate to do so.

18. Report on 'Staying Put' Policy and Provision in Thurrock

The Strategic Lead for Looked After Children presented the report found within the agenda.

RESOLVED:

- 1. Members are informed on the updated Staying Put Policy.**

2. Members review and comment on the policy and note the Council's responsibility as a Corporate Parent.

19. Verbal Update - Children in Care Council

The Assistant Director for Children's Social Care and Early Help advised the Committee that the Children in Care Council (CICC) as a service had been brought back into the Council under Children's Services.

Members heard that the new lead officer for the CICC would be attending the next meeting in the new year and would be accompanied with the Chair and Vice-Chair of CICC, to give an update to the Committee.

20. Work Programme

Members discussed the work programme and asked that the following reports be included:

- An update on Initial Health Assessments
- An update on missing episodes to be included in the Children's Social Care Performance report.

The recording of the meeting can be found from the following link:
[Corporate Parenting Committee - Tuesday 5 September 2023, 7:00pm - Thurrock Council committee meeting webcasts \(public-i.tv\)](#)

The meeting finished at 8.46 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

Children in Care Council

Corporate Parenting Report January 2024

The Children in Care Council (CICC) was previously run by Open Door until October 2023. It is now run by the Participation and Engagement Officer, Carly Banks (Thurrock Children's Services). The first meeting was held on 29th November 2023 where we discussed the purpose of the group and how we think it should be run going forward.

We have 10 members who are part of the whatsapp group and of those, 6 are active members attending meetings.

We have decided to merge our group with the "Thurrock Young Voices " group who are open to all young people aged 11+ who have a Social Worker, Support Worker or Personal Advisor. Young voices had 14 members (some members crossed over both groups) The merge brings the total number of members to 19.



What are the benefits to merging the groups?



We can give more young people an opportunity to have their say, regardless of whether they are in care or living with their family which makes us more of an inclusive group.

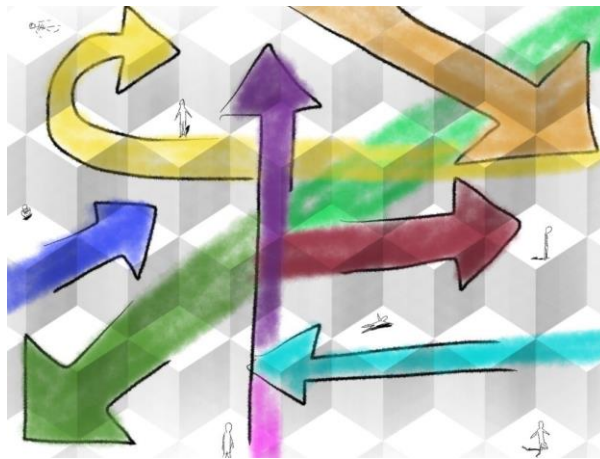
We can have a group free of labels given to us by the reason we have a Social Worker or Support Worker ie Child in Care, Care Leaver etc.

We can expand our group, meet new people and make new friends

We can achieve more together! We have worked on the same projects but in different groups. Some of our members have been part of both groups which makes things repetitive.

This group is for all young people, however, if we are in care, we will still be able to separately have our say on things that affect only children in care.

The journey so far...



- Both groups agreed on how the group should be run and that the CICC will adopt the group name 'Thurrock Young Voices'
- Co-Chairs have been agreed, (one from each of the original groups) with their individual roles identified. Meetings will be planned together, with an introduction of young people presentations.
- Both groups have come up with rules and expectations for members and the purpose of the group going forward, including goals for the year ahead
- All current members (active or not) have been invited to join the new whatsapp group.
- All future meetings to be held at the Tilbury Youth Hub, Brennan Road - this will improve the ability for young people to join virtually and also allow for some fun and games outside of the meeting time. Meeting time has also been extended.
- Member packs will be designed by the group which includes a t-shirt and hoodie with Young Voices Logo (in line with Youth Cabinet)

- Young Voices arranged a Christmas slumber party for members to meet and socialise.

Young Voices Christmas Slumber Party

Young Voices came up with the idea of planning and hosting an event for young people over the Christmas period. The vision was a slumber party / movie night with games and food, where all were invited to dress in Pyjamas or Christmas jumpers.

This was a great opportunity to introduce the members of CICC and Young Voices and also promote the group with other young people.

17 Young People attended on 22nd December and it was a really fun afternoon. Two of our IROs came and joined in some of the games too!

Members of both groups introduced themselves to everyone and explained what happens in the groups and how they can become members.

Here are some photos from the event (some identities have been protected).







Things we would like to work on in 2024...

To support the Corporate Parenting Committee meeting to be more young person friendly

- Young Voices to be first on the agenda
- Authors of reports to consider the language used in reports and meetings and whether a summary would be better for young people attending
- To consider the structure / formality of the meeting and if Young Voices need to be present for the entire meeting
- Suggestion for CPC Chair and another member to meet with Young Voices to discuss how this and other ideas could be achieved.

More of our goals for 2024-

- To bring Back the 'Power of Participation' Training for workers (Run by young people)
- More activities with workers involved - football/ sports suggested
- Two big events for Young People per year, like 'Young Voices at Grangewaters'
- Young Voices Member packs including t-shirt and hoodie to be created
- Create a Young Inspectors programme

25th January 2023		ITEM: 6
Corporate Parenting Committee		
Children’s Social Care Performance 2023-24		
Wards and communities affected: All	Key Decision: Non-key	
Report of: Children’s Social Care		
Accountable Assistant Director: Janet Simon, Assistant Director, Children’s Social Care and Early Help		
Accountable Director: Sheila Murphy, Executive Director, Children’s Services		
This report is: Public		

Executive Summary

This report provides information on the performance across Children Looked After and Aftercare. The overall performance for the service is good, this report focusses on data for Quarter 2 (July to September) 2023-24.

At the end of Q2 2023-24, 288 children were looked after by Thurrock Council, a further 276 young adults were receiving services from Aftercare. Children and young people are visited regularly, and the management of missing children is consistent and reflects good partnership with the police and Thurrock Community Safety. Improvement is required in the timeliness of Initial Health Assessment which is an area of focus with health partners.

The Care Leaving Service continues to be a focus for improvement, particularly to keep in touch and support young people into employment or education and to ensure they have the right accommodation to meet their needs and feel safe in the environments they live in.

Children are generally placed with foster carers or, where possible, with family members. Thurrock Council continues to embed it’s ‘Think Family’ approach to reduce the need for children to enter care. Foster Care recruitment continues to develop local placements for children.

1. Recommendation(s)

- 1.1 That members note improvements in Children’s Social Care and note the work that is undertaken to ensure good and improving performance.

1.2 Members scrutinise the performance data and provide challenge to the service as required on how, as corporate parents we provide appropriate services, keep children and young people safe and promote good outcomes.

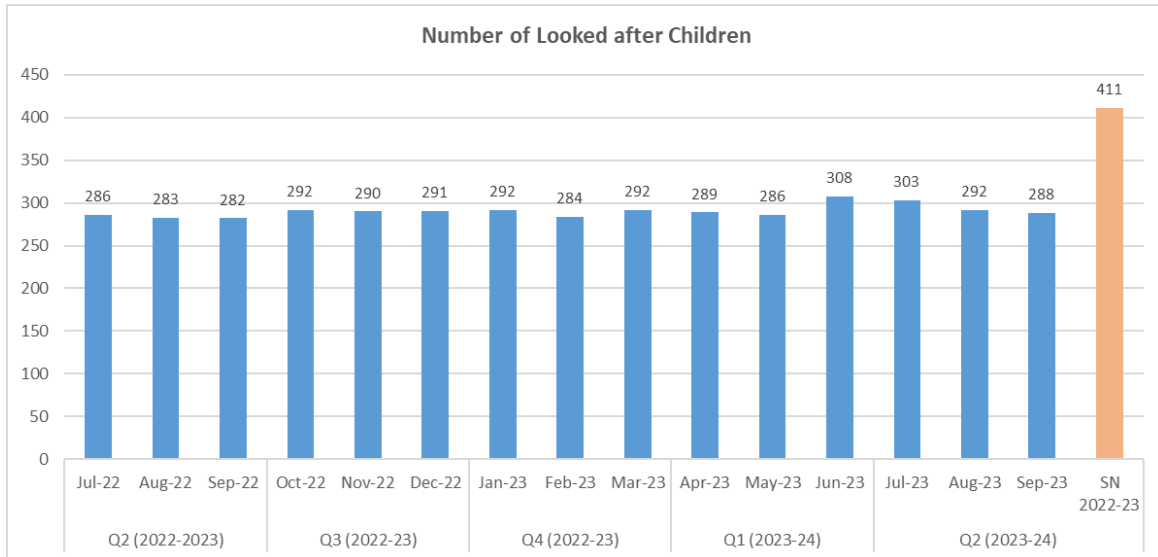
2. Introduction and Background

- 2.1 This report provides a summary of Children's Social Care performance. It highlights key demand indicators for Children Looked After and Care Leavers, such as the number of children who are looked after, benchmarking data and key performance indicators.
- 2.2 Thurrock produces a number of data sets and performance reports to meet its internal and external reporting requirements. The data in this report is from the At a Glance monthly performance report, regional benchmarking data and national data sets. External reporting requirements include the annual statutory data return to the Department for Education (DfE) that all Local Authorities must provide.
- 2.3 This data has been presented and discussed with the Children & Families Performance Group.
- 2.4 Teams and Managers use the data to understand and respond to changes in activity levels, to monitor and respond to the quality and timeliness of services and to collate information about how well children are doing. The information is also discussed with front line workers.

3. Performance Data for Children Looked After

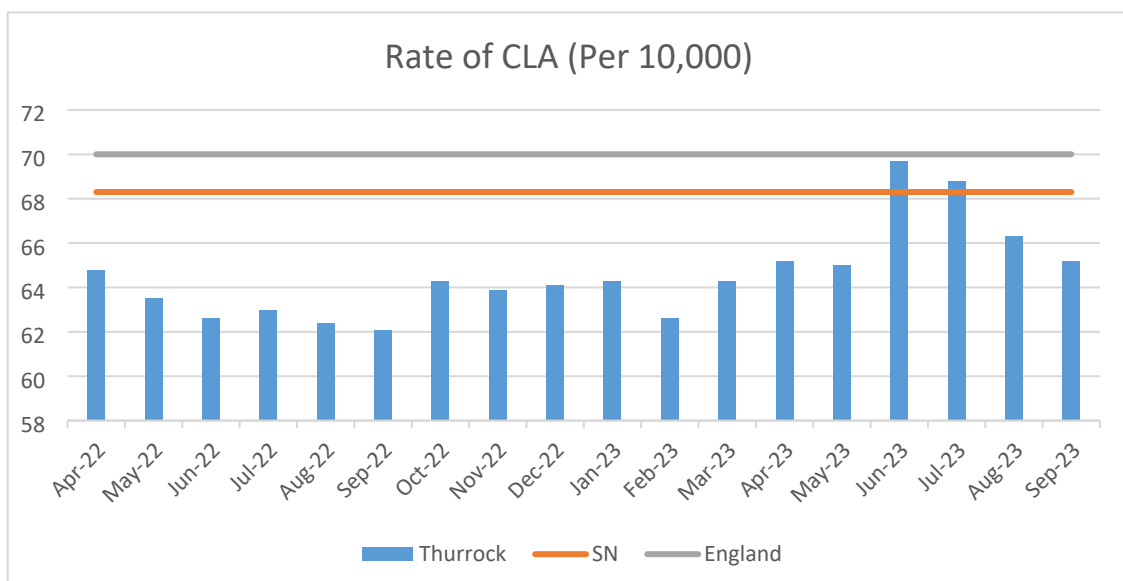
3.1 Number of Children Looked After (CLA)

The graph below shows the number of children who were Looked After at the end of each month. There is monitoring of children who may need to become Looked After and there are regular reviews of children entering care. Where safe and appropriate, children are returned to their families. Thurrock's Children in Care numbers have remained relatively stable year to date from 288 in April 2023 to 288 in September 2023 with two peaks in June and July. The end of Quarter 2, as at end September 2023, saw a decrease of 19 to 288 from 307 as at the end of June 2023 (Quarter 1). During September 6 children entered care, of these 3 were UASC and the remainder entered care as the result of safeguarding action by Thurrock Council and its partners.



3.2 The Rate of Children Looked After per 10,000 population

The graph below shows the rate of Children Looked After per 10,000 of the child population of under 18-year-olds in Thurrock. At the end of March 2023 there were 292 Children Looked After in Thurrock with the rate of 66 per 10,000. Based on the latest available benchmarking data (2021-22), Thurrock is below the Statistical Neighbour average of 68 and England average of 70 as at the end of September 2023. This demonstrates the work throughout the service to make sure the right children are coming into care and working with families to keep children within their family network/home where it is safe to do so. These numbers are despite the rise in numbers of UASC as a result of the national threshold rising. 288 children looked after at the end of September, equates to 65 per 10,000 population, this remains below the statistical and national outturn stated above.

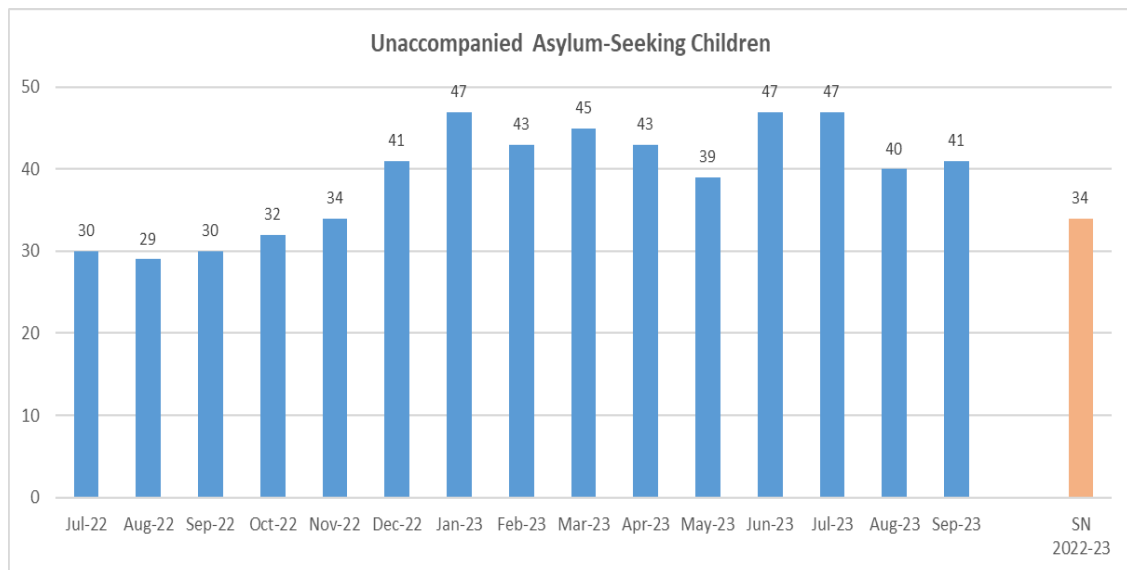


3.3 Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children (UASC)

UASC are a subset of Thurrock's Children Looked After number. As an authority with ports of entry, Thurrock has a steady number of new UASC. The National Transfer Scheme (NTS) protocol for UASC first began operating in 2016 which formed a voluntary agreement between local authorities in England to ensure a fairer, more equitable distribution of unaccompanied children across local authorities with a threshold of 0.07% of the local child population. After February 2022 all local authorities have been directed to participate in the NTS. From August 2022 the operating threshold was increased representing an increase from 0.07 to 0.1%. For Thurrock this represented an increase in both the UASC and CLA population of 17 children with the threshold rising from 27 to 44 UASC. This means that Thurrock has to accept transfers of UASC in the scheme if we are below 44 UASC in our Child Looked After population. This represents an increased demand for placements, social work time and After Care support on a long-term basis. As at end September 23 Thurrock had 41 UASC children.

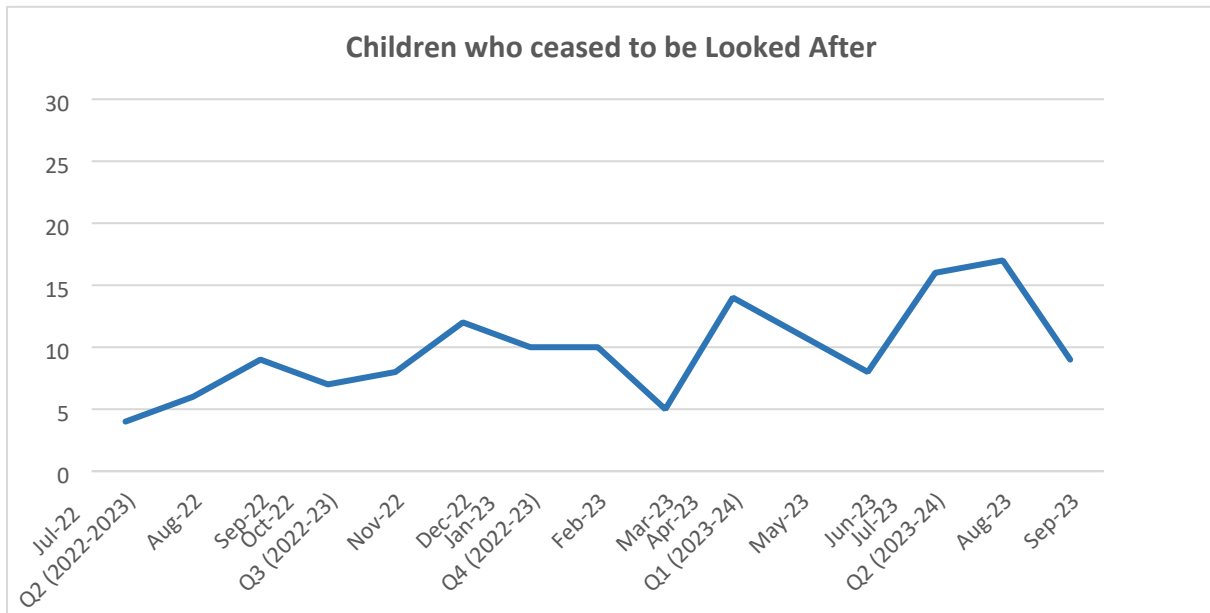
When a local authority reaches its allocated number there are arrangements in place for new arrivals to be transferred via the National Transfer Scheme (NTS). The NTS is operated by Central Government with the Home Office responsible for administration of the scheme.

The below graph shows the number of UASC that were looked after as at the end of each month since July 2022.



3.4 Children Looked After episodes ceased

It is normal for the number of children leaving care to fluctuate. Between April 2022 and March 2023, 97 children ceased to be looked after compared to 125 in the same period in 2021-22. During Q1 2023-2024 33 children ceased to be looked after, and during Q2 2023-24 42 children ceased to be looked after.



The most common reasons for children ceasing to be looked after was remaining with current carers and care being taken over by another LA in UK.

There are four factors contributing and impacting on the numbers of children in care in Thurrock:

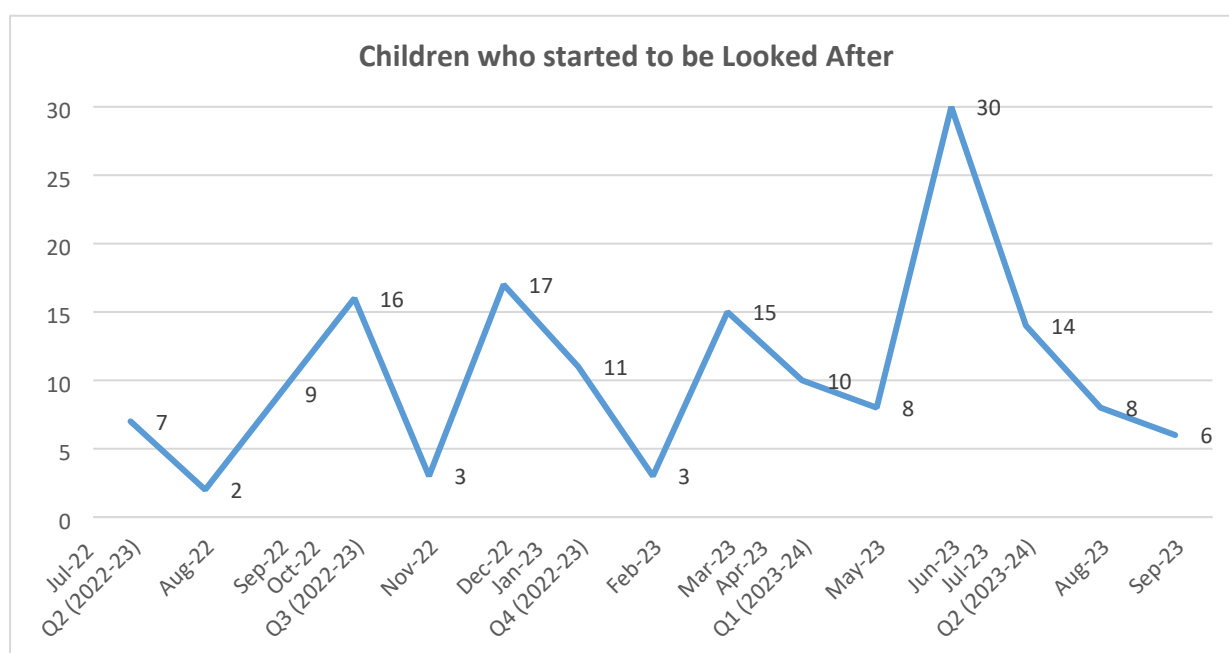
- Numbers of children entering care
- Numbers of children leaving care
- Numbers of UASC entering care
- Numbers of UASC who remain looked after by Thurrock

The below charts show entries in and exits out of care over the last few years including the changing trajectory of the UASC population in line with the rise from 23% entering care in Q1 to 39% in Q2.

	2018-19	2019-20	2020-21	2021-22	2022-23	Q1 2023-24 (Apr-Jun)	Q2 2023-24 (Jul-Sept)
Total number Entering Care	203	242	150	121	99	48	28
UASC entering Care	91	75	36	38	33	11	11
Total number Exiting Care	211	235	148	122	97	33	42
Number of CLA at end of reporting period	290	298	298	295	292	308	288
UASC Population at end of reporting period (% of CLA population)	31 (10.6%)	23 (7.7%)	24 (8%)	28 (9.4%)	44 (15%)	47 (15%)	40 (14%)

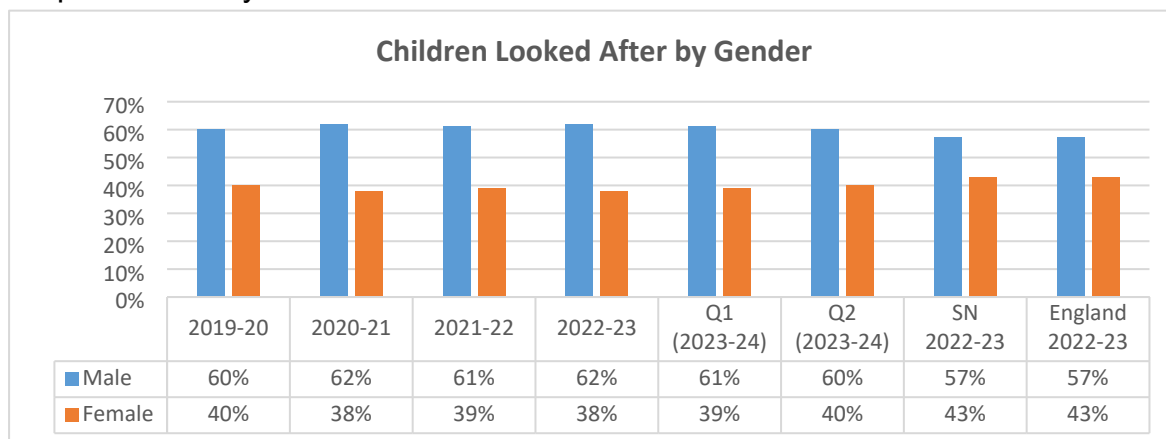
3.5 Children Looked After episodes started

It is normal for fluctuations to be seen with children starting episodes of care, this is shown by the graph below. There was however a sharp increase during June 2023 of 30 children starting an episode of care. The graph below demonstrates June was an exceptional month for the number of children entering care due to 9 UASC arrivals and safeguarding action in respect of larger sibling groups. In Q2 the numbers for children starting episodes of care have returned to normal levels following the spike in June.



3.6 Children Looked After by Gender

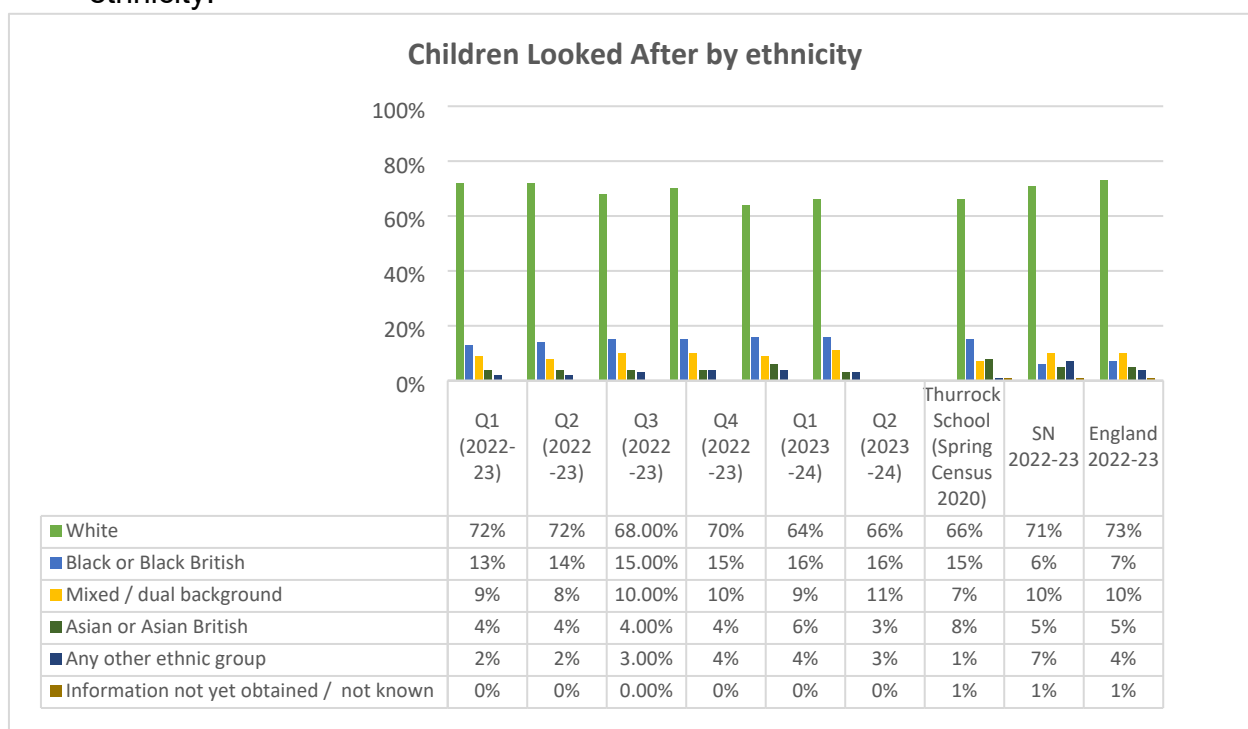
Based on the benchmarking data in 2022-23, the gender breakdown for males is slightly above Statistical Neighbours and England averages as at the end of September 2023, which is a reflection of our percentage of UASC, who are predominately males.



3.7 Children Looked After by Ethnicity

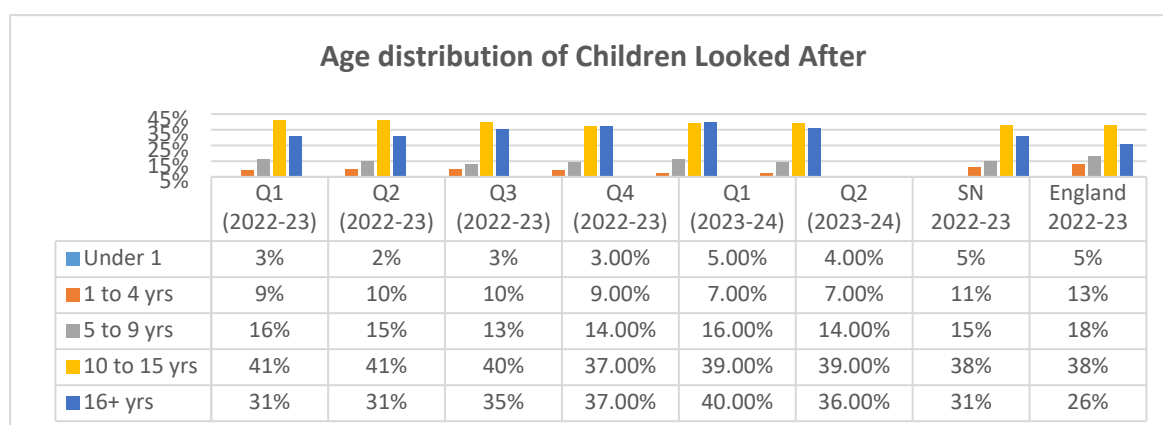
Statistical Neighbour and England averages are included. However, for Thurrock, school census data provides a more appropriate comparison, given the population of Thurrock.

Thurrock's Children Looked After are predominantly White which is in line with Thurrock's School Census in Spring 2020 and the Statistical Neighbour and England averages. Quarter 2 2023-24 outturn saw a decrease in Asian or Asian British, a slight increase in Mixed/dual background and a 2% increase in White ethnicity.



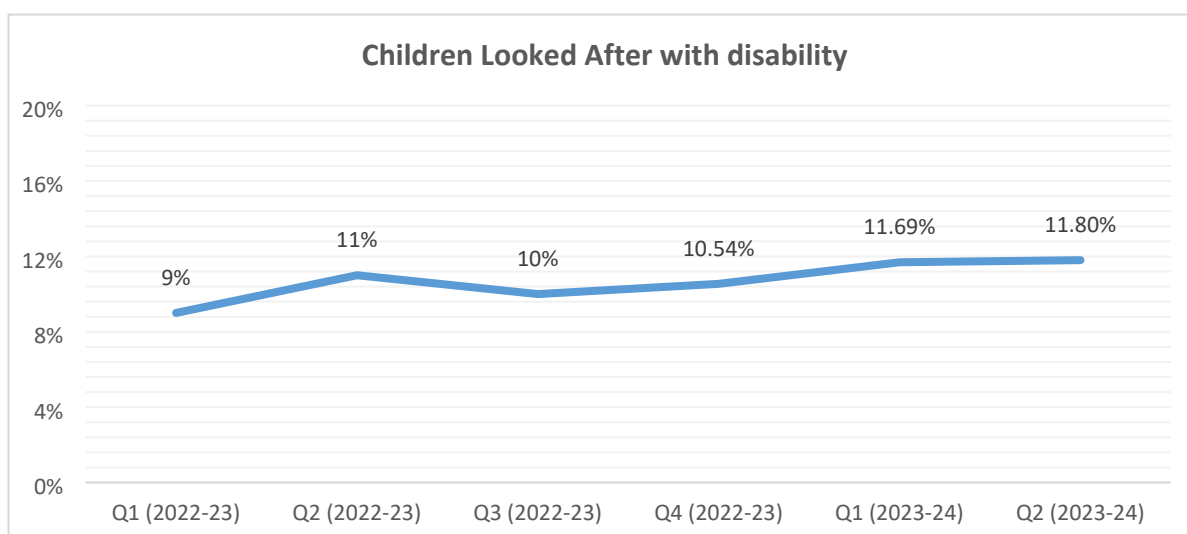
3.8 Children Looked After age profile

Based on the benchmarking data as of March 2023, the age profile of the Children Looked After cohort remains mostly stable and largely in line with the Statistical Neighbour and England averages. We are however, seeing a larger percentage in age group 16+ years a lower percentage in age group 1 to 4 years, when compared to both statistical neighbours and national out-turns for 2022 - 23. To some extent this reflects Thurrock's status as a point of entry for UASC given all most all are aged 15+ years. It also reflects the larger age span of some sibling groups. Permanence outside of care is more regular for younger children as opposed to permanence via long term fostering.



3.9 Children Looked After with a Disability

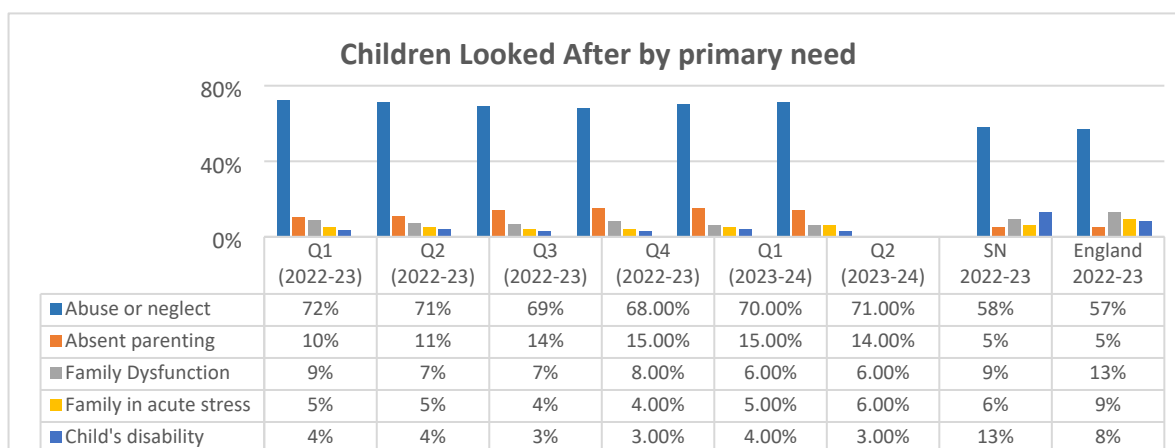
The number of children looked after with a disability has remained relatively stable since April 2022. At the end of September 2023, 34 (11.80%) of the total CLA cohort were recorded as having a disability. 24 of those children are male. 74% of those disabled children were placed within 20 miles or less from their home.



3.10 Children Looked After by Primary Need

Most children became Looked After because of the significant harm they are experiencing or likely to experience. Where possible, Social Care provide support and intervention to enable families to remain together and ensure that children only become looked after, when absolutely necessary.

The table below shows the primary need indicated for the child in care. Thurrock has a higher percentage recorded as 'Abuse or Neglect' and lower percentage recorded as 'Family Dysfunction' than statistical neighbours and national benchmarks; this is in line with previous quarters.

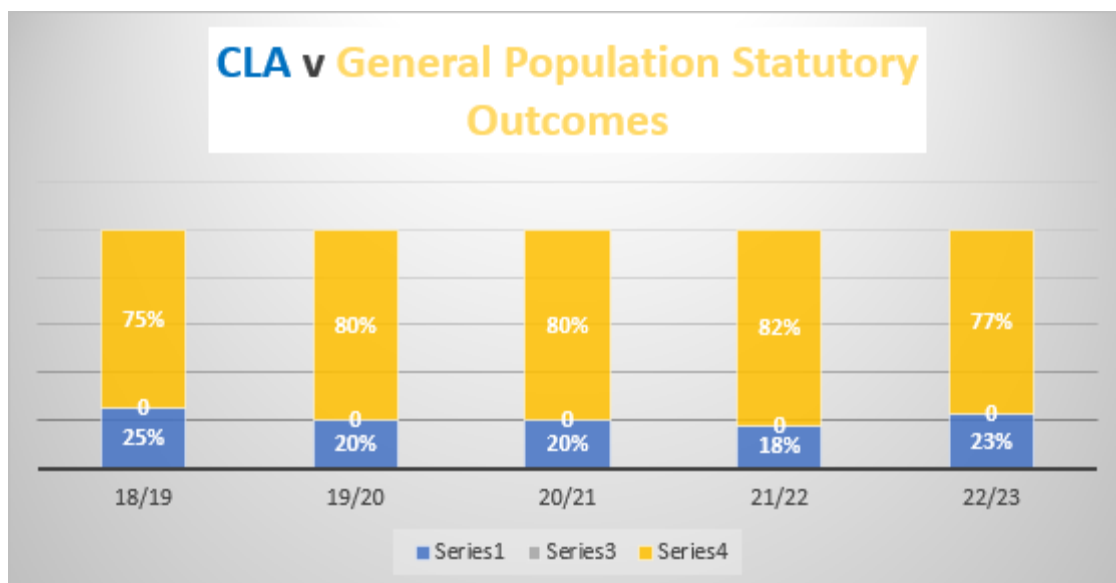


4. Number of CLA open to the Youth Offending Service (YOS)

4.1 Statutory Interventions

A statutory intervention is undertaken when a child has been convicted by the courts or made subject to a Youth Caution or Youth Conditional Caution and consequently has YOS intervention.

As at the second quarter of 2023/24 there were 20 children recorded as having statutory outcomes with Thurrock YOS and 4 of these children were looked after. The 4 looked after children represented 20% of the young people completing statutory interventions. This is in line with the trend for the last five years.



The above graph represents the percentage of Children Looked After versus the total number of young people in the Youth Justice System for the last five years. There has been a slight increase since the last financial year but overall, the figure has remained relatively static.

4.2 Youth Detention Accommodation

Under the Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2012, any child that is made subject to a Youth Detention Accommodation Order (remand in custody) by the Courts automatically becomes looked after by the local authority.

No children were made subject to Youth Detention Accommodation during the second quarter of 2023/24. However, we currently have 1 young person already subject to Youth Detention Accommodation. The young person is classified as CLA due to his remand in custody.

4.3 Out of court disposal panel

As at the second quarter of the 2023/24 financial year the out of court disposal panel dealt with 28 offences relating to 27 Thurrock children, of which one child had looked after status.

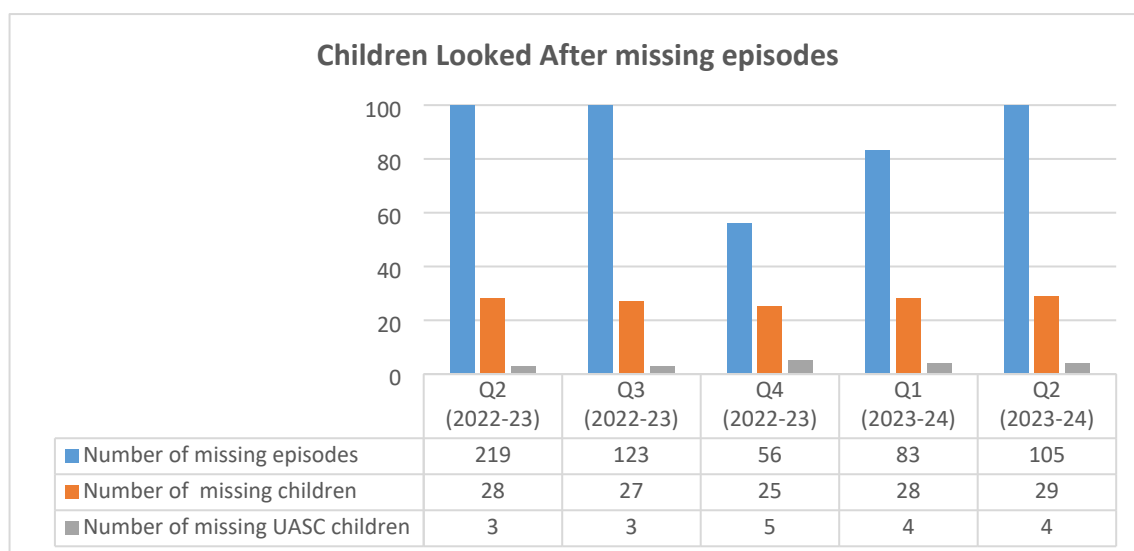
Thurrock YOS and Essex Police are committed to the national protocol¹ aimed at reducing the criminalisation of Children Looked After. This approach will be supported with a local pan-Essex protocol to ensure there is a focus on diverting any child (where possible) who is Looked After from the Criminal Justice System.

5. Children Looked After missing episodes started

The graph below shows the number of missing episodes started and the count of the individual children who went missing between July 2022 and end of September 2023. The most common reasons for children going missing is that they have stayed out past their expected return home time with friends or are with their families.

Between April 2022 and March 2023, there were total of 530 missing episodes which represented 52 individual children. This is a reduction on the previous year when there were a total of 566 episodes.

During Quarter 2, July to September 2023 there were a total of 105 missing episodes which represented 29 individual children, 4 of which were UASC.



The majority of children going missing remains for short periods of time and relates to older children (16 and over) staying out later than an agreed return home time. Younger children who are missing are reported to the Police at an earlier stage of the day and risk assessed. Strategy meetings continue to track reasons for missing episodes missing episodes are that they are all spending time with friends and/or family. Others are seeking to spend extended periods of time with friends/partners.

When children are reported missing the majority return within 24 hours, i.e. if reported at 11pm they are back in placement by the next day Most are back before the next morning. The majority are aged 17. Small numbers of children may spend longer periods away from placement.

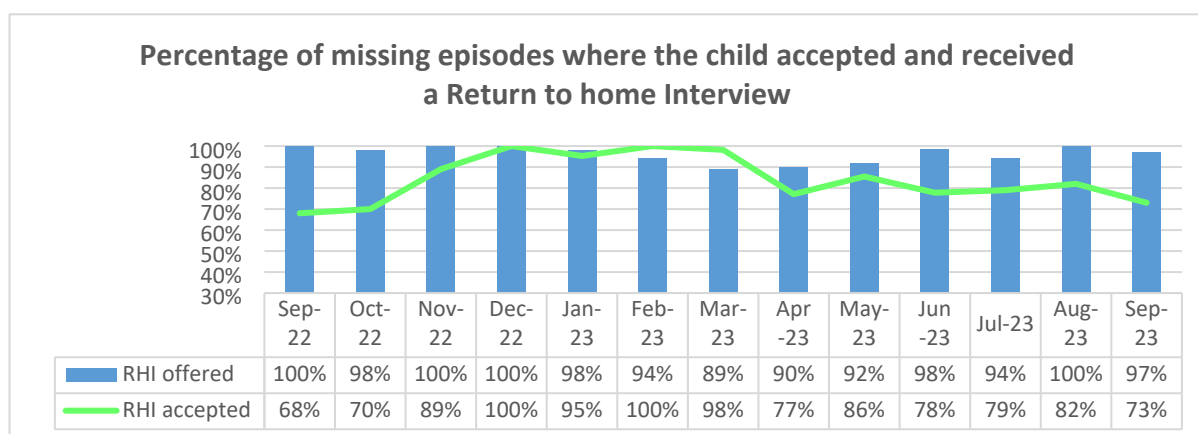
5.1 Children Looked After return home interviews (RHI)

Between April 2020 and March 2023, Inspire Youth Hub were commissioned to undertake independent Return Home Interviews (RHI). All children are offered a RHI within 72 hours following each missing episode, with the aim of understanding the young person's circumstances and the reasons why they go missing. Key Workers from placements, Foster Carers and Social Workers will also discuss missing incidents with children. There is a network of support provided to children to try to engage with them and understand the reasons for their missing episodes. The Participation Team have been able to engage and seek feedback from young people and this has been invaluable.

As at the end of September 2023, the percentage of children offered a return to home interview was 97% of which 73% accepted and received an interview. The offer of an RHI is not always accepted by young people for several reasons, including not wanting to reveal their whereabouts when missing and not believing that they were missing but 'out'. All young people who have a missing episode are reviewed at the weekly Missing Children Panel.

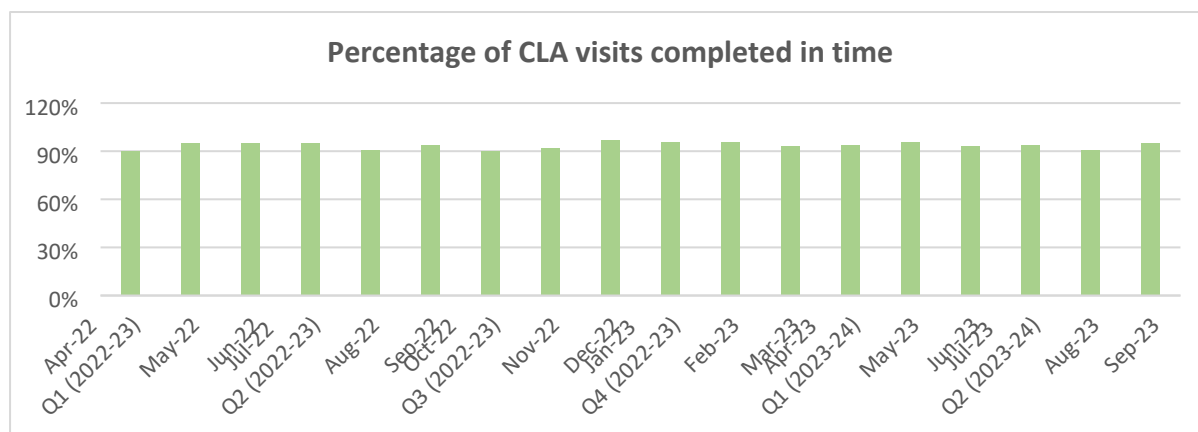
The graph below shows the percentage of return to home interviews taken up by young people since September 2022 and shows, in the main, a reasonably consistent picture of children accepting and receiving a RHI. There continues to be a small number of CLA who have consistently refused return home interviews. We continue to review how they engage this cohort of young people and alternatives such as whether there is anyone within the network better placed to have these conversations when they return from missing episodes, including their social worker and how this information is captured. This has increased the amount of Return Home Interviews completed and has ensured that young people are given the opportunities to share whether there are any safeguarding issues in relation to exploitation that needs to be addressed.

From April 1st 2023, the RHI Service transferred from Inspire to an 'In House' provision via the CE and Missing Team. The interviews for these posts are took place in July, and in the interim period the RHI's were being delivered by Social Workers, the Think Family Service and the CE and Missing Team.



5.2 Timeliness of Social Worker Children Looked After visits

Social workers are required to visit a child/young person within one week of the start of any placement. Visits are then due in accordance with the time agreed within the Care Plan. This can vary from 20 to 65 working days, permitted within regulations. The average visits completed in time between April 2022 and March 2023 was 94% compared to 91% in 2021/22 representing a 3% increase. During Q2 2023-24 an average of 93% of visits were completed in timescale.



5.3 Children Looked After Initial Health Assessments (IHA)

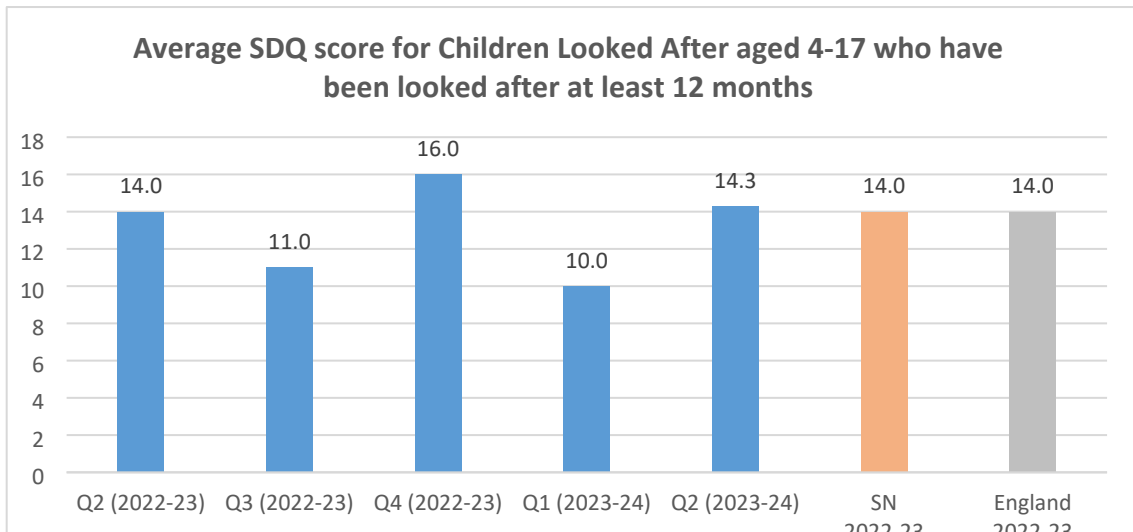
A separate report is provided to the Corporate Parenting Committee on Initial Health assessments. Please see that report

5.4 Children Looked After Strengths & Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ)

SDQ scores are a measure which provides an indication of the mental wellbeing of Looked After Children. Thurrock has a statutory responsibility to collect SDQ scores annually for all children aged 4-17 who have continuously been looked after for at least 12 months. Thurrock Childrens Services collate the SDQ scores termly via the Personal Education Plan supported by the Virtual School and Children's Social Care collecting the views of carers, school staff and children.

For each child where their score indicates a level of need (scoring 13 or higher) their case is individually reviewed by a multi-agency panel to ensure appropriate services are in place. Children benefit from a suite of local services including EWMHS, Kooth (online Counselling) and commissioned therapeutic services. For children placed out of area NHS provision or commissioned services are secured.

The average scores for Quarter 2 2023-24 are 14.3 which is above our Statistical Neighbour and National benchmarks. The mental wellbeing of Children Looked After is being appropriately reviewed, with support and intervention provided as necessary.



6. Adoption

6.1 Timeliness of Adoption

The average duration of care proceedings nationally has been over 40 weeks. The President of the Family Division re-launched the Public Law Outline process in January 2023 with a view to reducing the length of proceedings towards the 26 weeks statutory time limit.

The timeliness of adoption is measured as a 12-month rolling average, it is the length of time from the child entering care to moving in with an adoptive family. The average time between a child entering care and moving in with its adoptive family adjusted for foster carer adoptions, for children who have been adopted (days), as at end of Quarter 2 2023-24 was 585 days; this is an increase on the June 23 position of 537 days.

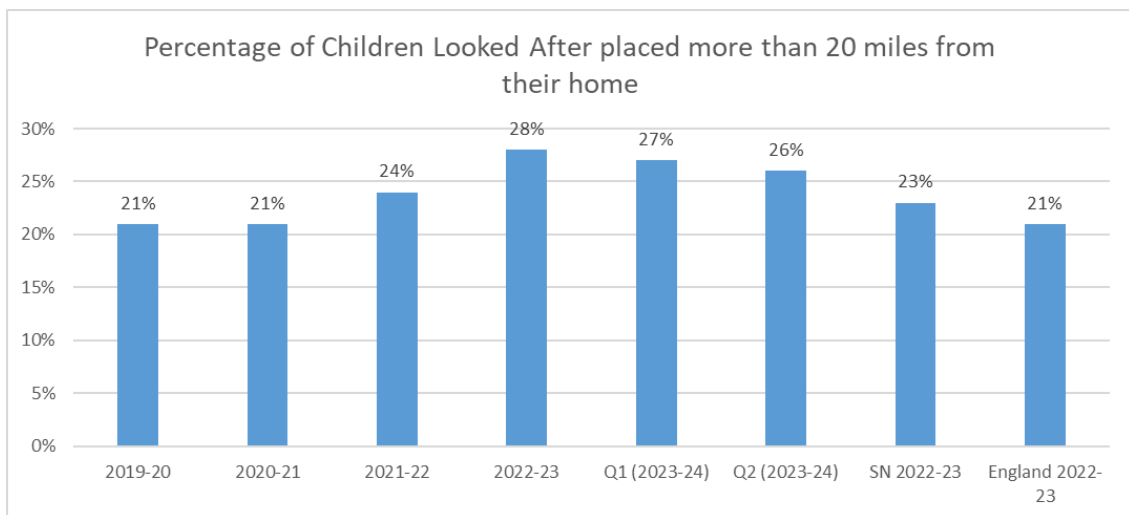
Based on 2022-23 benchmarking data, Thurrock is above the National average of 480 days. It is important to note that this measure relates to a relatively small number of children so a very small number of children experiencing a delay can impact on the data. Care proceedings have seen significant delays; court availability, and family members being identified late. We are working towards reducing the duration of care proceedings through early planning and close monitoring.

As at Q2 2023-24, the average time between an LA receiving court authority to place a child and the LA deciding on a match to an adoptive family (rolling 12 months) is 106 days, this is slightly lower the June 2023 average of 111. Based on 2022-23 benchmarking data, Thurrock is below the National average of 197 days.

6.2 Children Looked After placement distance

The Local Authority has a statutory duty to provide children with placements within its area unless it is not reasonably practicable to do so under the Children Act 1989. Placements out of area must be approved by the nominated person and placements 'at a distance' must be agreed by the Director of Children's Services.

At the end of September 2023, 74% of the Children Looked After cohort were placed within 20 miles or less from their homes, which represents 212 out of 288 children looked after. Based on the latest benchmarking data available for 2022-23, the national average for those placed more than 20 miles from their home was 21% and statistical neighbours was 23%, so at 26% Thurrock is currently above these. We continue to work hard to ensure that wherever possible, children are placed close to their community.



The chart below provides a breakdown by placement type as at end of Quarter 2 2023-24 and Quarter 1 2023-24.

0	Placement Type													
	Adoption	Semi-independent	Secure Children's Homes	Children's Home Regulations	Placed with own parent or other person with parental responsibility	Family Centre / Mother and Baby Unit	YOI or Prison	Residential Schools	FP with relative or friend: long-term fostering	FP with other: long-term fostering	foster carer who is also an approved adopter: FFA/concurrent planning	foster carer: not long-term fostering or FFA/concurrent planning	Other placement	
■ Q1 (2023-24)	2	53	1	20	7	2	2	2	6	15	120	1	73	4
■ Q2 (2023-24)	3	45	0	23	8	2	1	1	6	13	104	3	75	4

■ Q1 (2023-24) ■ Q2 (2023-24)

7.0 Care Leaving Service

The table below shows the care leaver cohort (Relevant and Former Relevant Children whose 17th, 18th, 19th, 20th or 21st birthday falls within Financial Year) and Young People aged 16-25 years who are in receipt of a Care Leaving service. Local authorities have a legislative duty to appoint a Personal Adviser for Care Leavers from the age of 16-21 and up until the age of 25 if required.

A Care Leaver, as defined in the Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000¹, is a person who has been 'looked after' or 'in care' for at least 13 weeks since the age of 14, and who was in care on their 16th birthday.

A young person's status as a care leaver can be divided into the following:

- Eligible child - a young person who is 16 or 17 and who has been looked after by the local authority/health and social care trust for at least a period of 13 weeks since the age of 14, and who is still looked after.
- Relevant child - a young person who is 16 or 17 who has left care after their 16th birthday and before leaving care was an eligible child.
- Former relevant child - a young person who is aged between 18 and 25 (or beyond if being helped with education or training) who, before turning 18 was either an eligible or a relevant child, or both.

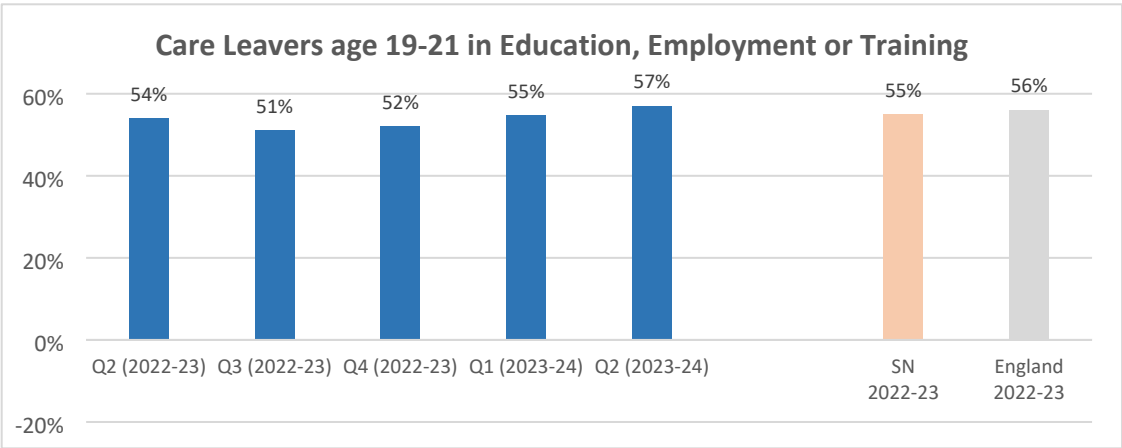
¹ <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2000/35/contents>

As at end of September 2023, 276 Care Leavers were being supported and receiving an Aftercare service. The charts below show the Care Leaver cohort broken down by age groups:

Care Leaver Age	Total	%
16	1	0
17-18	65	24
19-21	139	50
22-25	71	26
	276	

7.1 Care Leavers age 19-21 years in Education, Employment or Training (EET)

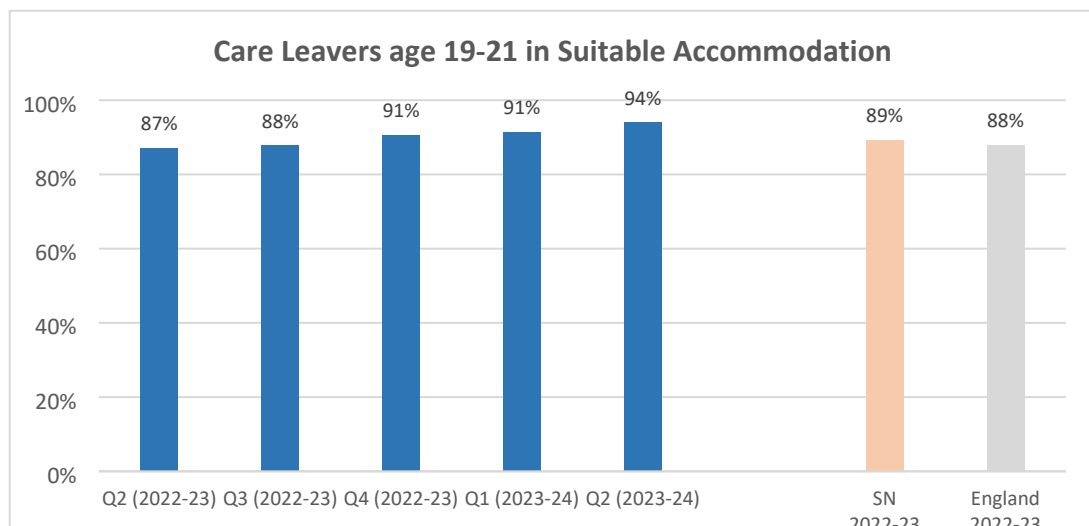
At the end of Q2 2023-24, 57% of the Care Leavers aged 19 to 21-year-old were in part or full-time education, employment or training compared to 55% at the end of June 23, which brings Thurrock above the Statistical Neighbour average of 55% and the England average of 56%. To strengthen oversight and planning to ensure our young people have support and opportunities for Education, Employment and Training (EET) there are two monthly panels which focus on pre and post 18-year-olds who do not have an EET offer. These panels are attended by the Aftercare Service, Inspire Youth Hub, and the Virtual School. The panel seeks to understand the issues for individual young people and align their interests to an EET offer.



7.2 Care Leavers age 19 to 21 years in Suitable Accommodation

Q2 2023-24 shows that the percentage of 19 to 21-year-old Care Leavers reported to be in suitable accommodation is 94%. Thurrock is marginally above the Statistical Neighbour average of 89% and England average of 88% based on 2022-23 benchmarking data. There are some care leavers who are not in touch with the service, as well as those whose accommodation is unsuitable. Reasons for accommodation being deemed unsuitable include care leavers who are UASC and missing, young people declining to say where they are living or care leavers who are in prison.

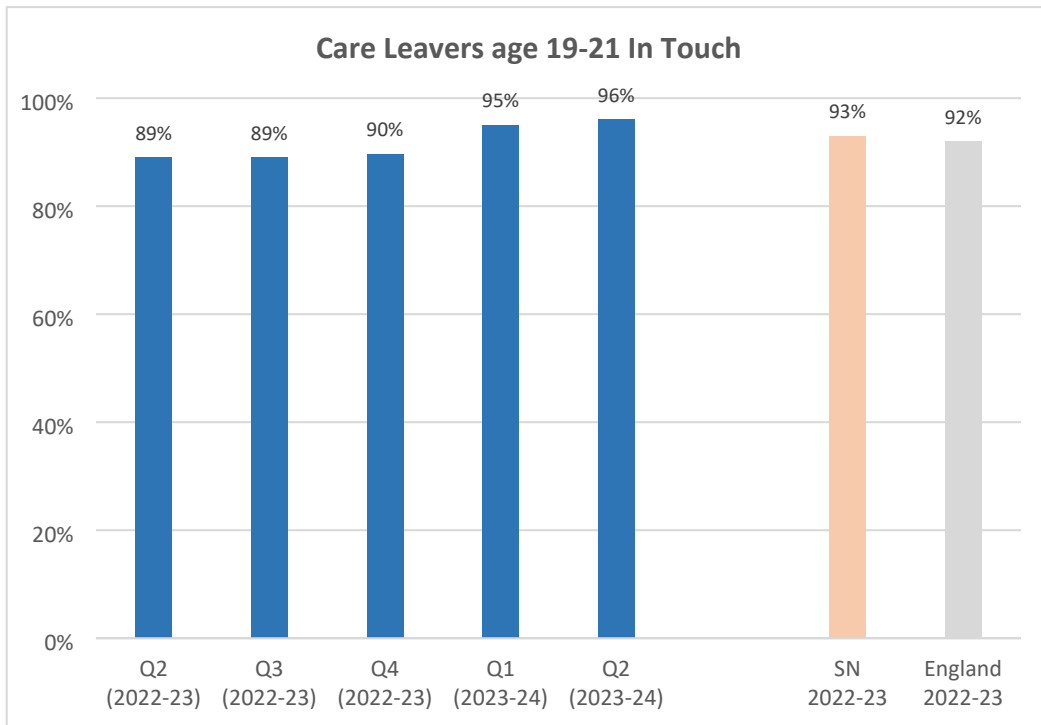
Increased housing support is being provided to young people by the Aftercare Service, Head Start Housing and Thurrock Housing Department. The 'Housing Offer' to Care Leavers has been updated with the Joint Housing Protocol 2020, ensuring good partnership working with clear pathways for young people to access housing, as well as ensuring they are prepared for their tenancies.



7.3 Care Leavers age 19-21 years 'In Touch'

Local Authorities are expected to stay in touch with Care Leavers and provide statutory support to help care leaver's transition to living independently.

At the end of Q2 2023-24, Thurrock was in touch with 96% of Care Leavers, this is a 1% improvement on the June 23 outturn of 95%. Thurrock's performance is above the Statistical Neighbour average of 93% and the England average of 92% based on 2022-23 benchmarking data. The reason for the percentage that are not in touch is mainly due to the cohort of missing UASC.



8. Consultation (including Overview & Scrutiny, if applicable)

8.1 Not applicable

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

9.1 None

10. Implications

10.1 Financial

Implications verified by: **David May**
Strategic Lead Finance

No implications. The cost of services are provided for within Children and Family Services revenue budget. In 2023/24 this is £35.615m.

10.2 Legal

Implications verified by: **Judith Knight**
Interim Deputy Head of Legal (Social Care & Education)

No implications identified.

10.3 Diversity & Equality

Implications verified by:

Roxanne Scanlon

**Community Engagement and Project
Monitoring Officer**

There are no direct diversity and equality implications arising from this report. However, the service does collect diversity monitoring data for looked after children, this data is given within this report. The data is utilised to consider issues of equality and to ensure that performance considers the impact on children with protected characteristics.

10.4 **Other implications** (where significant) – i.e. Staff, Health Inequalities, Sustainability, Crime and Disorder, and Impact on Looked After Children

- Not applicable

11. **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

12. **Appendices to the report**

- None

Report Authors:

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Head of Business Intelligence
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Head of Service Children Looked After
Children's Services

Clare Moore
Head of Service, Youth Offending Service and Prevention,
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25th January 2024	ITEM: 7
Corporate Parenting Committee	
Independent Reviewing Officer Annual Report	
Wards and communities affected: All	Key Decision: Non-key
Report of: Ruth Murdock, Head of Service, Quality Assurance and Reviewing, Trevor Willis Service Manager, Safeguarding and Reviewing	
Accountable Assistant Director: Janet Simon, Assistant Director, Children’s Social Care and Early Help	
Accountable Director: Sheila Murphy, Executive Director, Children’s Services	
This report is: Public	

Executive Summary

The purpose of this document 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.

This document should be read in conjunction with the *“Thurrock Children’s Services, Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) Annual Report”* for 2022 – 2023 (see Appendix 1)

1. Recommendation(s)

1.1 For the Corporate Parenting Committee to review, provide challenge and comment on the IRO Annual report 2022 - 2023 and the recommendations in the report.

2. Introduction and Background

2.1 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.

The IRO has a number of specific responsibilities, including:

- promoting the voice of the child
- ensuring that plans for Children Looked After 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

2.2 During the reporting period, the Thurrock IRO Service has remained stable; there have been no changes of personnel. The Service comprises of five permanent Independent Reviewing Officers.

The average caseload for IROs is 60 – with a variance between 59 and 62.

During the performance year April 2022 – March 2023, the IRO Service conducted a total of 800 reviews. This is a decrease of 133 reviews (14.25%) when compared to the number of reviews conducted the previous year. The performance, in respect of reviews being held within timescale, remained consistent compared to the previous year with 98.7% held within time.

This year, children and young people participated in person, or through an advocate, or by another means by providing their views in the majority of reviews. Only 0.84% of reviews were conducted (for children over the age of 4) where they did not attend nor send their views- representing 6 instances. Children and young people are encouraged to feed back their views by the 'Mind of My Own' App alongside speaking with their carers, allocated social workers and IRO.

For the period April 2022 to March 2023, 98.5% of review reports were completed within timescale by the IRO's.

2.3 Profile of Children and Young People in Care in Thurrock

Section 8 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:

- The rate of Children Looked After at the end of March 2023 per 10,000 of the child population was 66 which is in line with statistical neighbour at 68 and slightly below the figures nationally at 70 per 10,000 (2021/22). The monthly breakdown for the numbers of children looked after has remained relatively stable and consistent throughout the year ranging from 281-293

- The number of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children rose by seventeen young people to 45 at the end of March 2023- this increase reflects quotas set by national government in August 2022. This represents 15.3% of the total cohort of children and young people accommodated.
- The number of children adopted has increased to 13 children compared to last year -8 children. This increase is due to a backlog of cases held up in the legal system either due to the impact of Covid or legal challenge from parents.
- There are more boys Looked After in Thurrock than girls (62% and 38% respectively) – and increase of 1% for boys from 2021-22
- Black British children are not overrepresented in the looked after population at 15% which compares to the school census data (2022) of 15%, although children from mixed/dual heritage backgrounds are 10% compared to the school census data of 7%
- The majority of children looked after are subject to legal orders at 74.9% which shows a desire to achieve permanence and stability for children.
- 28.67 of Children Looked After live over 20 miles from their home address. This has risen by 4.67 and largely relates to the complex needs of some children which results in it not being possible to find local placements. The majority of children not placed in Thurrock (or within 20 miles) are placed in neighbouring boroughs of Essex, Greater London or Kent

2.4 Feedback from Children and Young People about their care plans

In January 2023 QR codes were introduced to CLA review forms which enable young people to give feedback from their reviews and these were only becoming more regularly used in March 23. Also, IROs attend children and young people participation events and encourage the children they work with to attend and take part.

IROs continue to look at creative and interactive ways of involving children and young people, including how reviews are recorded in a more accessible and personal format, focusing in on what interests a young person to annotate the CLA review document.

3 Issues Options and Analysis of Options

Please see the attached IRO Annual Report.

4 Reasons for Recommendation

4.1 To inform members of the work of the Independent Reviewing Officer Service during 2022-2023. The report also updates members with their recommended work plan for the IRO service during 2023 – 2024.

5 Consultation (including Overview and Scrutiny, if applicable)

- Not Applicable

6 Impact on corporate policies, priorities, performance and community

- Not Applicable

7 Implications

7.1 Financial

Implications verified by: **David May**
Strategic Lead Finance

There are no financial implications associated with this report.

7.2 Legal

Implications verified by **Judith Knight**
Interim Deputy Head of Legal (Social Care & 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. The IRO Handbook is statutory guidance and includes the requirement that an annual report is produced for the Corporate Parenting Panel covering the matters set out in paragraph 7.11 of that document which states:

- procedures for resolving concerns, including the local dispute resolution process and it should include an analysis of the issues raised in dispute and the outcomes;
- the development of the IRO service including information on caseloads, continuity of employment and the make up of the team

and how it reflects the identity of the children it is serving;

- extent of participation of children and their parents;
- the number of reviews that are held on time, the number that are held out of time and the reasons for the ones that are out of time;
- outcomes of quality assurance audits in relation to the organisation, conduct and recording of reviews;
- whether any resource issues are putting at risk the delivery of a quality service to all looked after children.

7.3 Diversity and Equality

Implications verified by: **Rebecca Lee**
Team Manager, Community Development and Equalities

An overview of the profile and diversity of children and young people in care in Thurrock is set out in section 8.3 of this report.

The Service is committed to practice which promotes inclusion and diversity, and will carry out its duties in accordance with the Equality Act 2010, Public Sector Equality Duty and related Codes of Practice and Anti-discriminatory policy. Members of the service represent diverse backgrounds and heritage and are able to promote equality and diversity.

7.4 Other implications (where significant) – i.e. Staff, Health Inequalities, Sustainability, Crime and Disorder, and Impact on Looked After Children

- 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):

- Not Applicable

9. Appendices to the report

- Appendix 1 - IRO Annual Report 1 April 2022 – 31 March 2023

Report Authors:

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Ruth Murdock
Head of Service Quality Assurance and Reviewing
Children's Services

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

ANNUAL REPORT

01 April 2022 – 31 March 2023

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1. Introduction and Purpose of the Annual Report

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

Where possible, this Report refers to Children Looked After (CLA) which reflects the views and wishes of children and young people in Thurrock 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 01 April 2022 to 31 March 2023.

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

4.1 As a Corporate Parent, the Council is ambitious to ensure that children achieve the best possible outcomes while in the care of the authority. We aim wherever possible for children to be cared for either within their own family or wider networks. However, when it is felt that this is not a safe or suitable option for all efforts are made to find children 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 2022/23, staffing within the IRO services has remained stable. There have been no periods of prolonged absence or sickness or changes to staffing. The service continues to comprise of five, permanent full-time members of staff.

5.2 All five IROs working for the Service are qualified Social Workers registered with Social Work England and subject to regular Disclosure and Barring Service enhanced checks. All have relevant and appropriate skills, bringing to the role specialist knowledge and experience.

5.3 There are two female and three male IRO's and the IRO's come from diverse backgrounds, ensuring young people in our care can be allocated to IRO's across a range of diverse groups.

5.4 All five of the IROs act independently 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 There have been no complaints received about the IRO service and conduct of the CLA reviews.

6. IRO Caseload and Service Performance

6.1 IRO caseloads

	2018/19	2019/2020	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23
Average caseload	62	60	60	59	60
Caseload range	44-68	57-62	58-61	57-61	59-62

6.2 The average IRO caseload been consistent in the past five years with a caseload average in 2022/23 of 60 children and young people. This is in line with the IRO handbook which states that an average IRO caseload should be between 50 - 70 children and young people for a full-time post. Children and young people's

circumstance and situations vary in complexity, and the 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.

- 6.3 IRO's may also have additional responsibilities which are shared amongst the team in addition to chairing reviews, such as sitting on, and advising on panel and supporting the delivery of training.

7. Number of Child and Young Person in Care Reviews

	2022									2023			Year to Date
Due in month	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	
Total held	58	99	44	63	39	74	84	71	63	64	63	78	800
Total held in timescale	55	95	44	63	39	73	84	71	63	64	62	77	790
Percentage of total held in timescale	94.8%	96%	100%	100%	100%	98.6%	100%	100%	100%	100%	98.4%	98.7%	98.8%
Held In quarter	201			176			218			205			800
Percentage held in timescale	96.5			99.4%			100%			99.0%			Average 98.7%

During the performance year April 2022 – March 2023, the IRO service conducted a total of eight hundred reviews. This is a decrease of 133 (a decrease of 14.25%) when compared to the number of reviews conducted the previous year. This reduction can be accounted for by fewer children in care as well as a lower percentage of children experiencing placement moves during this period. Additionally during the period 2021/22 the frequency of reviews may have increased to ensure robust oversight of the plans for children and young people coming out of Lockdown. The performance, in respect of reviews being held within timescale, remained consistent with the previous year, with the final average being 98.7% of reviews held within timescales.

The high performance in this area is due to the work of the whole team including Business Support as well as the IRO's in ensuring that reviews are held within timescales. Reviews are booked at five months to accommodate any unforeseen issues, such as availability of care plans or changes within family requirements (such as parental issues in attending the review) that arise or the need to change the date of a review to meet the needs and requirements of the child or young person.

7.1 Children and Young People's Participation in Reviews

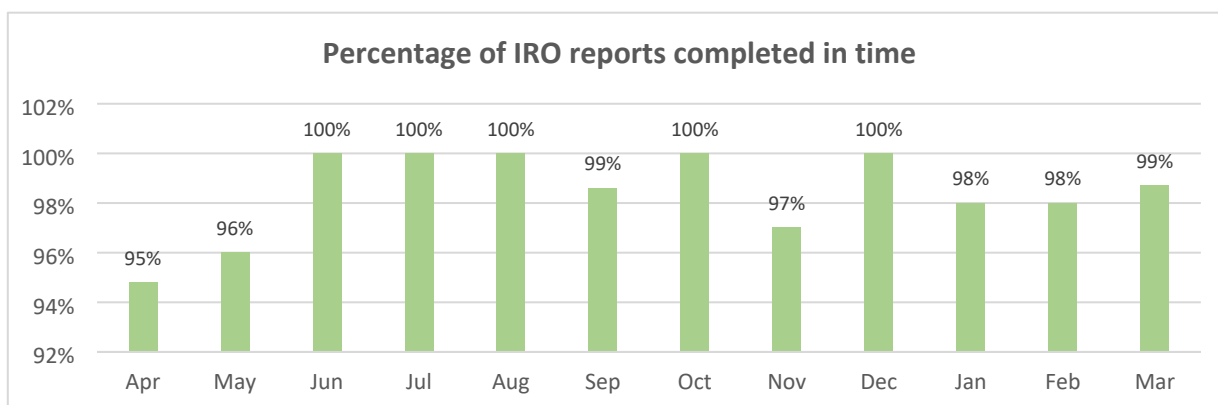
Ensuring that each review fully represents the views of the child is central to the review process and that the views of the child inform the adults around them with regards to their care planning. The IRO service works extensively to build relationships with children and young people to encourage their participation in the review process. During the reporting period there were only six instances where children did not attend or send views for their review this represents 0.84% of the total reviews held for children over the age of 4. Children attended and spoke for themselves in 55.4% of their reviews, an increase of 1% when compared to last year. All Looked After Children and young people over the age of four are offered access to the advocacy service.

C & YP Participation in Reviews	2019-20	2020-21	2021-22	2022-23
Child aged under four	142	151	131	92
Child attended and spoke	439	459	471	443
Child attended - advocate spoke	10	0	3	0
Child attended & gave non-verbal views	0	0	2	1
Child attended without contributing	14	10	6	6
Child did not attend, advocate briefed	59	20	12	8
Child did not attend, views sent	163	209	242	244
Child did not attend, no views sent	40	15	15	6
No participation recorded	0	0	0	0
Total	867	864	882	800

Whilst children and young people are given the option to attend their meeting, their attendance is not mandatory. There has been an increase in the number of children and young people who chose not to attend their review but rather send their views via other means. The IRO service continues to look at creative ways to gather the views of children and young people in a meaningful way. This involves offering children several ways to share their views in a manner that suits them. Whilst most children are keen to see their IRO face to face, there has been an increase (particularly with older young people) for their IRO to contact them over TEAMS on a video call. There remains an appetite for IRO's to engage with children and young people in more creative ways, utilising all resources available to them.

The IROs ensure that both parents, where possible, are consulted and invited to the review. The parent's views are considered in the review meeting, and they receive a copy of the record, where appropriate.

7.2 Completion of Review Reports between March 22 to April 23.



On completion of the child's review the IRO is expected to complete a report on the child's electronic file. The report provides a note of the review and its discussions, and the recommendation made in the review. There is an expectation that review outcome reports are completed and distributed to young people, parents, and professionals within 20 working days of the review.

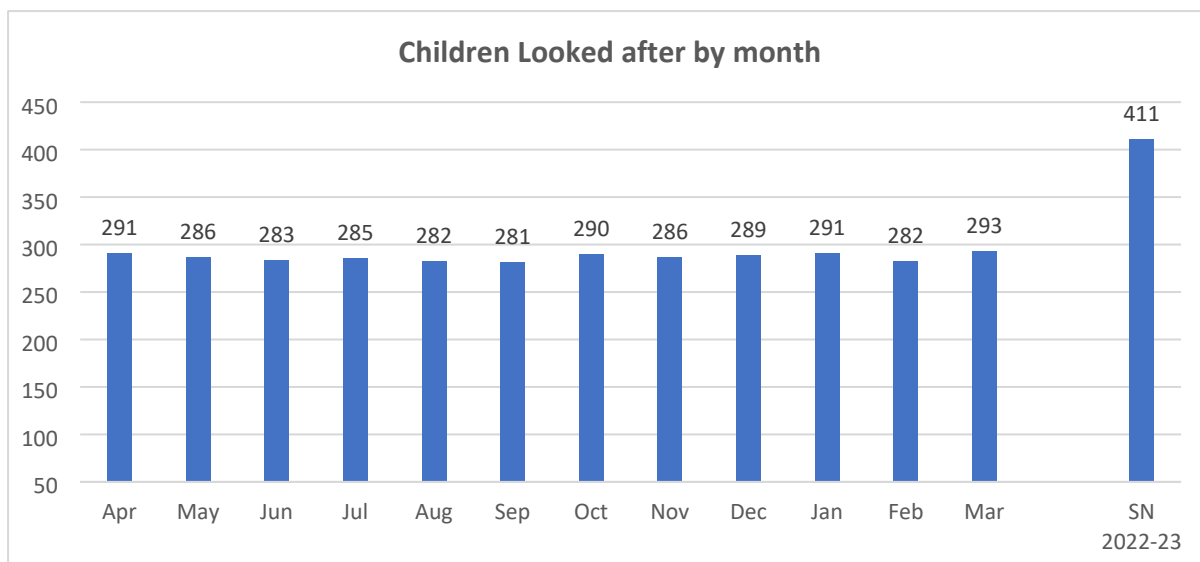
The number of reviews completed within timescale for the period April 2022 March 2023 range between 95 - 100% and on average 98.5% of reports were completed within timescale. Delays in the provision of reports is usually due to issues with the recording processes. Timeliness of reports is regularly scrutinised by the service manager and where appropriate issues of late reports are brought to the attention of the IRO and acted on as a priority.

The review process is supported by an efficient and professional business support unit and the IROs ensure that they visit or speak to children/ young people and will discuss how they experienced the review meeting and how/where they would like it conducted.

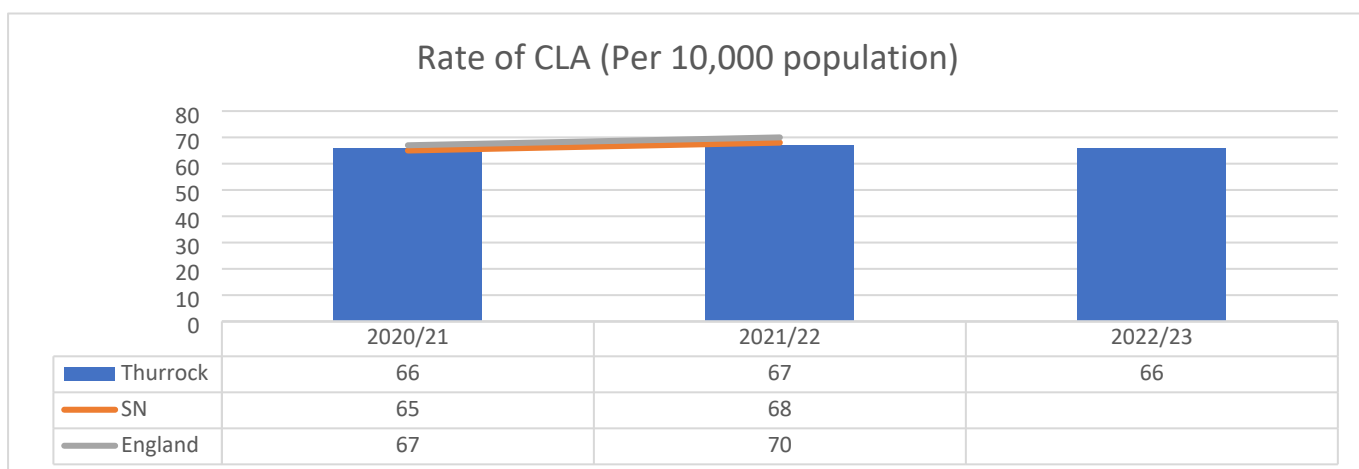
8. Profile of Children and Young People in Care in Thurrock

8.1 Numbers of Children in Care

Thurrock's number of children looked after is at the lower end of the statistical neighbour average. The monthly breakdown for the numbers of children looked after has remained stable and consistent throughout the year ranging between 281 and 293, this range is lower than the figures for previous year (294 to 308).

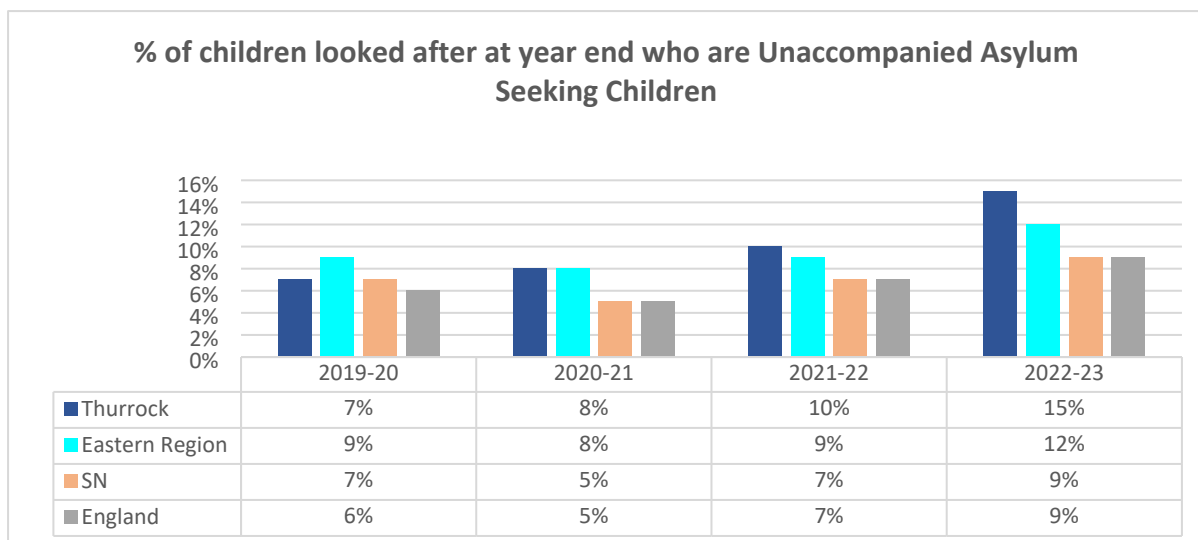


The rate of Children Looked After at the end of March 2023 per 10,000 of the child population was 66 which is in line with statistical neighbour at 68 and slightly below the figures nationally at 70 per 10,000(2021/22). (National comparative data for 2022-23 for rates is not available as the DfE will publish when ONS to provide revised mid-year population estimates)



Year	2018-19	2019-20	2020-21	2021-22	2022-23
Total cohort	293	298	298	294	293
Number of UASC	30	20	24	28	45

The number of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children rose by seventeen young people at the end of March 2023 this increase represents quotas set by national government in August 2022. This represents 15.3% of the total cohort of children and young people accommodated.



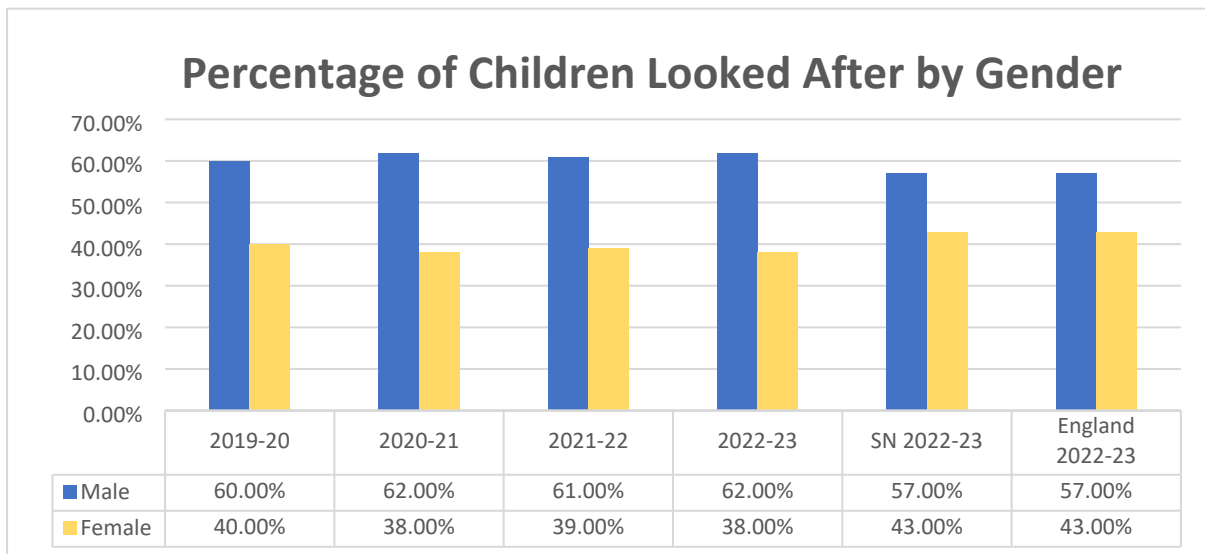
The percentage of children classed as UASC as a percentage of the CLA population at the end of 2022-23 is higher than figures for the Eastern Region, Statistical Neighbours and the rest of the country. The current quota for UASC is 0.1% of the general child population in Thurrock (44 children). There are times due to Thurrock being a port of entry for children seeking asylum this number is exceeded with UASC registering in Thurrock before being moved to another Local Authority.

Adoption figures have risen by 5 children during the reporting period, a 62.5% increase on last year. This increase is due to a backlog of cases held up in the legal system either due to the impact of Covid or legal challenge from parents.

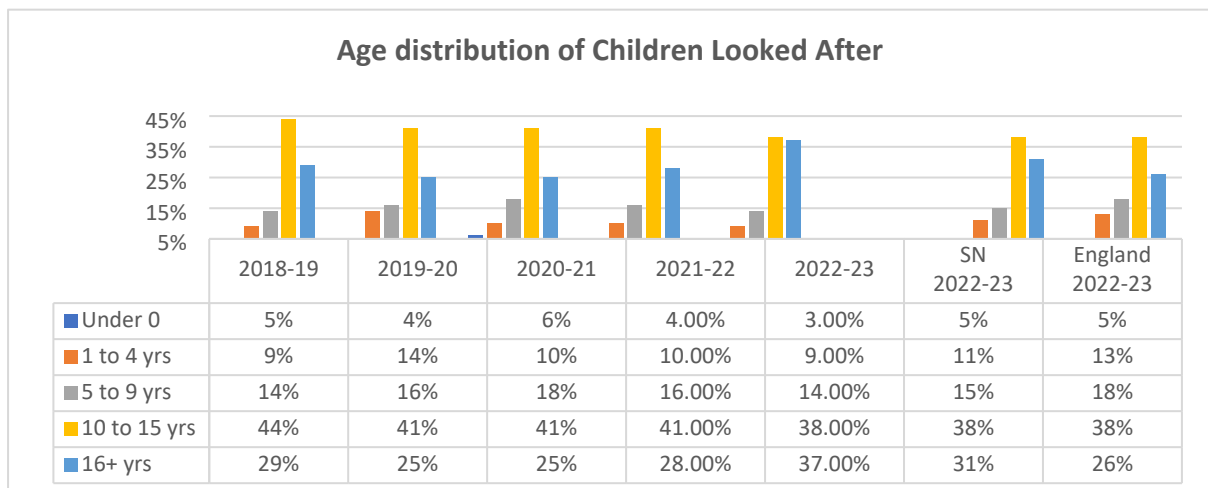
Year	2018-19	2019-20	2020-21	2021-22	2022-23
Total cohort	293	298	298	294	293
Adopted	13	14	8	8	13

Whilst the national picture for adoptions is somewhat mixed the spike seen by Thurrock is similar to that experienced by Essex and Southend both of whom use the same Court system. Every effort is made to secure permanent accommodation for children and continued scrutiny is provided by the IRO service to see whether any delay is avoidable.

8.2 Gender of Children and Young People in Care

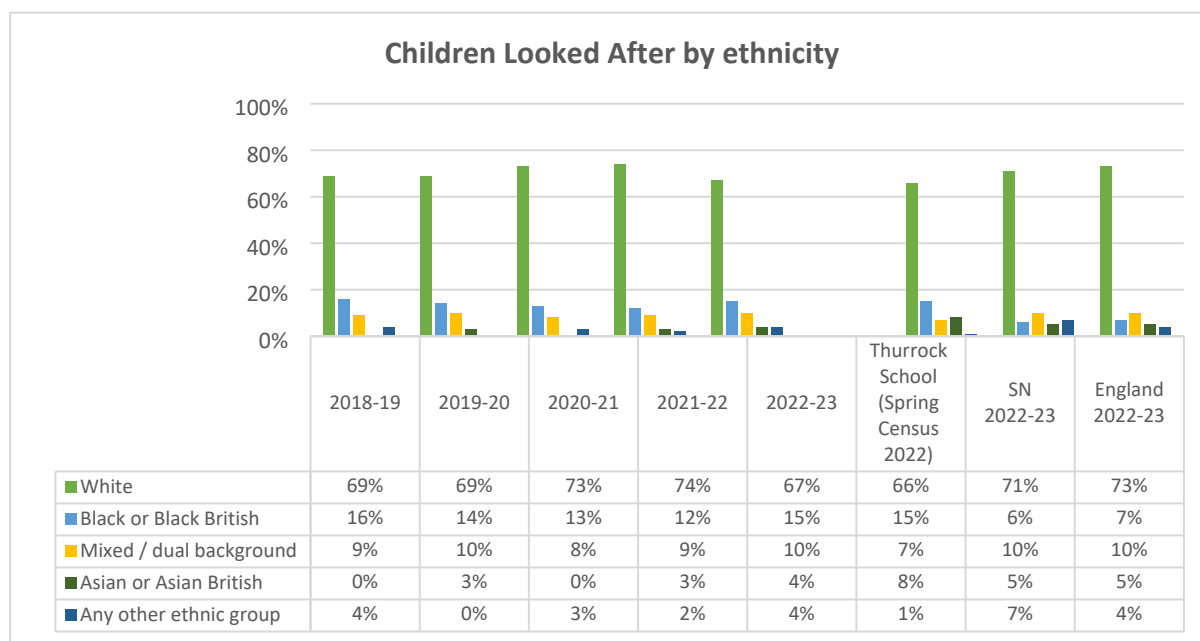


The number of males in care continues to exceed the number of females. Figures for 2022/23 show a 1% increase in the number of males to 62% with a similar decrease for females to 38%. The percentage of males accommodated in Thurrock is higher than percentages for statistical neighbours and the rest of the country, this is due to the number of UASC, the majority of whom are male and at the end of March were 15.% of our total CLA figure, 6% higher than statistical neighbours and the rest of the country.



The age distribution of children looked after continues to see young people in the 12 to 15-year-old age bracket represent the largest proportion of the total cohort. There has been a significant increase in the percentage of children aged 16 plus (9%). This is due to a sizeable number of children turning sixteen within the year and is reflective of the data from 2018/19 to 2021/22 where children aged 10 to 15 repeatedly represented the largest category and would account for the difference in the figures for statistical neighbours as well as the rest of the country.

8.3 Ethnicity of Children and Young People in Care



Identity is a core factor considered within the dimensions on developmental need (Care Planning Guidance 2015). This 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 they are and their heritage, and to understand, as far as they are able, why they are 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.

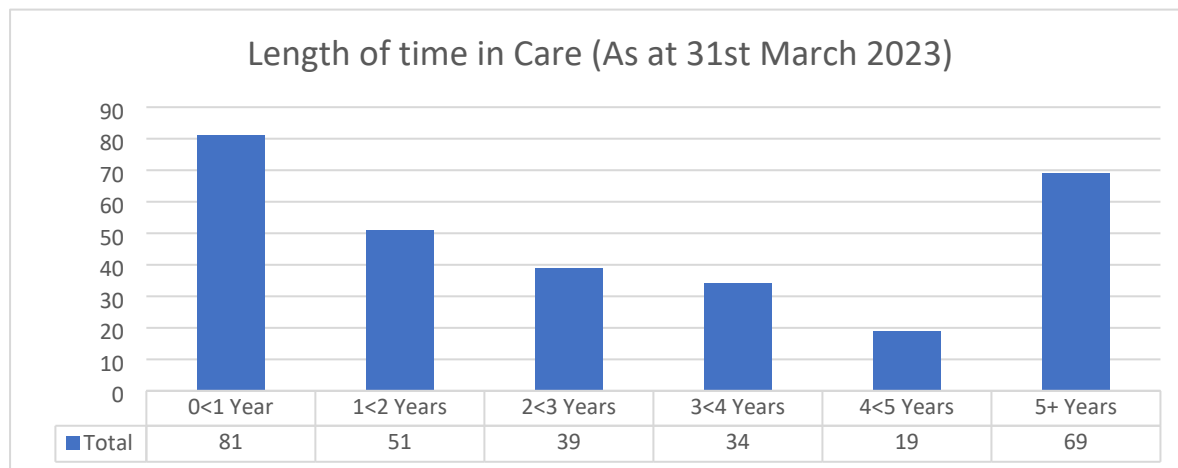
Racial and cultural identity is an important aspect of identity for many Children Looked After. The assessment of each individual child’s needs alongside the child’s own views will determine the actions which should be put into the care plan to ensure that they are able to develop a strong sense of identity and self-esteem.

The recorded information regarding the demographics of the ethnicity of children and young people Looked After has shown that children who are recorded to come from a “White” background continue to represent vast majority of children looked after (67%) however this has decreased by 7% from last year. There have been increases in the percentages of children from all other backgrounds with children from Black or Black British representing the next largest cohort.

The percentages of Children from White and Black or Black British backgrounds represent the largest cohort of Looked after children and young people, however this is in line with the Thurrock School Census (2022). The percentages of children from a Dual/Mixed background are higher than the school census however is in line with statistical neighbours. The increase in Asian or Asian British or any other ethnic background may be due to increases in the numbers of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children.

The differences in the data for statistical neighbours as well as the rest of the country in representative of the diverse communities within Thurrock and is in line with the census for our area.

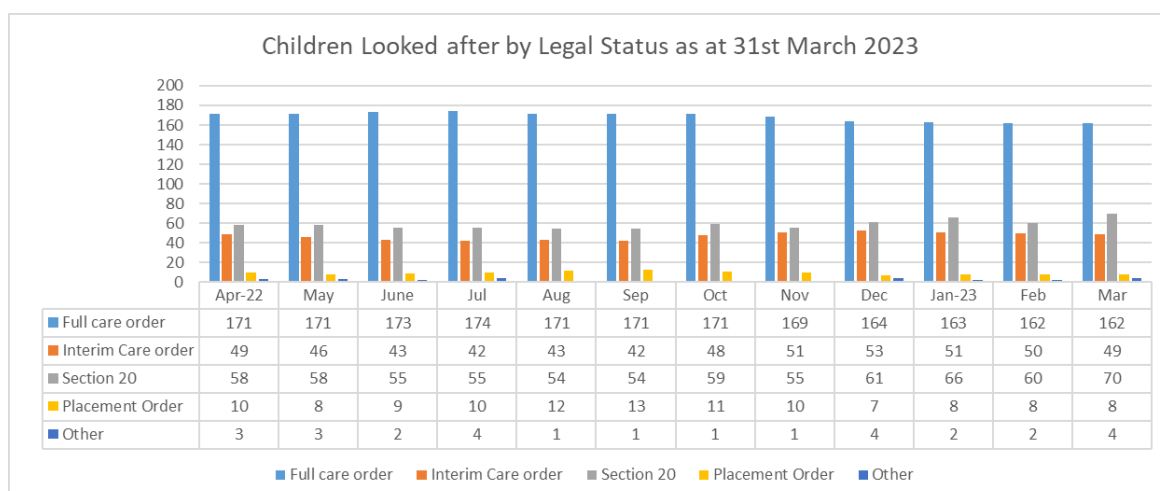
8.4 Time in Care for Children and Young People



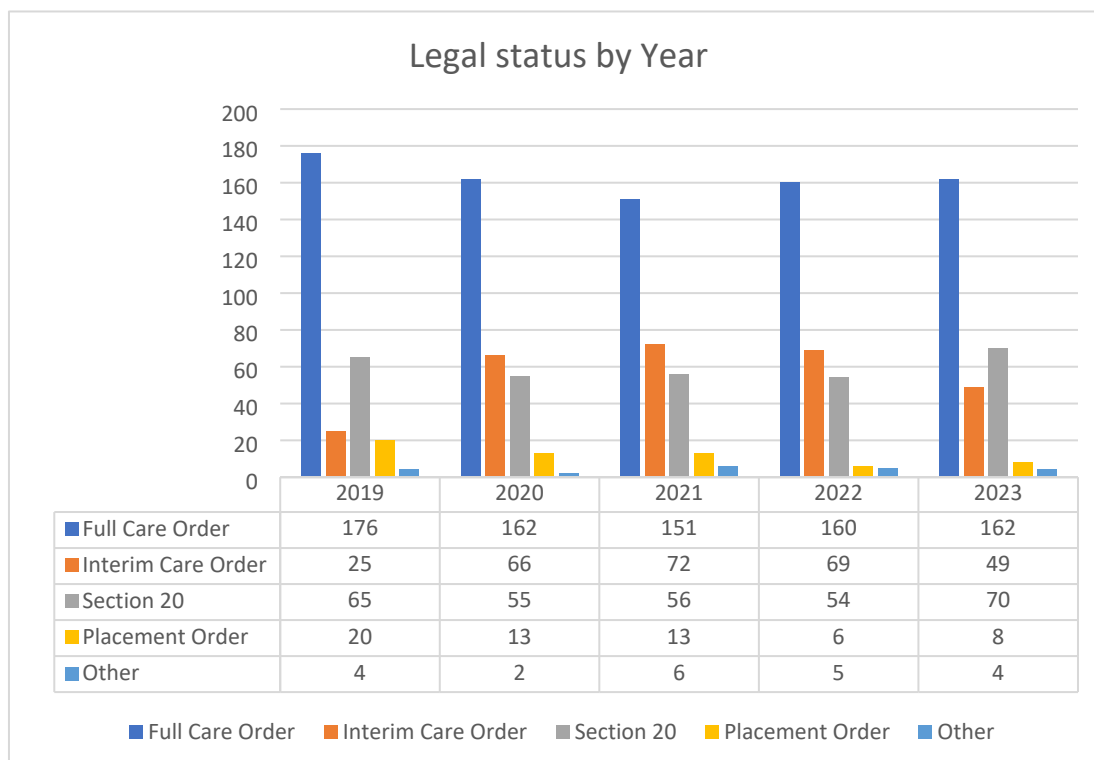
It is recognised that the best place for children is within the care of their families if this is safe. The longer that children remain in care the more problematic it becomes for them to return to the care of their families. It is therefore important that the IRO service continue to scrutinise the care plans that are put in place for children and young people to ensure that planning does not drift and that children do not remain in care for any longer than is necessary.

Sometimes it is not suitable for a child or young person to return home resulting in children remaining in care for longer periods of time. IRO’s closely scrutinise the care plan that has been developed for the young person and explore whether there are more appropriate ways of ensuring permanency for a young person, working with foster carers to explore the possibility of an SGO where children have been in placement for a long time.

8.5 Legal Framework for Children in Care



Data for Thurrock shows 74.9% of children were cared for under a Care Order, 55.5% under a Full Care Order, 16.7% on an Interim Care Order and 2.7% on a Placement Order. The majority of Children Looked After by Thurrock are, or have been, subject to legal proceedings where they have suffered some form of abuse or neglect and the accommodation is being used to protect them from further harm and to secure permanency for these children.

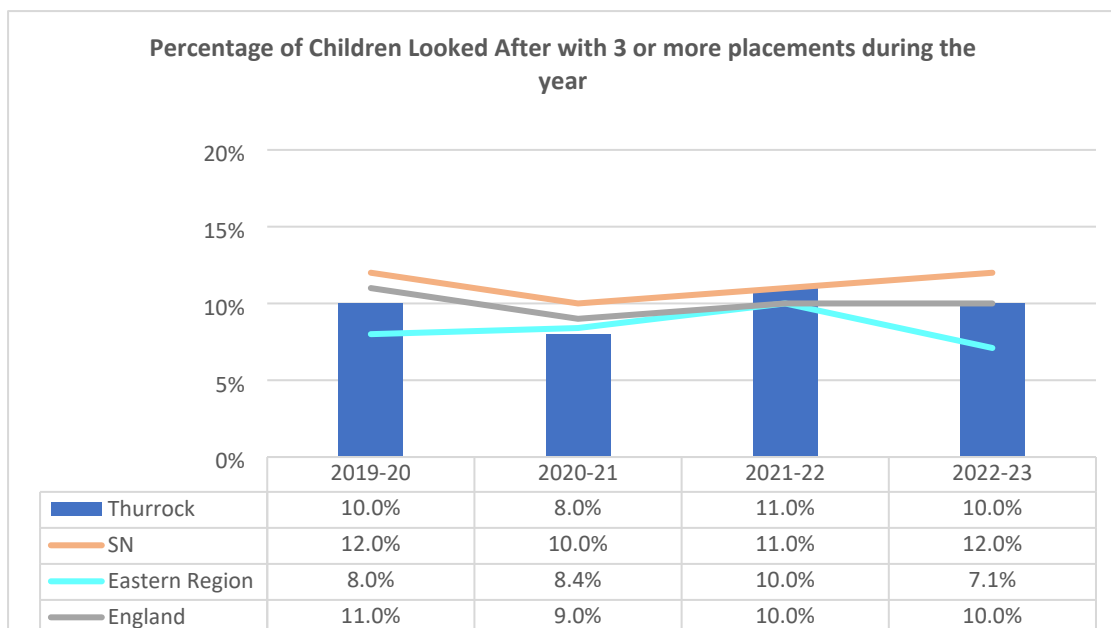


Any intervention that is offered to family's needs to be done so at the earliest possible opportunity that ensures the safety of the child or young person. The increase in Section 20 agreements to its highest levels since 2019 could be due to the increase in the numbers of Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children who are accommodated under S20 because of their status.

The threshold that must be crossed for a Full or Interim Care Order to be granted is contained within S31 of the Children Act. The Court may grant an Interim Care Order if it has reasonable grounds to believe that the child is suffering or is likely to suffer significant harm, or a Full Cre Order if the child is, or is continuing to suffer significant harm. This harm must be due to the care being provided to the child by his parents, or because the child is beyond parental control.

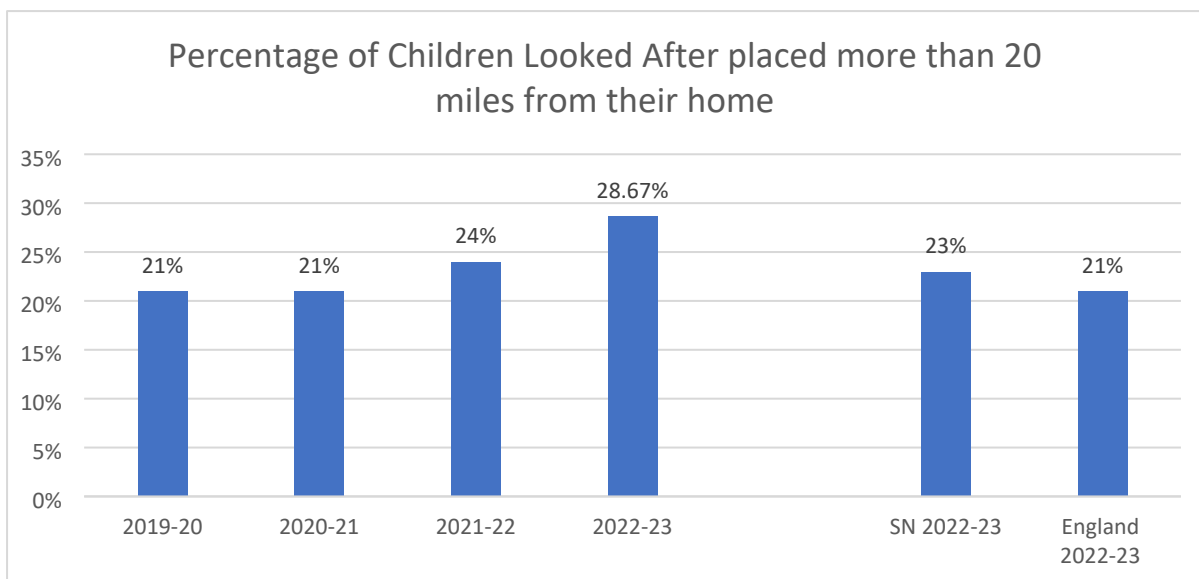
The challenge for the IRO service continues to be one that ensures that the plans that are developed for children are carried out within reasonable time scales and that the legal framework that children are placed under does not have an impact upon the stability that is required to allow them to achieve successful outcomes.

8.6 Placement Stability of Children and Young People in Care



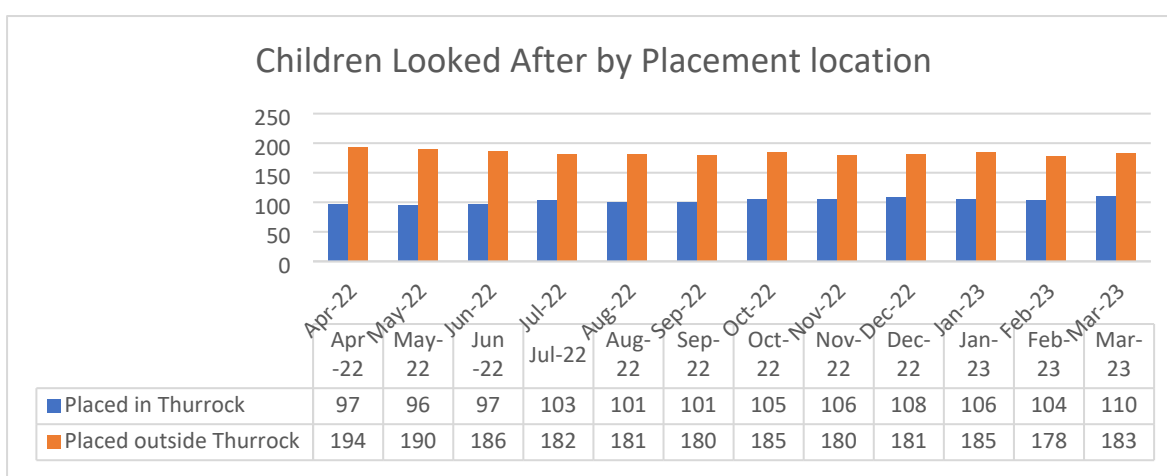
The percentage of children who have had three or more placements in the year 2022 to 2023 has decreased by 1%. The data for statistical neighbours saw a 1% increase, whilst national data saw no change. Wherever possible children need stability to allow them to build positive lasting relationships with the adults around them. Nationally there continues to be a shortage of placements available particularly for children with complex needs. Thurrock is working towards exploring ways to increase the number of placements locally which can meet these needs.

8.7 Placement location of Children and Young People in Care



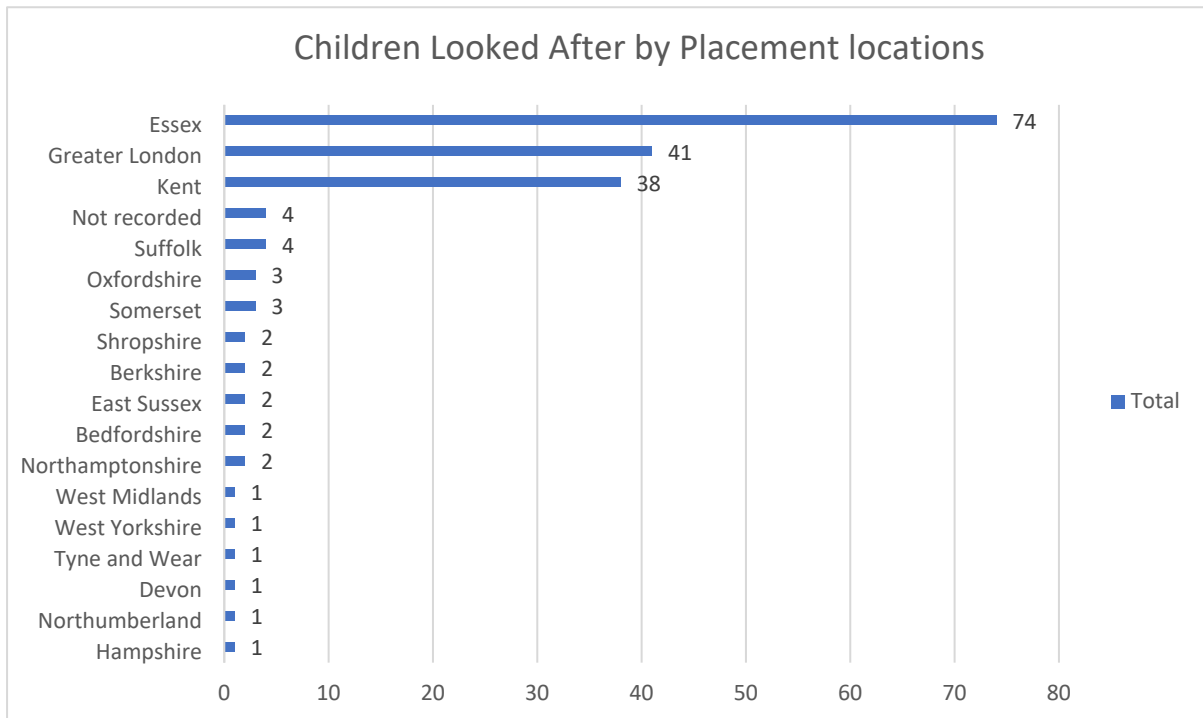
The number of children placed more than 20 miles away from their home has risen by 4.67%. This is higher than the figures for statistical neighbours as well as the rest of the country. The service recognises the need for every effort to be made to place children as close to their home as possible so far is consistent with the need to be safeguarded as well as to ensure that they have continued access to specialist therapeutic services what education provision.

Thurrock has a number of children who require specialist interventions and services, consideration needs to be given to the number of available services within Thurrock that have the capacity to meet these complex needs and requirements of these children as well as the need for some of these young people to be placed a significant distance away from Thurrock to ensure their safety and continued development combined with a national shortage of placements resulting in fewer options available to the service.



Whilst the IRO service recognises that children need to remain in the local area surrounded by familiarity, however this is not always possible and placements outside of the local area need to be sourced. Thought needs to be given not only to location

but also the needs of the individual child in order to ensure that each placement meets the needs and the safety of the child and young person.

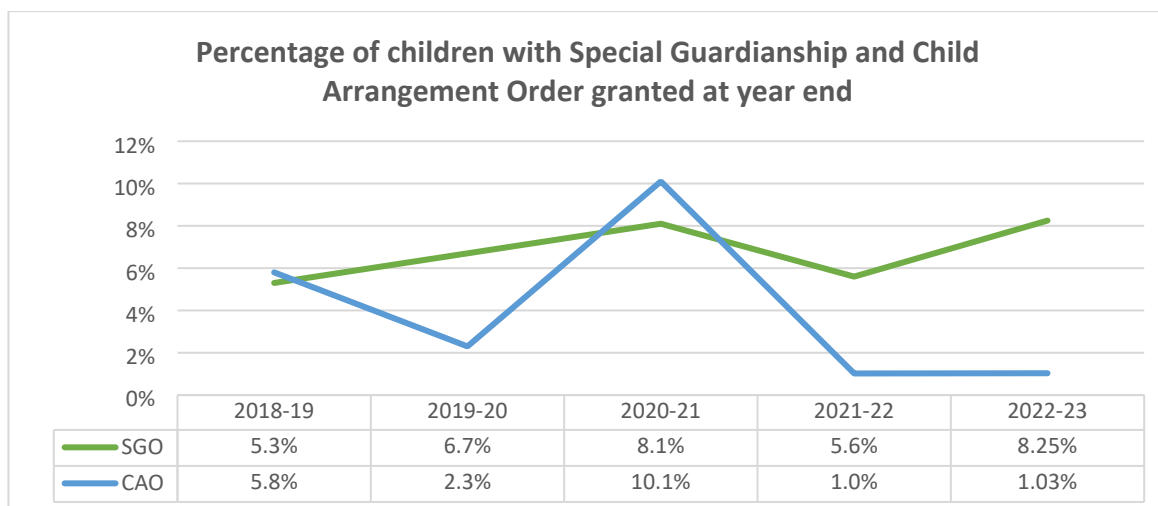


If a child or young person has to be placed outside of Thurrock then every effort is made to find a placement as close to home as is possible. Therefore most children and young people who are not placed within Thurrock are placed within Essex, Greater London, and Kent. There are times that a specialist placement is required either due to specific need or to ensure the child's safety and often these can be a distance from Thurrock.

9. Use of Special Guardianship Orders and Child Arrangement Orders

A Special Guardianship Order (SGO) is an order appointing one or more individual 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.

SGO is a more secure order than a Child Arrangements Order (CAO) because a person with Parental Responsibility cannot make an application to discharge an SGO unless they have the permission of the court to do so. Also, Special Guardians can make all day-to-day decisions, except for the child leaving the country, without the agreement of others with Parental Responsibility. However, SGOs are 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 Orders. Both an SGO and CAO are routes to permanence for children.



Special Guardianship Orders and Child Arrangement Orders can be used when looking to placing a 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, providing for a higher degree of commitment from the carer and long-term permanency for children.

8.25% of children had been granted a Special Guardianship Order in 2022/23 an increase of 2.65%, the numbers of children on a Child Arrangement Order have stayed the same.

10. 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.

It is recognised that at times when a dispute is raised it can be viewed being critical of social work practice and decision making and therefore it is encouraged that where possible disputes are resolved informally working alongside services. Thurrock's IRO's manage most disagreements and challenge very effectively and on an informal basis. In most of the cases discussion with social workers and their managers is effective in achieving the progress required.

The IRO will endeavour to ensure that the views of the child and young person are central to every interaction and form the basis of most disputes where the IRO feels that the views of the child have not been heard or properly understood. 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.

The IRO service has worked to build relationships with social work teams and wherever possible resolve disputes at the earliest opportunity at an informal level to avoid disruption and delay for children and young people.

There was one formal disputes during the reporting period Apr 2022 to Mar 2023. This was in relation to the progress of the care plan.

There were no disputes which had to be referred to the Corporate Director of Children Services or CAFCAS.

11. Feedback from the Children in Care about the IRO Service.

In January 2023 the IRO service developed and introduced the use of a QR code for children and young people to express their views about the IRO service. The information provided from this QR code, whilst limited showed a high level of satisfaction with the IRO service with 100% of children and young people who completed the QR code stating that they had spoken to their IRO before the review, that they felt involved in the review process and that there was nothing that they felt the service could improve the meetings or the support they received from the IRO service. Whilst this is very encouraging, it is hoped that going forwards this QR code will provide more information about how young people view the service and what recommendations they would have to improve it.

Children and young people are continually encouraged to make use of the Mind of My Own App to share their views and feelings and the IRO's provide children and young people with their contact numbers and emails. Prior to every review contact is made with the child or young person either face to face or via mobile phone or the relevant app.

12. IRO Service objectives in: 2022-2023

To contribute proactively to the transitions process for children and young people on the verge of leaving care.

The IRO service routinely reviews the transition planning for all young people aged over 15 ½ years old. The IRO service has worked with personal advisors within Childrens Services to make sure that they fully understand the transitions process and what is required. The IRO service has also worked with the Leaving Care Service to offer all children a further review after their 18th birthday to ensure that plans agreed prior to their 18th birthday have been carried out or escalated as appropriate.

The IRO will improve representation and participation of service users at CLA Review meetings. The IRO will collect feedback from service users about their CLA Review experience to help improve the CLA Review meetings.

As mentioned above the IRO service has recently implemented a QR code that is attached to the review correspondence provided to young people. It is hoped that analysis of this information in the coming year will allow for the service to be more responsive to the understanding the experience of young people.

To ensure that there is no delay in the plans for children with regards to long-term linking.

There are discussions within the Review where any child has been in Foster Care for more than a year if long-term linking is a plan that can be pursued. The IRO service will ensure that there are clear timescales for this to be completed and that this is checked at the midway reviews and provide the views of the IRO in a timely manner.

IRO service to strategically support and where necessary challenge & help the CLA service prepare care plans and review reports on time.

It is important that children, young people, and their families are clear about the plans that they Local Authority has for them and that they can take part in any meetings in an informed manner by having all the information prior to the meeting. Whilst the IRO service recognises the significant pressures upon frontline teams, it is felt that this is a basic requirement of the review process and as such where care plans and review reports are not provided on time the IRO service will look to challenge this with the allocated worker and the team manager. Emails are sent monthly alerting team managers and service managers about any upcoming reviews so that the relevant checks and balances are put in place. On the rare occasion that there is no care plan or reports every effort is made to minimise the impact and disruption upon the child or young person, either by holding the review in two parts or seeking another date in the near future. Feedback from the IRO service is that in the main social workers are ensuring that there is a plan available for discussion at the point of the review being held.

To take an active role in the provision of training to raise awareness of the role and remit of the IRO.

The IRO service will explore avenues to make practitioners more aware of the role of the IRO in terms of the Quality Assurance aspect of the position. A request has been made to be included in the induction programme for new starters and the IRO service will continue to build relationships with practitioners by being linked with service areas. It is felt that this is an ongoing goal due to changes within the Childrens Services workforce.

13. IRO Service Objectives 2023-2024

To complete the Recommendations from the Review within five working days to comply with the requirements of the IRO handbook.

The IRO needs to work collaboratively with front line services to ensure that the threshold for raising a dispute is consistent across the service.

The IRO service will continue to work alongside frontline teams to develop a clear and consistent offer with regards to service and financial provision to Looked After children and young people as well as Care Leavers.

To continue to build on the relationships with the social work teams and take an active role ensuring that the social workers are aware of the role of the IRO and the Review process.

To continue to provide minutes and reports to children and young people that are meaningful and age appropriate.

To explore the use of family network meetings to support young people moving home or turning 18.

25th January 2024		ITEM: 8
Corporate Parenting Committee		
Education and Employment for Care Leavers		
Wards and communities affected: All	Key Decision: Non-key	
Report of: Kate Kozlova-Boran, Head of Service, Employability and Skills, and Luke Froment, Service Manager, After Care		
Accountable Assistant Director: Janet Simon, Assistant Director, Children's Social Care and Early Help		
Accountable Director: Sheila Murphy, Executive Director, Children's Services		
This report is: Public		

Executive Summary

Care experienced young people should be supported to access education, employment or training by the Local Authority under The Children and Social Work Act 2017. This report sets out how Thurrock Council is executing its duties in relation to supporting young people over the age of 16 and entitled to a leaving care service to engage in education, employment and training. This is a vital role given the challenges care experienced young people can face.

This report sets out the legal duties on Thurrock Council and the steps being taken to support Care Experienced Young People to access education and employment. It makes recommendations for further work.

1. Recommendation(s)

- 1.1 **Members are invited to consider agreeing a target of 70% of Care Experienced Young People to progress into Employment, Education or Training following the end of year 11 Studies.**
- 1.2 **Members are invited to consider and agree that Thurrock Council takes a proactive role in offering apprenticeship and work experience opportunities as a corporate parent. These opportunities will be brokered via the Inspire hub.**
- 1.3 **Members agree to support identifying other potential opportunities for our care experience young people in the wider communities of Thurrock.**

2. Introduction and Background

- 2.1 Thurrock Council has Corporate Parenting responsibilities to care experienced young people. The Children and Social Work Act 2017 introduced three provisions:
1. A duty on local authorities which requires them to offer Personal Adviser support to all care leavers towards whom the local authority has duties under section 23C of the Children Act 1989, up to age 25. This includes care leavers who return to the local authority at any point after the age of 21 and up to age 25 and request such support.
 2. A duty on local authorities to consult on and then publish their 'local offer' for care leavers, which sets out both care leavers' legal entitlements and the additional discretionary support that the local authority provides.
 3. A duty on local authorities which requires them to have regard for seven 'corporate parenting principles', that will guide the way in which the local authority provides its services to children in care and care leavers¹.
- 2.2 All young people receiving a leaving care service fall within one of the following categories:
- **Eligible** – aged 16 or 17 and currently looked after and have been for at least 13 weeks since the age of 14 and ending after reaching the age of 16.
 - **Relevant** – aged 16 or 17, not currently looked after, previously Eligible but left care after 16th birthday. Relevant status ceases if a young person is living consistently for 6 months or more with a parent or someone with parental responsibility. Status resumes if this arrangement ceases.
 - **Former Relevant** - Aged 18 up to the age of 25 who were in care on reaching 16th birthday and previously an Eligible or Relevant child.
 - **Qualifying for Advice and Assistance** – aged 18-21 (up to 25 if in education) and were in care for less than 13 weeks on or after their 16th birthday.
- 2.3 Nationwide statistics indicate the difference care experienced young people face compared to the general population:
- Nationally, 41% of care leavers aged 19-21 years are not in education, employment, or training (NEET), compared to 12% of all 19- to 21-year-olds.
 - Nationally, just 13% of care leavers enter HE by their 19th birthday, compared to 45% of the wider population.
- 2.4 Thurrock Council works with young people to develop plans and access resources that enables them to reach their potential and achieve their ambitions. We have an aspiration for opportunities to be of good quality, appropriate to the young person interests, abilities, and goals.

1

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a93eb3ae5274a5b87c2fde4/Applying_corporate_parenting_principles_to_looked-after_children_and_care_leavers.pdf Pg8

3. Issues, Options and Analysis of Options

3.1 The following provides an overview of local performance

- In September 2023 58.6% of care leavers aged 19-21 were in Education, Employment or Training (compared to 54.1% in September 2022) and against a national figure of 55%.
- In September 2023 63% of care leavers aged 17-18 were in Education, Employment and Training against a national figure of 66%.

3.2 Colleagues from the Aftercare Team and Employability and Skills team work cross-departmentally to enable care experienced young people to have the best possible outcome in their careers by eliminating barriers to the Employment, Education or Training (EET) and providing exciting opportunities when the young people are ready.

3.3 The Local Offer sets out support that is available to all care leavers to engage them into education, employment or training. The current offer includes LA's commitments to:

- Support Young Person with their Personal Education Plan (PEP).
- Help to get onto study/training courses.
- Support on young people's pathway to university and higher education.
- Provide a defined careers advice offer from our Inspire Youth Hub Service.
- Ensure a personal adviser/foster parent attends university open day visits and all travel is paid.
- Ensure your university holiday accommodation costs are arranged in advance and paid for by a grant of up to £2,750 during year 1, 2 and 3.
- Provide a careers mentor from The Inspire Hub.
- Support through our Inspire Hub to prepare a CV, complete job applications, prepare for interviews, identify apprenticeship and job opportunities.
- Provide a financial payment to assist with interviews, e.g. travel costs and clothing.
- Provide travel costs to attend work or university until first pay cheque or student loan is available.
- Work with colleagues from Inspire to identify training or employment opportunities.

And the provision for:

- £100 per year towards books and materials for young people attending college or university.
- £500 to support living costs for young people deciding to take a gap year before attending higher education.

- £100 towards cost of clothing for first job interview.
 - £100 towards prom and graduation costs.
 - Support with travel costs to College or University.
 - University Higher Education Bursary; £2,000 per course.
 - Laptops, dependant on relevance to the study course.
 - University holiday accommodation cost; £2,750 per year over the first three years of the course along with support to identify appropriate holiday accommodation if required.
 - Support to apply for university bursaries and other charitable funding,
- 3.4 There is a weekly panel which focuses on post-18-year-olds who do not have an EET offer and a separate monthly panel focusing on pre-18 year olds. The panel seeks to strengthen oversight and planning; to ensure young people have opportunities into EET, to understand the issues for individual young people and align their interests to an EET offer. Each young person is regularly reviewed at panel to monitor impact and progress. The Personal Advisors in the aftercare team have an excellent understanding of the young people's needs and seek to take a trauma informed approach to meeting their needs for education and employment. The aim is to match each young person with an offer that enthuses and motivates them.
- 3.5 Fifteen young people have been identified to receive more targeted support into Education, Employment and Training. Progress is reviewed each month in a cross departmental monthly meeting with a focus on work placements, internships and apprenticeships within the LA and its partners. The discussions in this forum seek to address issues such as self-esteem and social anxiety that can act as barriers towards employment or education for care experienced young people. An evaluation of this will be undertaken to identify key points of learning and ways of imbedding this in future work.
- 3.6 Inspire meets monthly with the Virtual School to identify support for Children Looked After (CLA) who are Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET) and attends CLA reviews when asked to be part of transition planning.
- 3.7 **The 'Unlock Your Potential' Job club** started in October 2023 with young people from different backgrounds (SEND, Traveller community and Care leavers) attending. The course is run in partnership between Inspire and Thurrock Adult Community College (TACC). The course focuses on teamwork, resilience, budgeting, CV writing and career paths.
- 3.8 The next course in development, 'Preparing for Adulthood', focuses on budgeting and preparing food on a budget. TACC will provide each young person with an air fryer at the end of the course.
- 3.9 All courses are co-produced with care experienced young people and focus

on an identified need; are run in close partnership with the DWP and the Care leaver Job Coach to encourage the young person to attend and commit through their universal credit framework.

- 3.10 Music Sessions have been running in the Inspire professional Music Studio since July 2023 aimed at young people aged 15 years – 24 years. One care leaver attends regularly whose ambition is to work in the music industry. The sessions are run by a qualified musician upskilling the young person for his future career.
- 3.11 Mind' currently use Inspire Youth Hub to deliver wellbeing sessions. The workshops are becoming very popular and growing.
- 3.12 One Care Leaver has completed their Construction Skills Certificate Scheme (CSCS) training with 360 Training, a further six Care Leavers have signed up for the next intake. The incentive is that each young person receives all the appropriate PPE to be able to access and attend work.
- 3.13 Inspire have been working with Make Happen (NCOP) on a programme for Care-experienced young people in Year 9-13 to access HE and Apprenticeships. This included the delivery of workshops (in person and on-line) to care experienced young people and to carers, aimed at increasing participation by highlighting available support and challenging myths. Individual support has also been provided, for example with Student Finance and bursary applications, and with Personal Statements.
- 3.14 Care experienced young people are still experiencing longer term effects of Covid measures, which led to severe disruption to education and employment. The return to traditional exams has led to many students receiving lower grades than expected, and not being able to progress onto desired courses. This may lead to higher drop-out rates. Care experienced young people are also reporting mental health challenges. For some, this is having a negative impact on their ability to engage in EET.
- 3.15 Government financial support to encourage employers to take care experienced young people on as apprentices, and an Apprenticeship Bursary, has recently been introduced but it is too early to judge their impact. Historically, care leavers have felt discouraged from gaining qualifications through an apprenticeship by often low wages compared with unskilled work, for example in construction or logistics, to the detriment of their longer-term employment and earnings potential.
- 3.16 The Aftercare service have been working with commissioners to develop an expectation that an offer is made to provide care leavers with opportunities for education or employment by those who are facilitating services for Thurrock

council. Initial communication has been made with providers to Children's Services to see if they can assist. It is being explored if this can be taken on for all corporate contracts.

- 3.17 The Chair of the Corporate Parenting Committee and the Cabinet member for Education have been consulted regarding the role of members in championing the cause of Care Leavers in Thurrock and the expectation that all parts of the Local Authority will have a formal offer to support the education and employment needs of Care experienced young people. It is proposed that members of this committee review whether this can be raised with all members.
- 3.18 To ensure Care Experienced Young People are supported into Education, employment and or training, it is recommended that a target of 70% is adopted. This is line with national and statistical neighbours performance and is ambitious

4. Reasons for Recommendation

- 4.1 Members of the committee are sighted on the work done to ensure care experienced young people are supported to access employment education and training.
- 4.2 Members of the committee are able to comment on and provide challenge on the steps taken to reduce the gap between care experienced young people and the general population in terms of education employment and training.

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

- 5.1 As noted in the report above, young people have been consulted on the training courses and local offer for Care Leavers.

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

- 6.1 Children Looked After

7. Implications

7.1 Financial

Implications verified by: **David May**
Strategic Lead Finance

The support and associated costs identified within the report are funded from Children Services core budget or Department for Education additional and specific grants.

7.2 Legal

Implications verified by: **Nicola Monerville**
Principal Solicitor – LB Barking & Dagenham

This report provides Corporate Parenting Committee the opportunity to review and monitor the Council's performance as a Corporate Parent and to set future targets.

The Children and Social Work Act 2017 defines the role of corporate parents, in addition to expanding and extending support for care leavers.

The Council is under a duty to have regard to the corporate parenting principles under Section 1 of the Children and Social Work Act 2017 in relation to young people aged under 25 who are relevant or for relevant children in addition to children who remain looked after.

The duties to care leavers are set out in the Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000, associated regulations and statutory guidance. This includes a duty to arrange a personal advisor for each Looked After child who is an 'eligible' child i.e. a child who is 16 or 17, who has been looked after for a period of 13 weeks.

The personal advisor role can continue until the age of 25. Further the Council is under a duty to undertake an assessment of an eligible child's needs and prepare a pathway plan. This must be kept under review. The Council has a duty to take reasonable steps to keep in touch with a former relevant child.

7.3 Diversity and Equality

Implications verified by: **Roxanne Scanlon**
**Community Engagement and Project
Monitoring Officer**

The Service is committed to practice, which promotes equality, diversity and inclusion and will carry out its duties in accordance with the Equality Act 2010, Public Sector Equality Duty and related Codes of Practice and Anti-discriminatory policy. The service recognises that care leavers may have experienced obstruction or the impact of prejudice when accessing services including Social Care.

The Child Looked After and Aftercare services are committed to support all children in the care of Thurrock Council to be safe and well and to reach their

potential. Individual needs assessments and plans are made for each care leaver taking consideration of their identity, culture, history and social needs.

The Anti Racist Practice standards set by Thurrock Children's Services are applicable to this report and service.

7.4 **Other implications** (where significant) – i.e. Staff, Health, Sustainability, Crime and Disorder, or Impact on Looked After Children)

- Looked After Children

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

Report Authors:

Kate Kozlova-Boran
Head of Employability and Skills
Children's Services

Luke Froment
Service Manager, Aftercare
Children's Services

Daniel Jones
Head of Looked After Children
Children's Services

25th January 2024	ITEM: 9
Corporate Parenting Committee	
Placement Sufficiency Strategy	
Wards and communities affected: All	Key Decision: Non-key
Report of: Ceri Armstrong, Head of Transformation and Commissioning, and Dan Jones, Head of Service, Children Looked After	
Accountable Assistant Director: Janet Simon, Assistant Director, Children’s Social Care and Early Help	
Accountable Director: Sheila Murphy, Executive Director Children’s Services	
This report is: Public	

Executive Summary

Under Section 22 of the Children Act 1989 (amended by the Children and Young Persons Act 2008) the Local Authority has a duty, as far as is reasonably practicable, to secure sufficient accommodation within the authority’s area, which meets the needs of children that the Local Authority are looking after, and whose circumstances are such that it would be consistent with their welfare for them to be provided with accommodation that is local.

Thurrock Council’s Sufficiency Strategy has been reviewed and revised in light of the significant change in available provision in the local and national area. There are increasingly fewer placements available for children with a high level of need, children of secondary school age, sibling groups and, parent & child placements. This has been recognised as a national issue and the Government has published a forward plan, *Stable Homes Built on Love*¹

The Sufficiency strategy sets out Thurrock Council’s response including:

- Children and Young People’s priorities and experiences
- How local placements of all types will be developed
- How our Think Family’ approach and targeted intervention will work to reduce the number of children requiring a placement
- How the Sufficiency Strategy links to regional and national initiatives

1

[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1185931/Children s Social Care Stable Homes Built on Love consultation response.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1185931/Children_s_Social_Care_Stable_Homes_Built_on_Love_consultation_response.pdf)

1. Recommendation(s)

1.1 That members are advised of the revised Sufficiency Strategy and have had the had the opportunity to review and comment upon this in relation to Thurrock Council's statutory duty

2. Introduction and Background

2.1 Section 22 of the Children Act 1989 (amended by the Children and Young Persons Act 2008) places a general duty on local authorities to secure, so far as reasonably practicable, sufficient accommodation within the authority's area, which meets the needs of children that the local authority are looking after, and whose circumstances are such that it would be consistent with their welfare for them to be provided with accommodation that is in the local authority's area. In September 2021, the law changed to require that children aged 0-16 years are placed in either foster care, residential care or other registered care setting.

2.2 As noted in our previous update to this Committee², there has been a significant change in the local and national availability of foster placements, registered children's homes and specialist residential schools for children with SEND and complex needs.

2.3 Since our last Sufficiency Strategy, there have been two key changes in the legal framework around children's placements:

- It is now illegal for Local Authorities to place Children in unregistered provision when they are aged 0-15 years
- From the end of October 2023, all supported accommodation providers to looked after children must be registered with Ofsted or have made an application to do so.

3. Issues, Options and Analysis of Options

3.1 Every child in care requires a suitable placement that meets their needs and is as local as possible to the child's home. As at 30 September, 288 children were looked after by Thurrock Council which is near our twelve month average of 292 children. Thurrock Council has an allocated quota of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children in its care of 44 children and the 12 month average is 42 children.

3.2 The table below gives a breakdown of the placements that our children and young people are currently living in.

²

<https://democracy.thurrock.gov.uk/documents/s35310/Children%20Looked%20After%20and%20Care%20Leaver%20Sufficiency%20Strategy%20Update.pdf>

Placement Type	Number of Children Placed.
Placed for Adoption	3
Placed with Connected Persons Foster Carers	19
Placed with Thurrock Foster Carers	96
Placed with IFA Foster Carers	86
Placed with Parents/those with PR	8
Placed in Supported Accommodation	45
Placed in Registered Children's Homes/Schools	24
Placed in Registered Parent and Child Home	2
Placed in other settings	5

3.3 We want to ensure the right children are in our care, that they are in the right placements and that they transition into adulthood feeling supported with the skills to progress to independent living feeling settled, secure, and stable. We aim to do this through robust permanency planning and placement stability.

- 3.4 Over 2022/23 key placement pressures have been:
- Low availability of local Parent and Child Placements
 - Low availability of 52 week SEND School Placements
 - Fewer placements for children with complex trauma
 - Fewer placements for Secondary aged children

3.5 Children and young people placed outside the Local Authority area remains a challenge due to the under development of the care market and too few providers having local provision available. These are local challenges but also exist at a national level with sufficiency issues and increasing costs within the residential care market, Thurrock has looked at new solutions for children. To address the gaps locally, particularly around placements for young people with complex needs, often on Deprivation of Liberty Orders we have developed two residential homes within Thurrock utilising local council housing stock. These are initially being used as solo placements with the view to possibly increasing capacity to two placements in at least one of the homes. These two properties are being retained by the Local Authority and have been commissioned to a local provider to register with Ofsted. Both homes have received an initial inspection grading of 'good' by Ofsted. The development of the homes has reduced our reliance on emergency accommodation, significantly reduced costs and provided placement stability for two young people with a history of placement breakdowns.

- 3.6 Development of the care market has been a key priority under the difficult circumstances described. However, we have implemented a Placements Framework for supported accommodation, Independent Fostering Agencies (IFA) and residential placements. For supported accommodation 90% of placements have been made through the framework, having come from a position of zero prior to the implementation of the framework. The framework has supported around 50-60% of placements made with Independent Fostering Agencies (IFA's). Attracting residential care providers has been challenging given the national sufficiency issues with only around 5% of placements made from the framework for this placement type. There will need to be a focus on this area when the framework is retendered in 2024. The framework is periodically re-opened to attract new providers to be based in Thurrock.
- 3.7 The placement framework operates a quality monitoring approach to ensure that providers deliver to the standards set out in the specification. This has brought more stability and resulted in less providers being decommissioned.
- 3.8 A Placement Framework is also being developed for residential placements for children with Special Education Needs (SEND). Options are being considered to merge this with the retender of the placements for looked after children framework in 2024. This will be designed to bring the same consistency and quality framework to our SEND provision as we have developed in our overarching placement framework.
- 3.9 Getting the right support for care leavers is a priority for Thurrock as this supports transition into adulthood. Several interlinked projects are already in place bringing together partners such as Housing, Adult Services, Headstart and Children's Services to identify and meet support needs and find housing solutions locally.

The Revised Sufficiency Strategy

- 3.10 The revised Strategy is set out in Appendix 1.

The document sets out how Thurrock Council will discharge its duties and work to ensure that children have suitable placements. The document sets out the key priorities from young people and how Thurrock Council will address key challenges.

- 3.11 The Sufficiency Strategy will be overseen by the Executive Director of Children's Services and the Assistant Director for Children's Social Care and Early Help. Members will have oversight via the Corporate Parenting Committee who will receive an update annually. Members of the committee can call in more frequent updates at their discretion.

4. Reasons for Recommendation

- 4.1 Appendix 1 contains the Children Looked After Sufficiency Strategy which members can comment on and review. This strategy is completed in respect of Statutory requirements and in response to local needs.
- 4.2 The revision of the strategy implements a previous recommendation from the Corporate Parenting Committee³

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

- 5.1 The views of Children and Young People were sought in the preparation of the Strategy

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

- 6.1 People – a borough where people of all ages are proud to work and play, live and stay.
This means:
- 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

7. Implications

7.1 Financial

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

The provision of high-quality, cost-effective placements is a priority in meeting our duties for Children Looked After and Care Leavers. Whilst this strategy does not have savings targets attached, any savings that are achieved will contribute to the costs of earlier intervention and increased demand.

There are no financial implications in this report.

³ Para 4.2

<https://democracy.thurrock.gov.uk/documents/s35310/Children%20Looked%20After%20and%20Care%20Leaver%20Sufficiency%20Strategy%20Update.pdf>

7.2 Legal

Implications verified by: **Judith Knight**
Interim Deputy Head of Legal (Social Care and Education)

Section 22 of the Children Act 1989 (amended by the Children and Young Persons Act 2008) places a general duty on local authorities to secure, so far as reasonably practicable, sufficient accommodation within the authority's area, which meets the needs of children that the local authority are looking after, and whose circumstances are such that it would be consistent with their welfare for them to be provided with accommodation that is in the local authority's area.

The overall context for meeting the Duty is set out in the statutory guidance, (Sufficiency: Statutory guidance on securing sufficient accommodation for looked after children 2010) which states that: "Securing sufficient accommodation that meets the needs of looked after children is a vital step in delivering improved outcomes for this vulnerable group. Having the right placement in the right place, at the right time is a critical success factor in relation to the delivery of better outcomes for looked after children."

7.3 Diversity and Equality

Implications verified by: **Rebecca Lee**
Team Manager, Community Development and Equalities

Access to placements that meet the needs identified are key to improving outcomes for Children Looked After and Care Leavers. This strategy outlines key factors such as ethnicity, gender, age and provides an analysis of these to aid planning.

Placement planning addresses the individual diversity needs of children placed and the supervising social workers assist foster carers to ensuring appropriate oversight and supervision is in place. In some situations where a cultural match has not been possible, foster carers' support network (Independent Reviewing Officers, Social Workers, and Independent Visitors) can provide and contribute to the information and care that foster families need to provide appropriate support.

The service are currently completing a CEIA.

7.4 Other implications (where significant) – i.e. Staff, Health, Sustainability, Crime and Disorder, or Impact on Looked After Children)

Impact on Looked After Children – discussed in the report

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

- Appendix 1 - Children Looked After Sufficiency Strategy

Report Authors:

Ceri Armstrong
Head of Transformation and Commissioning
Adults Housing and Health

Daniel Jones
Head of Looked After Children
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Thurrock Council Sufficiency Strategy

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Children in Care and **Care Leavers**



Foreword

“Our young people have immense talent and potential, and we want them to have the best start in life and grow up well-equipped to take advantage of the opportunities available to them. We also wish to ensure children transition seamlessly into adulthood and are enabled to achieve their potential. To do this, we believe partners need to work in partnership with young people at the heart of all decisions and plans.”

Thurrock Brighter Futures Strategy 2021-26.

“Every child deserves a stable loving home that meets their needs up to adulthood and beyond. Every 'placement' is a child's home, their place for comfort and family life.

In Thurrock, we recognise that the national sufficiency of placements has changed since our last Strategy and so has our approach. Our vision is still to supply sufficient high-quality placements for children and young people that encourages their aspirations and ambitions and can support them to fulfil their potential. We aspire for our Care Leavers to have all the necessary skills and support they need to make the successful transition to adulthood and independence at a time that is right for them and tailored to their unique individual circumstances.

We will build our own placements, build our local independent sector and where needed, develop bespoke placements that meet need. We are focused on delivering the services children and young people need and deserve to achieve safe, happy, healthy, and successful lives.”

Janet Simon, Assistant Director, Children's Social Care and Early Help

Executive Summary

The Law says that Thurrock Council must plan to ensure there are enough foster homes, children's homes and other placements to meet the needs of the children and families living in Thurrock. This document shows that plan

We think one of the best ways to help is to make sure children and young people live with their family; this may stop them coming in to care or help them to leave care. Children and Young people want this too. We have a way of working called 'Think Family' and a dedicated team for children aged 14-18 to help do this.

Finding homes for children to live in has become difficult all over England in the last two years. In response the government has created a plan called "Stable Homes Built on Love." We are working with this plan as it rolls out alongside our own. We think it will take time for things to get better and there will be problems along the way. This plan sets out how we will move forward.

Thurrock needs more local homes for children to live in. Children and Young People have told us they want to be closer to their home and to be able to stay in their school when their home changes.

- We have incentives to recruit local foster carers and have supported more children's homes to open in Thurrock, but there's more to do.
- Other types of homes for children aren't so difficult to find, like families for children who need an adoption.

We will review this plan regularly and our children in care, Council and elected Council Members will get an update each year at the Corporate Parenting Committee.

Part 1 – Setting the scene for Thurrock

Children looked after (CLA) -
March 2023

292
children looked after
(compared to
293 in 2022)

15%
are unaccompanied
asylum seekers
(UASC)

62%
are male

30%
have been in care for
at least 2 ½
years

22%
have been in the
same placement for
more than 2 years

11%
have a disability

16%
are on an educational
health care plan

33%
are black, Asian or
minority ethnicity

37%
are aged 16 to 18

62%
of placements are
outside the Thurrock
boundary

Care leavers – March 2023

276

care leavers
(compared to
300 in 2022)

54%

are aged
19 to 21

54%

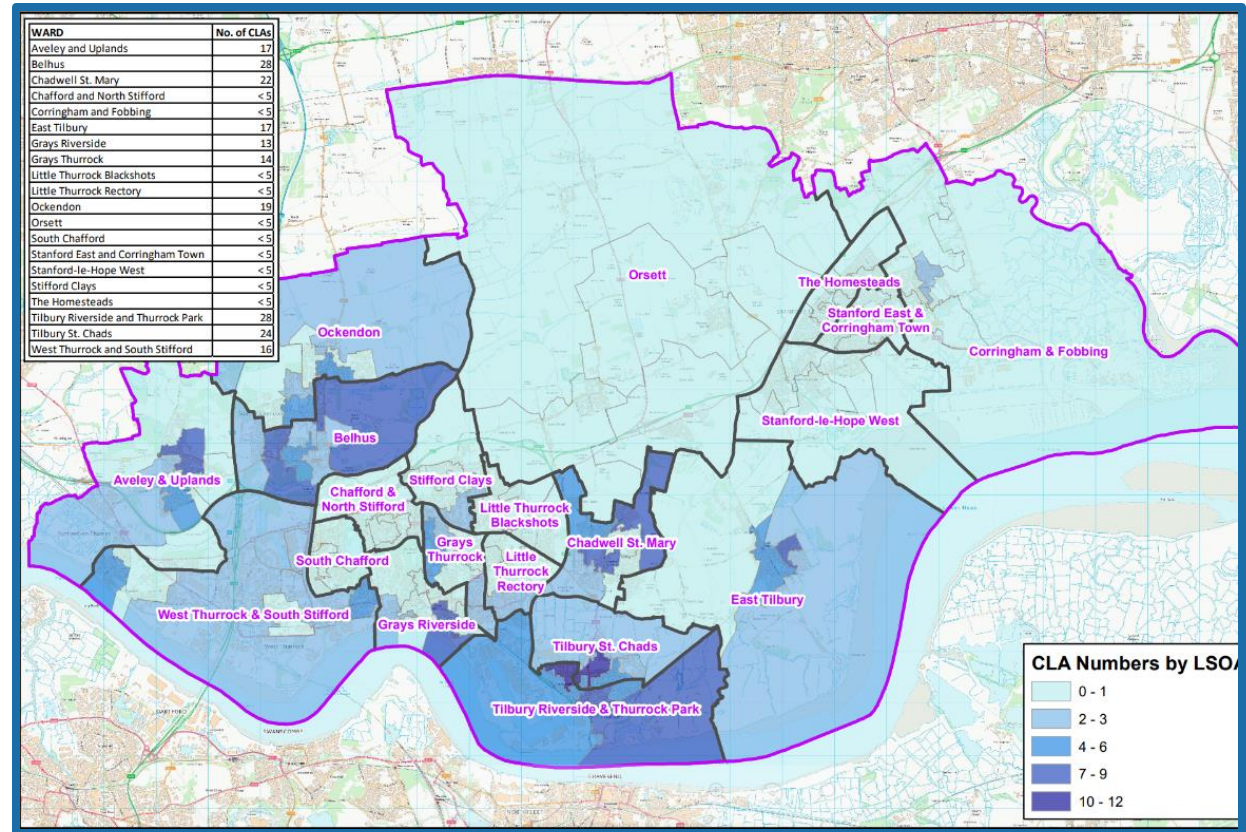
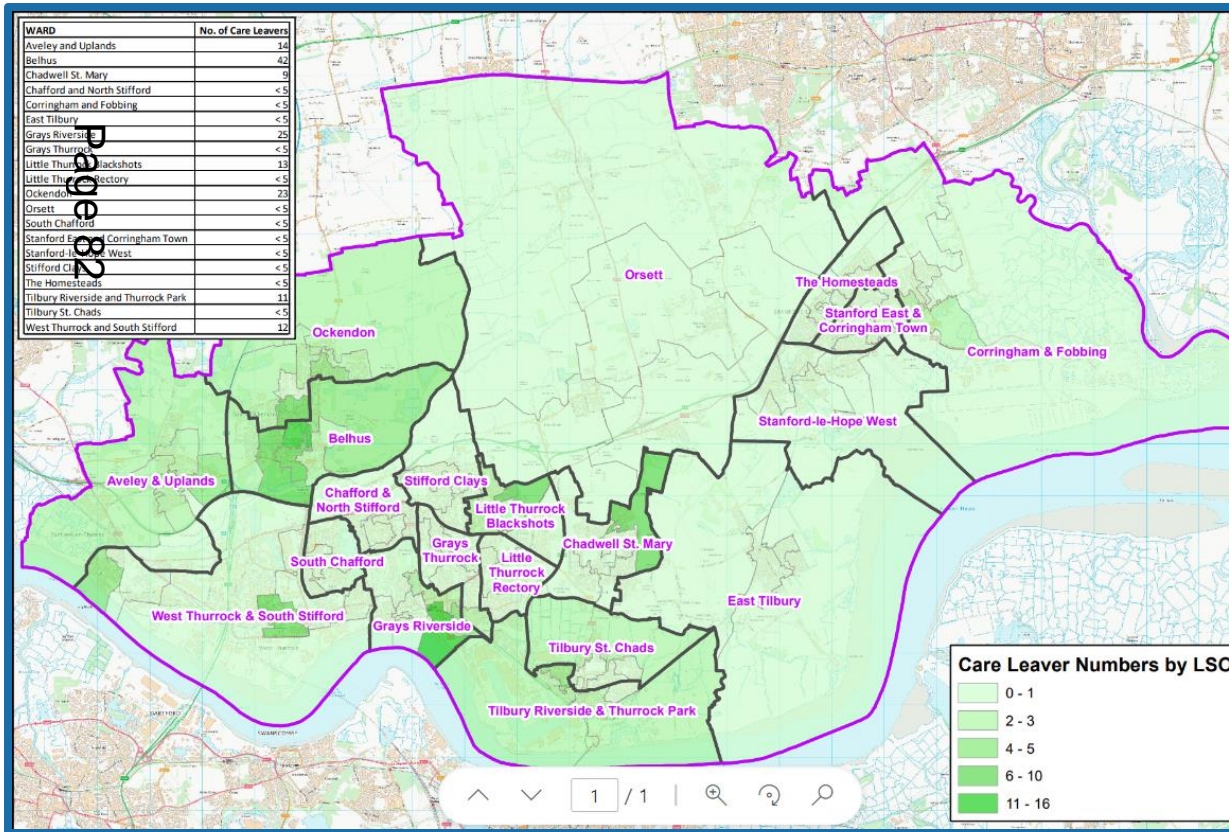
are in education,
employment
or training

94%

are in suitable
accommodation



Location of our CLA and Care leavers



What our young people have told us.....

"Sometimes we don't want to live in a family and would like to have residential care and semi-independent accommodation"

"We would like to live as close to our homes as possible with our foster carers or placement"

"We would like to live with our family if we can, and we would like to be able to live with our Parents if things have changed"

"We would like to have a say in where we live and more information about our new foster home or children's home before we go there"

"We don't want everyone to know we are in care, that's our business"

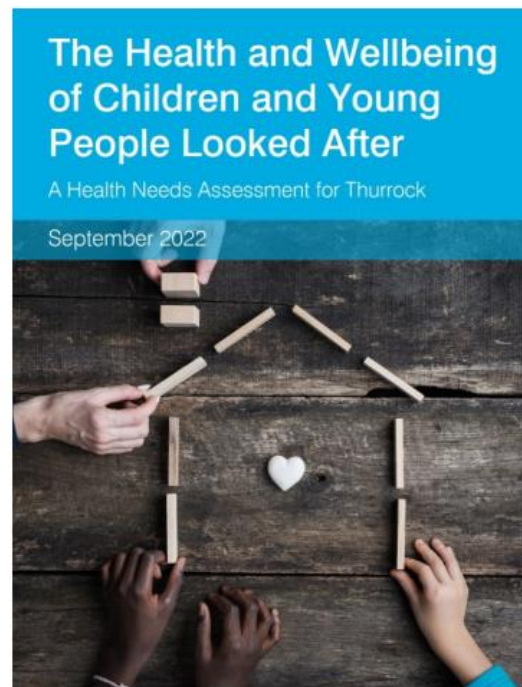
"We would like to be able to access education without placements changing our school"

Information from the Thurrock Health Needs Assessment – September 2022

The health and wellbeing needs of looked after children were assessed in September 2022

[Thurrock Council - Health needs assessment: children looked after, September 2022](#)

“Nationally, the prevalence of Children Looked After (CLA) has been increasing year on year. Although Thurrock has had a larger number of children in care than comparator local authorities, this has now stabilised from 2018 and is currently in line with national and comparator local authorities.”



“There is a strong positive association between ward level deprivation and the rate of CLA in each ward in Thurrock with children living in the most deprived area of Thurrock being 4.3 times more likely to be taken into care than those living in the least deprived area of the borough.”

“The difference in the percentage of pupils achieving a 9-4 pass in Maths and English at KS4 between CLA and the general pupil population in Thurrock was nearly three-fold, where CLA averaged 23.3% and the general population averaged 61%. However, performance against national CLA cohorts is positive for Thurrock.”

Thurrock projections

We anticipate that over the next three years, the overall number of children in care will remain steady - assuming there is no greater expectation in terms of the UASC quota.

We anticipate that whilst the overall number remains steady there will be a greater range of need including a need for specialist placements in the Thurrock area. This specifically relates to Special Educational Needs & Disabilities (SEND) residential placements linked to education. We anticipate there will be an increased requirement for short break needs, foster placements and residential placements for secondary age children and a greater range of local parent and child placements.



Our Vision

Our Vision is to provide sufficient high-quality placements for children and young people, taking account of their aspirations and ambitions, and supporting them to fulfil their potential.

We aspire for our Care Leavers to have all the necessary skills and support to make a successful transition to adulthood and independence.



Key Strategies

These key strategies underpin our aspirations for children and young people in Thurrock:

Thurrock Health & Wellbeing Strategy 2022-26

<https://www.thurrock.gov.uk/health-and-well-being-strategy/health-and-well-being-strategy-2022-2026>

Brighter Futures Strategy – Developing well in Thurrock 2021

<https://democracy.thurrock.gov.uk/documents/s31125/Item%208.%20Brighter%20Futures%20Strategy.%20Draft%20Strategy.pdf>

Our pledge to Looked after children

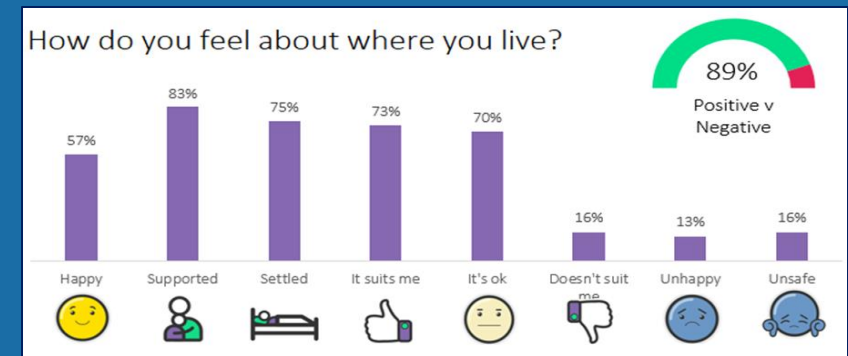
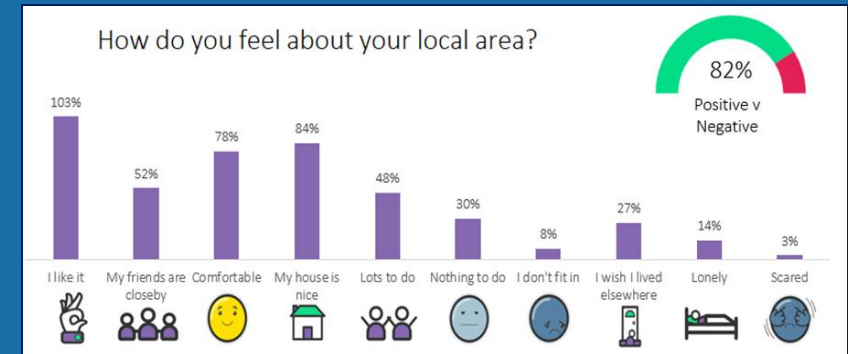
<https://www.thurrock.gov.uk/welcoming-children-into-care/our-pledge>

How are we doing?

Feedback from Children and Young People

Page 87

- Since 2019 we have used Mind of My Own to track our Children and Young People's satisfaction with their placements. Over three hundred responses have been received.
- Children are overwhelmingly happy with their carers. Some would like to live closer to home or in a different area
- Any young person who reports feeling unhappy, scared or unsafe through using Mind of My Own, triggers a safety link which allows us to identify them and explore the issues further. The system is audited to ensure safeguarding concerns have been addressed and action has been taken.



Part 2 – Our responsibilities

Legal duties

Local authorities have duties towards children under the Children Act 1989 that relate to the Sufficiency Duty, specifically:

- Section 17 - to supply a range of services to children in need and their families which can appropriately meet their needs.
- Section 20 - to supply accommodation for children in need where they are assessed as requiring this
- Section 21 - to accommodate children who are removed from their family to safeguard them.

When assessing the most appropriate placement for a child, Section 22 requires the local authority to give preference to placing with a relative, friend or other person connected with the child who is also a local authority foster parent.

Section 22 has added considerations when deciding on the most appropriate placement (not in order of priority):

- Proximity to the child's home.
- Avoiding disruption of education.
- Where possible placing the child with a sibling.
- To meet the specific needs of disabled children.
- Provision of accommodation within the local authority area where practical to do so.

our “corporate parenting”
duty



How we will fulfil those duties

The Children and Social Work Act 2017 extends a duty on Local Authorities to have regard to a set of Corporate Parenting Principles when exercising its functions in relation to looked after children and care leavers up to the age of twenty-five.

Thurrock Council will review the types of placements that are needed, looking at historical trends and future demand forecast, and match this against the known capacity both locally, and where necessary and appropriate, nationwide. The quality of placements is at the forefront of our policy, ensuring that we commission suitable placements with good providers and that they are subject to robust monitoring processes. A national shortage of places at residential homes for children with complex needs, presents challenges for the Council that will need to be overcome through improved collaboration and innovation, whilst keeping a focus on value for money. The Covid-19 pandemic has also presented its own unique challenges affecting the mental health of young people, emotional wellbeing, and isolation.

Thurrock Council, through this strategy, will work towards understanding our current market position, assessing local and national challenges around placements and start to develop the market. This will be achieved through several approaches including:

- developing closer relationships with providers currently on our Placements Framework
- collaborating with providers to develop new provision within or much closer to Thurrock
- building on recent projects that have developed our own residential placements using local authority housing stock
- increasing our own foster carers to enable less reliance on independent foster care

This will require a more collaborative approach providers and at a regional level to effect change.

Stable Homes, Built on Love

In September 2023, the Government set out its plan to reform children's social care and identified six ambitions:

Ambition 1: Family Help

Ambition 2: Keeping children safe

Ambition 3: Supporting families to help children

Ambition 4: Making care better for children in care and care leavers

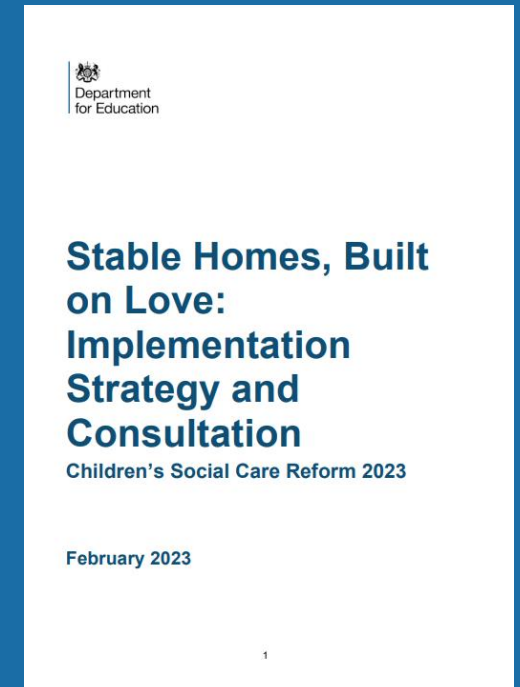
Ambition 5: Children have great social workers

Ambition 6: Improving the whole system for children and families

These themes inform our strategic plan.

This Strategy sets out how Thurrock Council will respond to these duties to ensure it meets the needs of its children in care and care leavers to deliver the best possible outcomes for them.

It will reflect on progress made since the last Strategy (2021-2024) and look forward to shaping future intentions for both commissioned services and our in-house foster care provision.





Children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND)

Children with SEND who are not looked after are not covered within this strategy and are subject to separate priorities contained within relevant strategies.

The current Thurrock SEND key strategic priority areas (that are currently being reviewed), and have been developed through a process of co-production with partners to fulfil our shared vision for SEND are:

1. Ensure that children, young people and families are at the heart of an effective SEND system
2. Ensure every child and young person is making good progress and attends a good place to learn
3. Ensure children, young people and families are well supported
4. Ensure an effective and responsive approach to assessing and meeting children, young people and families' needs
5. Ensure the early identification of and early support for children with SEND
6. Ensure young people are well prepared for adulthood

Part 3 – Local and National context

Challenges

Thurrock is experiencing increasing demand for placements for children due to many factors, including:

Population growth

Between the last two censuses (held in 2011 and 2021), the population of Thurrock increased by 11.6%, from around 157,700 in 2011 to around 176,000 in 2021

The population increased by a greater percentage than the overall population of the East of England (8.3%), and by a greater percentage than the overall population of England (up 6.6%). Thurrock was among the top 45% most densely populated English local authority areas at the last census. Thurrock saw England's largest percentage-point rise in the proportion of lone-parent households (from 11.2% in 2011 to 13.5% in 2021).

Changes in social circumstances

Covid-19 and the public health measures put in place to contain its spread, such as social distancing, temporarily reduced economic activity as firms and households were unable to produce and spend as they usually would. Weaker global economic activity added to these effects, reducing export demand, and disrupting international supply chains. Firm revenue and household income fell as a result, driving up the cost of living.

Changes in economic circumstances

The cost of living increased sharply across the UK during 2021 and 2022. The annual rate of inflation reached 11.1% in October 2022, a 41-year high, before subsequently easing. Recent data shows it was 6.7% in September 2023, unchanged from August 2022, resulting in increasing requests for fee uplifts from our commissioned and spot purchased providers.

Over three quarters of providers reported fee rate increases (77% compared with 62% last year). The majority reported increases in the higher 6-10% bracket. One in five providers (22% down from 35% in 2022) held prices, and nationally only one provider has decreased their fees

Part 3 – Local and National context

Challenges

Thurrock is experiencing increasing demand for placements for children due to many factors, including:

Placement Occupancy:

28% of children’s residential care providers reported being at 95% occupancy rate, the highest level recorded since June 2015.

More providers reported stable occupancy rates, and the proportion reporting declining levels fell from 25% in 2022 to 15% this year. The proportion of providers seeing annual occupancy grow by at least 6% also rose by one fifth.

Local Placements:

Providers found that two thirds of children in residential care were placed in a home in their local authority area or a near neighbour. This ratio has increased from 53% in 2021. However, Department for Education research shows that a placement’s ability to meet a child’s needs is prioritised over the location of the home.

Growth and staffing:

The proportion of providers reporting addition to capacity in the last year increased to 45% from 40% last year but is not yet back to pre-Covid levels. A factor could be challenges around insufficient staff, with 58% of providers reporting vacancy rates of 5% or above, and one in five having employee turnover rates of at least 30%.

Income:

The proportion of providers reporting a rise in turnover and income increased from 39% in 2022 to 46% in 2023, while a further 28% said profit/income was stable over the year. However, one in four providers (26%) reported a decline in income, the same proportion as the year before.

The trend in providers reporting reduced reserves that started in 2022 continued in 2023, with 54% reporting a decline compared to 43% last year. This highlighted the vulnerability of the sector to rising inflation due to its high medium-term fixed operating costs.

Commissioning challenges

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Insufficient Placement Capacity: The demand for residential and supported accommodation regularly exceeds the available capacity, leading to delays in finding suitable placements or inappropriate use of alternative arrangements.



A lack of Diverse Placement Options: Limited availability of specialised placements, such as those for children with complex needs or specific cultural requirements, can result in inadequate matching and compromised outcomes.



Inadequate Staffing and Training: Insufficient staffing levels or lack of proper training has affected the quality of care and support provided to children in residential and supported accommodation. The market frequently reports to commissioners' issues with recruitment of appropriately qualified, skilled, and experienced staff to key roles, with some resorting to overseas recruitment to address this issue.



Part 4 – Our approach

‘Think Family’ and Returning Home

The *Think Family* approach was adopted by Thurrock Children’s Service as its operating model in April 2022. It is used widely by both health and social care services to improve outcomes for vulnerable children and adults, including those with complex needs.

The *Think Family* approach does not replace Signs of Safety or Thurrock’s other existing practice models but is a way of working across the department including in Early Help.

It enables practitioners to build strong and effective relationships with parents and children by assessing the needs of each family member and then co-ordinating multi-agency interventions and intensive support in a timely way.

In Thurrock, this process will be strengthened by a series of family network meetings throughout the child’s journey. These meetings align with the Signs of Safety roadmap and build on family strengths. They include members of the family’s connected network, and the process helps parents and their network to create a family plan.

The plan sets out how the family and connected network will support and protect a child on a day-by-day basis to enable the child to remain living within their family or family network where it is safe to do so.

If a child is not able to live safely within their connected network, this approach will enable the local authority to start permanence planning for children at an earlier stage.

An example of our approach can be seen through Fiona’s story.....



We aim to reduce the number of children becoming looked after

We aim to divert children from entering court proceedings /care

We commit to the ongoing review of long-term care plans to enable children to return to their family

Fiona's story

Fiona became looked after when she was five years old. The court agreed a plan of long-term foster care for Fiona, and she was settled in a long-term placement. Work was done to build up time with her family, Fiona had expressed she wanted to stay with her foster carer

In 2023, Fiona's foster carer resigned unexpectedly. Fiona's team collaborated with her and her family to plan again. Fiona was now 14 years old. Things have improved a great deal for her parents, and she had adult siblings who were well placed to look after her.

Rather than seek another foster placement, a family plan was agreed. Fiona was initially cared for by her adult brother who was approved as a connected persons foster carer. This placement was used to build up time with her parents and build up positive parenting.

Fiona was able to move back with her parents with support. She loves being at home and feels settled, and we are working to discharge the care order.

Fiona will have the opportunity to grow into adulthood with her family and the support of her network.



Commissioning Priorities

It is important to recognise that further challenges may arise during the implementation of the sufficiency strategy. These challenges can include financial constraints, changes in legislation or regulations, and unexpected shifts in demand. To address these risks, the following measures will be taken:

- **Robust Financial Planning:**

Thurrock will engage in proactive financial planning to ensure sufficient resources are allocated to the implementation of this strategy. This may, in future, involve exploring funding opportunities, seeking grants, or reallocating existing resources.

- **Flexible and Adaptive Approach:**

Thurrock will adopt a flexible and adaptive approach to address changes in legislation or regulations that may affect this strategy. Regular monitoring and evaluation processes will be in place to show emerging trends or shifts in demand, enabling prompt adjustments to the strategy as needed.

- **Stakeholder Engagement:**

Thurrock will actively engage with key stakeholders, including children and young people, families, service providers, regional partners and other local authorities, to gather feedback and input throughout the implementation of this strategy. This engagement will help identify emerging risks and challenges and inform potential adjustments or improvements to the strategy.

- **Continuous Learning and Improvement:**

Thurrock will continue to foster a culture of continuous learning and improvement, including the ongoing use of Human Learning Systems (HLS) and the new operating model adopted by the Council in 2023.

<https://www.humanlearning.systems/>

This will be achieved through regular reviews of the sufficiency strategy, learning from best practices and experiences of other local authorities, and actively seeking research and evidence-based interventions to enhance the effectiveness of the strategy.

By proactively addressing risks, engaging stakeholders, and fostering a culture of continuous learning, Thurrock can mitigate challenges and ensure the successful implementation of the strategy over the next three years.

Through these efforts, Thurrock can provide our CLA with the quality placements and support they need for their well-being and development.

Recommended Strategies and Mitigation Measures:

Collaboration and Multi-Agency Working:

- Strengthen collaboration among local authorities, service providers, and agencies involved in the care and support of children.
- Establish regular multi-agency meetings, joint training opportunities, and shared protocols to improve coordination and information-sharing.
- Develop a comprehensive local offer that outlines the range of available placements and support services, streamlining the referral process and ensuring a comprehensive approach to meeting the needs of children.

Enhancing Placement Diversity:

- Collaborate closely with providers to develop specialised placements to cater to the diverse needs of children, including those with complex needs or specific cultural requirements.
- Strengthen partnerships with organisations that can offer alternative accommodation options, such as supported lodgings or shared housing arrangements.

Continuous Monitoring and Evaluation:

- Implement robust monitoring and quality assurance mechanisms to ensure the provision of high-quality placements.
- Conduct regular inspections, performance reviews, and feedback processes to show areas for improvement and ensure compliance with regulatory standards.
- Continue to seek feedback from children, young people, and families about their experiences and incorporate their perspectives into service evaluations and improvements.

Staffing and Training:

- Ensure that residential and supported accommodation providers have appropriate staffing levels to meet the needs of children.
- Invest in staff training programs, focusing on areas such as trauma-informed care, attachment theory, cultural sensitivity, and interventions for specific needs.
- Provide ongoing supervision, reflective practice sessions, and access to specialist support services to enhance staff well-being and retention.

Increasing Placement Capacity:

- Collaborate with our own housing department, private providers, housing associations, and community organisations to expand the capacity of residential and supported accommodation.
- Explore opportunities for developing new facilities or repurposing existing buildings/ housing stock to meet the demand.
- Invest in recruitment and training programs to increase the number of foster carers and kinship carers.

Dynamic Data analyses:

- It is essential to analyse the current data regularly and proactively with internal partners, most notably our colleagues in Business Intelligence, to understand the ongoing sufficiency challenges and dynamically develop effective interim strategies to address them.
- This analysis will provide valuable insights into the sufficiency gaps and enable evidence-based decision-making.



Progress against previous strategy

Considerable progress has been made since January 2021 in the implementation of our Children in Care and Placements Sufficiency Strategy.

The focus has been on enhancing the involvement of children and young people, achieving placement stability and permanence, effective commissioning and partnership working, developing support for care leavers, and expanding early support for our most vulnerable children.

Part 5 – Our priorities

Priority 1: Elevating the voice of Children and Young People

Efforts have been concentrated on prioritising the active participation of children and young people in decision-making processes. The Mind of My Own App provides a vital platform for them to share their views and feelings. Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs) have been proactively engaging with children and young people through various channels, including face-to-face interactions, mobile phone communication, and the use of a QR code.

Initial feedback from the QR code revealed a 100% satisfaction rate, indicating positive sentiments towards the IRO service.

We anticipate further insights as we continue to use this tool for ongoing improvements. Minutes of reviews have been revamped to enhance child-friendliness, adopting a magazine-style format with contributions and artwork from the children and young people themselves.

Transition planning is now included in reviews for young people at fifteen and half years old to enable improved care planning for their future. Our older young people also receive a personalised letter from their IRO and will have one post 18-year-old review, further demonstrating our commitment to their ongoing care. For older children and care experienced young people a specific participation officer will champion their voices in the development of services



Priority 2: Achieving Placement Stability and Permanence

Our commitment to placement stability and permanence is shown through various initiatives.

A commitment to stable homes within the family network via connected carers and Special Guardianship

A strong Fostering Service providing local placements for children and a robust support offer. The recruitment and retention of foster carers is underpinned by a clear strategy and work plan

Thurrock is developing the children's home Sector in its local area; two directly commissioned homes have opened supporting children with complex needs to have stable homes in their local community. Two further homes are in development.

Priority 3: Commissioning and Partnership Working

Consultation with children, young people, their families, and carers is integral to our contract monitoring process, contributing to planning and ensuring the quality of services. Commissioned services are available for children looked after and care leavers, supported by robust monitoring and quality assurance practices. Our commissioned offer ensures prompt and appropriate support for children, young people, and their families.

Priority 4: Developing the offer for care leavers

Enhanced collaboration with colleagues in the Adult Services Transitions Team facilitates better awareness of ongoing housing or care issues among care leavers. This proactive approach ensures a seamless transition and continued support for this demographic.

Priority 5: Developing Early Support for Vulnerable Children

The implementation of the *Brighter Futures* strategy and *Think Families* approach has strengthened integration with Health and Voluntary sector partners.

This collaborative effort enables targeted services for our most vulnerable children, young people, and their families/carers.

Being one of seventy-five local authorities to take part in the £301 million scheme supporting families post-Covid pandemic, displays our commitment to this initiative.

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The formal launch of three Family Hubs in October 2023 received significant media coverage and social media publicity, expanding our reach and impact.

[Family Hubs Start for Life Local Offer | Ask Thurrock](#)

Additionally, our service offer has been extended to include edge-of-care and reunification support, further details of which can be found at:

<https://www.thurrock.gov.uk/childrens-care-professionals-services/prevention-and-support-service>

The outlined achievements reflect our ongoing commitment to the well-being and positive outcomes of children and young people in our care.

Through strategic initiatives, collaborative partnerships, and a continuous focus on improvement, we are creating an increasingly more supportive and stable environment for Thurrock children and their families now, and in the future.

Part 6 –Making a difference

1. Reducing demand on placements - strengthening families so that children can remain safely at home.

We know that children thrive in safe and stable families and where it is achievable, appropriate and safe to do so, we should be doing everything we can to support families to make this happen. Sadly, we know that children in care do not always achieve the same outcomes as those who are not care experienced and our focus must always be on narrowing and eliminating this gap.

This approach will divert families from higher levels of needs and create meaningful change. Our approach has been to develop those teams using a *Think Family* approach within Childrens Services that identify needs early, put in place the proper wraparound support and that focusses on the difficulties the family are facing including domestic abuse, mental health, substance misuse and parenting skills, and how to overcome these.



Our Social Care and Early Help services are focussed on enabling children to remain at home supported by our *Think Family* approach. Since 2019, fewer children are staying in long term care and Thurrock is successful at re-habilitating children home. To build on this success an Adolescent Team has been developed to prevent entry in to care for secondary aged children and to support children back home from periods in care to reduce the number entering the care system.

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Our Family Hubs are now established and have brought together a multi-disciplinary approach with improved co-location and co-working across organisations which support families with children aged 0-19.

This work will further look to embed an early intervention approach and reach many more families across Thurrock. Our family network meetings build upon the earlier family group conference processes and work to build and capitalise on the assets within each wider family group to enable a child/young person to remain at home through use of these assets, and to put in place the support that is needed.

1. What we will do

- Build on the Brighter Futures Strategy, *Think Family* approach and development of the Family Hubs to try and keep more younger children safely with their families and prevent children coming into care.
- Work to support families of adolescents on the edge of care to reduce the number of older children coming into care.
- Increase the number of adolescent children who return home after a period of care by providing the right support to families that is bespoke to their needs.
- Increase the number of Special Guardianship Orders and Connected Carers, where appropriate, to ensure children can remain within a family environment that is familiar to them.
- Use family networks and specialist services to support parents to care for their own children when risk is manageable, so children do not remain in placements longer than needed.



2. More children are fostered and remain close to home.

Like many local authorities we know we have an ageing in-house foster carer cohort. We have worked to enhance our offer to new carers through a mix of financial incentive enhancements, a robust offer of training and support and a Council Tax exemption. We must continue to focus our efforts on this work to reduce our over reliance on Independent foster carer agencies.

We have collaborated with regional partners to join a regional Fostering Hub that will see a centralised point of access for prospective carers, oversee a communications strategy and act as a point of excellence, pooling resources and expertise across the region and providing a more consistent approach.

Too many children are placed outside of Thurrock.

As a small borough there will always be children outside of our borders, however we know we need to bring those children placed at greater distance much closer to home. An increase in foster carers who are equipped to look after some of those children will achieve this aim. This will provide children the opportunity to remain local and keep ties they may have with immediate and extended family, friends, and local services. Where we can keep more children closer to Thurrock in appropriate placements, we will deliver improved placement stability which will have a positive impact on those children.

We have collaborated with colleagues in Housing to develop local authority housing stock to provide our care leavers with secure local tenancies with proper support until age 25. We will continue this work to develop more housing stock, provide the opportunity to obtain independence and keep young people in Thurrock



2. What we will do

- Recruit and retain more in-house foster carers through our specialist team and planned Regional Fostering Hub.
- Reduce the number of children and young people who are placed outside of Thurrock and more than twenty miles away.
- Improve the placement stability of children and young people in care and reduce placement breakdown.
- Develop our 'Head start Housing' offer for our care leavers to enable more young people to secure a tenancy and remain within Thurrock.

3. Improve the commissioned offer through closer partnership working and effective monitoring

Where residential care is the best option, we must work much more collaboratively with providers to develop local provision that meets our sufficiency needs, encouraging existing and new providers to the market and communicating our needs more effectively. We are already sharing data on placement type and need across the region and are seeking to develop this further with regional collaborative commissioning of complex placements portraying a 'one customer' approach to providers within the region.

We have collaborated with colleagues in Housing to develop local authority housing stock to provide our care leavers with secure local tenancies with proper support until age 25. We will continue this work to develop more housing stock, provide the opportunity to obtain independence and keep young people within Thurrock.

Our Placements Framework was established in 2019 to address the number of spot purchase placements that were being made particularly for supported accommodation and residential placements. Supported accommodation has moved from all placements being spot purchased to around 10%, and independent foster care to around 40-50% and continuing to decrease every time that our framework is opened. We have been less successful with residential care which still sees around 95% of placements spot purchased. This is a trend seen across the country with local authorities having difficulty in attracting providers to frameworks with fixed pricing.

The establishment of Regional Commissioning Collaboratives will start to address these issues at a regional level and Thurrock has already started this journey through a DfE bid to work together across the Eastern Region to jointly commission places for children with complex needs including mental ill health, learning disabilities and difficulties and those subject to Deprivation of Liberty Orders. Regardless of the outcome of the bid there is a commitment to continue this work and build upon it, expanding to a greater range of placements. We need to communicate a more consistent message to providers that will provide clarity of our needs to them, enable them to supply the placements that are needed, deliver sustainability and commitment, and provide better value for money for local authorities through a 'one customer' approach.

We have successfully developed two local authority housing stock properties and commissioned a care provider for solo placements for two young people with complex needs. As a new provider of residential care this was achieved through a partnership approach with a local organisation, offering support and mentoring throughout their registration process with Ofsted. Registration was obtained in summer 2022 with both homes having received a 'Good' rating at their first inspection.

Through development of this approach these young people have achieved stability in their placement following a history of multiple placement breakdowns, they have resumed education and are engaging in therapy. The use of these homes has negated the need for unregulated placements and produced significant cost savings to the Council. We will seek to develop these arrangements further through the acquisition of further properties, the first of which is now in development.

Ensuring the safety and well-being of children must be a top priority. Providers of residential and post-sixteen accommodation should meet rigorous quality standards, including proper staffing levels, staff training, and regulatory compliance. Robust safeguarding measures should be in place to protect children from harm and enable their holistic development. Providers should invest in regular and comprehensive training for staff members. This training should cover areas such as trauma-informed care, attachment theory, and cultural sensitivity.

By equipping staff with the necessary skills and knowledge, they can better meet the diverse needs of children who are looked after.

To ensure the provision of high-quality placements, robust monitoring and quality assurance mechanisms will be in place. Regular inspections, performance reviews, and feedback processes can help show areas for improvement and ensure compliance with regulatory standards. Feedback from children and young people who are looked after, as well as their families, will be actively looked for and considered in service evaluations and improvements.



3. What we will do

- Take a more collaborative approach to working with placement providers to enhance relationships and improve capacity locally.
- Develop and commission more suitable placements for children and young people with complex needs including mental health difficulties, learning disabilities & difficulties and those subject to Deprivation of Liberty Orders.
- Reduce the need for unregistered placements for young people by developing the market to ensure sufficiency.
- Work with providers to increase the number of residential homes registered utilising local authority housing stock.
- Work in collaboration with providers to design bespoke support placements.

4. Fostering

- Children and young people thrive when within a family setting. Our first choice of placement, where safe to do so, should always be placing a child with suitable and well-matched foster carers in the local area or as close to it as possible.

- Our in-house fostering offer has been re-designed to offer more competitive financial rates, exemptions in Council Tax if living in Thurrock, and a robust suite of training and continued support.

- Despite a challenging market we continue to work at a local level to drive up recruitment rates and have recently agreed to join a Regional Fostering Hub which will provide a centre of expertise across the region, co-ordinating communications, recruitment, and training and improving our foster carer sufficiency understanding and developing this regionally. In-house foster carers can offer placements at a lower cost than Independent Foster Agency (IFA) placements, however we recognise there will be a continued need for IFA placements, albeit at a reduced level, if we achieve our aim of recruiting more in-house carers. Reducing the overall costs of supplying services for children and young people in care enables us to invest more in services for children and young people who are on the edge of care, and in preventative services.



4. What we will do

- Continue our drive to recruit and retain in-house foster carers residing in Thurrock through incentivisation and an effective package of training and ongoing support.
- Transition to the Regional Fostering Hub to further improve recruitment and retention and deliver improved regional sufficiency.
- When considering Foster Care, we look to the network first through Family Network Meetings and viability assessments at an early stage
- Whilst seeking to increase in-house foster carers, it is recognised we will still require IFA placements. We will work with the market to communicate our needs more effectively prior to the 2024 re-procurement of our Placements Framework, to increase participation and reduce spot purchase. This will be driven through a programme of market engagement



5. Supported Accommodation

Supported accommodation is often the most appropriate route for 16/17-year-olds in care who will need to develop proper independence skills as they move towards adulthood.

Young people will have unique needs and readiness to be able to live independently and we support them with this transition. This will be a key stability factor affecting young people's ability to continue education, training and maintain employment. The sufficiency need for supported accommodation includes as appropriate any unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (UASC), where despite fluctuating numbers, we have seen an overall significant increase over the last year and a half.

We have worked to develop our commissioned service through the development of a framework contract. through its initial and subsequent re-openings, we have reached a position where over 90% of placements are made via the framework, having previously had all our placements on spot purchase. This has been the most successful aspect of the framework to date.

Prior to the framework there was considerable variability in the quality and performance of some providers. Through a process of contract management these providers have been managed out. Currently the providers on our framework are in most cases meeting expected standards. Where these are not met there is swift action put in place to improve performance. The development of the Ofsted registration and inspection framework will significantly increase quality standards within this section of the provider market. Providers are within or close to Thurrock for most placements. The process of Ofsted registration has been closely monitored with a minority of providers saying they will not be registering. These provide extremely limited number of placements meaning that we will be able to secure more placements with registered providers on our framework.

- Our placements framework is due to be reprocurd for a spring 2025 start. We recognise the need to further enhance this offer and supply good placements to our unaccompanied asylum seeker (UASC) young people who have their own set of unique needs. As part of the commissioning process, we will look to strengthen the UASC offer as well as build on the existing number of providers that have met high quality standards pre-Ofsted registration. We will work to replace those few providers that have decided not to register with Ofsted and further encourage local provision.
- Our response to 16/17 years old who present as homeless continues primarily to be via the booking of several beds within two local hostel provisions that are commissioned. Bespoke levels of floating support can be put in place whilst a decision is made as to whether hostel accommodation continues to be the most appropriate option or if alternative placements such as foster care would be more suitable where a young person is accommodated under section 20. A current options appraisal is being undertaken to assess if these placements for young people will continue to be via a commissioned offer or delivered through our in-house Housing Team.
- We commission a young parents supported accommodation scheme with the same provider as our hostel provision. The 20-bed scheme is open to former or current looked after children aged 16-25 with Thurrock connections. It supplies floating support for families tailored to individual needs. In addition, two move-on accommodation units are available for families as a transition from the main accommodation to independent living. Options for recommissioning are currently being assessed in line with the hostel provision

5. What we will do

- Ensure that providers receive support through the final stages of the Ofsted registration process and are prepared for their first inspections.
- With increasing numbers of UASC children ensure that placements are effectively meeting their need with a specific focus in the 2025 new framework.
- Further increase the number of providers on the framework to replace those who have decided not to register with Ofsted.
- Support providers to set up in Thurrock through effective market engagement pre-procurement.
- Continue to monitor placements and adapt our approach to utilise the oversight of Ofsted inspection without loss of focus in this high-risk area.
- Have sufficient placement providers to ensure that placements with unregistered providers is a last resort and aim for this to be at zero.
- Explore commissioning options for our hostel and young parent accommodation units.



6. Residential Accommodation

The residential care market is well recognised nationally to have significant weaknesses in respect of placement availability, increasing costs and concerns around not supplying places to our most vulnerable children and young people. Thurrock has no homes registered in its own name but has recently worked in partnership with a local provider to register provision using local authority housing stock. The lack of provision has led us to find new ways of working, however we need to go further until such time as the newly planned Regional Commissioning Collaboratives (RCC) are operational at a regional level and start to positively impact on sufficiency and pricing.

We are seeing a continued increase in young people with complex needs including mental health issues, learning disabilities and difficulties, challenging behaviours, and those children subject to Deprivation of Liberty Orders. This has led to the use of some unregulated placements over the last two years. Whilst these are quality assured, they do not always deliver stability for young people and are some of our most costly placements.

To address these issues, we developed two homes by acquiring local authority housing stock, refurbishing the properties, and commissioning a local care provider to register with Ofsted and run the homes as solo placements under a medium-term licence. This has proved effective and has seen positive outcomes for young people, who are now engaging with education and therapy. A third home is in development with plans to use this as an emergency/crisis placement.

We will need to build on these innovative approaches to further develop this type of provision, working in partnership with providers to develop bespoke solutions to supply placements to our most vulnerable young people. The development of these solutions will ensure that we avoid the use of unlawful placements.

As the re-procurement of the Placements Framework approaches in 2025 we will need to significantly improve market engagement, building closer relationships with providers to deliver sufficiency at a local level. We know that residential providers are hesitant to join frameworks where they are tied to pricing agreements and see little benefit in doing so with the current under-capacity in the market. Whilst working at a local level to provide sustainability to providers we recognise that we will not solve this issue alone and that this affects almost every local authority in the country.

For this reason, the work that we are doing regionally, being led by Norfolk County Council, has significant buy-in from East of England local authorities, including Thurrock. Our sufficiency issues around residential care are similar, and we plan to regionalise sufficiency intelligence, create a single commissioning body to communicate our needs to the market, for them to develop sufficiency at a local level and for us to drive better value for money through a single co-ordinated voice across the region. This work will initially encompass those young people described above who have complex needs and require specialist placements. Over time this will develop into wider residential placements as a forerunner to the establishments of the Government's RCC programme.

We have made initial inks with our Housing Planning colleagues to ensure that any new homes that are intending on setting up locally and have applied for planning permission are brought to the attention of Childrens Services. The purpose in doing so will be to have initial discussions with those providers to forge early relationships and where appropriate, negotiate priority access to placements.

Parent and Baby placements are an effective way to assess parental ability, however there is a lack of these type of placements at a national level, in line with wider residential sufficiency gaps. Often parents and their baby are placed at significant distance from Thurrock, removing their critical support networks, whilst they are in placement. The same approach around improved market engagement and regional collaboration will need to be used.

In line with the wider difficulties around residential care, Thurrock continues to see need for residential school placements for children with Special Educational Needs and/or Disability (SEND) in 38 and 52-week placements. The number of children and young people in Thurrock who are on the Autistic Spectrum continues to increase, largely due to a leading school in Thurrock which attracts families to move to the area to access this well-respected school which is seen as a pioneering centre of excellence.

Our partners across the region have similar sufficiency issues with this being another area of focus on the work we are planning to collaborate on prior to the establishment of the RCC programme. In addition, we are exploring opening a framework for this type of placement but recognise the challenges this presents which will be like those in residential care. If we are to succeed in the development of this, we must improve our market engagement and potentially link this in with our wider placement framework for 2025. Options around this are currently being explored to assess the viability, benefits, and risks of each of these.

Short breaks and respite for disabled children are currently commissioned on a framework which is due to end in 2024. Historically there has been a limited number of providers on the framework necessitating the need to spot purchase regularly. Following market engagement, we are shortly to reprocure these services to attract a larger number of providers to the framework and increasing choice and flexibility in our offer.

Thurrock continues to be part of the Childrens Cross Regional Arrangements Group (CCRAG) partnership sharing monitoring and fee increase responsibilities across local authority partners. Recent work is now emerging around placement fee intelligence, sharing information, and analysing this to drive better value for money where providers may be using inconsistent pricing structures for different local authorities.



6. What we will do

- Work with our regional partners to collaborate on the commissioning of placements for children and young people with complex needs including SEND residential school placements to improve sufficiency and value for money.
- Continue to develop our own local authority housing stock, collaborating with providers to register homes for complex needs placements / emergency/crisis placements.
- Work in partnership with providers to develop bespoke solutions and increase placement sufficiency locally
- Improve the engagement with the market and then reprocure our placements framework in 2025 with a particular focus on residential homes and Parent and Baby placements.
- Work with our colleagues in Housing Planning to identify new homes seeking planning permission locally to start to build early relationships with providers.
- Continue to explore options for a potential framework for SEND residential school placements, whilst considering collaborative regional work in this area.
- Reprocure our short breaks and respite provision to increase capacity and reduce reliance on spot purchase arrangements.

7. Adoption

Our overarching aim is to supply secure and loving homes to children in need of permanence via adoption and to support those children and their families whilst needed. We offer child-led and adopter friendly services by an experienced and motivated professional team. Thurrock is part of the Adopt East Regional Adoption Alliance, the largest Regional Adoption Agency in the UK. We combine the experience, understanding, and professionalism of Local Authorities in Bedford, Essex, Hertfordshire, Luton, Norfolk, Southend, Suffolk, Thurrock with the invaluable insight of two Voluntary Agency partners, Adoption plus and Barnardo's, together with the ongoing support of Adoption UK and New Family Social.

Working as one, we pool our resources, share best practice, and ensure every child is given the best possible chance of growing up as part of a caring, loving family. Thurrock can access prospective adopters from across Adopt East at an early stage which has significantly increased our resource. Thurrock is also a net contributor of approved prospective adopters matched within Adopt East. We continue to recruit a diverse range of adopters to meet the needs of children over the whole course of their lives.

Thurrock Adopt East supports Adoptive families and families formed by Special Guardianship. Our core services and the added services provided by the region such as a respite hub, provides early intervention to families and prevents entry in to care.

7. What we will do

- Continue to recruit prospective adopters with the aim of continuing to be a net contributor to Adopt East
- Increase the offer of early permanence placements using our existing and newly approved adopters
- Increase the use of *Think Family* approach to support families at an early stage
- Continue to provide specialist therapeutic input



8. Care Leavers



Our Aftercare Team provide support to young people leaving care from age 18 up until 25. 'Staying Put' arrangements are promoted to provide a continuation of stability for young people. We will continue to promote this option where this is mutually beneficial.

For those young people who require and accept support to transition to independent living we provide several housing options including the use of local authority housing stock with floating support where this is needed, private landlord arrangements and in a small number of cases hostel provision. Care leavers can develop their living skills, access education and training opportunities and understand what it is like to live independently as an adult and transition towards this. For young people who feel ready to take on their own tenancy without support we provide grants to help set up their new home and will also increase their banding on the housing waiting list to speed up their move to independence.

We provide a local offer to care leavers with advice and guidance about independent living. Currently 94% of our care leavers are in suitable accommodation. We will continue to focus on this and further improve this figure. Just over half of our care leavers are engaged in full or part time employment or training, however this figure has remained static over the last year. Using appropriate accommodation and floating support where needed, we will work towards increasing this.

We will collaborate with our colleagues in Housing towards ensuring sufficiency of suitable accommodation and support for our care leavers to provide the best chance of developing independence skills, securing meaningful employment, training or further education and delivering positive outcomes for our care leavers.

8. What we will do

- Ensure sufficiency of suitable accommodation for our care leavers through a range of accommodation types.
- Commission effective floating support for those young people who require enhanced support.
- Work with commissioned providers of all services across the Council to place care leavers into employment and apprenticeships using social value clauses in contracts

Part 7 – Risk, Governance & monitoring

The priorities and intentions set out in our strategy will need clear monitoring and management to ensure they are kept on track and delivered.

With any strategy there are risks to delivery that will need management and mitigation.

The most prominent identified risks are set out here:

Risks	Mitigation
Difficulty attracting new providers to the Thurrock Placements Framework.	Robust market engagement processes to promote the offer to providers, working more in partnership.
<p>Lack of suitable Local Authority owned housing stock available to develop bespoke placement solutions.</p> <p>Additional lack of properties to meet the needs of our care leavers,</p>	<p>Working with Housing to forecast future need for both looked after children and care leavers ensuring this is completed in a planned way.</p> <p>Utilisation of potential Local Authority buy-back properties When housing stock is unavailable.</p>
increasing number of children and young people with complex needs (including SEND needs) and availability of suitable residential placements.	<p>Continued work on Local Authority owned housing stock with commissioned bespoke solutions.</p> <p>Continued exploration of regional collaboration and joint commissioning to increase sufficiency and value for money.</p>
Difficulty in commissioning a new framework for SEND residential placements, potentially experiencing the same difficulties that have been seen in attracting residential providers for looked after children to the Thurrock framework.	<p>Robust market engagement processes to promote the offer to providers, working more in partnership.</p> <p>Explore the potential to amalgamate the looked after children placements framework with SEND residential placements from 2025.</p>



Governance and Monitoring

Thurrock Council will continue to monitor and track the progress of this Strategy through an action plan with clearly defined accountability and an annual review throughout the life of the document.

The Assistant Director for Children's Social Care and Early Help will own the Strategy and its implementation.

The Executive Director of Children's Services and the Lead Member for Children's Services via the Development Board and Directorate Management Team will oversee Implementation of the Strategy.

Key Team members meet regularly to review the plan to meet our sufficiency duty and review the emerging needs and services available.

The action plan is reviewed every six months. Sufficiency covers a wide range of areas within children services, and it is important that partners, carers, children, young people, and providers are all invested into the actions held, so partnership and collaboration will remain key. Market engagement events will be used to ensure the strategy is kept live.

Members and key stakeholders including Children and Young People will have oversight of the Sufficiency Strategy via the Corporate Parenting Committee. The Sufficiency Strategy will be presented annually to this committee with an updating report for their review.

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25th January 2024	ITEM: 10
Corporate Parenting Committee	
Joint Report on Initial Health Assessments for Looked After Children (Update)	
Wards and communities affected: All	Key Decision: Non-key
Joint Report of: Dan Jones, Head of Service, Children Looked After, and Sharon Hall, Assistant Director, SET CAMHS and Children’s South Essex & Thurrock (NELFT)	
Accountable Assistant Director: Janet Simon, Assistant Director, Children’s Social Care and Early Help	
Accountable Director: Sheila Murphy, Executive Director, Children’s Services	
This report is: Public	

Executive Summary

This report provides an update on Initial Health Assessment performance. All children who are looked after should receive their IHA appointment within 20 working days of entering care. This target is not currently met, improvement actions have been taken as outlined in previous reports however, the paediatric capacity is now so limited that there is little prospect of meeting target. Without a significant increase in the Paediatric capacity in our Health area and in surrounding areas, children will continue to experience delayed assessments.

When a child becomes looked after by Thurrock Council, it is a statutory requirement that they receive an assessment of their health within 20 working days; this is known as an Initial Health Assessment (IHA). The IHA must be completed by a medical practitioner and is coordinated jointly between Thurrock Council and the NHS. Our target is that 70% of children entering care receive their IHA appointment within 20 working days of entering care.

- In the fourth and final Quarter of 2022-23 (the last financial year), we have seen a decrease in the numbers of children receiving an IHA in timescale. Only 15% of children received an IHA within 20 working days of becoming looked after
- In the first quarter of 2023-24 (the current financial year) 51% of children requiring IHA’s received IHAs in time – this was in large part due to additional Paediatric capacity funded by the ICB

- In the second quarter of 2023/24 36% of children accommodated received an IHA in time. This reflects the diminishing capacity to complete these assessments

The report highlights further areas for improvement to achieve our target of 70% of all children entering care in Thurrock achieving an IHA within 20 working days. These figures are for all Thurrock looked after children, irrespective of Placement area, and therefore relate to a number of different Health Providers.

Although the compliance with statutory timeframes for these assessments is important, it is noted that:

- Even when delayed, looked after children will have an Initial Health Assessment completed
- The local authority does not wait for the IHA to make health appointments and referrals in line with a child's health needs. Children are registered with GP's
- As a system we must start focusing on what these assessments tell us about our looked after children's health, and that we are assured that all efforts are being made to meet these accordingly.

1. Recommendation(s)

1.1 Members note the impact of reduced additional Paediatric capacity on securing timely IHA's

1.2 Members are advised of the delay reasons and that performance is declining since Q1 23/24

1.3 That the matter is returned to the Health and Well Being Board for review prior to the March Corporate Parenting Committee

2. Introduction and Background

2.1 When a child becomes looked after by Thurrock Council there is a duty under the *Care Planning, Placement and Case Review (England) Regulations 2010* to undertake an assessment of their health needs within 20 working days of accommodation. This is referred to as the Initial Health Assessment. There are two steps to the completion of an IHA:

- Social Care must refer the child within 5 days of becoming looked after
- The child attends the Initial Health Assessment appointment within 20 working days of becoming looked after.

Following the appointment, a report is sent to the Social Worker and ensures those caring for the child understand their health needs.

2.2 The Health Service local to where the child is living in care is responsible for the IHA appointment. For Thurrock children placed in Basildon, Brentwood and Thurrock, this Provider is NELFT. It is not permissible for Health Services

to prioritise children from their own area. This means that Thurrock based health services have to offer Paediatric IHA appointments to all children who are newly placed in Thurrock whether they are in our care or the care of another local authority. This is in accordance with NHS England guidance (2022)

2.3 Almost all children receive an IHA but there has been a fluctuation in the ability to deliver this within the statutory timeframe. This has been a persistent issue and was raised in the 2019 Ofsted Inspection of Children’s Services.

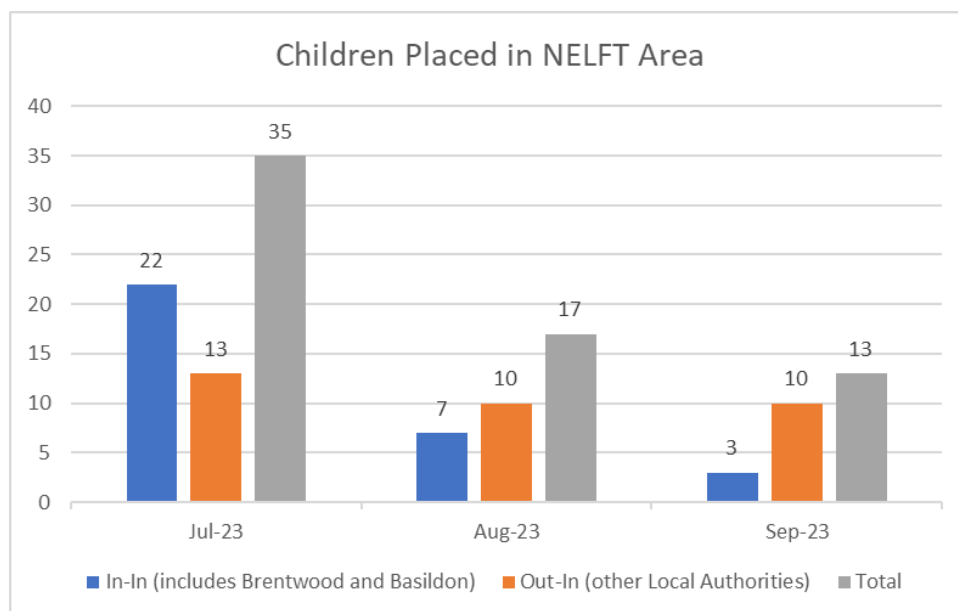
2.4 When considering IHA data it is important to acknowledge that Thurrock Children’s Social Care work with different health areas:

- Thurrock Children placed in Thurrock, Basildon & Brentwood – IHA completed by NELFT
- Thurrock Children placed outside of Thurrock, Basildon & Brentwood – IHA completed by local Health Providers

Children are also placed in Thurrock, Basildon & Brentwood by other local authorities - IHA completed by NELFT which impacts local capacity.

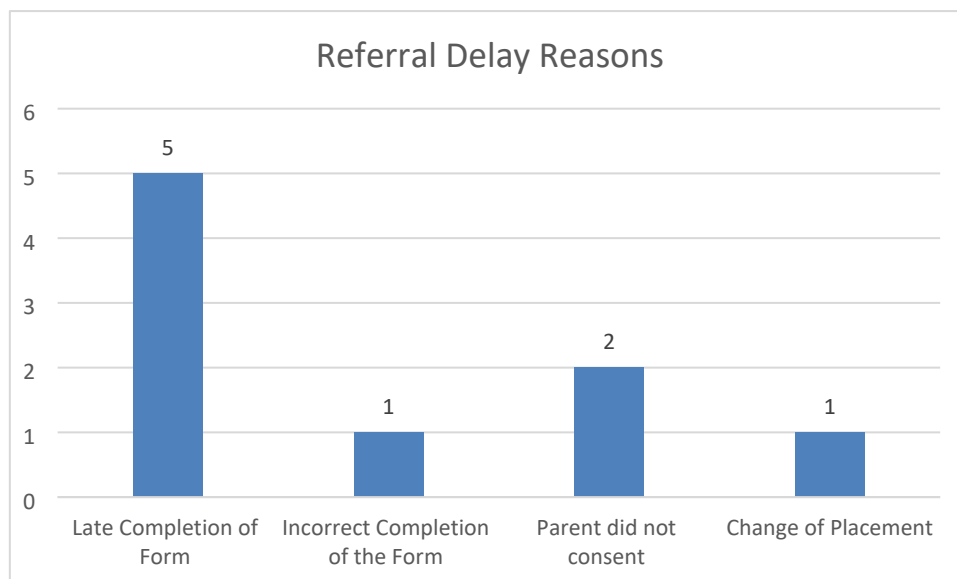
2.5 NELFT Data

The chart below shows the total number of children placed in the NELFT area during Q2 of 2023/24– this includes all Children Placed by Thurrock in the NELFT area and Children placed by other Local Authorities which amounts to 50% of all referrals.



2.6 Referral Performance for Quarter 2 2023/24

Thurrock Children’s Social Care are required to send a referral to Health within 5 working days of becoming looked after. Performance is that 68% of referrals are made on time. Delay reasons are monitored and the reasons this target is missed are:



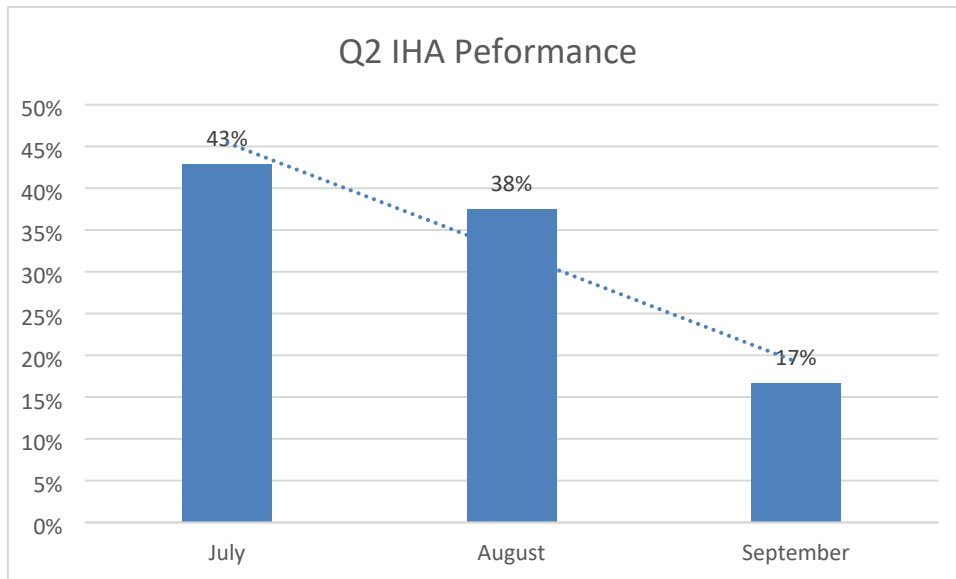
2.7 Where children aged 0-15 years become looked after at their parent's request (s.20); if the parent does not agree to the IHA then this can cause delay in referral as above. These instances of delay fall outside of the local authority's direct control.

2.8 Where the form is completed incorrectly or late, this is a practice issue within Social Care. There is regular follow up with Senior Managers in our Child in Need and Child Protection Teams but to address the ongoing need to drive improved performance, the Head of Service will join in overseeing tracking from January 2024.

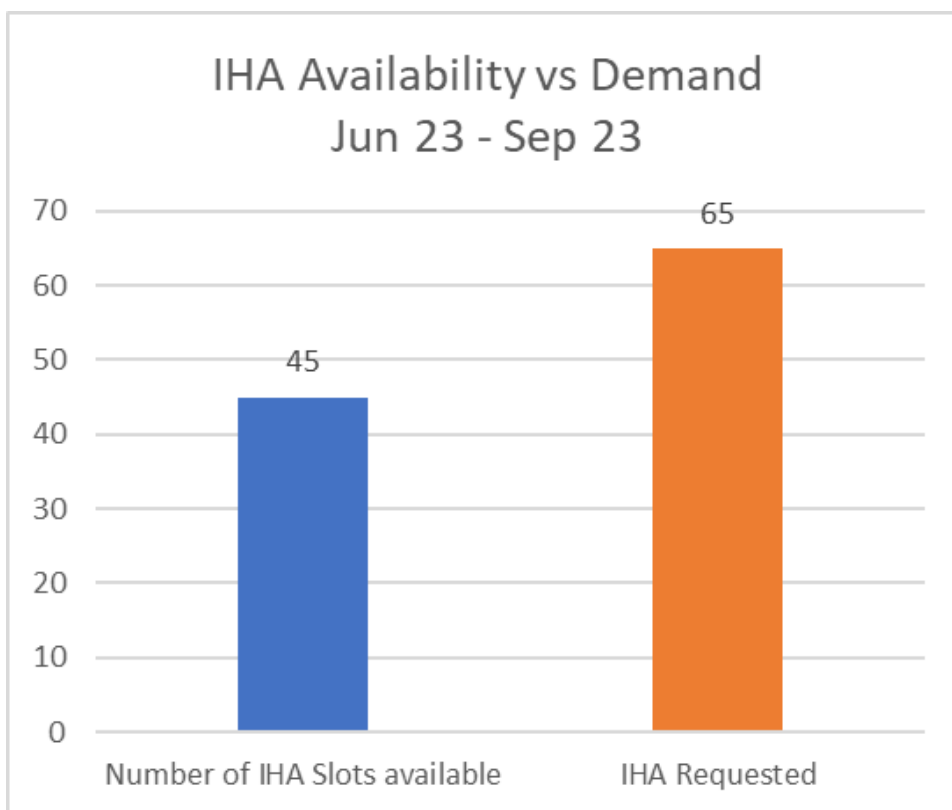
2.9 Delays in receiving the referrals impacts on the ability for NHS providers to accommodate IHA within the 20 days. Where the late referral was due to issues other than parents consent, the average delay was 3 days, leaving 17 days on average for the IHA to be completed. In a small number of cases (2), parents refusing to consent to an Initial Health Assessment represented a more significant delay, an average of 40 days making the IHA impossible to achieve in time.

2.10 **IHA Performance**

The following graph sets out IHA performance by the month children entered care:



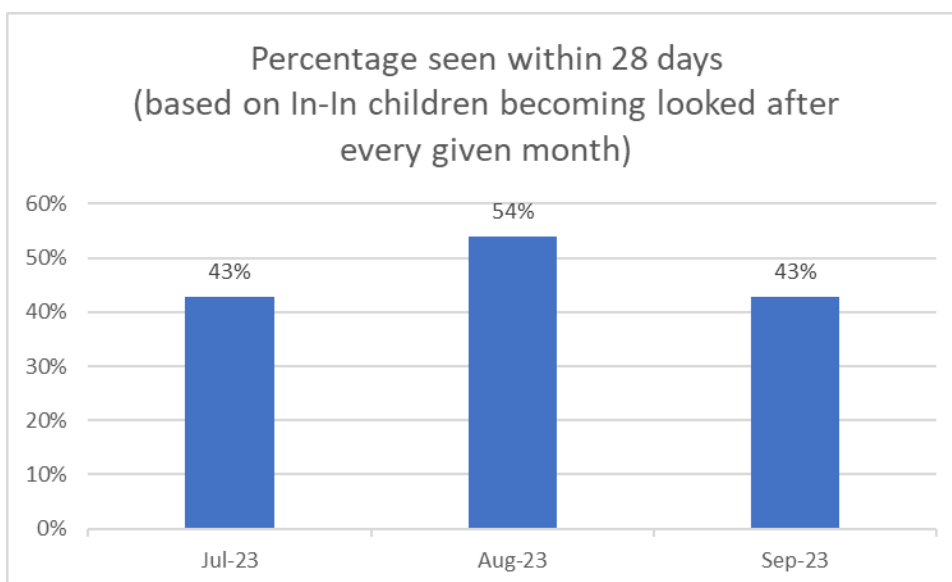
Performance is significantly dropping, whilst there are always a range of delay reasons, changes in the availability of Paediatricians (both in and out of our health area) has impacted significantly.



The above chart shows the local appointment availability (blue bar) versus the demand for appointments (orange bar). It is clear that demand is continuously exceeding supply. Demand can be variable and for this quarter the demand for IHA's for Thurrock Children was exceptionally high as 30 children entered care that month, 22 of whom required an IHA. They were placed both in and

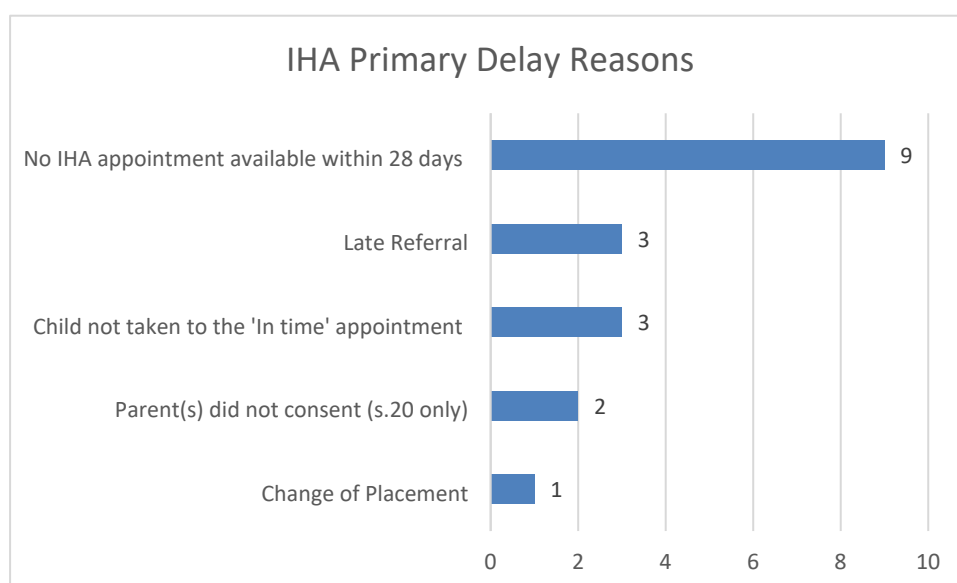
out of area. This means that there is only 70% of the required capacity in the health area. This creates a backlog which affects performance for Thurrock Children placed in area.

2.11 When children are placed within the NELFT area (Thurrock, Basildon and Brentwood) performance this quarter was as follows:



The above graph shows that where children are placed in the Basildon, Brentwood and Thurrock area, performance is better than out of area.

Delay reasons are tracked and reasons for delay in IHA are as follows for all Thurrock children (in & out of area)



The above graph reflects delay reasons since 01 July 2023 to 30 September 2023. Key themes and responses are:

- **No IHA appointment available within 28 days.** This means that demand outstripped capacity for IHA's to be delivered and an appointment was not available within the statutory time frames.
- **Late Referrals** – This has impacted 3 children. Late referrals can be due corrections required on the originally submitted form or consent issues.
- **Child not taken to the Appointment/Did not attend:** On occasion children have not been taken to the appointment, this was due to appointment times conflicting with other appointments e.g. a court ordered assessment
- **Parents did not consent:** For two children their parents did not consent which caused significant delay and made the IHA timescale unachievable
- **Change of placement** will change both placement and health area which can cause delay as a new appointment needs to be found.

3. Issues, Options and Analysis of Options

- 3.1 NELFT and the Council Officers work collaboratively to track and monitor all Thurrock children on a weekly basis. The ICB is also invited to attend. All children and young people are seen at the earliest opportunity. Regular exception reports capture the reasons for any breaches. The additional health capacity was effective and showed some improvement whilst in place. This is no longer available.
- 3.2 Whilst monitoring is effective to a point, the shortage of available Paediatric appointments in and out of area remains the most significant factor obstructing Initial Health Assessments being completed within statutory timeframes. This is not an improving picture, since the last report, the additional capacity commissioned by the ICB has ceased due to the provider pulling out of the contract. No other provider is available which means the ICB cannot improve the local offer. Capacity outside of the local health area remains depleted.
- 3.3 Furthermore, within NELFT, the appointment times have been increased from 60 minutes to 90 minutes. This means the number of appointments available each week has decreased with waiting times increasing. The appointment times needed to be longer in order to safeguard quality of IHAs being delivered.
- 3.4 IHAs are recognised as a national and local priority, as per the Southend, Essex and Thurrock (SET) Looked After Children Health Strategy 2022-24. The ICB will provide a full report on their response and actions to address the performance issues in Initial Health Assessments to the Corporate Parenting Committee in March 2024 and will provide a verbal update alongside this report at the next Committee meeting.

4. Reasons for Recommendation

4.1 The Corporate Parenting Committee are updated on the performance issues and is advised that we will not meet our target. Performance is dipping

4.2 The Corporate Parenting Committee is advised of the reduced capacity to complete IHA's within the Health Service.

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

5.1 Our Corporate target is for 70% of Initial Health Assessments to be completed in 20 working days of entering care. Failure to meet this target means children's health needs are not assessed in line with statutory obligations and a key priority is missed.

6. Implications

6.1 Financial

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

The are no financial implications for this report

6.2 Legal

Implications verified by: **Judith Knight**
Interim Deputy Head of Legal Services (Social Care and Education)

The Council has general duty to safeguard and promote the welfare of any child that its looks after under Section 22(3) of the Children Act 1989 and it must have regard to the Corporate Parenting Principles in Section 1(1) of the Children and Social Work Act 2017.

The Care Planning, Placement and Case Review (England) Regulations 2010 set out the detailed legal requirements in caring for Looked after Children. The timescales for health are set in regulation 7 which provides for the Council to make arrangements for the health assessment by the child's first review, and for a written report of the health assessment to be provided as soon as soon as reasonably practicable.

The first review must be within 20 working days of the date on which the child becomes looked after.

The assessments should be within this timescale to comply with the Local

Authority's statutory duty.

Health bodies have a duty to co-operate with the Local Authority under Section 27 of the Children Act 1989.

6.3 **Diversity and Equality**

Implications verified by: **Rebecca Lee**
Team Manager, Community Development and Equalities

The Service is committed to practice, which promotes equality, diversity and inclusion, and will carry out its duties in accordance with the Equality Act 2010, Public Sector Equality Duty and related Codes of Practice and Anti-discriminatory policy. The service recognises that a range of communities and groups of people may have experienced obstruction or the impact of prejudice when accessing services including Social Care and Health services. Both Services are committed to support all children in the care of Thurrock Council to access Initial Health assessments, individual arrangements are made where required to meet needs and address individual concerns

6.4 **Other implications** (where significant) – i.e., Staff, Health, Sustainability, Crime and Disorder, or Impact on Looked After Children)

- Impact on looked after children

7. **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

8. **Appendices to the report**

- None

9. **Key points of interest within appendices**

- None

Report Authors:

Daniel Jones
Head of Looked After Children
Children's Services

Sharon Hall
Assistant Director, SET CAMHS and Children's South Essex & Thurrock (NELFT)

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25th January 2024	ITEM: 11
Corporate Parenting Committee	
Missing Children Report	
Wards and communities affected: All	Key Decision: Non-Key
Report of: Mairead Morgan, Head of Service, Child Protection and Child in Need	
Accountable Assistant Director: Janet Simon, Assistant Director, Children's Social Care and Early Help	
Accountable Director: Sheila Murphy, Executive Director of Children's Services	
This report is: Public	

Executive Summary

This report provides an overview of the safeguarding processes in place in relation to Looked After Children when they are reported missing from care. It also provides further information regarding the number of Looked After Children who go missing, the nature of their missing episodes, and the actions taken to locate and safeguard them.

The majority of Looked After Children who are reported missing are aged 16-17 years old and return to their placement within 24 hours of being reported missing. The most common reason for the missing episode is the young person wanting to stay out later with friends/family or extend their time with friends/family overnight. For a small number of younger Looked After Children, aged 14-15 years old who have been reported missing on several occasions, there is a clear plan in place to safeguard them and consider what support and intervention is required to reduce their risks in relation to missing and exploitation. For the majority of the younger children, the Local Authority is in Care proceedings and there is clear oversight of the plan by the Court, or they are subject to a Care Order

A Return Home Interview (RHI) is offered to every Looked After Child when they return from a missing episode. This is an opportunity to consider any risks to the child and identify any support or intervention they may require. RHI's are now being provided by dedicated in-house workers and the initial indications are that the quality and timeliness of the service provided has improved. The RHI workers are focused on developing their ability to engage with the hardest to reach young people to ensure they are provided with the opportunity to share their experiences in relation to their missing episode and receive support and intervention as required.

1. Recommendation(s)

- 1.1 That members note the work undertaken to safeguard Looked After Children when they are reported as missing from care and the continued work underway to try to understand the context around individual missing episodes, reduce these wherever possible and improve the quality of the support and intervention provided.**
- 1.2 Members scrutinise the data and provide challenge to the service as required on how as corporate parents we provide appropriate services, keep children and young people safe and promote good outcomes.**

2. Introduction and Background

- 2.1 This report provides an overview of the safeguarding processes in place in relation to Looked After Children when they are reported missing from their placement.**

In addition, this report provides further detailed information regarding the context around Looked After Children who do go missing, the nature of missing episodes, and the action taken by Children's Social Care to safeguard children and to reduce the likelihood of further missing episodes.

3. Issues, Options and Analysis of Options

Missing Procedures for Looked After Children:

- 3.1 When a Looked After Child goes missing from their placement, the carer is responsible for informing the Police and Children's Social Care. If this occurs outside of working hours, the carer will also contact the Out of Hours/Emergency Duty Team, to ensure that immediate support is provided where required. Whilst missing, the carer is expected to continue to try to contact the young person, and any friends they may be with, to try to locate them.**

The social worker will try to contact the young person to ascertain their safety and wellbeing. They will also contact any family/friends and with the professional network to ascertain if anyone has seen or had contact with the young person, to try to locate them.

If the young person is missing for 12 hours, or there is an immediate concern regarding their safety, the social work team will contact the Police, health and all key professionals involved with the young person and arrange a strategy discussion. At this meeting professionals will share information and discuss any potential risk to the young person. They will devise a strategy to locate the young person and safeguard them. This may include actions such as the Police to complete phone work to try to track the young person's location, accessing CCTV to support in tracing the young person's steps to help identify where they may be and with whom, alerting other police forces

including the British Transport Police. In some cases, media coverage may be considered as a necessary step to locating the young person. If this is the case, the Executive Director of Children's Services is briefed of the situation and their consent is sought, prior to the media alert being released by the Police.

Social Work teams complete a High-Risk Notification for any Looked After Children who are missing for more than 24 hours. This is shared with the Executive Director for Children's Services and with the Lead Member for Children, to ensure they have oversight of these children and the actions being taken to locate and safeguard them.

Missing Looked After Children at risk of exploitation:

- 3.2 During the strategy discussion, the professional network will consider any additional risks to the young person, including risks in relation to child exploitation and modern slavery. Where these risks are identified, the professional network will consider the level of risk, and how this may be addressed. For a small number of young people who are victims of exploitation, their missing episodes are directly linked to exploitation, for example, children who are criminally exploited to sell drugs or run County Lines to different locations within the UK. In addition, children who are sexually exploited and are missing as a result of being groomed into sexually exploitative situations.

Thurrock Exploitation and Missing Team provide support to allocated Social Workers and practitioners in identifying and assessing risk in relation to exploitation. They also have specialist intervention workers who are able to provide one-to-one support to the young person. We recognise the importance of relationship-based practice, and developing trusting relationships with young people, in order for them to feel safe and able to talk about their experiences.

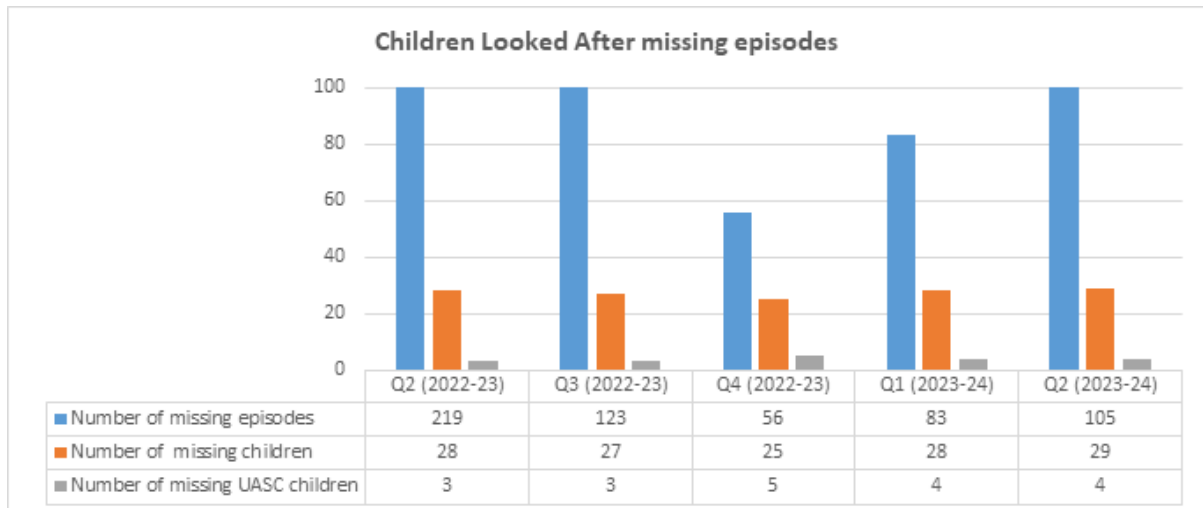
Children and young people who are assessed as medium – high risk of exploitation, are presented at the monthly Child Exploitation Tracking Panel, which is a multi-agency panel, chaired by the Head of Service for Child Protection and Child in Need and the Head of Service for YOS and Prevention. This panel enables the multi-agency network to review the safety plan in place for each individual child/young person and enables regular senior leadership oversight of the most vulnerable young people.

Children Looked After missing episodes:

- 3.3 The graph below shows the number of missing episodes started and the count of the individual children who went missing between July 2022 and end of September 2023. The most common reasons for children going missing is that they have stayed out past their expected return home time with friends or are with their families.

In Q1 2023/24 there were 83 missing episodes relating to 32 children, and in Q2, there was a slight increase to 105 missing episodes, relating to 33 children. The chart below demonstrates that there was a decrease in the number of

episodes in Q4 (2022/23) and Q1(2023/24) however the number of children these missing episodes relate to remains consistent. The number of missing episodes remains lower than both Q2 and Q3 (2022/23). This decrease is reflective of the work completed within the service to better understand where young people are when they are not in their placement, and reduce the number of missing episodes



The majority of children going missing remains for short periods of time and relates to older children (16 and over) staying out later than an agreed return home time. Younger children who are missing are reported to the Police at an earlier stage of the day and risk assessed. Strategy meetings continue to track reasons for missing episodes, with the majority stating that they are spending time with friends and/or family or are seeking to spend extended periods of time with friends/partners.

When children are reported missing the majority return within 24 hours, i.e. if reported at 11pm they are back in placement by the next day, most have returned before the next morning. The majority are aged 17. Small numbers of children may spend longer periods away from placement. This is further considered below.

Missing CLA Episodes Started - Volume

This chart shows the number missing episodes started within month for children on an open CLA plan



	Nov 2022	Dec 2022	Jan 2023	Feb 2023	Mar 2023	Apr 2023	May 2023	Jun 2023	Jul 2023	Aug 2023	Sep 2023	Oct 2023	Nov 2023	Total
Total	41	27	15	16	25	19	28	37	35	33	37	33	26	372

For the purpose of this report, we have considered the data in more detail between August – November 2023, to provide a clearer picture of the number of Looked After Children who go missing, their age, and the length of time they are missing for. We have looked more closely at this 4-month period to provide a snapshot of the most current data. Currently, this involves reviewing the data manually, therefore a smaller timeframe has been considered.

August 2023:

Number of missing episodes	33
Number of children	15
Age	All aged 16-17 years old aside from two young people under the age of 16 years old, with repeat missing episodes.
Returned within 24 hours	66% of all episodes

September 2023:

Number of missing episodes	37
Number of children	15
Age	All aged 16-17 years old aside from four young people under the age of 16 years old.
Returned within 24 hours	70% of all episodes

October 2023:

Number of missing episodes	33
Number of children	17
Age	All aged 16-17 years old aside from three young people under the age of 16 years old, with repeat missing episodes.
Returned within 24 hours	72% of all episodes

November 2023:

Number of missing episodes	26
Number of children	11
Age	All aged 16-17 years old aside from one young person under the age of 16 years old, with repeat missing episodes.
Returned within 24 hours	69% of all episodes

For those children that are missing for more than 24 hours, the safeguarding processes outlined previously are in place, and Children's Social Care work closely with the other agencies to locate and safeguard each child. For the children outlined above aged under 16 years old, with repeat missing episodes, there are clear plans in place to try to reduce the risks in relation to their safety and wellbeing. For each of these children the Local Authority is in care proceedings due to wider concerns regarding their safety and wellbeing, to make appropriate decisions in relation to their safety and wellbeing, which is overseen by the Court.

We have seen a reduction in missing episodes for these children, when they feel more settled and secure in their placement and have developed positive relationships with the professionals involved in their day-to-day care, and in providing them with support.

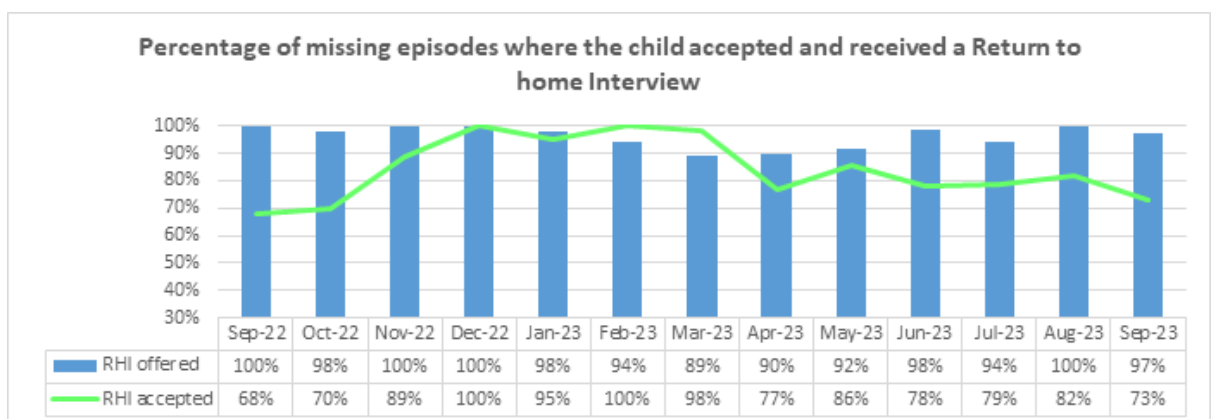
Children Looked After return to home interview (RHI)

- 3.4 In April 2020, Inspire Youth Hub were commissioned to undertake independent Return Home Interviews (RHI). From April 01 2023, the RHI Service transferred from Inspire to an 'In House' provision via the Child Exploitation and Missing Team. Two RHI workers have been recruited and have been in post since October 2023. Although it is early days the RHI workers have had a positive impact on the service, ensuring that 100% of children who went missing in November were offered a RHI within 72 hours of returning, with the aim of understanding the young person's circumstances and the reasons why they go

missing. Key Workers from placements, Foster Carers and Social Workers will also discuss missing incidents with children. There is a network of support provided to children to try to engage with them and understand the reasons for their missing episodes. The Participation Team have been able to engage and seek feedback from young people and this has been invaluable.

As at the end of September 2023, the percentage of children offered a return to home interview was 97% of which 73% accepted and received an interview. The offer of an RHI is not always accepted by young people for several reasons, including not wanting to reveal their whereabouts when missing and not believing that they were missing but were 'out'. All young people who have a missing episode are reviewed at the weekly Missing Children Panel, which reviews the risks to the young person and the actions taken to locate and safeguard them.

The graph below shows the percentage of return to home interviews taken up by young people since September 2022 and shows, in the main, a reasonably consistent picture of children accepting and receiving a RHI. There continues to be a small number of CLA who have consistently refused return home interviews, however they are still spoken with by their social worker, and placement, and their safety is assessed.



The Exploitation and Missing Team are working hard to consider how best to engage our most hard to reach children who decline a RHI, to ensure that wherever possible children who do go missing are able to talk about their experiences whilst they were missing and receive the support and intervention they require. With the RHI workers now being in-house, we hope to see that more Looked After Children are supported to engage with an RHI and access the support available from the team.

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

4.1 Not applicable

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

5.1 The term Corporate Parenting has been enshrined into legislation through the Children and Social Work Act 2017. It clarifies corporate parenting principles which Local Authorities and partners are required to adhere to. Corporate parenting and is a term used to describe how the council and its partners collectively carry out their responsibilities and support all children and young people who are in our care. It places collective responsibility on the Local Authority to achieve good parenting for all children in care. When Looked After Children go missing from care, the Local Authority has a corporate parenting responsibility to ensure that every possible step is taken to locate and safeguard the child.

6. Implications

6.1 Financial

Implications verified by: **David May**
Strategic Lead Finance

No direct financial implications. The services are supported through the Children Looked after budget of £3.5m.

6.2 Legal

Implications verified by: **Judith Knight**
Interim Deputy Head of Legal (Social Care and Education)

The Council is subject to a general duty to safeguard and promote the welfare of any child it is looking after. In relation to children who go missing the Council should have regard to the “Statutory Guidance on children who run away or go missing from home or care” [January 2014] This guidance requires that data and analysis of children who go missing should be included in regular reports to members as well as in reports to the LSCP.

6.3 Diversity and Equality

Implications verified by: **Roxanne Scanlon**
Community Engagement and Project Monitoring Officer

There are no direct diversity and equality implications arising from this report. However, the service does collect diversity monitoring data for looked after children, which is provided within the Children’s Social Care Performance Report Q2 (2023-2024). The data is utilised to consider issues of equality and

to ensure that performance considers the impact on children with protected characteristics.

6.4 **Other implications** (where significant) – i.e. Staff, Health, Sustainability, Crime and Disorder, or Impact on Looked After Children)

The Local Authority has a duty to safeguard children who go missing and those at risk of exploitation. As such, the Local Authority is required to follow safeguarding procedures to ensure that appropriate steps are taken to identify and address such risks. This involves working with multi-agency partners, both internal and external, including Police, health, education, the Youth Offending Service, and community safety.

7. **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

8. **Appendices to the report**

- None

Report Author:

Mairead Morgan
Head of Service - Child Protection and Child in Need
Children's Services

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Work Programme

Committee: Corporate Parenting

Year: 2023/2024

Dates of Meetings: 18 July 2023, 5 September 2023, 25 January 2024, 19 March 2024

Topic	Lead Officer	Requested by Officer/Member
18 July 2023		
Childrens Social Care Performance 22/33	Mandy Moore	Officers
Adoption and Fostering Panel Chairs Report	Dan Jones	Officers
Statement of Purpose Adoption	Dan Jones	Officers
Statement of Purpose Fostering	Dan Jones	Officers
Report on Initial Health Assessments for Looked After Children	Ines Parris / Dan Jones	Members
Fostering Recruitment	Liz Shields / Dan Jones	Officers
Work Programme	Democratic Services Officer	Standing item
5 September 2023		
Children's Social Care Performance 2022-23	Mandy Moore	Officers
Transitions to Adult Services for CLA	Dan Jones / Iyobosa Osunde	Officers
After Care Service Report	Dan Jones	Officers
Joint Housing Protocol for Care Leavers	Dan Jones / Housing	Officers
Verbal update – Children in Care Council	Open Door	Officers
Staying Put – Overview and outcomes report	Dan Jones	Members
Work Programme	Democratic Services Officer	Standing item
25 January 2024		
Children's Social Care Performance	Mandy Moore	Officers
Independent Reviewing Officer – Annual Report	Ruth Murdock / Trevor Willis	Officers

Annual Report of the Virtual Schools (<i>deferred to March 2024</i>)	Keeley Pullen	Officers
Education and Employment for Care Leavers	Dan Jones / Kate Koslova-Boran	Members
Children Looked After and Care Leaver Sufficiency Strategy Update	Ceri Armstrong / Dan Jones	Officers
Initial Health Assessment Update	Ines Parris / Dan Jones	Members
Missing Children Report	Mairead Morgan / Clare Moore	Members
CiCC – Agenda item to be agreed with CiCC – e.g. pocket money, placement moves etc		Standing item
Work Programme	Democratic Services Officer	Standing item
19 March 2024		
Corporate Parenting Committee Annual Report 2022/2023	Democratic Services	Members
Children’s Social Care Performance 2022/2023	Mandy Moore	Officers
CLA Health Report	Ines Parris (ICB)	Officers
SET Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service Report for Children Looked After	Tina Russell (NELFT)	Officers
CLA and the Youth Justice Service	Clare Moore	Officers
CiCC – Agenda item to be agreed with CiCC – e.g. pocket money, placement moves etc		Officers
Annual Report of the Virtual Schools (<i>deferred from January 2024</i>)	Keeley Pullen	Officers
Work Programme	Democratic Services Officer	Standing item