

# Thurrock Council

## Inspection of children's social care services

**Inspection dates: 11 November 2019 to 22 November 2019**

**Lead inspector: Brenda McLaughlin  
Her Majesty's Inspector**

<b>Judgement</b>	<b>Grade</b>
The impact of leaders on social work practice with children and families	Good
The experiences and progress of children who need help and protection	Good
The experiences and progress of children in care and care leavers	Good
Overall effectiveness	Good

Since the last inspection in 2016, when children's services were judged to require improvement, an experienced senior leadership team has driven a sustained pace of improvement in most areas. Services for vulnerable children and their families in Thurrock are now good. Although some developments are recent, strong child-centred practice is evident across all teams and services. Skilled and committed social workers and other frontline practitioners listen to children and their parents. They take time to understand children's experiences. Staff act swiftly to prevent harm and provide support early. Current senior leaders have worked diligently to develop and support a culture of continuous learning and improvement. Stability of leadership and strong aspirations to 'get it right' for vulnerable children are key factors in their success. Action to support exploited and missing children is beginning to make a difference, but changes need to embed further to ensure that risks to children are fully understood and addressed.

Children in care, adopted children and young people leaving care benefit from teams of highly committed, ambitious and determined professionals and carers, who work well together, helping them to remain safe and achieve well in life. The local authority is a highly ambitious corporate parent. There is a palpable sense that staff across all directorates want to do the right thing. Work to improve the timeliness of initial health assessments is critical and necessary, particularly for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children coming into care. Planned transitions for disabled children and care leavers need to happen earlier.

### **What needs to improve**

- Planned transitions and closer collaboration with adult services needs to happen earlier for disabled young people and care leavers.
- Timeliness of initial health assessments when all children come into care.
- Alignment and effectiveness of systems that support children at risk of criminal and sexual exploitation and children missing from home and care, to ensure that children can tell their stories.

### **The experiences and progress of children who need help and protection: Good**

1. Judicious, targeted investment in the newly reconfigured locality-based preventative and support service (PASS) as part of Thurrock's Brighter Futures strategy means that early help is carefully prioritised for the most vulnerable families. The pathway into PASS is clear: a 'team around the family' and well-being model takes a holistic, multi-agency perspective in addressing families' needs. As a result, children and families get the right level of help and protection at the right time, delivered by caring and skilled professionals, and this is making a difference to their day-to-day lives and protecting them from harm. Actions by managers to align performance monitoring, as well as audit programmes with children's social care, are positive developments.
2. Strong partnerships in the multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH) serve to protect children from harm. Thresholds between early help and social care services are well understood. The co-location with children's social workers of many other professionals, such as an approved mental health professional and a specialist female genital mutilation worker, enables highly effective collaboration and timely information-sharing. Proportionate checks are undertaken, and consent is routinely sought, or appropriately overridden, to protect children. Rigorous management oversight of this work ensures that children's experiences are constantly central to timely decisions about the steps needed to help and protect them from harm.

3. Assessments using the local authority's revised model of practice are comprehensive and analytical, and are a vast improvement on those seen during the 2016 single inspection. They are thorough and updated regularly, and they clearly reflect the child's voice. Focused, purposeful direct work is planned well, is done at the child's pace, and ensures that most children understand what is happening. Staff work skilfully to understand parental and family histories and cultures, as well as the impact on parents of mental illness, domestic abuse, poverty and insecure housing. Exceptionally competent examples were seen of social workers sensitively evaluating the impact that these and other vulnerabilities have on parents, while keeping a clear focus on children's needs at the heart of their practice.
4. Appropriate action is taken to safeguard and protect children who are at immediate risk of significant harm. Strategy meetings are thorough, and most involve a good range of agencies. Interventions are proportionate to risk, and, when children and young people need to be safeguarded, actions are taken promptly to ensure that they are protected. For instance, managers took decisive action to protect children who had recently moved to Thurrock and where previous local authorities had failed to act.
5. Child protection conferences are timely. Multi-agency core groups are held regularly; most are used effectively to review and update child protection plans. However, the quality of child in need and child protection plans is not consistently good. A minority of these plans lack clarity about risks, desired outcomes or timescales. Managers are aware of this and have increased their audit activity, which is supporting improvement. Assiduous management reviews and close monitoring of children's cases where child protection plans have been in place for more than a year have resulted in the number of plans appropriately reducing from 253 in 2018 to 144 at the time of inspection.
6. Effective monthly permanence planning meetings and rigorous monitoring and tracking of cases under the pre-proceedings stage of the Public Law Outline are preventing drift and ensuring timely decisions about applications to family courts. Increased risks to children are escalated swiftly. Plainly written 'letters before proceedings' ensure that parents understand the local authority's concerns. Where necessary, care proceedings are initiated quickly to ensure that children are not subject to neglect and other damaging home conditions for too long.
7. Leaders and managers have facilitated a range of evidence-based improvements, making a discernible difference to helping vulnerable children and their families sustain change. For example, additional investment in solution-focused 'families first' child in need teams, and in 'families together' edge of care teams, is resulting in persistent relationship-based work that is making a positive difference, enabling very vulnerable young people to remain living securely with their families. This effective and authoritative practice, while recent, adds value and leads to better experiences for

children. A culture of listening to children, understanding their world and acting on their views is increasingly embedded in practice across all teams in Thurrock.

8. Senior leaders have recognised the need to strengthen the operational coordination of information and alignment of systems to monitor and assess the impact of work with vulnerable adolescents and children at risk of exploitation. Having commissioned an external review in August 2019, they have put an appropriate action plan in place to drive improvement. While information on missing children is circulated daily to managers, leaders accept that the response to children who go missing or who are at risk of criminal or sexual exploitation is not yet strong enough for all children. Return home interviews do not take place routinely. Therefore, some children do not have the opportunity to tell their story. However, social workers know children well and work tirelessly to help and protect them from harm. Safety planning for a small number of children needs to be sharper. This was an area for improvement in the 2016 inspection.
9. Effective strategic relationships with multi-agency partners have resulted in the successful disruption of known perpetrators who criminally exploit or traffic children and vulnerable adults. Gang injunctions have been issued and gang members have been constrained, imprisoned, or moved out of Thurrock. Online abuse is taken very seriously. Young people across schools and colleges have responded positively to the reintroduction of 'Walk Online' roadshows, a programme which covers broader safeguarding issues, including online exploitation, knives and offensive weapons, and the impact of gangs. The dangers of radicalisation are understood well by the local authority and partner agencies. The Prevent referral pathway is clear, simple and easy to use. A heightened level of awareness, particularly on the part of schools and colleges, is helping to protect children and young people.
10. Effective arrangements for identifying and responding to children and young people who are privately fostered helps protect them and ensure they are appropriately cared for. Private foster carers have the same access to training and support as other foster carers. Privately fostered children are seen regularly and are seen alone. Young people who present as homeless have their needs carefully considered and are very well supported to return home or to move to alternative provision.
11. The operational response to allegations made against adults who are working with children in a position of trust is rigorous. More work is needed to improve awareness-raising with partner agencies. Children and their families benefit from prompt, proportionate and effective help and protection out of hours. Communication with daytime services is good.
12. Until recently, disabled children and their families did not consistently get the right level of help and support from children's social care. Action by senior

leaders has strengthened management oversight for these children. Risks and safeguarding concerns are recognised, and children's cases are stepped up appropriately when needs change and a more intensive social work response is required. Assessments are updated routinely. Skilled social workers understand children's unique needs and find ways to communicate with them to ensure that services are attuned to their specific wishes. Work with adult services and other professionals to support young people into independence does not happen early enough. Further work is required to ensure that plans are of a reliably high standard.

13. Children who are electively home educated and those missing from school benefit from effective management oversight and interventions. Leaders quickly act where there are safeguarding issues.

### **The experiences and progress of children in care and care leavers: Good**

14. Most children come into care either on a planned or voluntary basis or through the application of a court order when efforts to protect them at home have been unsuccessful. Children of all ages are safeguarded, and care orders for older adolescents are sought when appropriate. Children and young people benefit from help and support provided by dedicated, ambitious and determined professionals who work well together, helping children to remain safe and achieve well in life. Permanence planning for children in care is tightly managed and is effective in ensuring stability and avoiding drift. When children need alternative long-term care outside their families, joint plans are tailored carefully to their individual needs. Decision-making is timely, and prompt action is taken to ensure that children have good-quality stable homes together with their brothers and sisters.
15. Social workers know children well. While some children have experienced too many changes in staff, most children are able to build trusting relationships with new workers and their foster carers. Social workers visit regularly, and they spend time encouraging children to talk about their concerns or worries. For instance, when children are reluctant to engage with other professionals, social workers learn the relevant skills and work through the issues with the child. Respectful, tenacious work by staff who really care about helping children is helping them to recover from the trauma they have suffered.
16. Independent reviewing officers (IROs) work diligently with social workers and carers to support children to express their views. They visit children, listen carefully to what children would like to happen, and take swift action to make changes. Most review minutes are easy to read and understand. IROs are a valuable source of continuity in children's lives. They rigorously review children's care plans and provide effective critical challenge. Case recording is clear and up to date, and the voice of the child is consistently evidenced. Inspectors saw many examples of creative and sensitive work helping children

to come to understand why they cannot live with their parents or extended families.

17. Children are settled in their placements, including those who are living outside the local authority area. They are well supported by carers and other professionals and most are doing well. Children and their carers socialise and spend time doing fun things together. Faced with a long waiting time for access to child and adolescent mental health services, the local authority proactively commissions emotional help and support services. Responding quickly in this way to assist children and their carers is increasing emotional resilience. This is enabling children, particularly adolescents with complex needs, to remain settled in the same placements. Increasing numbers of young people remain living with their foster families after 18.
18. Social workers regularly update their assessments for children in care, ensuring that they are child-centred, comprehensive and analytical. Bespoke intensive support provided by the families together team enables children to return home safely to their birth families. Advocates are used effectively when children need them. Staff listen to and act on children's views and aspirations. They arrange family contact sensitively and support it well, respectfully taking account of parents' wishes. For example, when parents are in prison, staff visit and seek their advice about how they should communicate this to their children. Children regularly access a wide range of activities, such as brownies, rugby or gymnastics. Apps are being used well to help children express themselves, and there is evidence of creative and imaginative direct work, including work, in some cases, to help children understand and make sense of their life stories.
19. Routine, sensitive planning for children to enable them to live with family members is a real strength in Thurrock. Staff complete initial viability and risk assessments promptly, helping to reduce disruption and allowing children to remain within family settings with people whom they know and trust. They use connected care arrangements well to provide children with safe and effective care while parenting assessments are ongoing. Most connected carers are well supported to care for children, and a number have decided to make applications for special guardianship orders. The local authority guarantees that special guardians and children will receive support that is equivalent to that given to other care givers.
20. A significant increase in the number of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children entering care and a relatively high percentage of older children in care present specific challenges. Many of these young people have suffered neglect and trauma, some are estranged from their families and others have been known to agencies for many years. Frontline staff skilfully build relationships with these children. They work in collaboration with partner agencies to ensure that they can access personalised help and support. However, delays in completing initial health assessments are a critical issue

for this group. Although leaders are working with health colleagues to resolve the delay, the pace of change is too slow.

21. The court team is emerging from a very difficult period, during which high levels of staff turnover have had a negative impact on the quality and timeliness of applications in the family courts. Currently, good-quality parenting and connected carers assessments contribute to effective and timely permanence plans for children who are unable to live with their parents. Anonymously profiling children whose plan is for adoption before placement orders are made has proved to be highly effective in ensuring that prospective adoptive families are identified early and quickly matched with them.
22. Children and carers benefit hugely from highly experienced and dynamic social workers and senior managers in Thurrock's fostering and adoption services. Staff take great pride in their work. Foster carers and adopters are positive about the support they receive. Excellent therapeutic support is available for foster carers and adopters. Trauma-based learning is integral to the authority's extensive fostering and adoption training programmes.
23. Since moving its adoption service back in-house in 2018, the local authority has widened the adoption options available for all children who need them, not just babies and toddlers. A creative, far-reaching recruitment strategy is increasing the range of placements available to meet children's diverse needs. The assessment process is well organised and responsive. Senior managers listen to and regularly consult with foster carers. Foster carers use their expertise to influence the organisation in a positive way. Their input during training and recruitment events, initial visits and mentoring of new carers is invaluable. Extensive investment in life-story work is greatly appreciated by adopters and birth families. This work is being extended to children living with special guardians and foster carers.
24. All children in care have an up-to-date personal educational plan (PEP). This is a useful tool to ensure that the right support is provided to meet children's education needs. The virtual school is very effective in supporting the achievement of children in care, getting them the help and support they need to do well. Staff quality assure the personal education plans that schools use to support and monitor pupils' academic and social progress. Outcomes at the end of key stage 2 are strong. At key stage 4, they are improving year-on-year. Staff encourage children and young people to participate in their PEP meetings. They acknowledge their views and respond to them quickly.
25. The proportion of care leavers in education, employment or training over the age of 19 is high. However, for those aged 17 and 18, it is lower than it should be. Leaders recognise this and have recently moved responsibility for these pupils back to the virtual school. It is too early to see the impact of this change.

26. The transition from child in care to care leaver is not as seamless as it needs to be. The quality and effectiveness of early pathway planning is variable. Some young people don't have an up-to-date pathway plan. Others, who are clearly vulnerable, do not have a current risk assessment. Although personal advisers (PAs) attend 16-year-old children in care reviews, there is little evidence of meaningful involvement from the after-care team until young people are approaching their eighteenth birthdays. Capacity has been an issue. The local authority has employed four additional PAs and a senior practitioner to address this gap, but it is too soon to evaluate the impact.
27. Care leavers spoke positively and with genuine warmth about PAs who help them realise their ambitions. They have access to employment, training and apprenticeships delivered by enthusiastic staff via the inspire hub. At the time of inspection, 26 young people were attending university. Care leavers who originally arrived in this country as asylum-seekers benefit from the support they receive from a PA whose personal experience of the asylum-seeking process gives him a unique insight into the trauma, challenges and practical obstacles that young people face. Extensive corporate investments mean that all care leavers have access to customised high-quality accommodation up to the age of 25 years. There are no children under 16 in unregulated provision. PAs visit young people who are in custody regularly and they support them well when they are released from prison.

**The impact of leaders on social work practice with children and families:  
Good**

28. Effective and stable senior leadership has led to considerable improvement in the quality and impact of social work practice for children in need of help and protection, those in care and care leavers since the Ofsted 2016 single inspection. Although some improvements are recent, services are now good, with many examples of exceptional child- and family-centred practice. Good governance arrangements are firmly in place, ensuring that the senior leadership team and elected members communicate regularly and effectively.
29. The assistant director and the recently retired director of children's services (DCS) in children's social care have shown remarkably strong leadership, addressing considerable deficits in practice reported at the last inspection. Together with the unstinting support of the current interim DCS, the chief executive officer, elected members and strategic leads, they have created a culture of high expectation, support and challenge. Listening to children and acting on their views are practices that are becoming strongly embedded in practice.
30. Leaders know their communities well. They have focused on co-designing services based on what local people need. Senior leaders promote a strong ethos of participation and advocacy. They ensure that children's and

professionals' views are at the centre of their work. Strategic and corporate arrangements are congruent with this vision, providing a clear understanding and shared approach to prioritising and meeting children's needs. The senior leadership team and elected members demonstrate a collective determination to provide high-quality services that improve outcomes for vulnerable children. They are connected to frontline practice and have a good knowledge of individual children. A palpable sense about wanting to do the right thing fosters an open learning culture, and allows leaders to engage readily in internal and external reviews and challenge. For example, a review of the poor adoption performance resulted in them bringing the service back in-house.

31. Successful workforce planning and staff development in Thurrock have increased the number of frontline practitioners supporting children. This has increased capacity to sustain a good-quality service and is a substantial improvement since the last inspection. Leaders have tackled staff competence issues and have helped practitioners and managers who were resistant to raised standards to develop the requisite skills or to move on. While this has meant that some children have experienced changes of social worker, the quality of practice is stronger as a result, and recent action by managers is improving staff stability. Newly qualified social workers receive exceptional support. A strong emphasis on developing and nurturing all staff encourages more to remain in the local authority. A diverse workforce of practitioners and managers who reflect the local community is a real strength, leading to better engagement by young people and their parents.
32. The local authority takes its responsibility as a corporate parent for children in care very seriously. All directors across the council have had corporate parenting training. Work to improve support to the children in care council is positive. Elected members are ambitious for children and young people in their care and have ensured that their vision for outstanding quality services is underpinned by appropriate financial resources. This provides a sound basis for good service planning and provision. Active engagement with local and international businesses based in Thurrock is successfully securing apprenticeships and jobs for children in care when they leave school.
33. Performance management is well established and is a priority. Monthly development boards which are chaired by the DCS undertake regular analysis of data and monitor progress against priorities. The lead member also provides detailed scrutiny. Managers use weekly performance and audit information effectively in most service areas. Some of the developments are recent, and the changes, while showing positive and continuous improvement, need to embed further. There is no complacency. Instead, a strong culture of continuous learning, professional accountability and responsibility enables staff to flourish in a safe but challenging environment.

34. Staff consistently feel well supported in their work and their professional development by highly visible, approachable and involved managers at every level. Senior leaders take the time and trouble to nurture talent. There is a tangible culture of professional accountability and respectful challenge devoid of blame across teams. Morale is good. Supervision is frequent and mostly effective.
35. Social workers and managers are fittingly proud of the work they are doing in Thurrock. They know their children and families very well and speak with passion and enthusiasm about the often exemplary work they undertake with them. They work in an environment where caseloads are manageable and where leaders support them to do their jobs effectively.



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