

18 December 2014		ITEM: 5
Corporate Parenting Committee		
Information on Recent External Placements for Young People		
Wards and communities affected: All	Key Decision: Non-key	
Report of: Roland Minto – Service Manager, Placements and Support		
Accountable Head of Service: Nicky Pace		
Accountable Director: Carmel Littleton, Director of Children’s Services		
This report is public		

Executive Summary

This report updates members of the Committee on a range of issues regarding the placement choices made for looked after children.

1. Recommendation(s)

- 1.1 That the members of the Committee note the efforts made by officers to choose appropriate resources for looked after children, including our more difficult to place children.**

2. Introduction and Background

- 2.1** At previous meetings of the Corporate Parenting Committee it was agreed that officers would provide elected members with some detailed information about the placement choices being made by officers for looked after children. With due consideration about the maintenance of appropriate professional boundaries of confidentiality, reports have been prepared since September 2013, outlining all new external placements made in the periods immediately preceding them, and commenting on a number of the presenting issues which influence decision making.
- 2.2** Reports have therefore varied in content, depending on any specific issues in focus, so that officers can respond within the report, and within the meetings, to additional queries raised by members. However a consistent and understandable thread has been a focus on the more expensive external placements, and how decisions that these are required are arrived at, and previously details of such new arrangements was reported.

- 2.3 However it has been agreed that because of concerns about the possible identification of individual young people, this additional appendix will no longer be included. However in the period to be covered since the last report, i.e. 1.8.14 – 27.11.14, 44 young people have entered the system, of whom 36 currently remain. Of the 44, five were young people remanded to the care of the local authority, but were actually placed in Young Offenders Institutions. A further 9 are Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Young People. Twenty-three of the new entrants in this period were aged 15 or above, and only five were aged less than five years, one of whom has since returned to his family.
- 2.4 During the same period 28 young people left the care of the authority, eight of them through reaching their eighteenth birthday, the remainder either to return to their families, or to be placed permanently with alternative carers through Adoption or Special Guardianship, or in one case to receive a custodial sentence, which terminated his status as a looked after child.
- 2.5 This background information illustrates the very fluid nature of placement demand in Thurrock, with some placement requests being for only a short duration, whilst others obviously become the base for the child or young person for a considerable period. However the overall balance of placement type remains broadly similar. At 27.11.2014 there were 300 looked after children in Thurrock. The current spread of placements, with the comparative figure in brackets for the previously reported period, is illustrated below. It will be noted that there is a slight reduction in the number of children at the younger end of the age range; this may in part be a consequence of a national pattern of fewer children entering the system as a result of some well-publicised High Court decisions, though it is widely considered that this will reflect only a temporary slowdown.

Age of child	In house fostering	Independent Fostering	Residential	Other	Total by age
Under 1	5 (9)	1 (3)		2 (2)	8 (14)
1-5	13 (19)	16 (19)		14 (8)	43 (46)
6-11	37 (33)	33 (33)	4 (5)	1 (2)	75 (73)
12-15	29 (29)	37 (35)	23 (23)	2 (1)	91 (88)
16+	27 (27)	20 (19)	6 (14)	30 (16)	83 (76)
Total by provision type	111 (117)	107 (109)	33 (42)	49 (29)	300 (297)

In total therefore 218 children (or just over 72%), were living in foster placements; this figure rises to slightly over 78% for under 16s.

- 2.6 The apparent reduction in the use of residential placements for over 16s and the consequential rise in the “other” category does not actually reflect a change in usage but a more accurate classification of some of the supported accommodation placements being provided for older adolescents, particularly though not exclusively Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Young People. In addition it also includes the young people remanded into custody mentioned above; there have been six since September 1st, five of whom were not looked after immediately prior to this happening.
- 2.7 As reported previously, for several years Thurrock had been able to concentrate most of its use of foster placements within our internal resources, with an approximate ratio of 70%-30%, but as the numbers of Looked After Children rose internal supply had not expanded to meet demand, and hence our proportionate use of Independent Fostering Agency placements increased. It still remains our objective to restore the previous balance, as we believe a local foster placement, with foster carers who we have recruited, trained and continue to support, will be best able to meet a local child’s needs.

3. Issues, Options and Analysis of Options

- 3.1 Members of the Committee have requested information about recruitment activity to increase our own supply of foster carers, as it was recognised that some of our competitors, both local authorities and Independent Fostering Agencies, have been more aggressive in their advertising strategies. Some new publicity materials were developed over the last year, although it has not been possible to launch an assertive fresh campaign ourselves to take this forward, largely for capacity reasons. Nevertheless we have maintained a regular presence of small local information sessions, replacing larger Open Evenings which no longer appeared a cost effective mechanism to attract enquiries. Members of the Fostering Service have also attended events such as the Orsett Show. In addition we have recently made begun to develop dialogue with the local Multi-Faith Forum, which we are optimistic will widen our capacity to reach different areas of the community.
- 3.2 Through existing strategies we received 86 new enquiries April - October 2014, which led to 28 completed initial visits. Fifty-one of the enquiries came via the Council’s Internet site. There were eight fresh Approvals at Panel in this period, but four of these were of Connected Persons (otherwise known as Family and Friends Carers). These Carers need to be fully assessed as with any other applicant, and this work clearly sits within the remit of the Fostering Recruitment and Assessment Team, but unfortunately does not lead to the development of the kind of flexible additional resource we need. During the same period a further ten households attended preparation groups, prior to a formal application to be assessed.
- 3.3 It is acknowledged that more work needs to be planned in 2015 to ensure a steady flow of suitable applicants, but this needs to be understood in the context that applications need to be received in balance with our capacity to thoroughly assess them within appropriate timescales.

- 3.4 Members further asked for some commentary on the question of controllable and uncontrollable financial pressures in relation to placement decisions. Clearly the most significant control possible is in restricting the numbers of young people entering the system, and where possible finding means for them to safely exit the system. Over recent months Managers have strengthened the oversight of this by the establishment of a Threshold Panel to consider all requests for children or young people to become looked after, and there has been a slight fall in numbers entering compared to the same period last year. In contrast it is recognised that performance in assisting young people to leave the system has not kept pace with this, and this is an issue which will be attracting more attention in the period ahead.
- 3.5 However in relation to the financial pressures for those who are in placements, this will always be to a degree “demand led”, in that once the decision that a child requires a placements there will inevitably be financial consequences. Nevertheless some strategies are in place to contain this, most notably the priority that is always given to using a foster placement wherever possible in preference to other forms of provision. The main exception to this, as outlined in previous reports, are some Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking young people, who are generally older teenagers, about whom we have no background information, and therefore placing them with Foster Carers who may also have younger children is not considered a safe initial option.
- 3.6 The cost of placing children in foster care will vary depending on their age and any specific needs they have, and calculating the comparative unit costs is dependent on what one includes in the calculation for in-house placements. However the most recent calculation, completed in October this year suggests that the average cost of an in-house placement is around £706 per week ((£36,712 per year) compared to £776 per week (£40,352) for an Independent Fostering Agency placement.
- 3.7 Use of external foster placements is managed as far as possible within the boundaries of the “Eastern Region” agreements to which Thurrock has been party since 2008; with the Sub-Eastern Region Foster Care Framework Agreement (ER5) and now with the Eastern Region Select List (ER Select List). By combining with other Local Authorities we have been able to stimulate the market, with particular emphasis on quality local provision, with over 80% of children and young people now being placed with 20 miles of the Civic Office, the introduction of new Independent Foster Care Providers into the local market and by the mechanism of collective local authority bargaining to contain placement costs.
- 3.8 Proportionately foster placements represent good value for money but unfortunately not all young people can be accommodated this way, because their needs and/or behaviours have proven too difficult for a foster carer to manage. In some instances these placements also require education to be provided on site, which poses an additional challenge. There are significant

variations in the costs of residential placements, stemming from whether the needs of the young person require regular one to one (or more) staffing, e.g. for some young people on the autistic spectrum or those needing extra supervision because of self-harming or violent behaviours. The most recent average calculation is that residential placements cost around £3,460 per week, a figure which is inflated by a small number of such very high cost placements.

- 3.9 Residential placements are less susceptible to the kind of collective bargaining agreements with which we can contain Independent Fostering costs, as the relatively low numbers mean it is difficult to predict future use and therefore develop longer term “bulk” commissioning strategies. Thurrock is a member of the Children’s Cross Regional Arrangements Group (CCRAG) and is represented on the CCRAG Steering Committee. CCRAG is a partnership consisting of Local Authorities from the East, South East and South West Regions of England who are committed to working together to support the sourcing, contracting, monitoring and annual fee negotiations for children’s placements in independent and non-maintained special schools and children’s residential care homes.
- 3.10 Whilst CCRAG does not entirely provide a basis for controlling all our costs it provides a useful mechanism for the exchange of information about providers, for monitoring quality, and for ensuring that Thurrock is not being charged disproportionately to other Local Authorities.
- 3.11 Contributions have previously been made to help meet the Social Care Placements expenditure by Education and the Clinical Commissioning Group but unfortunately Health have indicated their intention to withdraw their previous funding from next April, which will create an additional budgetary pressure.
- 3.11 Budget projections for the current year are revised, in collaboration with colleagues in finance, on a regular basis to take into account current usage and expectations up to the end of the financial year. The current forecast against our external placements budget of slightly over £9 million pounds is that we will come in close to budget, but as this is a highly volatile process one or two changes of children’s care arrangements could affect the situation significantly . The most up to date estimates will therefore be presented to Members at the December Committee Meeting.
- 3.12 The costs for in-house foster care are currently being contained within the existing budgets.

4. Reasons for Recommendation

- 4.1 It is hoped that member of the Committee will continue to find this information useful in developing their understanding of the issues involved. Officers accept there is a very real challenge in balancing the need to find the best

possible placement option for young people, whilst simultaneously working within the financial resources available.

5. Implications

5.1 Financial

Implications verified by: **Kay Goodacre**
Children's Services Finance Manager

As previously the key financial implication of the report is to note the continuing strain currently on the external placements budget, and the need to both contain the increase in numbers of looked after children where it is safe to do so, and make the most effective use of the funding available.

5.2 Legal

Implications verified by: **Lindsey Marks**
Solicitor

The Children Act 1989 is very clear the best interest of the child should remain the paramount consideration, and the local authority would be very vulnerable to legal challenges if it were evidenced that placement decisions were being made purely on the basis of financial considerations.

5.3 Diversity and Equality

Implications verified by: **Teresa Evans**
Equalities and Cohesion Officer

The local authority has a clear duty to ensure that placements are identified appropriate to the needs of all children who require them. This is true for children of all backgrounds, cultures and ethnicities, but also for children with significant disabilities and particularly those less able to communicate their wishes and feelings to those organising their care. The observation about developing links with the local multi-faith forum is therefore positively noted.

6. 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):

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Children's Services, Care and Targeted Outcomes