

<b>12 March 2015</b>		<b>ITEM: 7</b>
<b>Report to Corporate Parenting Committee</b>		
<b>Information on Recent External Placements for young people</b>		
<b>Wards and communities affected:</b> All	<b>Key Decision:</b> Non-key	
<b>Report of:</b> Roland Minto – Service Manager, Placements and Support		
<b>Accountable Head of Service:</b> Andrew Carter , Children’s Social Care (CATO)		
<b>Accountable Director:</b> Carmel Littleton, Director of Children’s Services		
<b>This report is</b> 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 Reports for previous meetings of the Corporate Parenting Committee have provided elected members with some detailed information about the placement choices being made by officers for looked after children. These reports have included information on new external placements made in the periods immediately preceding them and commented on a number of the presenting issues which influence decision making.
- 2.2 Reports have 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.
- 2.3 However it has been agreed that because of concerns about the possible identification of individual young people, an appendix previously provided will

no longer be included. However in the period to be covered since the last report, i.e. 27.11.14 – 4.2.15, 18 young people have entered the system, of whom 12 currently remain. Of these 12, five were less than two years old and the other seven were aged between 14-17 years old.

- 2.4 During the same period 15 young people left the care of the authority, six 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 to receive a custodial sentence which terminated their status as a looked after child.
- 2.5 This background information illustrates the continuing 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 5.2.15 there were 278 looked after children in Thurrock. The spread of placements on this date, 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	4 (5)	2 (1)		(2)	6 (8)
1-5	12 (13)	11 (16)		15 (14)	38 (43)
6-11	33 (37)	32 (33)	4 (4)	1(1)	70 (75)
12-15	29 (29)	35 (37)	23 (23)	1 (2)	88 (91)
16+	18 (27)	21 (20)	5 (6)	32 (30)	76 (83)
Total by provision type	96 (111)	101(107)	32 (33)	49 (49)	278 (300)

In total therefore 197 children (or just over 71%), were living in foster placements; this figure rises to slightly over 76% for under 16s.

- 2.6 As noted previously there is a relatively high number of young people in the “Other” category, particularly in the 16+ age group. This category includes a range of semi-independent accommodation, which is frequently used for older adolescents, particularly, though not exclusively, Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Young People for whom neither foster care or more traditional children’s homes settings are appropriate. In addition it also includes young people remanded into custody, who are classed as Looked After Children during the period of remand.

- 2.7 There are currently also a relatively high number of under-fives in the “Other” category. This covers a number of options, such as children placed with their parent or placed with prospective adopters, pending final Adoption Orders being made. There are currently 12 children in this latter category, which reflects a genuine success story on behalf of those involved in the adoption process.

### **3. Issues, Options and Analysis of Options**

- 3.1 Members have 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.
- 3.2 We have also established a structure of Looked After Children surgeries, to install a further level of case scrutiny to ensure both that there is no drift in the planning process for young people, and that expensive resources are not being deployed when an less expensive one can secure equal outcomes.
- 3.3 A further strand of enquiry from members has been for some additional detail on the circumstances surrounding decisions to use Independent Fostering Agency (IFA) placements rather than in-house resources, and whether these decisions were made on the basis of specific need or simple unavailability of a local carer.
- 3.4 In reality these decisions normally represent a degree of compromise between these two factors, unless there is a very specific safeguarding or welfare issue which indicates placement further away from the home area.
- 3.5 We currently have 25 young people in IFA placements which have been made since 1.4.2014. Six of these young people belong to two sibling groups, and in these instances there would have been a conscious decision to prioritise keeping the children together over a desire to place them locally. Foster carers who can take larger sibling groups are a scarce and valuable resource, and whilst we do seek to attract and fast track the assessments of in-house applicants with this capacity this is likely to remain a challenging issue. A further placement was for a Parent and Child placement which was needed at short notice.
- 3.6 Of the remainder, only four are still in their initial placement following the young person becoming looked after, and many had previously been placed at some stage with in-house carers, prior to the decision to seek an external resource. Eighteen of the 25 children are aged 13 or above, which strongly

indicates one of our major placement pressures, namely finding foster carers for teenagers, although this is by no means specific to Thurrock. This does not necessarily indicate that in-house carers are any less skilled or resilient in managing teenagers, and the challenges of teenagers are identical for all carers. However there is no question that it is easier to recruit foster carers interested in caring for much younger children.

- 3.7 Of the 12 young people who have come into Thurrock's care since 27.11.14, and currently remain, eight have been placed with foster carers, of which five have been with in-house carers. Of the three in the Independent sector, one referral was to find a specific parent and child placement which we did not have available at that moment, one was following a serious breakdown of a semi-independent living arrangement for a 17 year old, and the third was a deliberate preference to create some geographic distance in order to protect a young person from difficult family dynamics.
- 3.6 As stated in previous reports we remain acutely conscious of the additional cost of using Independent Fostering Agency placements; and this is always taken into consideration, but there is widespread acceptance amongst local authorities that we will continue to need a "mixed economy" and the challenges are twofold, namely to achieve the best possible balance of in-house against external placements, and secondly to ensure that external costs are contained.
- 3.7 As reported previously 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).
- 3.8 Despite these measures, and further efforts to ensure that children and young people neither become nor remain looked after longer than necessary, there are clear budgetary pressures this year, and according to the latest figures provided by Corporate Finance we are facing a possible overspend on external placements of around £100,000. This is created by a combination of factors, including an overall increase in looked after children across the year, significant payments for young people on remand and a small number of teenagers requiring high levels of additional staffing to maintain their safety and security. In the latter instances we monitor closely to ensure that additional costs are not incurred longer than necessary, but this has to be balanced with our obligations to ensure safety for both the individual young person, staff members and other children. Fortunately some of the projected overspend can be offset against underspend in the in-house fostering budget, thus containing the overall costs within the Service Area.

#### **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. Consultation (including Overview and Scrutiny, if applicable)**

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

## **7. Implications**

### **7.1 Financial**

Implications verified by: Kay Goodacre  
Consultant, Corporate Finance

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.

### **7.2 Legal**

Implications verified by: Lindsey Marks  
Principal 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.

### **7.3 Diversity and Equality**

Implications verified by: Natalie Warren  
Community Development and Equalities Manager

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.

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

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

None

- 9. Appendices to the report**

None

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