

22 July 2015

ITEM: 13

Council

Cabinet Member Report – Children’s Social Care

Report of: Councillor Bukky Okunade, Cabinet Member for Children’s Social Care

This report is public

1. Introduction

1.1. This report covers the following areas of council responsibility:

- Family Support, Children in Need and Child Protection – this includes the MASH (Multi Agency Safeguarding Hub) and assessment functions, support services for disabled children, children in need, including those on child protection plans.
- Children and young people who are in the Care of the Local Authority and for whom we are corporate parents
- Adoption - children for whom adoption has been identified as being in the child’s best interests
- Care Leavers – children and young people who have left the care of the local authority
- The Youth Offending Team – those young people who have come to the attention of the criminal courts
- The Troubled Families programme
- The Thurrock Local Safeguarding Board

2. Family Support

2.1 Early Offer of Help

Our Early Offer of Help puts the ethos of Early Intervention at the heart of delivery across children’s services and a range of agencies. Through this we are transforming our systems, including children’s centre delivery to support those most in need at an earlier stage.

2.2 Our approach is one of a multi-agency partnership, working to collectively provide a team around the family approach utilising evidence based primary prevention programmes such as Family Nurse Partnerships (FNP) and the Maternal and Early Childhood Sustained Home Visiting Programme (MESCH). Aligning these programmes with wider services, such as the Healthy Child Programme and access to early education for two, three and four year olds mean that we can offer a structured programme of support.

- 2.3 This 'wrap around approach' embeds the team around the family approach in universal services but with structured links to targeted early support when it is needed. Community based services such as Community mums and dads add to our support pathways that are made up of both statutory and community based services.
- 2.4 MASH (Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub)_will only proceed to a formal assessment of need when the threshold for social care intervention is met and referrals are stepped up to CFAT. In the event where referrals do not meet the social care threshold but still require additional support, referrals are stepped down to the Early Offer of Help services.
- 2.5 Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH)
Thurrock introduced the MASH in July 2014 with the official launch taking place in September 2014. The MASH provides a new multi-agency model for delivering services to children and families in Thurrock that offers a single point of entry for all referrals and requests for help for children and young people. The MASH brings together a variety of agencies into an integrated co-located multi agency team; where information is shared appropriately and securely on children, families and adults.
- 2.6 The MASH is situated at the centre of the main council offices in Grays and has successfully performed its functions as set out in my previous report in October 2014 regarding:
- Informing partners in the MASH about the level of need or risk at the first point of contact.
 - Playing a lead role in supporting and promoting effective information sharing across agencies.
 - Supporting processes that ensures Children Social Care remain responsible for the overall decision making on cases referred to it.
- 2.7 MASH core agencies include: Children Social Care, Essex Police, Locality Senior Practitioner, Troubled Families Programme Manager, Health, Probation, Housing and Education Welfare.
- 2.8 An independent review of the MASH was carried out in March 2015. The report scores the MASH as 'Good' against the Ofsted grade descriptors.
- 2.9 The MASH is expanding its role to include the piloting of a First Response Team to increase capacity to focus cases appropriately towards early intervention where this is appropriate to the levels of need and risk.
- 2.10.1 Family Support Services consist of MASH, Child & Family Assessment Team (CFAT), Four Family Support Teams, an Adolescent Support team and a specialist service consisting of two practitioners dealing with Domestic Violence and Drug, Alcohol and Substance Misuse.
- 2.10.2 Family Support Teams deal with Children who are deemed as 'Children in Need'.

Section 17 of the Children Act 1989 imposes on Local Authorities a general duty to safeguard and promote the welfare of the children in their area who are 'in need' and to promote the upbringing of such children by their families by providing a range and level of services appropriate to those children's needs. Other agencies have a duty to co-operate with Social Care in carrying out their duty to assess the needs of the children in need to provide services as necessary.

- 2.10.3 Family Support teams work with children who are subject to Child Protection Plans. Section 47 of the Children Act requires that where a Local Authority has reasonable cause to suspect that a child in their area is suffering or likely to suffer significant harm, they shall make necessary enquiries so that they can determine what, if any, action needs to be taken in order to safeguard and promote the child's welfare.
- 2.11 The service continues to review the quality of provision to children and families in need. Regular CIN surgeries are held to ensure that cases are being appropriately progressed in relation to outcomes for children and young people.
- 2.12 Where appropriate cases are stepped down to early offer of help from being on Children in Need plans or up to child protection plan or legal proceedings within the Public Law Outline.
- 2.13 The Adolescent Support Team provides focused support to young people and their families. The team have developed and embedded an adolescent neglect tool taking learning from local and national Serious Case reviews to ensure that the signs of adolescent neglect are recognised and acted on. The team's primary function remains to enhance outcomes for adolescent young people and avoid family breakdown.

3. Children who need help and protection

- 3.1 The rate of children subject to child protection plans has fluctuated in Thurrock. The rate had been on an upwards curve in Thurrock and continued to rise through 2013/14. The rate per 10,000 children in 2013/14 was 75 (288 children). This compares to a rate of 53 per 10,000 in 2012/13.
- 3.2 As set out in my previous report the service has undertaken auditing of these decisions. The Head of Service has been holding CP surgeries to systematically review all cases where children have been subject of plans for 18 months or more with a further surgery to focus on children on plans for 12 months or more.
- 3.3 As at end of August 2014 there were 194 (49.2 per 10,000) children subject to plans compared to 236 in the same period in 2013/14. The number of children subject to Child Protection Plans reached its lowest point in October and November 2014 with 167 children and young people being subject to a CP plan.
- 3.4 Since November 2014 the number of children and young people subject to a Child Protection plan has again increased to 51 per 10,000 as of 31.3.15. At the time of writing in June 2015 there are 210 children subject to Child Protection plans.
- 3.5 The increase in the number of children subject to plans is seen as being due to better identification and responses to neglect and more robust escalation from Children in Need plans to Child Protection plans.

- 3.6 Two children have currently been subject to Child Protection Plans for more than 3 years. No children have currently been subject to Child Protection Plans for between 2 – 3 years. 176 of the current 210 children have been subject to a Child Protection Plan for between 0 - 11 months.
- 3.7 Public Law Outline (PLO) tracking meetings have been established to ensure that where cases are escalated from child protection plans to pre- court proceedings, these are tracked robustly. Under the new arrangement we are ensuring that in future no case remains subject to PLO (the pre-issuing of court proceedings stage) for more than 6 months. The outcomes required from the parents (care givers) under the pre-care proceedings agreement are either achieved within timescales or the matter is progressed to issuing an application to the court. Where required progress and improved outcomes have been made the matter is stepped down.

4. Disabled children

- 4.1 The Team for Disabled Children continues to provide support for children, young people and their families. Commissioned and In House services offer families a variety of short breaks via sitting and befriending, access to social and leisure activities, residential overnight breaks and overnight breaks in the child's home. These services ensure that as many disabled children and young people continue to live with their families for as long as possible.
- 4.2 The Sunshine Centre continues to offer support to children, young people and their families by providing individual, group activities and additional short breaks in school holidays. The Centre now provides targeted support to those children and young people that need it the most and are making progress in supporting more able children into mainstream activities. The Sunshine Centre continues to provide activities two evenings a week to Young Carers aged 4-8 years. These children provide some form of care to either a disabled sibling or parent with drug and alcohol issues, mental health problems or disabilities.
- 4.3 The Sunshine Centre's services for Early Years were inspected by Ofsted in August 2014. The Centre received the grading of Outstanding for all the 3 areas inspected.
- 4.4 The service for disabled children continues to lead on the commission of an organisation called "Young Carers of Barking and Dagenham" who co-ordinate our young carers group for children and young people who have a disabled sister or brother or a parent who suffers from a physical or mental illness or substance misuse problem.
- 4.5 In partnership with Children's Services, the Young Carers of Barking and Dagenham are working with Thurrock Schools to achieve the 'Gold Award' for all schools in supporting young carers and promoting their educational attainment.
- 4.6 In partnership with parents and young people the Children with Disability Service has worked to improve communication methods with children, young people and their families. Advocacy services available to children with disabilities have been reviewed to ensure that these are responsive to the diverse needs of young people. Spot purchasing arrangements are in place for where the communication needs of the child or young person are highly specialised and cannot be met within existing

provision.

- 4.7 In-line with parents' wishes greater use of social media and on-line forms of communication have been made to communicate with parents.
- 4.8 The department continues to work closely with the parent consultation group CaPa to review and develop the Thurrock 'Local Offer'. The 'Local Offer' is published as part of the SEND reforms under the Children and Families Act 2014.
- 4.9 The Local Offer provides:
- Information about education, health and care services
 - Information about leisure activities and support groups
 - Hold all the information in one place
 - Service provision that is co-produced and more responsive to local needs and aspirations

5. Family Group Conferencing

- 5.1 A family group conference is a process led by family members to plan and make decisions for a child who is in need or at risk. Children and young people subject to their age and understanding are normally involved in the conference and supported to express their wishes and feelings.
- 5.2 Thurrock continues to provide an in-house family group conference service. The service continues to support families in finding solutions in the provision of safe care for children within the family, or finding alternative care for children within the extended family.

6. Looked After Children and Young People and Care leavers

- 6.1. Our numbers of looked after children in Thurrock had risen over recent years. In August 2014 the number of looked after children was 307, which equates to 78 per 10,000. As of 31.3.15 this has reduced to 70 per 10,000. In June 2015 we currently have 285 looked after children.
- 6.2. All of the looked after children must have a registered placement and the placement budget remains an area of ongoing financial pressure for the service. Children are placed in foster care whenever possible and within the local area. Specialist residential placements are used when these are in the best interest of the young person.
- 6.3 The placement of choice for most children is a foster home registered directly with the council, thus ensuring effective co-working with the social work teams, continuity of school and family and friends contact, as well as better value. At the 31 March 2015 Thurrock had a total of 104 fostering households with a potential occupancy of 141 children.

7. Care Proceedings

- 7.1 The service has responded to the challenge of concluding care proceedings within 26 weeks, implementation by the Family Justice review, with a reduction in the average

duration to 27 weeks. Thurrock also saw a reduction in the overall number of proceedings issued in 2014/15.

- 7.2 Our key priorities remain to ensure only the 'right' children come into care and the 'right' time into the 'right' placement. A number of actions have been put in place and continue to address this: a Looked After Children's Surgery is chaired monthly by the Service Manager; the Threshold to Care Panel chaired by the Head of Service meets weekly, full integration of the MASH, Troubled Families and Early Offer of Help; Court and Permanency tracking panels.
- 7.3 The number of care proceedings issued in 2014/15 has shown a marked reduction on the level of proceedings issued during 2013/4 and 2012/13.

8. Adoption & Permanency

- 8.1 Permanency Plans are put in place at the second LAC review and supported by robust legal planning meetings, other than in cases when a permanent placement is required from the outset e.g. a relinquished baby.
- 8.2 We have been very successful in the outcomes of family finding and as of the 31.3.15 had only two children we were actively family-finding for re: adoption.
- 8.3 Timeliness has been an issue for us as reflected in our scorecard (3 yrs average of 710 days between BLA and placed for adoption) but, as also reflected in the scorecard, we have made measurable progress which we intend to continue to build on.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/adoption-scorecards>

Our in year average for 2014/15 is 507 days.

- 8.4 We have twelve approved adopters without links and consider that we have sufficient in-house capacity to meet our needs while contributing to wider national needs. We are exploring links with Essex County Council to utilise our adopters.
- 8.5 Timeliness has been an issue in relation to the completion of PARs within stage 1 & 2 and we are focused on achieving continuous improvement in this area.
- 8.6 In order to continually improve our recruitment of adopters we are exploring possible partnerships with the Coram Adoption Charity.

9. Care Leavers

- 9.1 We have seen an increase in care leavers who are recorded as being in employment, education and training from 35% (19, 20 & 21 birthday) to 42%.
- 9.2 This is below our aspirational target of 70% of care leavers being in employment, education or training, which when achieved on current data would make us one of the best performing authorities in the country. Our ultimate aim is for 95 - 100% of care leavers without complex disabilities or mental ill health to be in continuous

employment, education or training.

10. The Youth Offending service

10.1 YOS is a statutory agency responsible for the enforcement of all criminal court orders in respect of 10-18 year olds and for the delivery of interventions attached to those orders plus the planning and through care of those young people serving custodial sentences. The YOS is multi-disciplinary staffed and funded by partner agencies in Police, Local Authority, Education, Probation, Health and the Ministry of Justice via the Youth Justice Board to whom it reports. It has a governance board, comprising senior members of partner agencies with a dual reporting line to the Community Safety Partnership and the Children and Young People's Partnership Line management of staff is through the Council and YOS manages staff from the partner agencies.

10.2 In April 2015 the YOS received a Short Quality Screening from Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Probation. The report is highly complimentary of the work undertaken by the YOS, particularly in relation to safeguarding:-
<https://www.justiceinspectors.gov.uk/hmiprobation/wp-content/uploads/sites/5/2015/05/Thurrock-SQS-0415.pdf>

10.3 Thurrock is a low spending authority generally and has the smallest YOS in the country. The value for money indicators are therefore good for Thurrock's YOS. Thurrock YOS generally achieves a lower re-offending rate than the national, regional and family averages.

10.4 The last full inspection of Thurrock YOS was in January 2012 by both the Care Quality Commission and HMI Probation. Both outcomes were very positive with an overall minimal improvement required and the action plan as a result of the inspection was successfully implemented.

10.5 The YOS is continually improving and developing to respond to new challenges and opportunities. The YOS has expanded its provision to respond and support victims of crime; is leading on promoting social cohesion and combating radicalisation (as part of the PREVENT agenda) and is working in partnership to reduce serious youth violence.

11. Troubled families

11.1 The national Troubled Families programme focuses on families with worklessness, poor school attendance and anti-social behaviour as problem features. This is operated locally under the national descriptor and uses programme managers to work to support the lead professional for each family, as is identified in the early help model of delivery. This a 'payment by results' (PBR) programme.

11.2 Our validated PBR data shows that Thurrock have successfully 'turned around' over 100% of families within Phase 1 of the Troubled Families Programme.

11.3 We believe the 'Triad' (MASH, Troubled Families and Early Offer of Help) provides us with a solid base for entering Phase 2 of the Troubled Families Programme.

11.4 I am very proud of our Troubled Families Programme and unique Thurrock strengths, which include:

- Dedication to working with and helping improve the lives of the people living within Thurrock. A team that are prepared to work and deliver support services in flexible ways to ensure the best outcomes for the Troubled Families e.g. one Parental Outreach Worker is currently taking a number of previously withdrawn young people out doing "Positive Activities" (Football/Basketball/Tennis, etc.) in local parks. Some of these young people were so withdrawn they had seldom ventured out of the family home or to school in over a year. This has also allowed other services to engage them such as Thurrock Therapeutic Treatment Services.
- A strong belief in the ideals of the Troubled Families programme - use of the Team Around the Family model which emphasises and encourages participation; is action orientated and supported by a SMART outcomes framework.
- A full engagement plan for schools, with frequent visits to ensure the Troubled Families agenda is fully embedded within participating local schools.
- Development of co-located Thurrock Housing Department, TF Champions
- A strong Multi-Agency Partnership Board

12. The Local Safeguarding Children's Board

12.1 The board has continued to be proactive within the community, raising awareness on safeguarding.

12.2 Key achievements for the board during 2014/15 have included :

- Continuation of 'Walk online' Programme across schools and 'Stranger Danger' to raise awareness of online exploitation and protection amongst pupils, teachers, parents, professionals and carers.
- Development of the Risk Assessment Group and Multi-Agency Sexual Exploitation (MASE) Group to co-ordinate multi-agency identification, disruption and support for young people at risk of CSE; young people who go missing and young people who experience a multiplicity of risk factors.
- Development of a clear Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) pathway
- The LSCB Conference in November 2014 – Spotlight on Neglect

12.3 In December 2014 the Safeguarding board published the serious case review 'Julia'. A copy of the full report can be found on the LSCB website. As portfolio holder I deeply regret the historic failings highlighted within the review and I am closely monitoring progress with officers against the LSCB 'Julia' action plan.

- 12.4 The LSCB continue to monitor the 'Julia' action plan across all agencies and updating reports on the action plan have been and will continue to be presented to the Children's Overview and Scrutiny Committee.
- 12.5 A further Serious Case Review – 'Megan' has been commissioned by the board and is due for publication later this year. Initial learning from Megan has been applied across agencies and a detailed action plan will be produced.

13. Conclusion

- 13.1 Thurrock Children Social Care (CATO) has made significant progress within 2014/15 and remains focused on achieving continuous improvements in practice and outcomes for children.
- 13.2 Thurrock was last inspected by OFSTED in 2012 – it is expected in the next year that there will be an inspection from OFSTED under the new Framework. This incorporates the Safeguarding inspection, with looked after children, including care leavers, but this also includes the previous separate inspections of the fostering and adoption service. There is also a separate inspection of the LSCB that happens concurrently.
- 13.3 Learning from Serious Case review has been disseminated across the Thurrock LSCB partner agencies and continues to be embedded into practice.

14. Financial Information:

(A Motion agreed by the Council on 23 January 2013 requires the Cabinet Member to cover all finance and budget issues of their portfolio that they consider relevant, including (but not limited to): fiscal management; budget responsibility of the cabinet member; receipts and actual spend vs. predicted spend; the levels of virements and value for money.)

14.1 Details of the 2014/15 out turn and variances are detailed below.

Cost Centre	Sum of Original Budget 14-15	Sum of Revised Budget 14-15	Sum of 14-15 Out-turn	Sum of Variance budget v Out-turn
Youth Services	1,359,263	1,012,017	873,622	(138,395)
Social Care - Service Managers	944,650	1,052,719	1,063,896	11,177
Legal Proceedings	707,678	607,678	500,961	(106,717)
External Purchasing	9,023,135	9,023,135	9,069,069	45,934
Internal Fostering and Adoption Costs	5,555,224	5,677,698	5,624,593	(53,105)
Thurrock Access to Resources Panel	107,000	107,000	204,455	97,455
Initial Response Team	499,690	1,157,109	1,154,544	(2,565)
Family Support Services	1,203,022	1,203,022	1,774,502	571,480
Troubled Families	92,039	42,039	-62,763	(104,802)
Children with Disabilities	1,361,237	1,361,237	1,535,807	174,570
Safeguarding and Review	580,763	624,548	825,131	200,583
Through Care and UASC	1,075,931	1,088,433	1,385,365	296,932
Other CATO Services	2,137,447	2,070,711	2,272,946	202,235
Total Care and targeted outcomes	24,647,079	25,027,346	26,222,128	1,194,782

14.2 The largest budget pressures are:

- External placements / rises in numbers of LAC
- Agency staff
- Legal fees

14.3 External placements

This budget covers all external fostering placements with Independent fostering agencies, residential placements, semi-independent provision and also includes costs for secure placements. This budget has been previously added to by the council to meet the growing demand. The external placement budget has been reduced by £2m in 2015/16. We continue to hold weekly threshold panel to scrutinise every decision for a child to become accommodated as well as monthly LAC surgeries to ensure permanence plans are progressed rapidly and challenge if children and young people remain in residential care longer than they need. We continue to focus on increasing our pool of in-house foster carers; more robust commissioning and partnerships with other local authorities to achieve maximum value for money.

14.4 Agency staff

The service remains committed to establishing a diverse permanently staffed workforce to meet the needs of the community. The retention of experienced staff is a key priority for the service.

Spending on agency will remain a high risk area for the budget.

There is a current 30% vacancy rate across CATO and particularly within the Children and Family Assessment Team and Family Support Teams.

A range of recruitment initiatives are being undertaken including:

- Recruitment of Newly Qualified Social Workers and support packages via the ASYE Academy
- The Return to Social Work Programme
- Step Up to Social Work Programme.

14.5 Legal fees

This budget covers the cost of Court fees, legal representation for the Council and any specialist reports requested by the Court. Thurrock has seen a reduction in the number of weeks taken to conclude proceedings and this is now at an average of 27 weeks. The aim is to reduce this to 26 weeks or below in-line with the best interests of children and value for money. The threshold panel continues to scrutinise requests to issue proceedings to ensure that these are appropriate.

14.6 The service continues to face challenges in bringing the budget on line with increasing demand and expectations as well as making the required budget savings that have been identified.

