

LOOKED AFTER CHILDREN and CARE LEAVERS STRATEGY

August 2019

ABOUT THIS DOCUMENT

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Introduction

This strategy sets out the strategic intentions in respect of children and young people who are looked after by Thurrock Council and our care leavers. The strategy will describe the actions that will be taken to ensure we achieve the best possible outcomes for all the children and young people for whom we have a responsibility.

Elected members have a statutory duty of being corporate parents and are accountable to the public.

We wish to see our council look at those we have responsibilities for with the same care and attention as we would our own children. As such we need a service where Elected Members can play a real role and step up to the duty of being a corporate parents as well as holding to account our Directors.

In addition our services must include those it serves. We will seek the views and input of those with the most intimate insight on the service children looked after and care leavers.

We have made a Pledge to our looked after children (appendix one). The Pledge has been developed by our looked after children and young people, and those who have left care. The Pledge underpins the work with our looked after children.

Definitions

A Looked after Child is a child who is:

- Subject to a Care Order, Interim Care Order or Emergency Protection Order;
- or
- Accommodated under a voluntary agreement with those who have parental responsibility for him/her under section 20 The Children Act 1989, or where those with parental responsibility are unable to exercise it through ill-health or absence e.g. Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children.

The definition care leavers includes young people who have left care post 18 but also children who have not left care but have become eligible for support post the age of 18.

A care leaver is a young person who is;

- Eligible children within the meaning given by paragraph 19B of Schedule 2 to the Children Act 1989. Eligible children are young people aged 16 and 17 who have been looked after

for at least 13 weeks since the age of 14 and are still being looked after.

- Relevant children within the meaning given by section 23A(2) of the children Act are children who are not being looked after by a local authority, but was, before last ceasing to be looked after, an eligible child, and is aged 16 or 17.
- Former relevant persons within the meaning given by Section 23C(1) of the Children Act 1989 are young people aged between 18 – 25 who have been either eligible or relevant children or both.

Planning for preparation to leave care begins at 16yrs with the introduction of a pathway plan although the young person may remain a looked after child until their 18th birthday. Support to care leavers will continue until they are 21 years of age or to 25 years if they are in continued education or request a continuing service.

The National Context

The Care Planning, Placement and Case Review Regulations 2010 came into force on 1 April 2011 and to support their implementation a suite of statutory guidance was issued setting out how local authorities should carry out their responsibilities in relation to care planning, placement and review for all children who are looked after.

These revised regulations and guidance streamline processes to increase the emphasis on more effective care planning, with a focus on the child, and are designed to improve the quality and consistency of care planning, placement and case review for looked after children. They also aim to improve the care and support provided to care leavers. This statutory guidance outlines all of our responsibilities and underpins all of our work in promoting good outcomes for children who are looked after.

The current drivers that have informed practice and decision making within Children's services are:

- The Children and Families Bill 2013 particularly those sections pertaining to SEN, Early Years, Family Justice Reforms and the most significantly the requirement placed on local authorities to deliver a local offer in partnership

with children, young people and their families

- The Welfare Reform Act 2012, its impact on families who are already at risk of poverty

In Thurrock, on 31st March 2019 there were 293 children looked after. Numbers of children have reduced over the last 2 years bringing the rate to 68.4 per 10,000, lower than our statistical neighbour average. The number of children and young people who are unaccompanied asylum seekers has reduced from a peak of 44 last year to 24 in July 2019, representing 8% of our number of looked after children. At the end of July 2019 we have 218 Care leavers over 18 years.

Infrastructure

The Children Looked after Service consists of the following:

- A Court Team – The team consists of a team manager, senior practitioners and social workers. The remit of the Court Team is to work with those children who are subject to Care Proceedings.
- Three Children Looked After Teams – The teams consist of a Team Manager, senior practitioners and social workers. Their remit is to work with all children who are looked after including children who are unaccompanied asylum seekers.
- The After Care team – The team consists of a Team Manager; senior practitioner and personal advisors. All care leavers have an allocated a Personal Advisor by their 18th birthday. Where possible, we will allocate a Personal Advisor by the time the young person is 16 ½ years old. The Personal Advisors remit is to work with our care leavers alongside their social workers whilst under 18 to support them on their journey to young adulthood and beyond and to provide the continued support to young adults from the age of 18 years to 21 years of age or 25 years if in full time education or requesting a service.

The Children in Care Council

The Children in Care Council is facilitated and run by Open Door, who are commissioned by Thurrock Council. There is a Service Level Agreement in place

that is monitored by The Commissioning Team and Social Care through regular monitoring meetings and meetings with the children in care council.

Corporate Parenting Committee

The Corporate Parenting Committee meets regularly and consists of Members, chaired by the Lead Member for Children's Services, senior officers, Children in Care Council and Foster Carers Association.

Vision for Thurrock

Looked After Children and care leavers in Thurrock will both be cared for and cared about; we will strive to seek the same good outcomes that any good parent would want for their own children We want to ensure the right children are in our care, that they are in the right placements and that they leave our care at the right time. We want our children looked after to feel settled, secure and stable and aim to do this through robust permanency planning and placement stability.

Thurrock is committed to improving the outcomes and life chances of the children and young people who are in our care and providing the best support to care leavers. We want everything the best parents want for their children:

- That they are happy and healthy both physically and emotionally;
- That we keep them safe and protected from harm and exploitation;
- That we support them into adulthood and that we prepare them for independence;
- That children do well at school and can later access training or employment and enjoy good relationships with their peers.
- We are ambitious for our children, we want them to achieve their potential and participate in decisions which affect their lives;
- We want looked after children and care leavers to work with us and, along with parents and carers, shape the services we offer to them.

Achieving our Vision

Across all of the services we deliver, we seek to make sure that all decisions are centered on the views and needs of the child. We also aim to making sure that our time is focused on achieving the right outcomes for our children who are looked after or leaving care to achieve these aims.

Priority 1: Focus on the child

Ensure that all internal processes are focused on the child and maximise the impact of money spent to ensure that the best outcomes are achieved.

Actions:

1. Make sure that the voice of the child is at the center of everything that we do.
2. Ensure that all processes are efficient and minimise any potential wasting of resources.

Expected outcomes:

- Clear decision making processes and clarity around roles and responsibilities throughout the placement process.
- Better communication between teams and improved information sharing.
- All systems are fit for purpose and support effective management of information throughout process.

Priority 2 – Achieving permanence

Ensure that children know where they will live long term and that there is sufficient support available for children to achieve their long term care plans to prevent looked after children remaining in placements which may not best meet their needs.

Where possible we want all our children to be in placements which provide them with long term placement stability, and where appropriate to leave care. We describe this as achieving permanence for that child. Although it is sometimes necessary to move a child to provide them with a better placement our aim is to minimise the number of times each child changes placement as this can be very disruptive. To achieve permanence it is essential that all our teams work effectively together to support each placement. Permanence can be achieved in a number of ways, including adoption, special guardianship order, child arrangement order or

matched for long term fostering. Each of these options gives the chance for the child to achieve stability and achieve their potential.

Actions:

1. Regular reviews of all placements to understand where there is opportunity to support permanence or where a child might be better served by moving to a different placement.
2. All placements are regularly brought before the placement panel or permanence panel for review and all options for that child are considered so each child is able to move towards permanence without delay.
3. Ensure all children who are at the edge of care and those becoming looked after are part of a Family Group Conference/Family Network Meeting to ensure family solutions are achieved where possible.
4. Ensure necessary support for our carers and children in care to enable long term placements. This covers placement support such as therapeutic intervention to ensure the carer's home can meet the needs of the children placed with them.
5. Raise awareness of and assist carers to apply for Special Guardianship Orders [SGO] wherever suitable to ensure that this option is available to achieve permanence and security for children who are looked after.
6. Ensure life story work is an integrated part of work with children and young people so that they can make sense of their history.
7. Review all approved connected carers to see whether an SGO would be more appropriate to meet the child's long term needs.

Expected outcomes:

- Increase placement stability and so minimise the damaging effects of additional placement moves for already vulnerable children.
- Granting more SGO arrangements will:
 - Enable a young person to escape the intrusion and stigma that is sometimes attached to being looked after.
 - Young people have the security of knowing that they are legally part of their carer's family.
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Priority 3: Ensure a sufficient supply of adopters to reduce timescales from placement order to matching. Ensure children and their adoptive parents are supported to achieve the best outcomes for children

Continue work with the RAA arrangements and maximise the impact of recruitment and matching of children and adopters. Continue to develop our adoption support services to embed a service that is valued by adopters and ensures children and adopters have the support they need.

Through our permanence tracking ensure that delay is avoided in achieving adoption.

Actions:

1. Increase our early intervention and therapeutic offer to provide the additional support for adopters funded through the Adoption Support Fund (government funding to provide therapeutic support to adoptive families).

Expected outcomes:

- Reduced adoption placement breakdowns through ensuring placements are adequately supported, helping us avoid further disruption for vulnerable children.
- 2.3 To recruit sufficient adopters and maintain supply of placements as the number of available adopters continues to fall across the UK. Ensure delay in matching is avoided.

Actions:

1. Implement the Adoption Recruitment Strategy.
2. Raise awareness of support for those who have adopted through more effective use of social media.
3. Increase targeted support groups for families to allow early intervention where a placement might be at risk of breaking down.
4. Maintain quality and quantity of matches through a review of processes to ensure they are robust and achieve what is right for the child

Expected outcomes:

- Support adoption of children who have experienced trauma. Prevent placement breakdown and support permanence.
- Reduce the timescales from placement order to matching with adopters
- Reduce risks for a child resulting from being looked after: already separated from the birth family and foster carer, breakdown of a placement with their permanent carers can be extremely disruptive for a child.

Priority 4 – Increase Fostering Recruitment**Fostering recruitment and retention**

There are three main types of foster care available to our children who are Looked After. Where possible we keep children with people they already have some form of relationship with, this type of placement is [connected persons] Family and Friends Foster Care. When a child is first referred to us we will speak to any proposed carers to assess whether they will be able to provide the support that child needs. If we cannot find a suitable related carer, we will try to place them with one of our Thurrock 'in-house' carers. Only where we cannot identify a good match to an in-house placement to meet their needs will we then look to place them with an independent fostering agency (IFA).

We are looking over the next three years to significantly increase the number of children placed with Thurrock Council foster carers. Children placed locally have better access to other support services to support better outcomes for the child. We have set a target to increase in house placements by recruiting 20 new fostering households year on year. Making allowance for foster carers lost each year to retirement this should result in a steady growth of in house placements.

Actions:

1. Improve our offer to potential carers to encourage them to foster with Thurrock Council rather than an independent agency.
2. Increase support and training for our carers to help give them resilience.
3. Increasing local engagement and raising awareness of fostering with

Thurrock.

Expected outcomes:

- Increased proportion of in-house carers, to meet our ambition to place more children with Thurrock Council carers by 2021.
- Improved value for money to allow us to invest more of our budget in supporting our children who are Looked After.

Priority 5: Commissioning Sufficient Provision

Where children have needs which cannot be met through other types of placement we will seek to identify a residential home in which they can live. Where this type of placement is made we will review it regularly to ensure that it is still the best way to meet their needs. Residential care will offer permanence for some children but we will also seek to move children to a foster placement or other family placement where possible to achieve permanence.

We have a number of children often later entrants to care or UASC who cannot be matched with a foster placement or residential placement. The number of these young people has reduced this year to 22 [aged 16rs to 18yrs]. These young people are provided with semi-independent accommodation and support that is monitored by the authority. These are placements not regulated by Ofsted.

We have recommissioned semi-independent support for children aged 16 to 18 years and a system to monitor the additional support young people need at this stage to support engagement in education and wellbeing.

This year we are commencing recommissioning of accommodation for young adults 18years and above to ensure a range of accommodation with varying levels of support to meet need. We will also continue to monitor provision to ensure accommodation and support meets needs and preferences of care leavers.

Actions:

1. Responding to the increasing complexity of need presented by those needing residential placements.
2. To continue to increase the number of young people staying put in foster placements and take up of shared lives continued placement with carers.
3. To further develop the range and quality of 16+ provision
4. Improve placement planning and deliver a joined up approach to identification of specialist residential provision to reduce reliance on emergency placements.
5. Review availability of therapeutic support to allow us to provide more support to those children placed in-house.
6. Work closely together in partnership between services supporting looked after children with special educational needs.
7. Monitor provision and update commissioning plans for 16 to 18year olds
8. Re commission accommodation and support for young adults 18yrs plus.

Expected outcomes:

- Higher proportion of children within residential placements located nearer to their home.
- Earlier recognition of any issues within placements to avoid placement breakdown, improve outcomes for our children who are Looked After.
- Semi-independent accommodation is only used for 16 to 18year olds where necessary.
- Increase staying put and shared lives take up of staying with foster carers or staying in touch with residential placements
- Re commission a range of accommodation and support, to support care leavers 18years plus until they are ready to manage an independent tenancy. Ensure supply of affordable, independent secure tenancies to meet demand.

Priority 6: Help Children achieve at school and do well when they leave school

The Virtual school tracks education plans for all looked after children and provides support to schools and social workers to deliver Personal education plans that impact for children. Personal Advisors support Care leavers in accessing skills needed to help access employment. This has consistently helped reduce the

attainment gap for children looked after and care leavers.

UASC young people are supported to achieve language proficiency in English to help them access education and training and support their independence.

Actions:

9. Personal education plans are up to date and of a quality that creates impact for children.
10. Children with a reduced timetable are tracked to ensure the provision is meeting their needs and that they return to full time education as soon as possible.
11. Improve placement matching to meet education needs.
12. Increase access to work experience and a range of apprenticeships for care leavers and support to engage care leavers in achieving and completing apprenticeships.
13. Work closely together in partnership between services supporting looked after children with special educational needs.

Expected outcomes:

- Continue to reduce the attainment gap for looked after children
- Increase access to education training and employment for care leavers particularly young adults with additional needs.
- Earlier recognition of any issues within placements to improve outcomes for our children who are Looked After.

Priority 7: Improve Health outcomes and access to Healthy living advice for looked after children and Care Leavers

All looked after children and care leavers need to enjoy good physical and mental health. They need support from carers and social workers to overcome trauma. All of our children have routine immunisation; health and dental checks. There are often delays in initial health checks which can delay access to treatment. Older care leavers need to be confident about their own health history which can be difficult if they have limited contact with their family. They also need to be confident about

healthy living and able to access help when they need it.

Actions:

14. Improve timeliness of Initial Health checks by more efficiently capturing parental consent and working with health commissioners to ensure early appointments through weekly tracking.
15. Ensure Care leavers have access to healthy living advice and knowledge about accessing services when they need them.
16. Ensure all care leavers have a health passport. Currently 86%.
17. Ensure all children who have SDQ scores above 17 have timely access to mental health support.

Expected outcomes:

- All looked after children are supported in healthy lifestyles and have access to routine monitoring to ensure health needs are met without delay.
- All care leavers have a health passport to ensure they have the knowledge to inform health decisions in adult life.
- Children and young adults can access mental health support and treatment without delay.
- All Care Leavers have access to healthy living advice including sexual health and access to specialist services for a small number when needed, including support with mental health and substance misuse.

Priority 7: Children who go missing from placement or are vulnerable to exploitation are kept safe

Children do go missing from placement for days or hours particularly in the first year of being looked after. Triggers and factors which contribute to missing episodes are reviewed and actions built into care plans to manage and reduce risk.

We have commissioned open door to provide an independent service to complete return home interviews for young people. Performance in engaging young people in return interviews is not adequate. We are reviewing the service to identify how this can be more effective.

Action

1. Prepare proposals for delivery of an effective return home interview service and implement these arrangements so that more young people have a return interview.

Appendix 1

Our Pledge to Children Looked After

Our pledge makes 5 promises to children and young people in our care. These cover:

- health
- education
- reaching potential
- positive relationships
- leaving care

The pledge was written by young people and has been adopted throughout the council.

It applies to all children and young people, from birth to their 18th birthday, who are in our care. Some apply to those leaving care from the age of 18 up to 21 years, or 25 years in certain cases.

The pledge applies regardless of sex, race, sexual orientation, disability, age, ability or background. It applies wherever young people are placed, whether this is inside or outside Thurrock.

Our 5 promises

We promise to work to help you to develop healthily by:

- helping you to keep fit and healthy and giving you the resources and information on how best to equip yourself to continue to develop
- making sure you are given support to have regular health and dental checks.
- having social workers support you in all aspects of your development and giving you every opportunity to flourish

We promise to do everything we can to keep you safe and feel important to us while in care by:

- making staff available to speak to you when you need to contact them to discuss your problems, anxieties and achievements

- involving you in decisions and plans that are made that will affect your current and future life
- not changing your social worker unless absolutely necessary
- giving you advice and support to stay safe both within your home and community
- calling you back within 24 hours

We promise to help you reach your dreams while in care by:

- celebrating your achievements and recognising your goals and helping to push you further while in care
- supporting you to attend and achieve in education
- providing you with good educational opportunities that best meet your abilities
- providing you with a translating dictionary in your language when you first come into care if your first language is not English
- giving you the same opportunities available to young people who are not looked after

We promise to support your positive relationships and social activities by:

- giving priority when you ask to stay with friends and relatives away from your normal placement
- aiding you in having easy access to libraries, youth clubs and positive activities
- giving you access to an independent visitor/ mentors
- supporting you in being heard throughout the local authority across all departments

We promise to prepare you for adult life and leaving care by:

- supporting you financially up until the time you start work or are entitled to claim benefits
- providing you with a grant to help you settle into your own accommodation when you leave care
- supporting you in higher education at university
- helping you with support to seek employment and training

- helping you with transport for attending education and looked after children appointments
- Supporting you to apply for all documentation, you need such as a driving license passport and national insurance number.