

Thurrock - An ambitious and collaborative community which is proud of its heritage and excited by its diverse opportunities and future

Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee

The meeting will be held at **7.00 pm** on **16 November 2023**

Committee Room 2, Civic Offices, New Road, Grays, Essex, RM17 6SL.

Membership:

Councillors Elizabeth Rigby (Chair), Sara Muldowney (Vice-Chair), Qaisar Abbas, Vikki Hartstean, Srikanth Panjala and Maureen Pearce

Sarah Barlow, Church of England Representative
Kim James, Chief Operating Officer, HealthWatch Thurrock
Nicola Cranch, Parent Governor Representative

Substitutes:

Councillors Paul Arnold, Aaron Green, James Halden, Susan Little, Sue Shinnick and Cici Manwa

Agenda

Open to Public and Press

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1 Apologies for Absence	
2 Minutes	5 - 10
To approve as a correct record the minutes of Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee meeting held on 12 September 2023.	
3 Items of Urgent Business	
To receive additional items that the Chair is of the opinion should be considered as a matter of urgency, in accordance with Section 100B (4) (b) of the Local Government Act 1972. To agree any relevant briefing notes submitted to the Committee.	

4	Declaration of Interests	
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Queries regarding this Agenda or notification of apologies:

Please contact Rhiannon Whiteley, Senior Democratic Services Officer by sending an email to Direct.Democracy@thurrock.gov.uk

Agenda published on: **8 November 2023**

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DECLARING INTERESTS FLOWCHART – QUESTIONS TO ASK YOURSELF

Breaching those parts identified as a pecuniary interest is potentially a criminal offence

Helpful Reminders for Members

- *Is your register of interests up to date?*
- *In particular have you declared to the Monitoring Officer all disclosable pecuniary interests?*
- *Have you checked the register to ensure that they have been recorded correctly?*

When should you declare an interest *at a meeting*?

- **What matters are being discussed at the meeting?** (including Council, Cabinet, Committees, Subs, Joint Committees and Joint Subs); or
- If you are a Cabinet Member making decisions other than in Cabinet **what matter is before you for single member decision?**



Does the business to be transacted at the meeting

- relate to; or
- likely to affect

any of your registered interests and in particular any of your Disclosable Pecuniary Interests?

Disclosable Pecuniary Interests shall include your interests or those of:

- your spouse or civil partner's
- a person you are living with as husband/ wife
- a person you are living with as if you were civil partners

where you are aware that this other person has the interest.

A detailed description of a disclosable pecuniary interest is included in the Members Code of Conduct at Chapter 7 of the Constitution. **Please seek advice from the Monitoring Officer about disclosable pecuniary interests.**

What is a Non-Pecuniary interest? – this is an interest which is not pecuniary (as defined) but is nonetheless so significant that a member of the public with knowledge of the relevant facts, would reasonably regard to be so significant that it would materially impact upon your judgement of the public interest.

Pecuniary

If the interest is not already in the register you must (unless the interest has been agreed by the Monitoring Officer to be sensitive) disclose the existence and nature of the interest to the meeting

If the Interest is not entered in the register and is not the subject of a pending notification you must within 28 days notify the Monitoring Officer of the interest for inclusion in the register

Unless you have received dispensation upon previous application from the Monitoring Officer, you must:

- Not participate or participate further in any discussion of the matter at a meeting;
- Not participate in any vote or further vote taken at the meeting; and
- leave the room while the item is being considered/voted upon

If you are a Cabinet Member you may make arrangements for the matter to be dealt with by a third person but take no further steps

Non- pecuniary

Declare the nature and extent of your interest including enough detail to allow a member of the public to understand its nature



You may participate and vote in the usual way but you should seek advice on Predetermination and Bias from the Monitoring Officer.

Our Vision and Priorities for Thurrock

An ambitious and collaborative community which is proud of its heritage and excited by its diverse opportunities and future.

1. **People** – a borough where people of all ages are proud to work and play, live and stay
 - High quality, consistent and accessible public services which are right first time
 - Build on our partnerships with statutory, community, voluntary and faith groups to work together to improve health and wellbeing
 - Communities are empowered to make choices and be safer and stronger together

2. **Place** – a heritage-rich borough which is ambitious for its future
 - Roads, houses and public spaces that connect people and places
 - Clean environments that everyone has reason to take pride in
 - Fewer public buildings with better services

3. **Prosperity** – a borough which enables everyone to achieve their aspirations
 - Attractive opportunities for businesses and investors to enhance the local economy
 - Vocational and academic education, skills and job opportunities for all
 - Commercial, entrepreneurial and connected public services

Minutes of the Meeting of the Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 12 September 2023 at 7.00 pm

Present: Councillors Elizabeth Rigby (Chair), Sara Muldowney (Vice-Chair), Vikki Hartstean, Paul Arnold (Substitute) (substitute for Qaisar Abbas) and Aaron Green (Substitute) (substitute for Srikanth Panjala)

Apologies: Councillors Maureen Pearce and Qaisar Abbas
Sarah Barlow, Parent Governor Representative

In attendance: Priscilla Bruce-Annan, Local Safeguarding Children's Partnership Business Manager
Lee Henley, Head of Information Management
Clare Moore, Strategic Lead - YOS and Prevention
Elizabeth Shields, Service Manager, Social Care Service Managers
Janet Simon, Assistant Director, Children's Social Care and Early Help
Sarah Williams, Service Manager, Education Support Service
Angela Surrey, Youth Worker, Children's Service Youth Cabinet
Jenny Shade, Senior Democratic Services Officer

Before the start of the Meeting, all present were advised that the meeting was being recorded, with the audio recording to be made available on the Council's website.

12. Minutes

The minutes of the Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee meeting held on 15 June 2023 were approved as a true and correct record.

In regard to ACTIONS, it was agreed that an officer's name should be included to identify who the owner of each action would be.

The apologies given by the two co-opted members need to be included in the minutes.

13. Items of Urgent Business

The Chair agreed one urgent item of business.

Sarah Williams provided members a reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete (RAAC) update, following work with the Department of Education and survey works undertaken during the summer.

The following points were raised:

- Five confirmed schools had RAAC present in their building which were St Cleres, Arthur Bugler, East Tilbury, Thameside and Corringham.
- Awaiting the outcome of Aveley Primary School.
- Additional surveys will be undertaken on the 14 September, on four Catholic schools in Thurrock.
- Outcome was still awaited on the Grays Convent sports hall roof.
- Work will continue with the Department of Education and Schools.
- Members will be kept up to date by Briefing Notes via Councillor Carter.
- The Department of Education were sharing information on a regular basis.
- No RAAC incidents in regard to danger to those in school had been reported.
- Members agreed an item should be added to the work programme for the next meeting.

ACTION:

Action 1: Add RAAC to the work programme for the next meeting (Democratic Services)

At 7.14pm, Sarah Williams left the meeting.

14. Declaration of Interests

No interests were declared.

15. Youth Cabinet Update

The Youth Cabinet Representation presented an update to the Committee on the Essex Wildlife Trust, the Local Plan, the British Youth Council Events, their meeting with Dr Dave Smith and Work on the Horizon.

The Committee thanked the Youth Cabinet Representative for their presentation and the excellent work they had undertaken.

Following the presentation the following were raised:

- A request will be made for the feedback collected from the Local Plan workshops to be shared with members.
- Local Plan had been made accessible to the Youth Cabinet and the knowledge of their own areas had been helpful.
- Stated it would be nice to see more trees and shrubs in areas.
- Youth Cabinet representative had enjoyed their three years as chairperson developing their skills, making an impact on the community and making changes to the environment within Thurrock.
- Potentially contacting Open Door to undertake some joint work on recruitment for future members.
- Work on the Horizon would be discussed at the next meeting.

- Members requested the date for the next Youth Cabinet meeting when Dr Dave Smith would be attending so that members could also attend.

Councillor Muldowney referenced Councillor Carter's attendance at this meeting and stated that he, as portfolio holder, had his platform where overview and scrutiny was for backbencher members to have their say.

At 7.28pm the Youth Cabinet representatives left the meeting.

16. 2022/23 Annual Complaints and Representations Report - Children's Social Care

The annual report presented covered the period 1 April 2022 to 31 March 2023 and set out the number of representations received in the year including the number of complaints, key issues arising from complaints and learning from complaints.

The following points were raised:

- The Chair thanked officers for the report and noted it was good that the number of complaints had gone down.
- It was noted that complaints also helped improve services going forward.
- The co-opted member raised her concern on the lack of information on some of the complaints. Reassurance was given by officers that these complaints were being looked into and the right management structure was in place. There was more information behind each complaint, however each complaint provides a summary.
- Agreed that each complaint had been looked into and appropriate action had been taken.
- Discussed the Disabled Children complaints and whether this was a theme/issue arising, to which assurance was given that the service had improved.
- It was noted that staff vacancies were not a contributable factor to the complaints.

RESOLVED

The Children's Overview and Scrutiny Committee considered and noted the report.

At 7.51pm, Lee Henley left the meeting.

17. Fostering Recruitment - Verbal Update

Officers provided members with a very informative verbal update on the current position of foster carer recruitment to which Members thanked officers and made the following comments:

- There was not an average retention period for how long someone was a foster carer.

- A Thurrock foster carer had recently celebrated being a foster carer for 40 years.
- Members agreed the foster carer recruitment events were most enjoyable.
- Members also acknowledged the dedication of Thurrock foster carers.
- There had been an increase in enquiries, each enquiry was responded to appropriately and support offered.
- The website was very informative.
- The age group demographic of foster carers was shifting to young families.
- Three households had been taken up this year.
- Timescale from initial enquiry to approval the target was four months.

18. Family Hubs and the Start for Life Programme Report

The report presented provided members with information on the Family Hubs and Start for Life Programme.

The following points were raised:

- Members acknowledged the good response so far.
- Members noted their interest in how the obesity and oral hygiene services would develop.
- Member questioned whether the Delivery Plan was accessible for viewing. Members were advised this was a very big non-public document, but officers agreed to seek advice whether it could be shared.
- Work was already on going between the family hubs and community hubs as there were some overlapping of services.
- Members requested dates and times of coffee mornings so that they could participate.
- Members were informed that specific training sessions such as Weight Management and Oral Health were in place and would be delivered.
- Members were referred to the specific program for children ages 0-2 called "Henry".
- A training offer for staff was in place offering 18 places this would enable those members of staff to assist in the delivery of those training sessions.
- Members were assured the services being funded did not exceed the council's current budgets.

ACTIONS:

ACTION 2: Delivery Plan – request a copy be sent to members (Clare Moore)

ACTION 3: Dates and times for coffee mornings (Clare Moore)

Councillor Muldowney commented that reports presented to overview and scrutiny committees should not be "to note". Those to note reports should be presented as Briefing Notes outside of this meeting.

RESOLVED

Members received the report for information and noted the progress of the requirements and responsibilities of local authority areas engaged in the Family Hubs and Start for Life programme.

19. Items Raised by Thurrock Local Safeguarding Children Partnership

This report presented to Members provided an update on the Thematic Review into Serious Youth Violence and Gang Related Crime Review action plan.

The following points were raised:

- The action plan was devised by a multi-agency task and finish group which included representatives from the Community Safety Partnership.
- As part of the plan, there were workers who sat on the youth offending team that worked specifically with targeted groups of children who were identified as at risk or vulnerable. Part of their role was to undertake school-based work with groups of children within schools.
- Work was being undertaken with adult teachers in school to incorporate the learning knowledge and understanding into some of the work that was carried out for children in schools.
- Referred to the Thematic Review Appendix it was good to see progress was being made.
- Going forward once foundations had been made and more children and young people were talking about their experiences and identifying areas or hotspots, to look at how incidents are reported. To understand where the intelligence was so that services and interventions be put in place to mitigate some of those incidents.
- Discussion on the programme and funding available for the training, support and advice being undertaken by Olive Academy.

RESOLVED

The Committee noted the progress made on Thematic Review Action Plan to date.

20. Work Programme

Members discussed the work programme.

Members agreed that an update item on RAAC be added to the work programme for the remainder of the municipal year.

The Chair requested a meeting with Officers and Democratic Services outside of the meeting to discuss the work programme.

ACTION:

ACTION 4: Democratic Services to organise (Democratic Services).

The full recording of the meeting can be viewed from the following link:
[Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee - Tuesday 12 September 2023, 7:00pm - Thurrock Council committee meeting webcasts \(public-i.tv\)](#)

The meeting finished at 8.49 pm

Approved as a true and correct record

CHAIR

DATE

**Any queries regarding these Minutes, please contact
Democratic Services at Direct.Democracy@thurrock.gov.uk**

Children's Services
Overview and Scrutiny Committee Meeting
Thursday 16 November 2023
Youth Cabinet Update



Purpose of the report: The Youth Cabinet would like to provide members with an update of their work.

1.1 **Trading Standards**

A Youth Cabinet member recently linked up with the Trading Standards Team, as an underage volunteer, to support with an underage sales operation in Thurrock. The aim of this work is to undertake test purchases in shops where the underage volunteer enters a shop and attempts to buy an age-restricted product such as alcohol, vapes, etc. By carrying out this work, Trading Standards officers can assess whether the retailer is checking customers are old enough to buy these goods. During the operation two out of four premises sold to the underage volunteer.

The Youth Cabinet member found the opportunity to be a worthy experience helping to make a difference and prevent underage sales.

1.2 **Youth Voice Conference**

On Saturday 21 October 2023 Thurrock's Member of Youth Parliament (MYP), along with one worker, attended the Youth Voice Conference at Writtle University College in Chelmsford. The day was planned and delivered by young people with the support of Essex Boys and Girls Clubs, Essex Council for Voluntary Youth Services, Essex Police and Essex Violence and Vulnerability Unit. The conference saw young people and professionals attend with a day full of guest speakers, workshops, and a market stall area with lots of information and services for young people to access.

Thurrock's MYP also delivered a Stay Spike Safe workshop to young people as part of his Spiking campaign. During the workshop young people explored what spiking is, listened to victim's stories, discussed common misconceptions, and looked at the risks. They also shared gadgets to prevent being spiked, such as bottle stoppers and CYD drink testers. *See Appendix A image.*

The conference was a great success. It was an opportunity to share knowledge and skills, network with other areas and build new working relationships with other youth councils in Essex whilst celebrating the importance of youth voice.

1.3 **SEND Youth Voice**

Thurrock Youth Cabinet are currently in the process of developing a new strand to our work to encompass SEND Youth Voice. We have felt for some time that this is an area of growth to ensure that the voices of SEND young people are captured in our work.

We are planning a Youth Voice drop-in event for SEND young people on Wednesday 29 November 2023 from 6:30pm – 8pm in Grays, to start capturing views and opinions. This will be hosted by the Youth Cabinet with the support staff. We would be grateful if you could support us to promote this event. *See Appendix B image.*

1.4 **Knife Crime Awareness Campaign**

A Thurrock Youth Cabinet member is currently in the process of starting a Knife Crime Awareness Campaign in the borough. This will not only raise awareness of the dangers of carrying a knife but also inform young people of the location of the knife bin in Grays. Currently, many young people seem to be unaware of its location.

As mentioned, the campaign is in the beginning stages. So far, the Youth Cabinet member has gained the backing of Essex Police and the Ben Kinsella Trust who will provide support and guidance where needed to the Youth Cabinet member.

The Ben Kinsella Trust has also invited all Youth Cabinet members to their Knife Crime Exhibition in Barking with the opportunity to also take part in a free Knife Crime workshop. We plan to visit in the early new year, which will help to inform the growth and direction of the campaign. We look forward to sharing more details about this campaign over the coming months.

1.5 **Essex Wildlife Trust**

On Saturday 16 September 2023, nine members of the Youth Cabinet took part in the [Nextdoor Nature project](#) as part of an ongoing program of work. In partnership with Essex Wildlife Trust and Riverside Community Big Local, they hosted a small community event at Falcon Woods, following the success of the litter pick in June.

The event was an opportunity for residents to drop in, share their views and learn more about the work that the groups have been doing.

Youth Cabinet members created and designed the content of the event. There was an Ideas Zone to capture residents' views on how the site could evolve. As well as a Voting Area to talk about potential changes to the area. There was also an Activity Space for younger members of the community make bug hotels for the site or their own garden.

Key outcomes were:

- Nine members of the Youth Cabinet attended and ran the event with support from Essex Wildlife Trust & Riverside Community Big Local Group.
- Twenty-two members of the community/public engaged with the event and took part in the activities and had a say.
- Eleven members of the public signed up to support with on-going maintenance on the site.

Overall, the event was a success and Youth Cabinet members are looking forward to linking with residents and supporting ongoing activities, consultations, and changes to the site to help nature on our doorsteps. *See Appendix C image.*

1.6 **Work on the horizon**

- On Friday 17 November 2023 Thurrock's Member of Youth Parliament (MYP) will be attending the House of Commons, along with all other MYP's from across the UK. Once there, they will sit on the green benches and debate on the five chapters of the Food for Learning Bill.
- On Saturday 9 December all Youth Cabinet members will have the opportunity to attend the British Youth Council Youth Conference which will be a day of guest speakers, workshops, and networking.
- Next year the Make Your Mark campaign will run again. The campaign will give all young people aged 11-18 in the UK a chance to vote on the biggest issues they feel young people face today. We will ask for your support in promoting this campaign early next year. Alongside Make your Mark, elections for Thurrock's new Member of Youth Parliament (MYP) will also take place. Thurrock has eight MYP candidates that will be running in 2024.
- Thurrock Youth Cabinet's recruitment drive is currently in progress. We are looking for student representation from the following schools:
 - Ormiston Park Academy
 - Harris Academy Riverside
 - St Clere's School
 - The Gateway Academy
 - Thames Park Secondary School

If you have connections with these schools, please ask them to get in touch at youthcabinet@thurrock.gov.uk to book a meeting. The Youth Cabinet lead worker is happy to attend the school to discuss the Youth Cabinet with students.

Appendix

Appendix A



Thurrock's MYP delivering Stay Spike Safe Workshop at the Youth Voice Conference



Appendix B

Youth Voice drop-in Event on Wednesday 29 November 2023



  **THURROCK COUNCIL**  **INSPIRE**
YOUR FUTURE

YOUTH VOICE DROP-IN EVENT HOSTED BY THURROCK YOUTH CABINET

Are you 16-25 years old?

Would you like to have a say on life, learning and living in Thurrock?

If so, Thurrock Youth Cabinet would like to hear from you!

Do you identify as neurodiverse, additional needs, special needs, SEND
(Special Educational Needs and Disabilities) ?

Join a new Youth Voice group and turn your ideas into action.

To find out more come along to our drop-in event.

Wednesday 29th November 2023
drop in from 6.30pm-8pm
Inspire Youth Hub, 24-28 Orsett Road, Grays, RM17 5EB
(free parking at back of building)

- Meet Youth Cabinet members and staff
- Have your say on a debate topic
- Get a taster for the things we talk about and take action on
- Ask any questions
- Find out when the new group starts
- Parents/carers welcome to attend

 **Register your interest at**
youthvoice@thurrock.gov.uk

Appendix C

The Falcon Woods Community Event on Saturday 16 September 2023



16 November 2023	ITEM: 6
Children’s Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee	
Children’s Social Care Performance – Quarter 1 2023-24	
Wards and communities affected: All	Key Decision: Non-key
Report of: Marc Rhodes, Business Intelligence & Data Analytics Manager	
Accountable Assistant Director: Janet Simon, Assistant Director Children’s Social Care and Early Help	
Accountable Director: Sheila Murphy, Corporate Director of Children’s Services	
This report is Public	

Executive Summary

This report shows that:

- The Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH) continues to support a shared understanding and management of threshold decisions. Children and families receive the right help at the right time and the response to family difficulties is proportionate to risk.
- All data continues to be monitored on a monthly basis to ensure that decision-making within the Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH) remains robust and ensures families are supported by the most appropriate service.
- Between April and June 2023, the number of The Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH) contacts received was 1,561 compared to 1,515 in the same period in 2022, which demonstrates a consistent number of contacts received.
- Between April and June 2023, the number of referrals was 592 compared to 629 between the same period in 2022. This demonstrates a consistent number of referrals.
- Between April and June 2023 Early Help (Prevention and Support Service) received 346 referrals which included 55 children stepped down from Children’s Social Care.
- 98% of children and families’ assessments were completed in timescale. There has been consistent performance of 94% or above since August 2022, which demonstrates excellent performance in this area.
- As at end of June 2023, the number of children subject to a Child Protection Plan was 105 compared to 108 at the end of June 2022. Children subject to a Child Protection plan are carefully reviewed and numbers fluctuate each quarter, therefore this increase does not present any concern.

- The number of children looked after by Thurrock Council at the end of Quarter 1 2023 went up to 308 as the result of an increased number of children entering care in June including 9 UASC (Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children).
- For Care Leavers aged between 19-21 there has been improved performance across all three areas of suitable accommodation, being 'in touch' and being in education, employment, or training.

1. Recommendation(s)

- 1.1 **That members review the areas of good practice and performance in Children's Social Care and work undertaken to date to manage demand for statutory social care services.**
- 1.2 **Members provide appropriate challenges around areas for development or any areas of concern.**

2. Introduction and Background

This report provides a summary of Children's Social Care performance for Quarter 1, 2023-2024 (April to June 2023). It highlights key demand indicators such as number of contacts, benchmarking data, and key performance indicators.

Thurrock produces a number of data sets and performance reports to meet its internal and external reporting requirements. The data in this report is from the 'At a Glance' monthly performance report, regional benchmarking data and national data sets.

This data has been presented and discussed with the Children & Families Performance Group.

The latest benchmarking data published is 2021-22 and is used within this report. The statutory returns that inform these have now been successfully submitted for the 2022-23 reporting period and reports will reference the updated benchmarking once published (expected Autumn 2023).

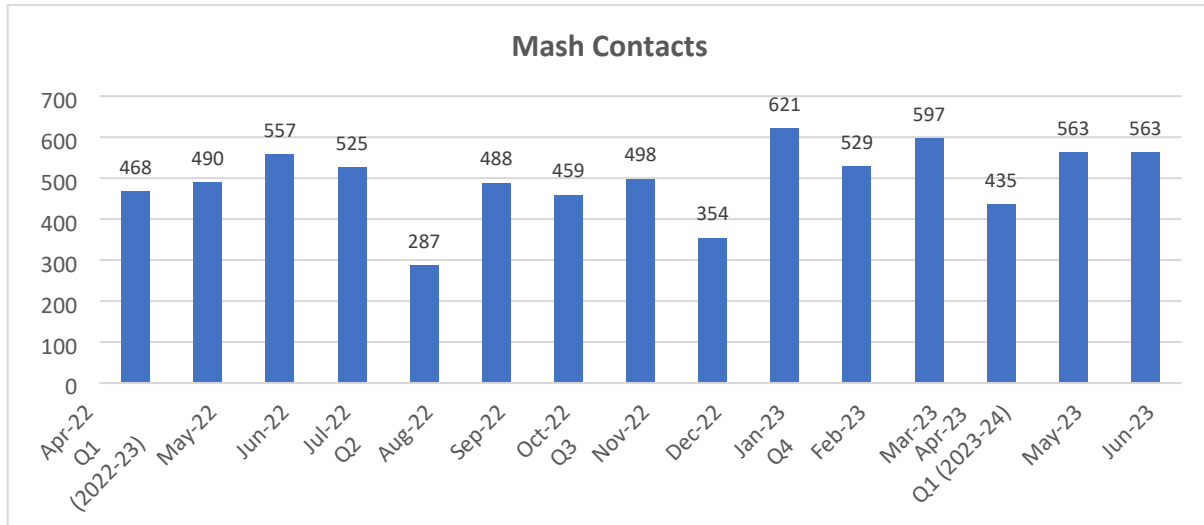
3. Thurrock Performance Data

3.1 MASH Contacts

The graph below shows the number of contacts received over the last year. The number of contacts fluctuate month to month, with Quarter 4 of 2022-2023 seeing the highest number of referrals over the year (1747). This number reduced in Quarter 1 2023-2024 (1561) which was similar to the number of contacts received in Quarter 1 2022-2023 (1515). This indicates that the rise in Q4 was a short-term variance. This data will continue to be monitored and reviewed to identify any patterns or themes, and any further action that may be required.

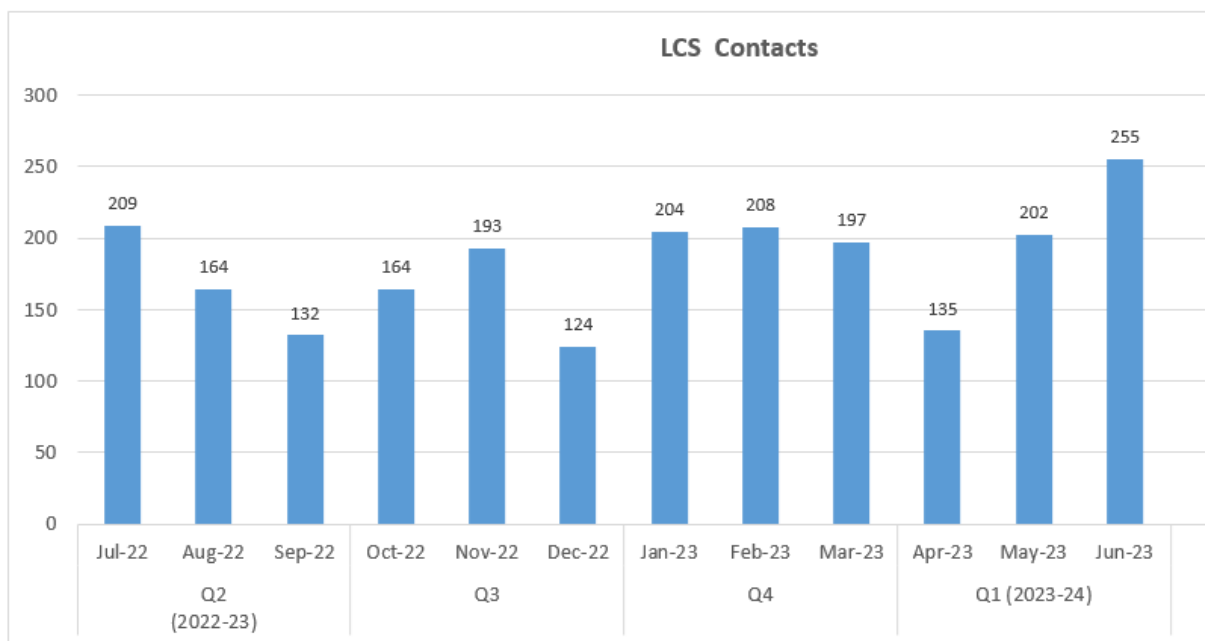
Of the total contacts of 1561 received in the period, 41% (645) resulted in no further action (NFA) and the remaining required some level of intervention. The number of contacts with an outcome of NFA remains consistent month to month. Where the outcome of a contact is NFA, advice is provided and agencies can contact the MASH to consult and discuss the best way

forward, including how to access to a range of universal services that can provide appropriate support and intervention to children and families.



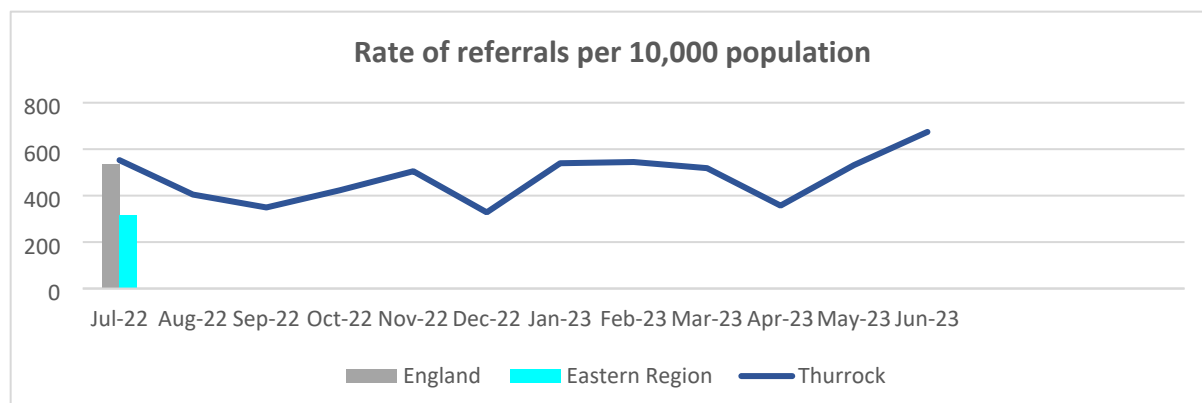
3.2 Referrals

Between April and June 2023, the number of referrals was 592 compared to 629 in the same period in 2022. This shows a 5.8% drop in the number of referrals when comparing the two quarters. This is a slight reduction; however, the number of referrals does fluctuate, and this does not raise a concern. Below shows the number of referrals since Quarter 2 2022-23.



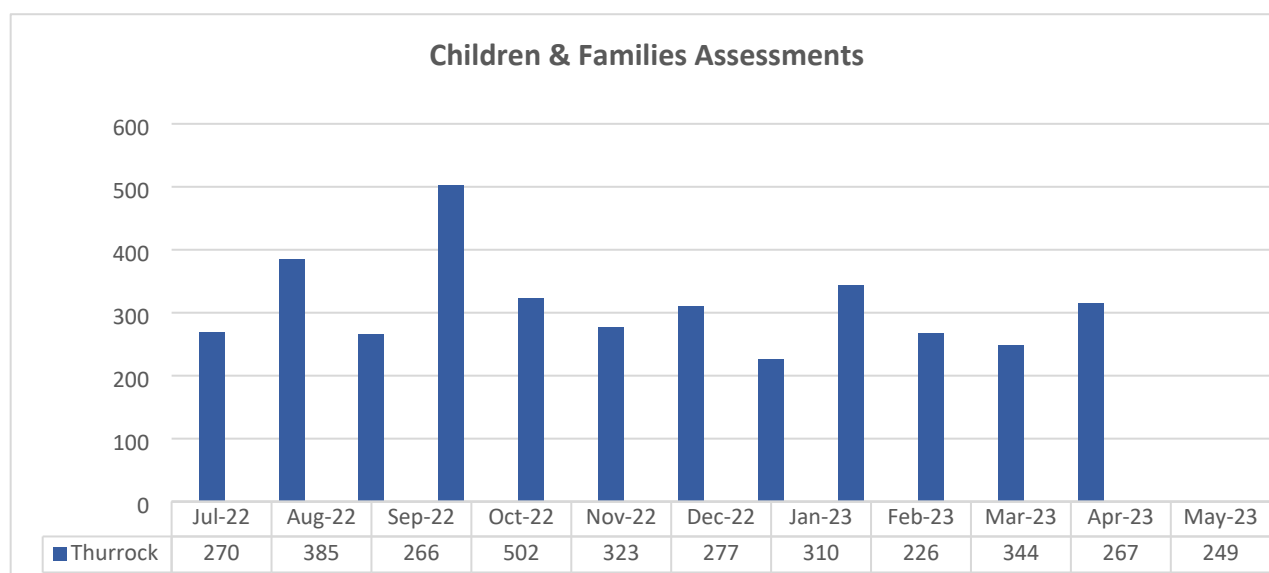
3.3 Rate of referrals

As at the end of June 2023, the rate of referrals per 10,000 was 674. Based on the latest published benchmarking 2021-22 data, Thurrock is above the England rate of 538 and Eastern Region rate of 317. Once benchmarking for 2022 – 2023 is available, we will have a better understanding of how Thurrock compares nationally and within the Eastern Region.



3.4 Children & Families Assessments

Between April and June 2023, 831 assessments were completed compared to 921 in the same quarter in the previous year. This is a 9.7% drop in the number of assessments completed during Quarter 1 2023-24 to the same quarter the previous year. The graph below shows the number of assessments completed over the last 12 months. The number of assessments completed each month fluctuates, within a range of 226 (February 2023) – 385 (August 2022), aside from October 2022 where 502 assessments were completed. This was significantly higher than any other month over the year and appears to be a short-term variance as the number reduced to 323 in November 2023. The variance in the number of assessments completed is to be expected and does not raise a concern.



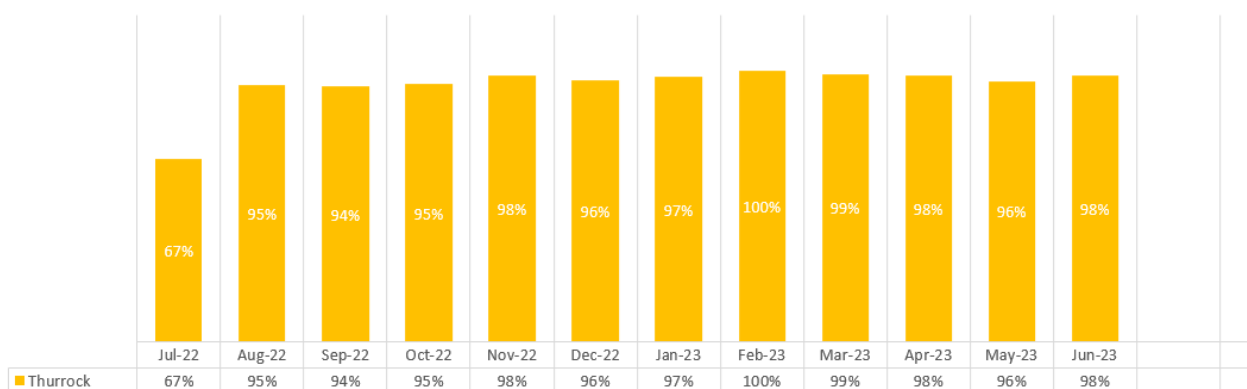
3.5 Children & Families Assessments completed in timescale

The number of assessments completed in timescale continues to show good performance at 98% as at end of June 2023.

The benchmarking data in March 2021-22 shows that at the end of Quarter 1 2023-24 Thurrock was above Statistical Neighbour average of 88.65%, the England average of 84.5% and Eastern Region average of 87.6%. This is reflective of the work being

completed within the teams to ensure assessments are completed within timescale and to a good standard.

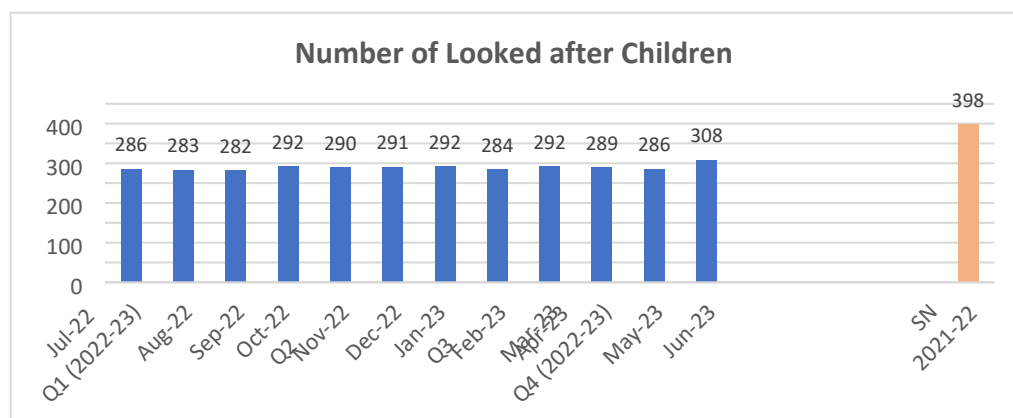
CHILDREN & FAMILIES ASSESSMENTS COMPLETED WITHIN 45 WORKING DAYS



4. Children Looked After (CLA)

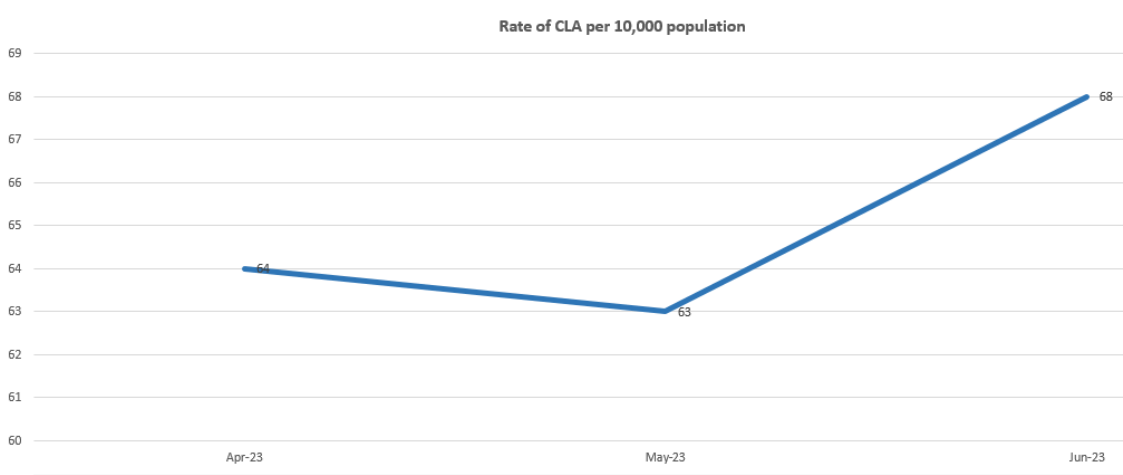
The graph below shows the number of children who were Looked After at the end of each month. There is monitoring of children who may need to become Looked After and there are regular reviews of children entering care. Where possible, children are returned to their family where safe and appropriate. The end of Quarter 1, as at end June 2023, saw an increase up to 308 Children in Care. During June 30 children entered care, of these 9 were UASC and the remainder entered care as the result of safeguarding action by Thurrock Council and its partners.

Of the 308 children in Thurrock's care at the end of June 2023 47 children were UASC. This a greater proportion of the total number of looked after children than in previous years. This reflects an increased threshold for UASC and a reduction in the number of resident children in care.



4.1 The rate of CLA per 10,000 population

The graph below shows the rate of Children Looked After per 10,000 population of under 18-year-olds in Thurrock. At the end of June 2023 there were 308 Children Looked After in Thurrock with the rate of 68 per 10,000. Based on the benchmarking data 2021, Thurrock is in line with Statistical Neighbour average of 68 and below England average of 70.



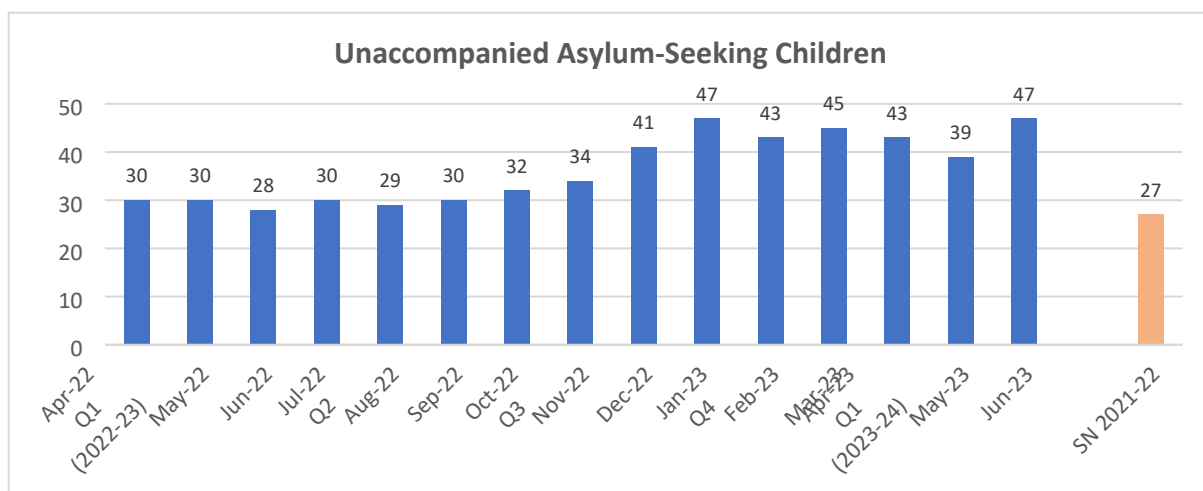
4.2 Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children (UASC)

UASC are a subset of the Children Looked After number above. Local Authorities through agreement have a simple formula to ensure a fair distribution of the responsibility for looking after unaccompanied children. Each local authority has a 0.1% ceiling for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children as a proportion of its total number of children.

Thurrock's allocated number is 44 children Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children. There is ongoing work with the Home Office to ensure timely and smooth transition for this cohort if Thurrock's allocation of UASC is exceeded.

When a local authority reaches its allocated number there are arrangements in place for new arrivals to be transferred via the National Transfer Scheme (NTS). The NTS is operated by Central Government with the Home Office responsible for administration of the scheme.

The below graph shows the number of UASC that were looked after at the end of each month since April 2022. As at the end of June 23 we surpassed our threshold of 44 with 47 UASC Children.

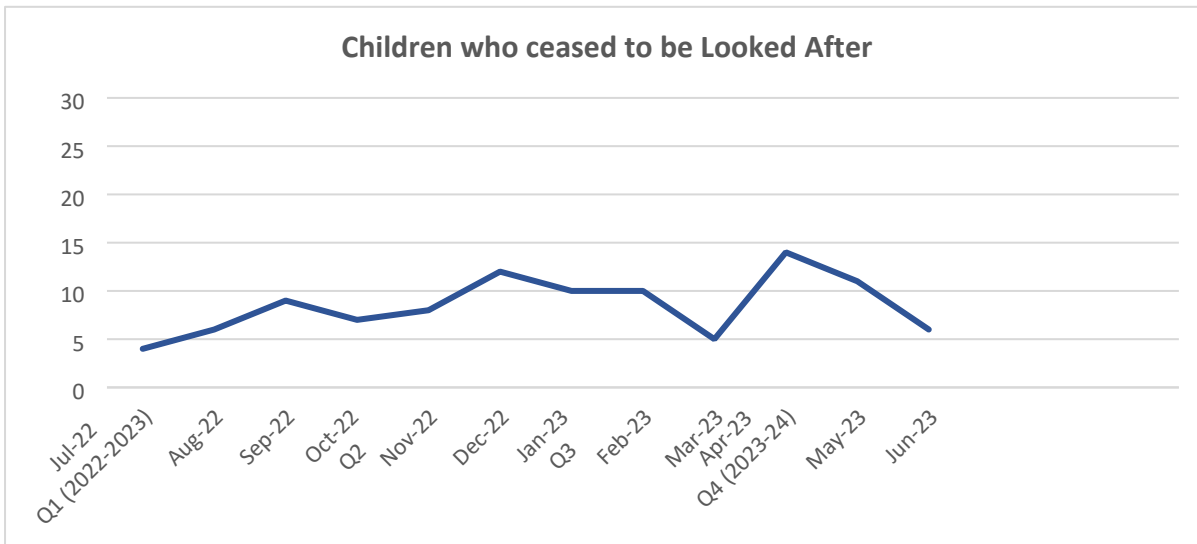


4.3 Children who ceased to be looked after

It is normal for the number of children leaving care to fluctuate. Between April and June 2023, 31 children ceased to be looked after. This fluctuates based on the following factors:

- The number of children turning 18 in the month
- The number of court cases concluding in leaving care to those with PR (parents/SGO/Adoption/Child Arrangement order)

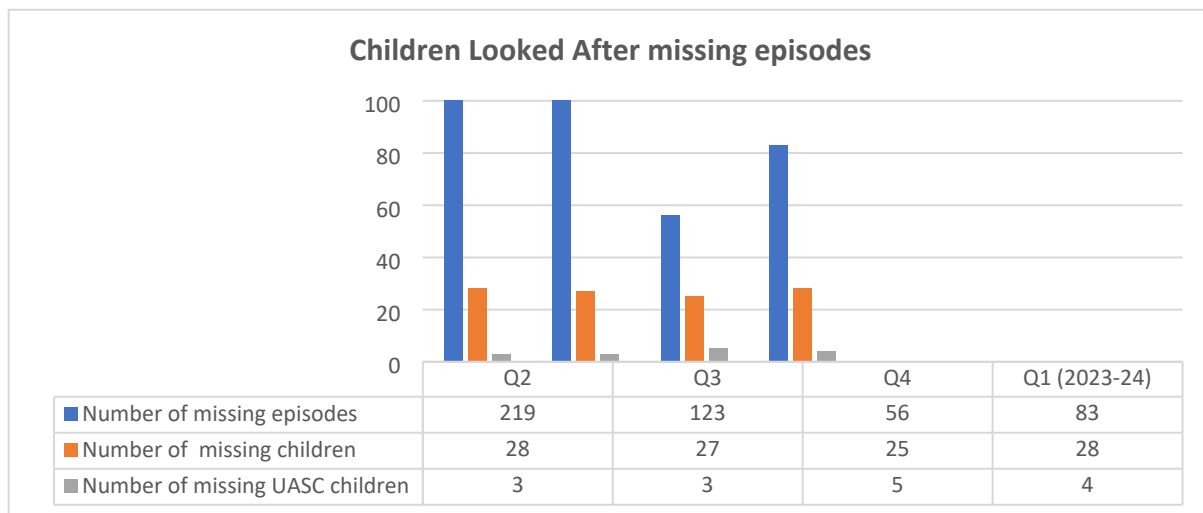
- S.20 arrangements ending.



4.4 CLA who go missing

During Quarter 1, April to June 2023 there were a total of 83 missing episodes which represented 28 individual children, 4 of which were UASC. The below chart shows the trend for missing episodes since Q2 2022-23.

Many of the children are missing for a few hours and have stayed out later than their agreed return time. Over 90% of the children and young people were staying with friends, or family. The others have refused to say where they have been, or who with. Over 80% of the children that went missing were aged 16 and 17 years old, with the majority being male young people. The youngest children were aged 13 years and there were 2 children that went missing of that age. With 1 aged 14 and 2 aged 15 years. 12 children went missing for more than 24 hours, with all but one recorded as missing over 72 hours.



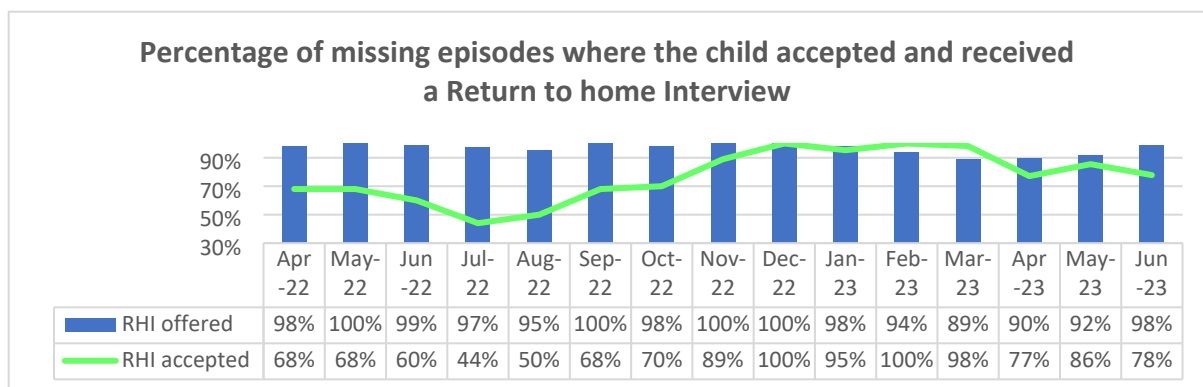
4.5 CLA return to home interview (RHI)

Since April 2020, Inspire Youth Hub were commissioned to undertake independent Return Home Interviews (RHI). All children are offered a RHI within 72 hours following each missing event, with the aim of understanding the young person's circumstances and the reasons why they go missing. Key Workers from placements, Foster Carers and Social Workers will also discuss missing incidents with children. There is a network of support provided to children to try

to engage with them and understand the reasons for their missing episodes. The Participation Team have been able to engage and seek feedback from young people and this has been invaluable.

As at the end of June 2023, the percentage of children offered a return to home interview was 98% of which 78% accepted and received an interview compared to 99% and 60% respectively in June 2022. The offer of an RHI is not always accepted by young people for several reasons, including not wanting to reveal their whereabouts when missing and not believing that they were missing but 'out.' All young people who have a missing episode are reviewed at the weekly Missing Children Panel. The panel monitors and makes multi agency plans to support the safety of young people during their absences and discusses whether the young people are at risk from Criminal or sexual exploitation.

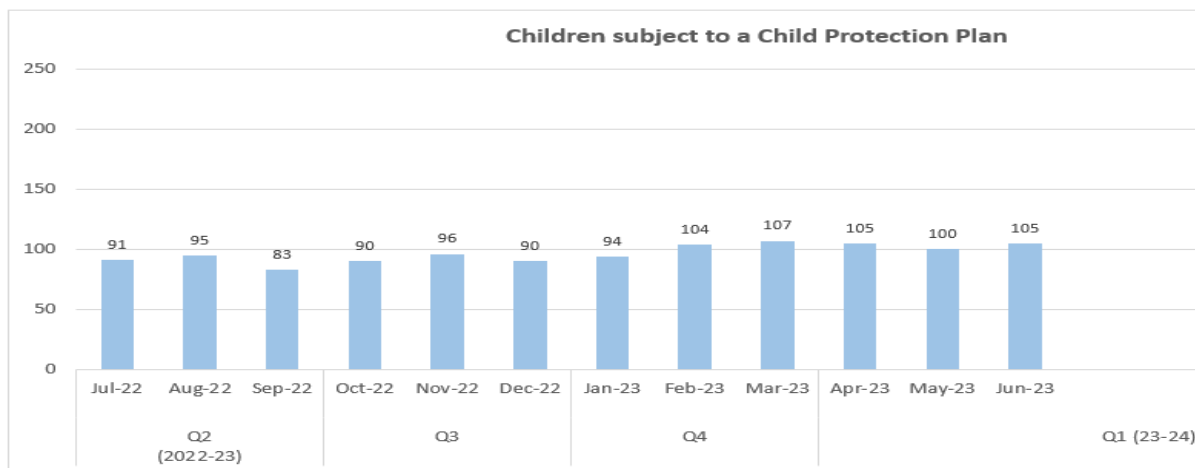
The graph below shows the percentage of return to home interviews taken up by young people since April 2022 and shows, in the main, an improved picture of children accepting and receiving an RHI. There continues to be a small number of CLA who have consistently refused return home interviews. We continue to review how they engage this cohort of young people and alternatives such as whether there is anyone within the network better placed to have these conversations when they return from missing episodes, including their social worker and how this information is captured. This has increased the amount of Return Home Interviews completed and has ensured that young people are given the opportunities to share whether there are any safeguarding issues in relation to exploitation that needs to be addressed.



5. Children Subject to a Child Protection Plan (CPP)

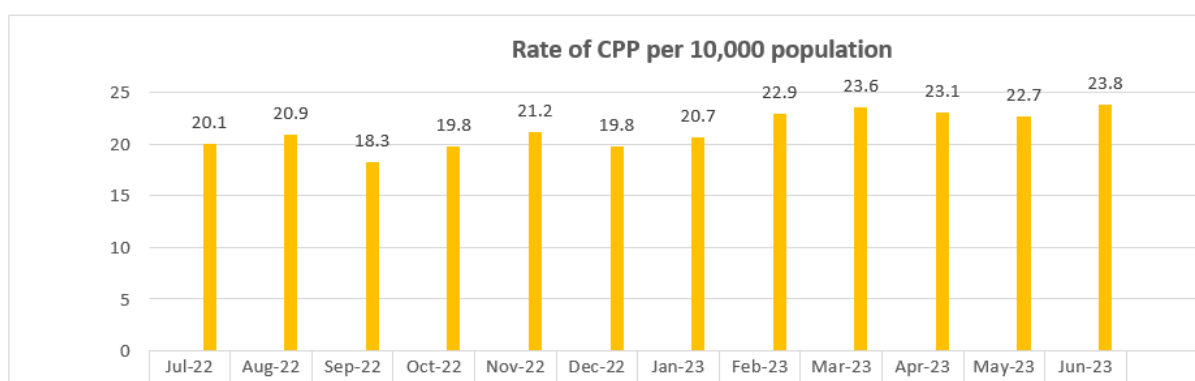
5.1 Number of Children subject to Child Protection Plan

At the end of June 2023, the number of children subject to a Child Protection Plan was 105 compared to 108 at the end of June 2022. These numbers do fluctuate depending on family size and numbers of referrals.



5.2 The rate of CPP per 10,000 population

At the end of June 2023, the rate of children subject to a Child Protection Plan was 23.8 per 10,000 population which is the same as end of June 2022. Based on the benchmarking data 2021-22, Thurrock is below the Statistical Neighbour rate of 38.0 and England rate of 42.0. Despite being lower than the Statistical Neighbours, average figures for the Eastern region were 26.3 per 10,000 population. This is an indicator where a lower rate is usually reflective of better practice and there is also considerable variation across local authorities. For example, for Qu 4 in the eastern region Cambridge is 20.6 Essex 21.7 and Hertfordshire 16.3 whereas Norfolk is 40.6 The number of children subject to a repeat CP (Child Protection) plan is 14 % (June 2023) which compares favourably to the national and statistical neighbours of 20%. This indicates that interventions are effective in bringing about positive change in most cases

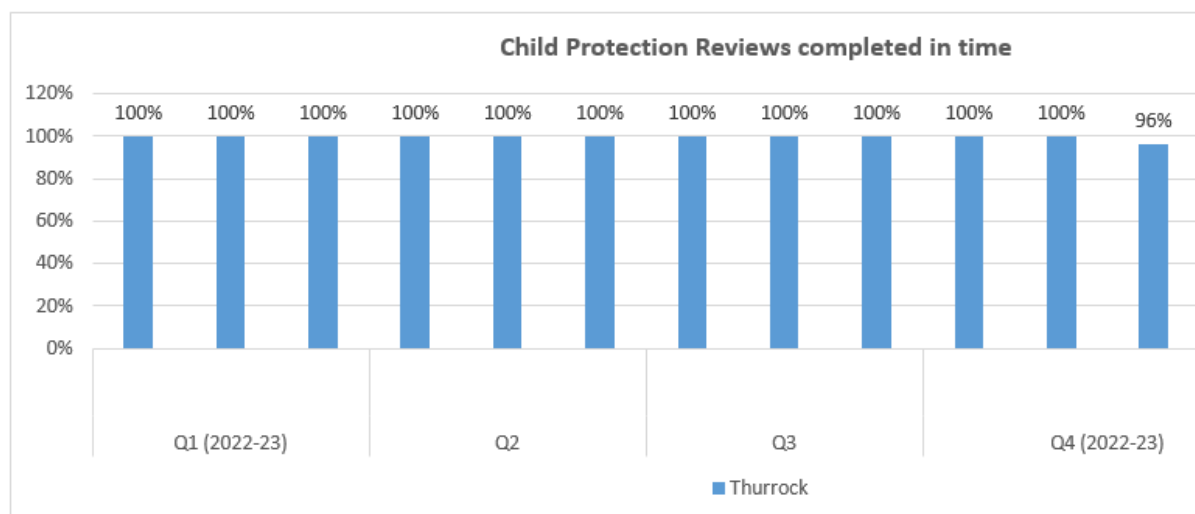


The regular monitoring of children subject to a CP plan through the CP surgery and through assessments using signs of safety continues to ensure that children who need to be subject to a child protection plan are offered those services, but if it is possible to work with families safely, a Child in Need Plan will be offered.

5.3 Child Protection reviews

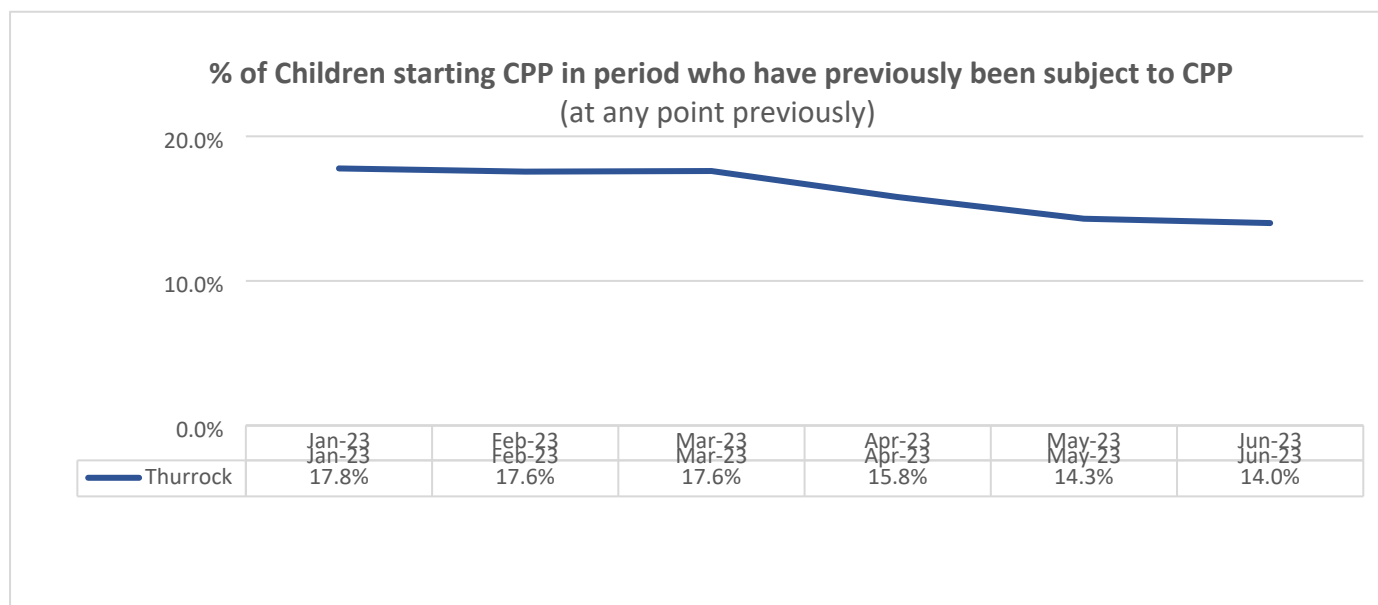
Child Protection plan reviews completed on time continue showing good performance which is usually 100% but 96% at the end June 2023. The below graph shows the overall trend since April 2022. The slight reduction in timeliness in June was to take account of the particular needs of one family.

Compared to 2021-22 benchmarking data, Thurrock continues to perform above the Statistical Neighbour average of 88% and the England average of 89%.



5.4 Repeat Child Protection Plan

At the end of June 2023, the percentage of children subject to a repeat Child Protection Plan (at any point previously) was 14%. When comparing to 2021-22 benchmarking data Thurrock is below the Statistical Neighbour average of 20%, England average of 23% and Eastern Region average of 20%. This would indicate that the Child Protection plans have been effective in bringing about sustained change, as re-referrals are occurring less than comparators.



6. Care Leaving Service

The graphs below show the **OC3 care leaver cohort** of Young People aged 16-25 years who are in receipt of a Care Leaving service. A Care Leaver, as defined in the Children (Leaving

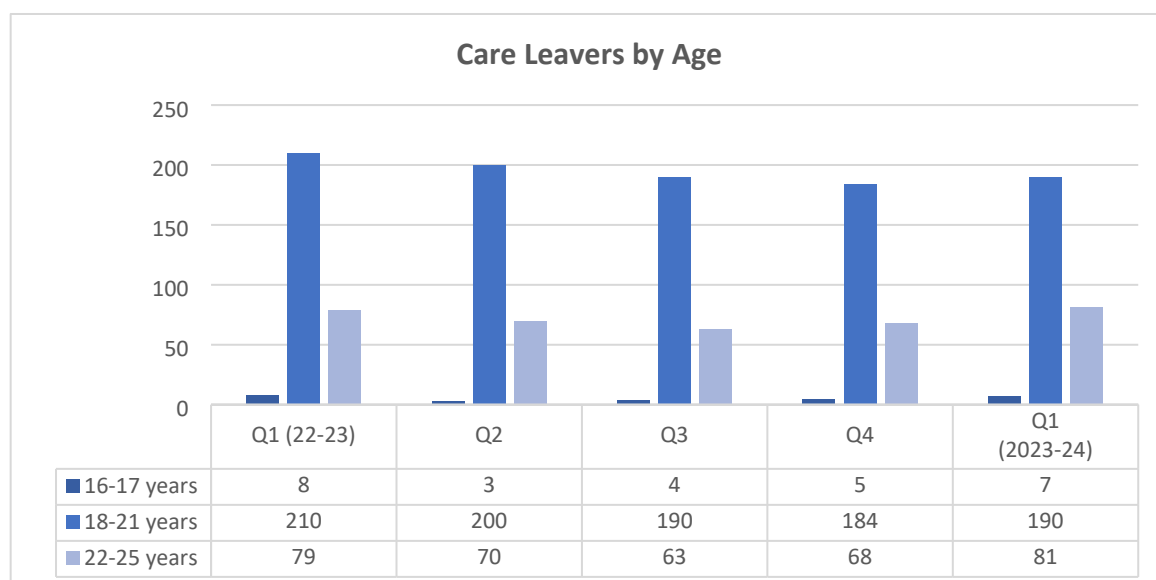
Care) Act 2000¹, is a person who has been 'looked after' or 'in care' for at least 13 weeks since the age of 14, and who was in care on their 16th birthday.

A young person's status as a care leaver can be divided into the following:

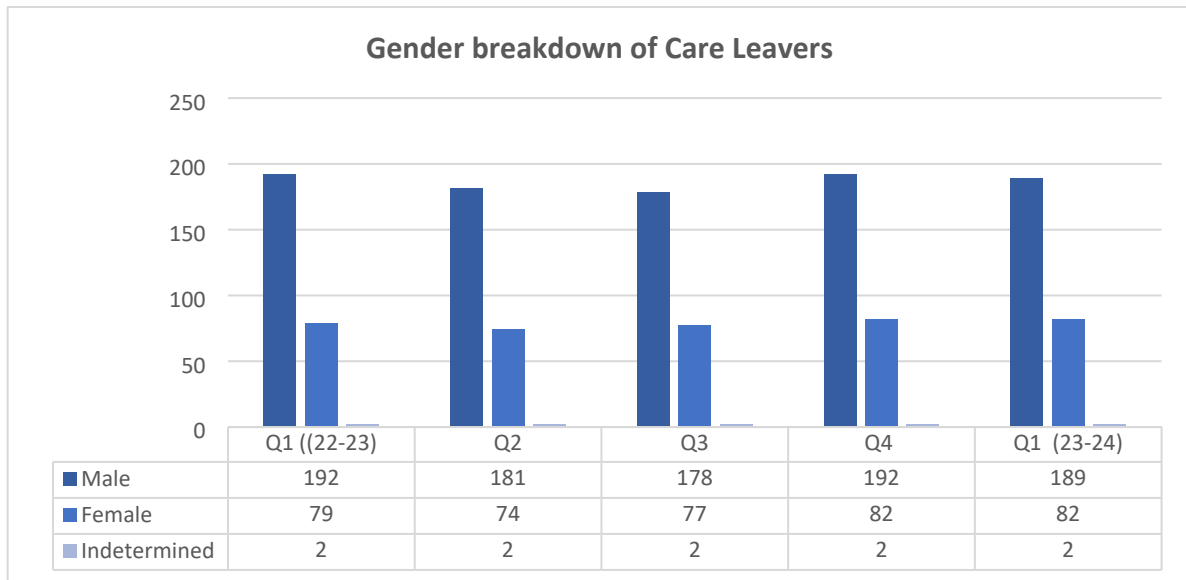
- Eligible child - a young person who is 16 or 17 and who has been looked after by the local authority/health and social care trust for at least a period of 13 weeks since the age of 14, and who is still looked after.
- Relevant child - a young person who is 16 or 17 who has left care after their 16th birthday and before leaving care was an eligible child.
- Former relevant child - a young person who is aged between 18 and 25 (or beyond if being helped with education or training) who, before turning 18 was either an eligible or a relevant child, or both.

As at end of June 2023, 278 Care Leavers who were Relevant or Former Relevant and 109 who were Eligible Care Leavers were being supported and receiving an Aftercare service,

The charts below show the Care Leaver cohort broken down by age groups and gender.

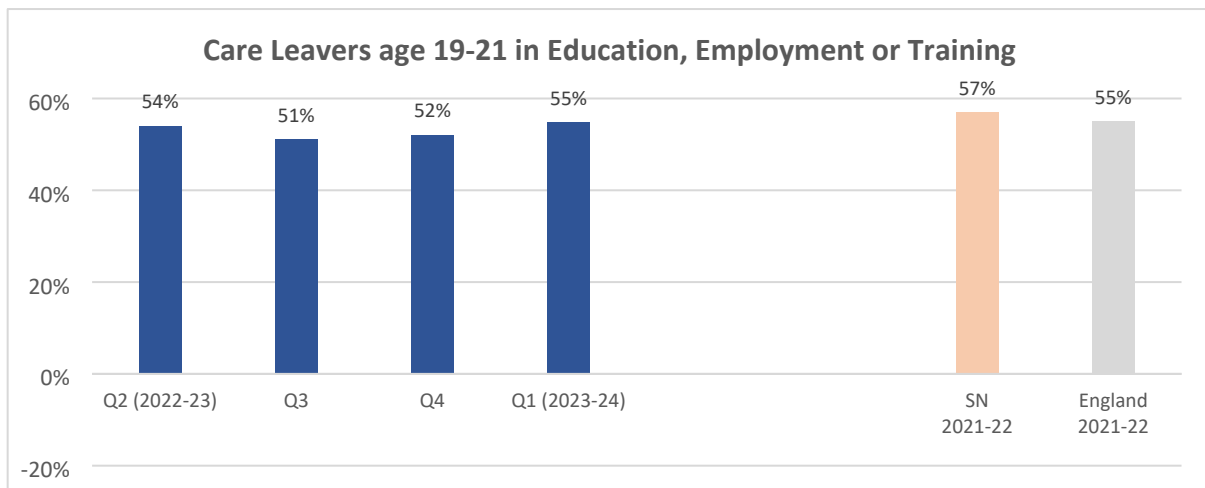


¹ <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2000/35/contents>



6.1 Care Leavers age 19-21 years in Education, Employment or Training (EET)

At the end of Q1 2023-24, 55% of the Care Leavers aged 19 to 21-year-old were in part or full-time education, employment, or training, which brings Thurrock marginally below Statistical Neighbour average of 57% and in line with the England average of 55%. To strengthen oversight and planning to ensure our young people have support and opportunities for Education, Employment and Training (EET) there are two monthly panels which focus on pre and post 18-year-olds who do not have an EET offer. These panels are attended by the Aftercare Service, Inspire Youth Hub, and the Virtual School. The panel seeks to understand the issues for individual young people and align their interests to an EET offer.

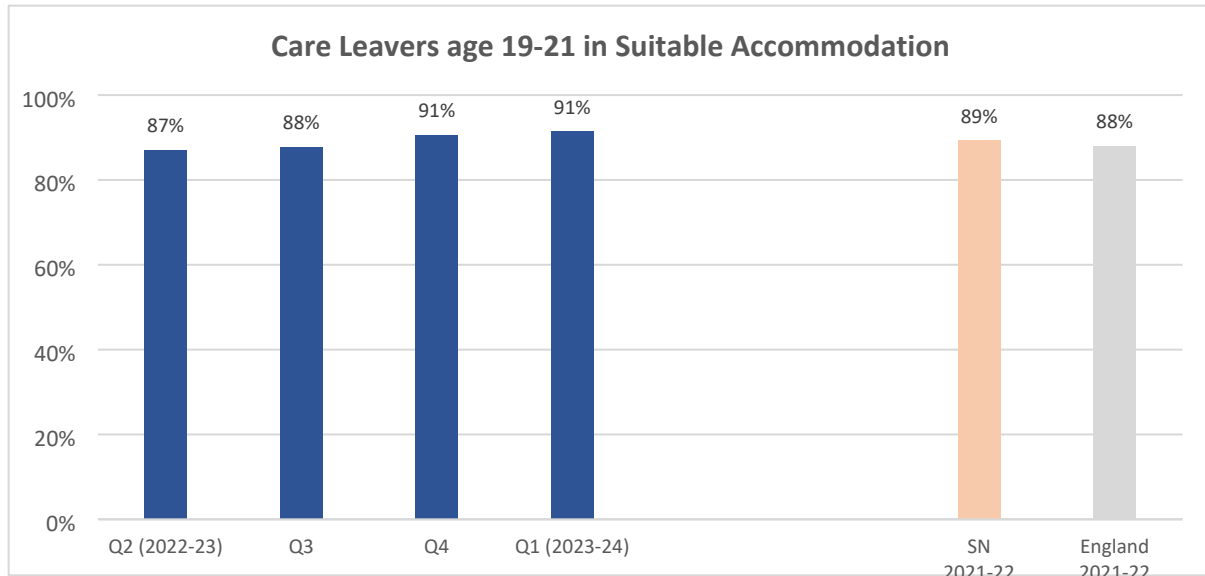


6.2 Care Leavers age 19 to 21 years in Suitable Accommodation

Q1 2023-24 shows that the percentage of 19 to 21-year-old Care Leavers reported to be in suitable accommodation is 91%. Thurrock is marginally above the Statistical Neighbour and England average of 89% and 88% respectively, based on 2021-22 benchmarking data. There are some care leavers who are not in touch with the service, as well as those whose accommodation is unsuitable. Reasons for accommodation being deemed unsuitable include care leavers who are UASC and missing, young people declining to say where they are living or care leavers who are in prison.

Increased housing support is being provided to young people by the Aftercare Service, Head Start Housing and Thurrock Housing Department. The 'Housing Offer' to Care Leavers has

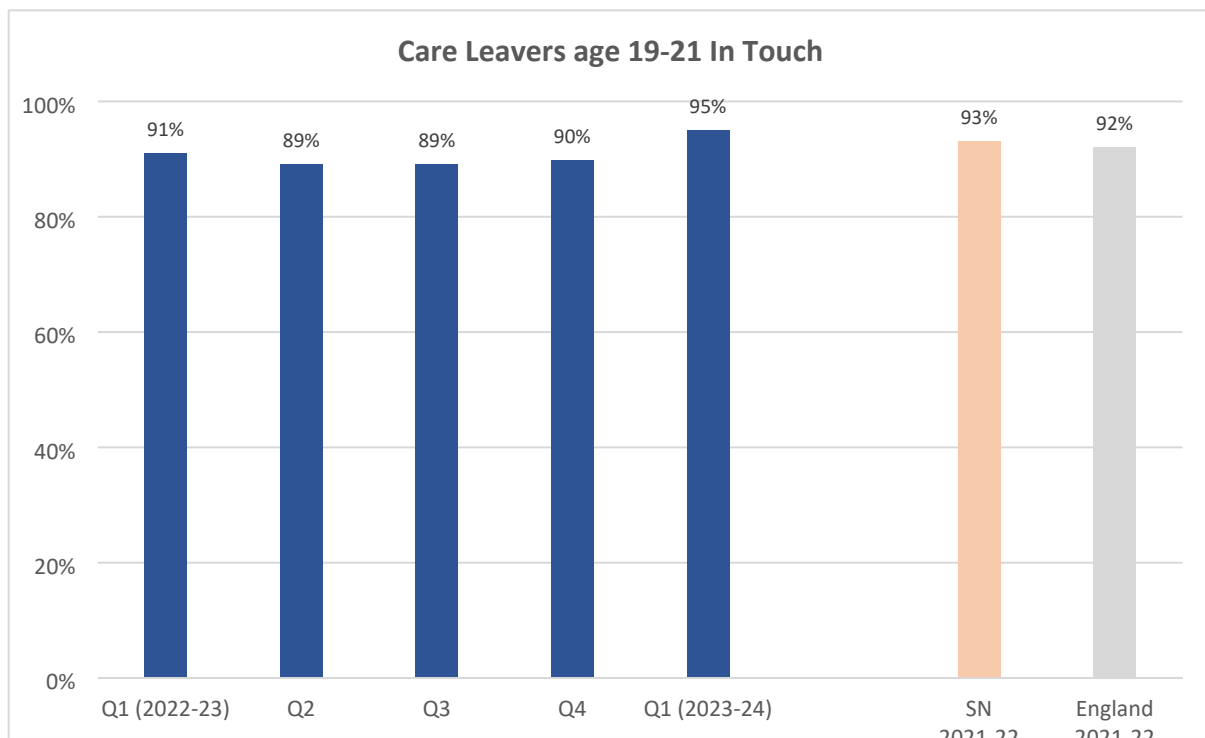
been updated with the Joint Housing Protocol 2020, ensuring good partnership working with clear pathways for young people to access housing, as well as ensuring they are prepared for their tenancies.



6.3 Care Leavers age 19-21 years 'In Touch'

Local Authorities are expected to stay in touch with Care Leavers and provide statutory support to help care leaver's transition to living independently.

At the end of Q1 2023-24, Thurrock was in touch with 95% of Care Leavers. Thurrock's performance is above the Statistical Neighbour average of 93% and the England average of 92% based on 2021-22 benchmarking data. The reason for the percentage that are not in touch is mainly due to the cohort of missing UASC.



7. Adoption

As at the end of Q1 2023-24, there were 1 child adopted and 5 children were placed with prospective adopters.

7.1 Timeliness of Adoption

The average duration of care proceedings nationally has been over 40 weeks. The President of the Family Division re-launched the Public Law Outline process in January 2023 with a view to reducing the length of proceedings towards the 26 weeks statutory time limit.

The timeliness of adoption is measured as a 3-year rolling average, it is the length of time from the child entering care to moving in with an adoptive family. The average time between a child entering care and moving in with its adoptive family adjusted for foster carer adoptions, for children who have been adopted (days), as at end of Quarter 1 2023-24 was 498 days; this is an improvement on March 23 position of 560 days.

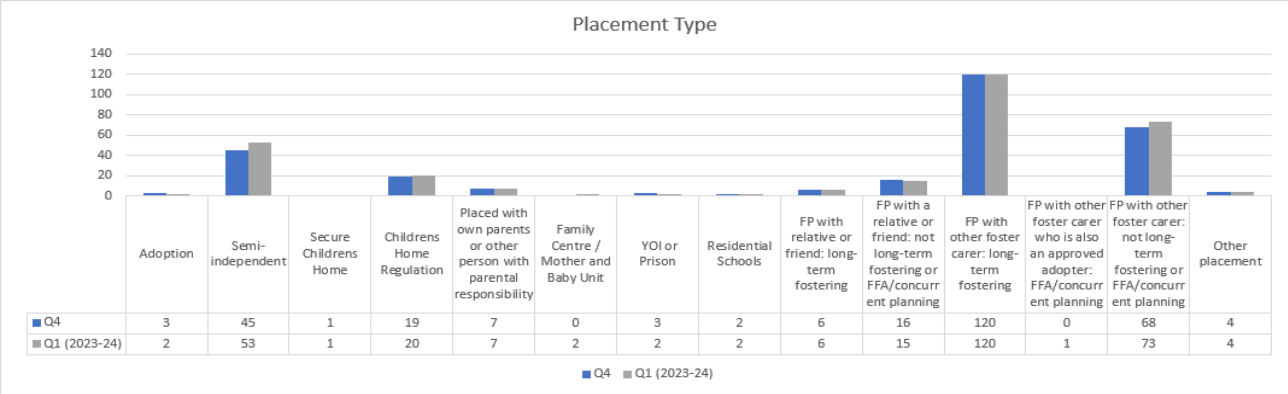
Based on 2021-22 benchmarking data, Thurrock is above the National average of 397 days and the Statistical Neighbour average of 435 days, and Eastern Region of 459 days. It is important to note that this measure relates to a relatively small number of children so a small number of children experiencing a delay can impact on the data. Care proceedings have seen significant delays in part due to court availability, and family members being identified late. We are working towards reducing the duration of care proceedings through early planning and close monitoring.

As at Q1 2023-24, the average time between an LA receiving court authority to place a child and the LA deciding on a match to an adoptive family (3-year average) is 177 days, this is slightly higher than March 2023 average of 106. Based on 2021-22 benchmarking data, Thurrock is below the National average of 196 days which is evidence of good performance.

7.2 Children Looked After placement distance.

The Local Authority has a statutory duty to provide children with placements within its area unless it is not reasonably practicable to do so. At the end of June 2023, 72% of Children Looked After were placed within 20 miles or less from their homes, which represents 223 out of 308 children looked after. Based on the latest benchmarking data available in March 2022, the national average for those placed 20 or more miles from their home was 16% and statistical neighbours was 21.8%, so at 28% Thurrock is currently above.

The chart below provides a breakdown by placement type as at end of Quarter 2 2022-23 and Quarter 1 2023-24.



8. **Reasons for Recommendations**

8.1 Children's Overview & Scrutiny Board Members to note and comment on current performance position.

9. **Consultation** (including Overview & Scrutiny, if applicable)

9.1 Not applicable

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

10.1 None

11. **Implications**

11.1 **Financial**

Implications verified by: **David May**
Strategic Lead Finance

No implications identified.

11.2 **Legal**

Implications verified by: **Judith Knight**
Interim Deputy Head of Legal Services

No implications identified

11.3 **Diversity & Equality**

Implications verified by: **Natalie Smith**
Community Engagement and Project Monitoring Officer
Adults, Housing & Health

There are no direct diversity and equality implications arising from this report. However, the service does collect diversity monitoring data for looked after children, this data is given within this report. The data is utilised to consider issues of equality and to ensure that performance considers the impact on children with protected characteristics.

11.4 **Other implications (where significant)** – i.e., Staff, Health inequalities, Sustainability, Crime and Disorder and Impact on Looked After Children

Not applicable

12. **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):

Not applicable

13. Appendices to the report

None

Report Authors:

Daniel Jones, Strategic Lead, Children Looked After, Children's Services

Clare Moore, Strategic Lead, Youth Offending Service and Prevention, Children and Family Services

Ruth Murdock, Strategic Lead, Quality & Assurance, Children's Services

Mairead Morgan, Strategic Lead, Safeguarding, Children's Services

Mandy Moore, Strategic Lead Business Intelligence, Performance, Quality & Business Intelligence (statistics)

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16 November 2023	ITEM: 7
Children’s Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee	
Update: Stable Homes, Built on Love: Government Implementation Strategy and Consultation on Children’s Social Care Reform 2023	
Wards and communities affected: All	Key Decision: Non-Key
Report of: Janet Simon, Assistant Director, Children’s Social Care and Early Help	
Accountable Assistant Director: As above	
Accountable Director: Sheila Murphy, Corporate Director of Children’s Services	

Executive Summary

On 2nd February 2023, the Government Launched the implementation strategy Children’s Social Care Reform: Stable Homes, Built on Love for consultation. The implementation strategy is the government’s response to three reviews that took place in 2022. The Independent Review of Children’s Social Care (May 2022), The Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel Review into the Murders of Arthur Labinjo-Hughes and Star Hobson (May 2022) and the Competition and Markets Authority Review of Provision of Homes for Children Coming into Care (March 2022). This report sets out the actions taken so far in implementing the Government’s Strategy.

1. Recommendation(s)

- 1.1 **That the Overview & Scrutiny Committee note the contents of the Government’s implementation strategy for reforms to children’s social care and the potential impact these will have on service delivery over the next few years.**
- 1.2 **That Overview & Scrutiny note actions taken thus far in implementing the Government Strategy.**

2. Introduction and Background

- 2.1 In 2022, a number of national reviews placed a spotlight on children’s social care. Three of these are addressed in the Children’s Social Care Reform Strategy: Stable Homes, Built on Love. These reports included;
 - The Independent review of Children’s Social Care, published in May 2022. This presented recommendations to Government including detailed proposals which are considered in the Government response and strategy. This was

based on extensive consultation including gathering the views of children, young people, families and from across the sector and wider stakeholders.

- The Child Safeguarding Practice review panel's review into the murders of Arthur Labinjo-Hughes and Star Hobson, published in May 2022, made a number of recommendations based on an evaluation of practice following the deaths of Arthur in Solihull and Star in Bradford – both cases drawing high profile media attention and identifying weaknesses in how services to keep these children safe were provided. This included front door processes, attention to the concerns of family members and quality and timeliness of assessment work in both cases. The need for greater integration of multi-agency safeguarding responses was a key recommendation.
- The Competition and Markets Authority review of provision of homes for children coming into care, published in March 2022, a market study launched in response to concerns around how the placements market was operating, both in terms of availability of placement and cost of placements.

2.2 The Strategy sets out six pillars to transform children's social care:

- Family Help provides the right support at the right time so that children can thrive with their families.
- A decisive multi-agency child protection system.
- Unlocking the potential of family networks.
- Putting love, relationships, and a stable home at the heart of being a child in care.
- A valued, supported and highly skilled social worker for every child who needs one.
- A system that continuously learns and improves and makes better use of evidence and data.

3. Issues, Options and Analysis of Options

3.1 The strategy sets out reforms in Children's Social Care and includes a multi-agency approach to safeguarding with an emphasis on family help; engaging and supporting family networks as part of a single system; improvements to recruitment and retention of social workers and a commitment to supporting kinship carers and care leavers.

3.2 The Government is sponsoring several test and learn pathfinder programmes to test out delivery of some elements of its strategy before they are rolled out nationally.

3.3 Alongside a wide range of consultation and engagement sessions the following is a summary of actions taken thus far.

- An evaluation of the multi-agency arrangements in local areas commissioned to start in autumn 2023.
 - Multi-agency practice principles published to support responses to child exploitation and extra familial harm.
 - £10m investment to test new initiatives to reduce delays in public law cases
 - A joint Children's Social Care and Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) roundtable convened with sector experts on disability in May 2023
 - Legal aid entitlements extended to prospective guardians making applications for Special Guardianship Orders (SGO) in private family law proceedings.
 - Announcement of the first 3 areas for the Families First for Children Pathfinder
 - Bidding launched for LAs to apply for grant funding to deliver family finding, befriending, and mentoring programmes for children in care and care leavers.
 - Work with 27 local authorities to deliver the Staying Close Programme.
 - Co-designing of the Northeast Fostering Pathfinder to develop a foster care recruitment and retention programme.
 - National Minimum Allowance for Foster Carers increased by 12.43% and increased the amount of income tax relief available to foster carers.
 - Launch of the first Residential Childcare Workforce Census
 - Leaving Care Allowance and apprenticeship bursary each increased to £3,000
 - Launched the national workload action group.
 - Published a policy paper on multi-agency information sharing.
- 3.4 £45 million of funding has been made available for the Families First for Children (FFC) Pathfinders to design and test reforms set out in [Stable Homes, Built on Love](#). The pilot will prioritise family-led solutions by increasing the use of family group decision-making and testing the introduction of FNSPs.
- 3.5 Dorset, Lincolnshire and Wolverhampton Councils were announced in July 2023 as the first wave of local authority pathfinders to take part in delivering the FFC programme to run until 2025. The pilots will include the introduction of family network support packages (FNSPs) to remove any financial or practical barriers faced by families accessing services and involves designing a new model of provision which will test the implementation of reforms across 4 policy areas:
- Family Help
 - Child Protection
 - Family Networks
 - Safeguarding Partners
- 3.6 The vision as set out, is to ensure that children, families, and communities:
- Are given the opportunity to co-design and co-produce the reformed system.

- Can access one system and work with one lead practitioner, who coordinates one bespoke team around the family and co-creates one plan to support them.
 - Only need to tell their story once and experience the system as welcoming, supportive, fair, and focused on their strengths.
 - Can access strong, decisive multi-agency safeguarding arrangements to protect children and young people from harm.
- 3.7 A second wave of local areas piloting the programme is expected to launch in spring 2024 and applications to take part close on 06th November 2023. To be eligible, local authorities must:
- Be one of the top 153 upper tier local authorities.
 - Have an Ofsted rating of requires improvement or above on the last day of the application window.
 - Have multi-agency support with applications countersigned by local statutory safeguarding partners (police force and Integrated Care Board)
 - Not be subject to section 114 notice spending controls on the last day of the application window.
 - Not already be participating in the Family Networks Pilot.
 - Not exceed the upper limit of their grant funding band.
- 3.8 As part of the Strategy, the government has pledged to deliver a fostering recruitment and retention programme so foster care is available for more children who need it, investing over £27 million over the next two years. The DfE are looking to run two regional pathfinders to test creation of end-to-end improvements in the Fostering Recruitment and Retention Programme. The regions taking part will play a key role in shaping future delivery.
- 3.9 The DfE invited regions to bid to be Pathfinders and take part in a pilot project. Thurrock has joined the Eastern Region in a bid to be part of the creation of a Regional Recruitment hub to improve the recruitment and retention of Foster Carers and implementation of the 'Mockingbird' model which provides peer support for new and existing foster carers via experienced and dedicated carers who act as a hub, supporting and providing respite to other carers. This approach has been successful in stabilising placements and retaining foster carers.
- 3.10 A successful bid would mean that Thurrock Council and the Region will benefit from grant funding to support this initiative including signposting and routing applicants to their local authority supporting increased recruitment and placements locally for children. It is anticipated that this will go live in April 2024 when the successful regions have been announced.
- 3.11 In addition the strategy has recognised that young people leaving care need sufficient funds to meet their needs when they start living independently. As a result, the government have increased the amount available for the care leavers allowance from £2,000 to £3,000. In addition, the Care Leavers apprenticeship bursary will increase from £1,000 to £3,000 to give better

opportunities for care leavers to start and complete high-quality apprenticeships.

- 3.12 Thurrock CSC are well placed to work towards the principles within the strategy which already align well with many aspects of our current work. The Family Help model is aligned with the Think Family Model and the recent launch of a network of Family Hubs across Thurrock. The Service has also worked to strengthen its support to foster carers and connected carers and our offer to care leavers.
- 3.13 The use of agency social workers continues to be essential to support gaps in services where permanent staff are not retained, and determined and creative recruitment is only having a moderate impact on vacancies.
- 3.14 Review and evaluation of service provision at the Front Door in response to the National Review into the murders of Star and Arthur has confirmed that the service has established pathways for families to be directed to early help and there is a strong emphasis on robust responses to referrals including from family and anonymous calls which were highlighted in that report as areas of potential weakness.
- 3.15 The service has robust arrangements including appropriate challenge in place with both the Police and Health partners to respond to Child Protection referrals and sufficient experience within the workforce to provide expertise in leading child protection responses.

4. Reasons for Recommendation

- 4.1 To ensure that Children's O&S is kept informed of the potential changes to the children's social care landscape both within Thurrock and nationally.

5. Consultation (including Overview and Scrutiny, if applicable)

- 5.1 The Government consultation closed 11 May 2023 which provided a wide opportunity to input into the consultation process.

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

- 6.1 There will be an impact on Council Policies and performance as and when there are changes and developments in legislation and guidance.

7. Implications

7.1 Financial

Implications verified by: **David May**

Head of Financial Management (Children Services and Dedicated Schools Grant)

There are significant cost implications associated with the proposals in the Government's strategy. Additional funding has been provided to local pathfinders, before wider roll out. There are aspects that will increase costs to the local authority such as care leavers support, enhancement of "Kinship" support and further support to foster carer. Consideration will need to be given if new burdens funding is to be provided to the local authority or if these costs need to be provided for within existing budget provision.

7.2 Legal

Implications verified by: **Judith Knight**
Interim Deputy Head of Legal (Social Care and Education)

The report has no immediate legal implications.

However, the Council needs to be mindful that the Government's Consultation Response in September 2023 sets out potential legislative change in relation to disabled children.

The Children's Social Care National Framework will be issued as statutory guidance. Working Together to Safeguarding Children Statutory Guidance will be updated.

There is a proposed consultation on statutory guidance for national rules on Local Authority use of agency child and family social workers.

The Council will need to adapt its policies and procedures, as needed, to these changes.

7.3 Diversity and Equality

Implications verified by: **Rebecca Lee**
Team Manager - Community Development and Equalities Adults, Housing and Health Directorate

Successful implementation of the Government Strategy will improve the lives of the most vulnerable children and families in our communities.

A Community and Equality Impact Assessment on any potential changes will be undertaken as required.

7.4 **Other implications** (where significant) – i.e. Staff, Health Inequalities, Sustainability, Crime and Disorder, and Impact on Looked After Children

There are implications for Children Looked After and Care Leavers in the Strategy which aims to improve their outcomes.

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

Report Author:

Janet Simon

Assistant Director Children's Social Care and Early Help.

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16 November 2023	ITEM: 8
Children’s Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee	
Children’s Transport Contract Procurement 2024	
Wards and communities affected: All	Key Decision: Key
Report of: Sarah Williams, Strategic Lead, Education Support Services	
Accountable Assistant Director: Michele Lucas, Assistant Director Education and Skills	
Accountable Director: Sheila Murphy, Corporate Director – Children’s Services	
This report is: Public	

Executive Summary

The contracts for Children’s Transport provision were extended by one year and agreed by Cabinet on 15 March 2023. The extension was agreed from September 2023 to July 2024. The provision of home to school transport is a statutory duty on the Local Authority and we are required to undergo a re-procurement exercise. The value of the contracts requires a Cabinet decision.

This report recommends a full re-procurement of the Childrens home to school Transport for the start of the academic year 2024/2025 to ensure best value is achieved and allows for new transport operators to join during the contract period.

1. Recommendation(s)

1.1 Children’s Overview and Scrutiny recommend Cabinet agree the recommendation for the Council to collaborate with Essex County Council (ECC) on a procurement exercise for a Dynamic Purchasing System (DPS) and to undertake further competition via the DPS to award contracts for Children’s home to school transport as set out in section 3.

1.2 Children’s Overview and Scrutiny recommend Cabinet agree that the Director of Children’s Services, in consultation with the Education Portfolio Holder is given delegated authority to award contracts following further competitions under the DPS.

2. Introduction and Background

2.1 The provision of home to school transport is governed by the Education Act 1996 and the Transport Act 1985. In addition, the provision of transport, in

exceptional circumstances for children who are subject to Child in Need or Child Protection procedures is supported by the Children Act 1989, as amended by the Childcare Act 2004. This legislation is clear that other than in exceptional circumstances, parents are responsible for getting their children to school.

- 2.2 The current framework agreement (“the Framework Agreement”) originally awarded in 2019 is due to end in July 2024 (includes the extension period as agreed by cabinet on 15 March 2023). All contracts procured under the framework agreement cover home to school transport and children’s social care transport. A framework is an overarching agreement between the council and transport operators and outlines the principles under which contracts can be placed. The framework is used to procure transport operators under individual routes and is a closed procurement whereby once awarded onto the framework no other operators can apply to join and can only be for a maximum period of four years with no option to extend other than under exceptional circumstances. This type of framework does not allow for new transport operators to join the framework during its lifecycle. When this framework was last procured in September 2019, there were set transport routes that were published and awarded to operators for a fixed price and over a period of four years, which was not sustainable for the operators given the price rises in fuel costs and cost of living.
- 2.3 The Council currently has contracts in place for 180 routes covering the full spectrum of primary, secondary and special schools children’s transport provision. We currently transport in the region of 1000 pupils a day. Transport is provided by coach, minibus and taxi. Members should be aware that this is subject to change as this is a demand lead service.
- 2.4 In addition to the current transport contracts, Thurrock also provides transport provision in the form of travel expenses where this represents best value.
- 2.5 The current contract value is approximately £6.1m per annum. This amount fluctuates due to changes in demand where the immediate implementation of additional route contracts is needed arising from factors outlined in 2.8 below resulting in the anticipation that the demand for children’s home to school will increase by 7% per annum. This is based on the historical and forecasted increase in numbers of Education and Health Care Plans included within the Dedicated Schools Grant Management Plan. The potential effect of this (inclusive of a 5% CPI increases) on annual contract value would mean an annual increase of £0.620m. A separate report will be provided in January 2024 to Children’s Overview and Scrutiny as indicated in 2.7 below, this will also provide information on the steps to take be taken to contain budgetary pressures.
- 2.6 There are three distinct areas of children’s transport:
- Mainstream schools - where for example distance / safety of a route to school require the Council to provide school transport. In such cases there is a statutory duty to offer transport.
 - Special schools and Resource Bases – A statutory duty to offer transport subject to the pupil meeting the agreed criteria.

- Children’s Social Care – provision of ad hoc transport service to children and young people for a variety of purposes. Journeys may be one-off or regular scheduled arrangements that include contact visits as well as out of hours emergency journeys.

- 2.7 There continues to be an ongoing transport review looking at a number of areas to ensure best value is achieved wherever possible in line with the approved Home to School Transport policy and the statutory duties. A separate report will be provided to Children’s Overview and Scrutiny in January 2024 and will include an updated Home to School Transport policy following the publication of revised Department for Education statutory guidance on 29th June 2023.
- 2.8 Members should note that there continues to be an increasing demand for Children’s Transport due to a rise in the number of children meeting the statutory criteria for home to school transport as set out in the Home to School Transport Policy.
- 2.9 The service continues to encourage independent travel to school where possible. This is not always appropriate where individual pupil needs prevent pupils travelling independently.
- 2.10 Contracts and costs continue to be managed within the service along with a monthly review of budgets and forecast expenditure for the financial year. As part of the contract management process, termly meetings with transport operators take place and key performance indicators measured in line with contract terms and conditions.

2.11 **Market engagement**

A market engagement session was undertaken on 15 May 2023 with Operators on the current Framework to discuss the extension of the current Framework and also our proposals on the re-tendering of the Childrens Transport going forward and to have their initial thoughts on contracting for the service under a DPS system.

A questionnaire was sent out to the operators on the current framework asking what their views were on how the current Framework was operating and what they would propose to the Council to consider going forward. The questionnaire also asked them if they were familiar with a DPS and how they felt it was working. Some of the Operators are already registered under the Essex County Council DPS so are familiar on how this works, however we recognise that some of the operators are not familiar with a DPS.

This engagement exercise has provided the Council with information on: -

- areas for improvement on the current contract which will be fed into the upcoming contract meetings.
- familiarity of suppliers (including local SMEs) with a DPS and potential training required by suppliers to be able to join a DPS.

Further market engagement exercises are planned to ensure full participation of both our current operators and any potential new operators in our re-procurement process.

2.12 The council does not currently have a Passenger Transport Marketing Strategy.

3 Issues, Options and Analysis of Options

The existing framework agreement for Childrens transport is due to end in July 2024. There is a need for the Council to ensure a contracted service is in place from August 2024 onwards. There are currently 4 options for cabinet to consider the continued service provision.

OPTION 1 - Do nothing.

This option would not support the Council in delivering its statutory duties to provide home to school transport. Therefore, this option is discounted.

OPTION 2 - Deliver the service in house.

The costs of setting up an in-house service i.e., vehicle fleet, resources and systems will be significant and are not currently planned or within the department's budget scope. Therefore, this option is discounted.

OPTION 3 – Contract for the service via a Council own framework agreement or Dynamic Purchasing System (DPS)

Both procurement routes have some similarities and differences in summary.

- Both can be put in place with more than one organisation providing the Council access to more sources of supply. However, to note once the framework agreement is in place, no further organisations can be added, whereas on a DPS, organisations can be added at any point (subject to the organisation meeting the selection criteria) during its period of operation.
- Both establishes the terms and conditions on which future contracts will be called off promoting standardisation of contract terms.
- Both simplify and streamline the procurement processes.
- A DPS does not have the option for a direct award. The only award mechanism to call a DPS is via a further competition (also called a mini competition). Whereas on a framework agreement the mechanism to call off a framework agreement is via a direct award or further competition.

The Council currently contracts for the service via a framework agreement. The lack of flexibility to include additional suppliers onto the framework agreement has been one of the challenges experienced by the Council. Where suppliers have handed back routes to the Council due to contract un-affordability, the Council has had to rely on the remaining suppliers for the service provision. This has increased the risk of the remaining organisations on the framework not having the capacity to deliver the required service in the face of increasing demand on the service.

A DPS would be able to provide the council a route for managing the risk of supply and demand as organisations can be added at any point (subject to the organisation meeting the selection criteria) during its period of operation.

However, the setting up of the Council DPS is resource and time intensive. Additional resources would be required to be paid for to support the DPS set up and implementation.

OPTION 4 - Collaborate with Essex County Council (ECC) on a procurement exercise for a DPS. – This option is recommended.

In undertaking the market engagement, the Council liaised with other local authorities who had a DPS in place for school transport to find out if there were any opportunities for collaboration. As part of this process, it was found that ECC were looking to retender their Transport DPS on a similar timeframe as the Council. The Council approached ECC about the possibility of both Councils working together to facilitate the DPS (to be tendered for by ECC) being open to use by Thurrock. ECC have agreed to this. ECC intends to go out to tender for the DPS in October / November 2023. The key benefits of this option (in addition to those outlined in option 3 above).

- With the DPS being open to the Council to use, it can call off the DPS once in place by undertaking further competition processes to award contracts for the service provision.
- Reduces duplication of effort with resources and time efficiencies gained. ECC will be undertaking the process to put the DPS in place therefore the Council does not need to duplicate what ECC is doing but work with them to benefit from the process.
- Suppliers of the service will only need to tender to join one DPS and will have access to a wider market of both Councils. This reduces duplication as suppliers do not need to complete a similar process twice.
- ECC have had a DPS in place for many years, which they have continued to refine and improve. The Council will benefit from the experience and support to be provided by ECC during the process.
- Both Councils can work together to schedule calling off the DPS to avoid and reduce both Councils competing against each other in the same market to facilitate achieving the best value from the supply market.

As ECC will be setting up the DPS, their e-tendering system will be utilised. Dependent on the licence agreement for the system, there may or may not be a small cost to the Council to utilise the system to call off the DPS. This is being confirmed with ECC.

It is proposed for contracts awarded via the DPS for the provision of the children's home to school transport to be for a four (4) year period with the option to extend for up to 12 months.

To provide price certainty and maintain contract sustainability, during the contract duration it is proposed for prices to be fixed for the first two years and for price increases in subsequent years to be based on the CPI rate prevailing at the time (this will be included as a clause with the contract).

The preferred and most efficient option is option 4. If approved, option 4 means:

- Reduction / elimination of duplication of effort for the Council and suppliers
- Resources and time efficiencies
- Market management to achieve better value
- A procurement / contracting route to manage the risk of supply and demand faced by the department
- Fosters collaboration along with its associated benefits

5. Consultation (including Overview and Scrutiny, if applicable)

5.1 Consultation with current transport operators was undertaken on 15 May 2023 to obtain their views.

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

6.1 This report impacts on the following corporate priorities:

- People: a place where people of all ages are proud to work and play, live and stay;
- Place: a heritage rich Borough which is ambitious for its future;
- Prosperity: a Borough which enables everyone to achieve their aspirations.

7. Implications

7.1 Financial

Implications verified by: **David May**
Strategic Lead Finance

The provision of Home to School Transport is a statutory duty on the Local Authority, for those considered eligible, to facilitate their attendance at the relevant education establishment.

Children's transport costs have a significant impact on Council Budgets.

The 2023/24 Medium Term Financial Strategy provide growth of £1.243m, recognising significant increases in Special Educational Needs and inflation. The 2023/24 budget is £6.145m.

In order to contain cost pressures whilst ensuring that Thurrock fulfils its statutory duty, the most economical and suitable method of transport should be selected, which includes travel allowances, use of the commercial bus network and hired transport. There is the potential of a cost pressure risk in 2024/25 and beyond. Alternative funding opportunities and mitigations to the pressure may have to be sought by the service to contain it within the budget envelope should this risk materialise.

7.2 Legal

Implications verified by: **Kevin Molloy**
Principal Solicitor

Section 508B of the Education Act 1996 which was inserted by Part 6 of the Education and Inspections Act 2006 sets out the general duties placed on local authorities to make school travel arrangements as they consider necessary for eligible children within their area, to facilitate their attendance at the relevant educational establishment. Such arrangements must be provided free of charge.

Section 508A places a duty on local authorities in England to assess the school travel needs of all children and persons of sixth form age in their area and to assess and promote the use of sustainable modes of transport.

Section 508C of the Act provides local authorities with discretionary powers to make school travel arrangements for other children not covered by section 508B but the transport does not have to be free and the local authority is entitled to charge for this.

Section 508D of the Act places a duty on the Secretary of State to issue guidance to which local authorities have to have regard to in the performance of their functions under Section 508B (Travel arrangements for other children). The Secretary of State may revise the guidance from time to time. Section 444 of the Education Act 1996 expressly states that the child shall not be taken to have failed to attend regularly at the school if the parent proves that the local authority fails to make appropriate transport arrangements to and from school under Section 508, however parents are responsible for their child's attendance at school and local authorities are under a duty to provide home to school transport, where necessary, to enable them to enforce attendance. Following issue by the Council of a s114 notice, the Council must ensure that its resources are not used for non-essential spending. The contracts at issue here are all essential and the provision of them a statutory duty. In procuring the services outlined, the Council must observe the obligations upon it outlined in national legislation and in its internal procurement rules. Officers will need to ensure Legal Services are kept fully informed as they progress through the procurements referred to above to ensure compliance.

7.3 Diversity and Equality

Implications verified by: **Natalie Smith**
Strategic Lead: Community Development and Equalities

The Council has a statutory duty, when exercising its functions, to comply with the provisions set out in the Sec 149 Equality Act 2010.

The Council must, in the performance of its functions, therefore, have due regard to:

- eliminate discrimination, harassment, victimisation and any other conduct that is prohibited by or under this Act;

- advance equality of opportunity between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it;
- foster good relations between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it.

We will ensure the partner meets the statutory duties of a local authority in the provision of home to school transport, and also in its HR policies. The authority should note that where an external supplier carries out a function, the Council remains responsible for meeting the statutory duty set out in the Equality Act 2010. The authority must give due regard to ensuring that all services are delivered in a way which is non-discriminatory and promotes equality of opportunity for staff and service users. The services provided will cater for the needs of all users and identifying the needs of particularly vulnerable groups will be a key aspect of the tender process. Prospective contractors must give due regard to the diverse needs of young people in Thurrock and plan to meet these. Specific equality requirements will be identified in the service specification and pre-qualification questions.

7.4 **Other implications** (where significant) – i.e. Staff, Health Inequalities, Sustainability, Crime and Disorder and Impact on Looked After Children

None

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

**Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee
Work Programme 2023/24**

Dates of Meetings: 15 June 2023, 12 September 2023, 16 November 2023, 16 January 2024, 12 March 2024

Topic	Lead Officer	Requested by Officer/Member	Description of Report
15 June 2023			
Terms of Reference	Democratic Services	Officers	
Youth Cabinet Update	Angela Surrey	Standing Item	
Items Raised by Thurrock Local Safeguarding Partnership Board: Progress Update on Peer Review and Case Review – Action Plans	Priscilla Bruce-Annan	Standing Item/ Members	
Statutory Duties Report - Children's Social Care	Janet Simon	Officers	
Statutory Duties Report – Education	Michele Lucas	Officers	

Children's Social Care Performance – Quarter 4 2022-23	Janet Simon	Chair	
Fees and Charges Report			
Work Programme	Democratic Services	Standing item	
12 September 2023			
Youth Cabinet Update	Angela Surrey	Standing Item	
2022/23 Annual Complaints and Representations Report – Children's Social Care	Lee Henley	Officers	
Fostering Recruitment Update	Janet Simon	Members	
Family Hubs / Start for Life Update	Clare Moore	Officers	
Items Raised by Thurrock Local Safeguarding Partnership Board: Progress Update on Peer Review and Case Review – Action Plans	Priscilla Bruce-Annan	Standing Item	

Work Programme	Democratic Services	Standing item	
16 November 2023			
Youth Cabinet Update	Angela Surrey	Standing Item	
Children's Social Care Performance Quarter 1	Janet Simon	Officers	
Update on Stable Homes Built on Love	Janet Simon		
Childrens Transport contract re-procurement 2024	Sarah Williams		
Work Programme	Democratic Services	Standing Item	
16 January 2024			
Youth Cabinet Update	Angela Surrey	Standing Item	
Adult Community College Update Report	Michele Lucas		
Overview of Responsibilities of Portfolio holder for Children's Services	Councillor B Johnson		

Children Obesity report			
Educational Attainment Data 2022/23	Michele Lucas		
Thurrock Childcare Sufficiency Annual Assessment Report 2023	Michele Lucas		
Items Raised by Thurrock Local Safeguarding Partnership Board	Priscilla Bruce-Annan	Standing Item	
Work Programme	Democratic Services	Standing item	
12 March 2024			
Youth Cabinet Update Report	Angela Surrey	Standing Item	
Overview of Responsibilities of Portfolio holder for Education			
Update from Working Group on Mental Health			

Update from Working Group on Health Living (Childhood Obesity)			
Items Raised by Thurrock Local Safeguarding Partnership Board	Priscilla Bruce-Annan	Standing Item	
Work Programme	Democratic Services	Standing Item	

Briefing notes:

Update on Aveley & Orsett Heath Schools - completed

Update on RAAC - completed

Updated: October 2023

Clerk: Rhiannon Whiteley

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