

19 November 2009		ITEM 7
Children's Services Overview & Scrutiny Committee Panel		
Fostering Report Outlining Process and Performance		
Portfolio Holder: Cllr Sue MacPherson, Portfolio Holder for Children's Services		
Wards and communities affected: All	Key Decision: Not Applicable	
Accountable Head of Service: Jean Imray Head Children's Health & Social Care		
Accountable Director: Jo Olsson Director Children Education and Families		
This report is public		
Purpose of Report: to outline Fostering systems and processes as undertaken by the Council's Fostering Service		

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report was requested by the Committee and is for information only. This report sets out the different elements of the purpose and function of the Fostering Service and makes comment on current levels of activity. The last report to the Panel was presented in July 2007.

A separate report covering the work of the Adoption Service is also being presented.

1. RECOMMENDATIONS:

1.1 To note the report

2. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND:

2.1 Prior to October 2007 the functions of the Fostering and Adoption Services were undertaken by one team, overseen by one team manager. However in recognition of the specialist nature of both functions, and the need to strengthen managerial capacity at Team Manager level, two distinct teams were created. This was in line with the proposal put before Cabinet in April 2007. Following recent restructuring of managerial accountabilities within

Children's Social Care, line management of Fostering falls within the remit of the Service Manager – Placements and Support.

- 2.2 The fostering service fulfils a central role in ensuring the Council will fully meet its Corporate Parenting responsibilities, by finding and maintaining appropriate placements (a safe and nurturing place in which to live) without which children and young people cannot hope to develop securely and meet their full potential.
- 2.3 Thurrock fostering service is a significant aspect of the provision offered to children in care. The service is comprised of five schemes. These are:
- The fostering team. This scheme has 80 fostering households. It is often referred to as the general fostering team. From April 2009 the general fostering team was restructured; it now has a dedicated Assessment and Recruitment Team (ART) and a dedicated Foster Carer Support Team (FCST). It is intended that this change will strengthen the recruitment capacity within the service, whilst ensuring existing carers receive the support they need.
 - The therapeutic fostering scheme. This scheme has 10 fostering households, one of which is used to provide respite care to relieve the other carers. These carers adopt a therapeutic approach in their care of children and young people who have significant emotional and social need, and who are difficult to place. There are currently 22 children placed with these carers.
 - The supported lodging scheme. This scheme has 11 households. Initially it provided a service to those young people (15 years and over) who need less supervision in their preparation to live independently in the community, but increasingly also caters for a percentage of this age group with more complex support needs.
 - The shared care scheme. This scheme provides support to disabled children and young people; there are 22 households, a proportion of which also function as befrienders to disabled children.
 - The private fostering scheme. This scheme seeks to identify those children who are being cared for by adults who are not close birth relatives. There are 6 households currently active. These children are not legally Looked After, but the Council has a responsibility to assess and ensure their needs are met; this function is delegated to the Fostering Service.
- 2.4 The successful maintenance of fostering placements significantly reduces the use of residential care and placements with Independent Fostering Agencies. Thurrock currently has approximately 230 children looked after. Of these 135 are with Thurrock Foster Carers; about 20 are in residential provision, and another 29 are with Independent Fostering Agencies, either because of specific needs which cannot be met locally, or because they are long established placements which we would not wish to disrupt. The remainder

are living with parents, relatives or friends, or are placed for Adoption. Use of residential provision has been consistently below the National average in percentage terms.

	Mar-05	Mar-06	Mar-07	Mar-08	Mar-09
Thurrock:	8.0	8.0	9.0	11.0	11.3
England:	15.5	14.9	14.9	14.7	n/a

- 2.5 Average cost of an Independent Fostering Agency placement is currently around £800 per week. Placement in a residential unit generally starts around £2750 per week. The average cost of an in house foster placement is £500 per week. In addition to the issue of cost, an in-house placement is likely to be more local, and is easier to monitor for quality.
- 2.6 Despite efforts to maximise the use of in-house placements, some demand for external placements is inevitable, and constant vigilance is required to ensure that costs are contained as fully as possible. This is partly controlled through the ER5 agreement by which, with neighbouring authorities, Thurrock has managed to negotiate more competitive rates with an agreed selection of Independent Agencies.

3. ISSUES AND/OR OPTIONS:

- 3.1 Thurrock currently has 123 approved fostering households, with the potential for 196 approved places. However at any one time a proportion of these places will not be available, for example because of carers needing a temporary break, or to avoid jeopardising existing placements. Moreover, newly approved carers may need time to develop expertise in working with children who present more challenging behaviours, which generally arise with the older age group.
- 3.2 It is estimated that nationally there is a shortfall of foster carers in excess of eight thousand, and Thurrock needs to ensure that it is attractive in comparison to both neighbouring authorities and Independent Agencies.
- 3.3 In order to address the need for carers able to offer placements to more difficult to place children, in addition to the Therapeutic Fostering Scheme, Thurrock has a graded system of enhanced payments, based on levels 1, 2, and 3. Carers receive the different levels of payment based on assessment of their skills, and the difficulty of the work undertaken. The opportunity exists for foster carers to move up levels as they acquire experience.
- 3.4 It is essential that we maintain and increase our pool of carers, in order to reduce future reliance on external placements except in situations where a very specific need has been identified. In particular attention will need to be paid to the age profile of existing carers to ensure that the service is not affected by a number of carers approaching retirement at the same time.
- 3.5 In the year to March 2009 there were 24 new approvals of foster carers, across all categories. There have been 14 approvals to date this year, with a

number of requests for initial visits currently being pursued. A review will take place in the spring 2010, to evaluate the impact of separating out the Recruitment and Assessment functions as described above.

3.6 Significant resources are put into the support of foster placements through services based at Oaktree Resource Centre. This support has contributed to the fact that previous experiences of foster carers being “poached” by Independent Fostering Agencies have not been repeated recently. However, the provision of additional support services has been one of the selling points in persuading local authority foster carers to move to Independent Agencies.

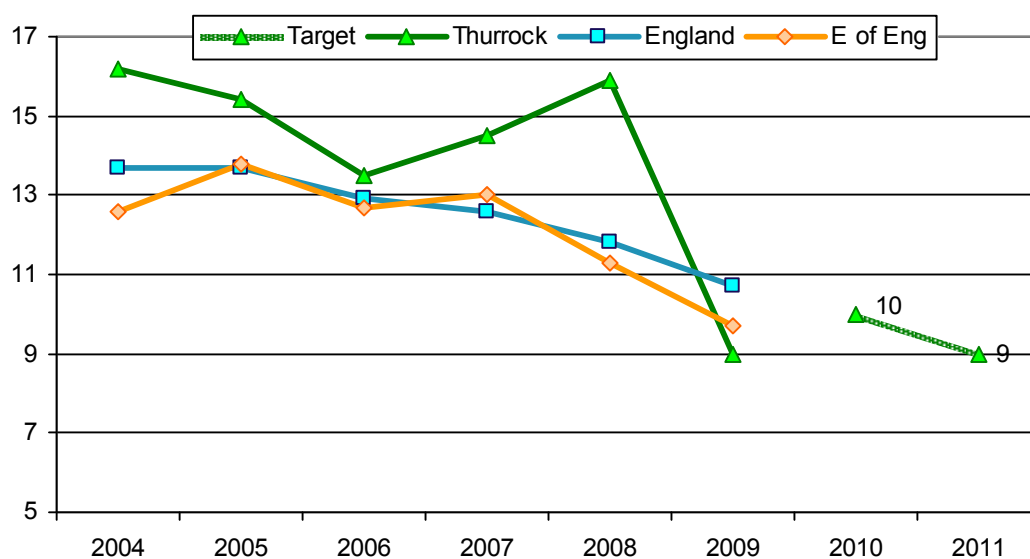
3.7 The fostering service currently makes a major contribution towards performance against National Performance Indicators

- NI 62 considers the percentage of young people with more than three placement moves since April 1st. The target is 10%, and performance for year-end 2008/09 was 9%. (Good performance is low.) This means that Thurrock is in the second quartile for performance nationally.

	Mar-06	Mar-07	Mar-08	Mar-09	Mar-10
Target:	x	x	x	x	10
Thurrock:	13.5	14.5	15.9	9.0	0.0
England:	12.9	12.6	11.8	10.7	n/a
E of England:	12.7	13.0	11.3	9.7	

Rank (/149):	92	108	136	47	
Quartile:	3	3	4	2	
Rk SN (/11):	6	7	11	3	

Dif from National:	-0.6	-1.9	-4.1	1.7	
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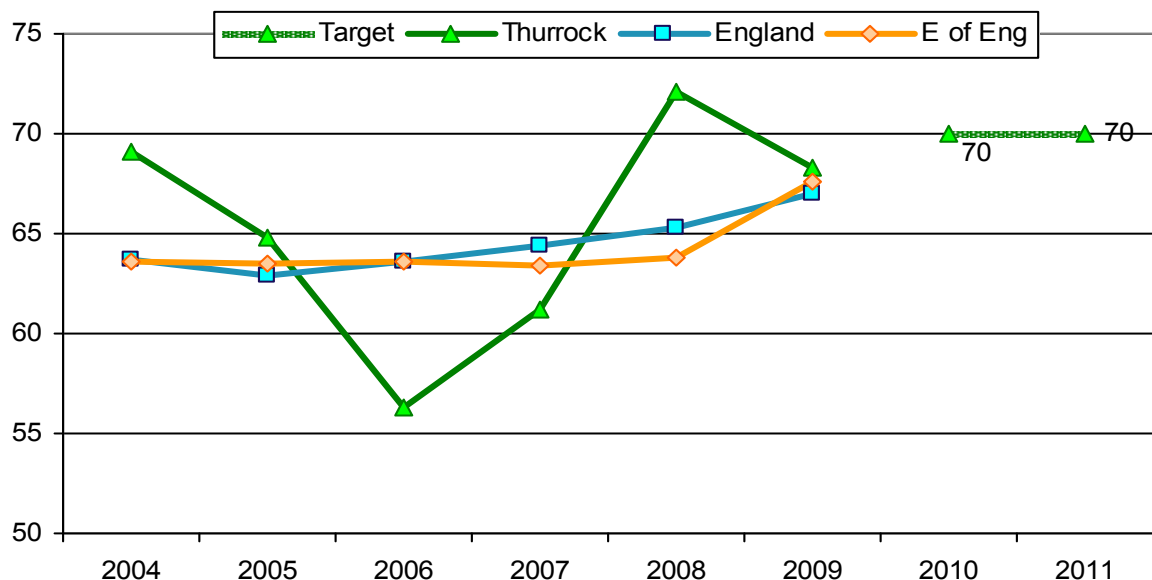


- NI 63 measures the percentage of children who have been looked after for 2.5 years who have been in their current placement for more than 2 years. The target is 70%, and performance for 2008/09 was 68.3% again placing Thurrock in the second quartile nationally. (Good performance is high.)

	Mar-06	Mar-07	Mar-08	Mar-09	Mar-10
Target:	x	x	x	x	70
Thurrock:	56.3	61.2	72.1	68.3	0.0
England:	63.6	64.4	65.3	67.0	
East of England:	63.6	63.4	63.8	67.6	

Rank (/148):	128	96	16	62	
Quartile:	4	3	1	2	
Rank SN (/11):	10	7	5	5	

Dif from National:	-7.3	-3.2	6.8	1.3	
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Both these indicators suggest Thurrock is performing well in achieving placement stability for young people. This performance is also linked to the positive work that the Oaktree resource centre does with looked after children and foster carers to support fragile placements. The Supporting Enhancing Local Foster Care (SELF) project run from Oaktree provides therapeutic support to foster carers to enable them to care for young people with complex needs.

- 3.8 Thurrock council has a high percentage of looked after children in foster care as opposed to residential. Of the 22 young people currently in residential care 17 have a permanent and substantial disability, receiving respite or 52 week long term residential care.

- 3.9 The work of assessing and monitoring private fostering arrangements is undertaken by one of the social workers in the team. However the Council also has a responsibility to publicise to members of the public their obligation to notify the local authority of such arrangements. As this was also an area subject to a specific inspection by Ofsted in August 2008, when the service was assessed as Satisfactory, work needs to be undertaken to review effectiveness and resourcing in this area.
- 3.10 The name of the supported lodgings component of the service is potentially confusing. In other authorities “supported lodgings” is used to refer to a more traditional tenant/landlord or landlady arrangement. In Thurrock it refers to a specific group of approved foster carers, and as such we may be “underselling” what is actually provided. Attention therefore will be given to the possibility of renaming this aspect of the service.
- 3.11 The Fostering Service is formally subject to a rigorous inspection at a minimum of once every three years. In April 2007 this responsibility passed from CSCI to Ofsted. The last inspection visit was in March 2008. The overall judgement was Satisfactory, indicating that the service is “sound”, with Good judgements on two of the five outcome areas assessed. At that time the Team Manager had only recently taken up his post, and he has taken action to address issues identified; work will be continuing to ensure compliance with Regulations and National Minimum Standards.
- 3.12 An audit of payments to foster carers was carried out as part of the approved internal audit plan in 2007/08. The overall conclusion of the audit was that the payments process provided “substantial assurance that risks material to the achievement of the organisation’s objectives for this area are adequately managed and controlled.”

4. IMPACT ON CORPORATE POLICIES, PRIORITIES, PERFORMANCE AND COMMUNITY IMPACT

- 4.1 The management of the Fostering service raises no specific issues in relation to Section 17 of the Crime & Disorder Act

5. IMPLICATIONS

5.1 Financial

Implications verified by: **Yannick Stupples-Whyley**
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There are no direct financial implications within the report.

5.2 Legal

There are no legal implications arising from this report.

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5.3 Diversity and Equality

Implications verified by: **Samson DeAlyn**
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There are no direct diversity implications arising from this report, as it is for information only.

5.4 Other implications (where significant) – i.e. Section 17, Risk Assessment, Health Impact Assessment, Sustainability, IT, Environmental

The management of the Fostering Service raises no specific issues in relation to Section 17 of the Crime & Disorder Act

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