

21 July 2021	ITEM: 10
Council	
Report of the Cabinet Member for Education and Children's Social Care	
Report of: Councillor Barry Johnson, Cabinet Member for Education and Children's Social Care	
This report is: Public	

Executive Summary

Thurrock, like the rest of the country, has been dealing with a global pandemic – as I write my first report as Cabinet Portfolio Holder for Children's Services, I want to start by thanking all our staff working with children and families both staff employed by the Council and all our partners, including schools, for the hard work and commitment they have shown to our children & young people and adults over the past year.

This report sets out the work we have undertaken over the past year however, my presentation will concentrate on my key priorities for the coming 12 months.

Appendix A to this report provides a summary of the resources available to Children's Services and the ESFA Dedicated Schools Grant budget for 2021/22.

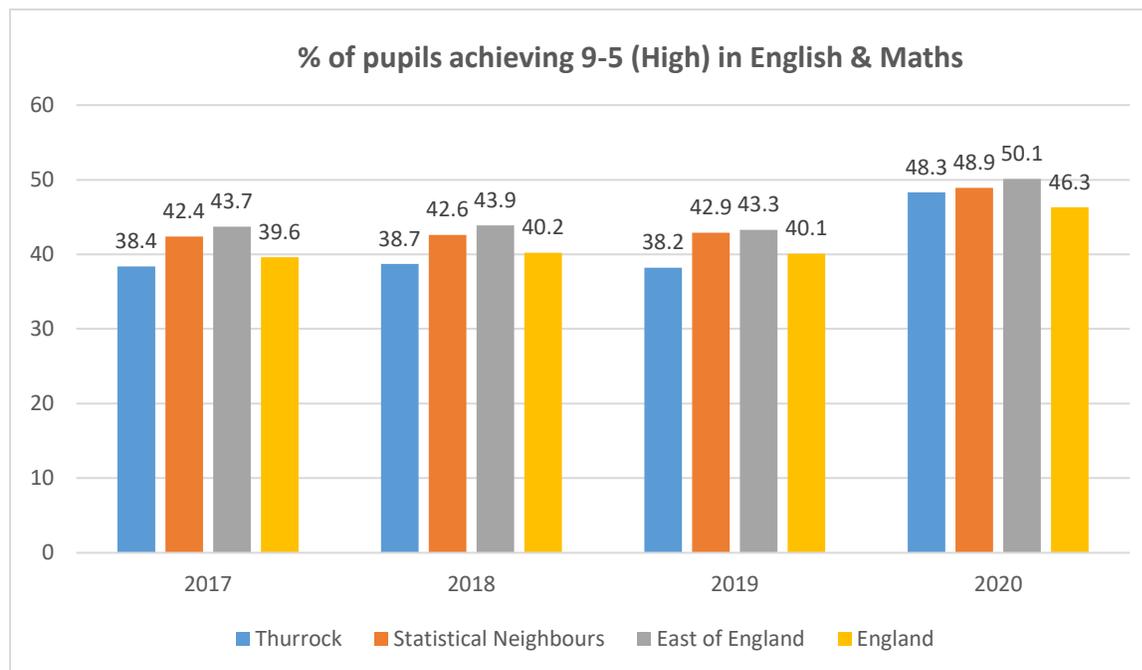
EDUCATION & SKILLS – supporting our children and young people and adults to achieve.

1. School Effectiveness

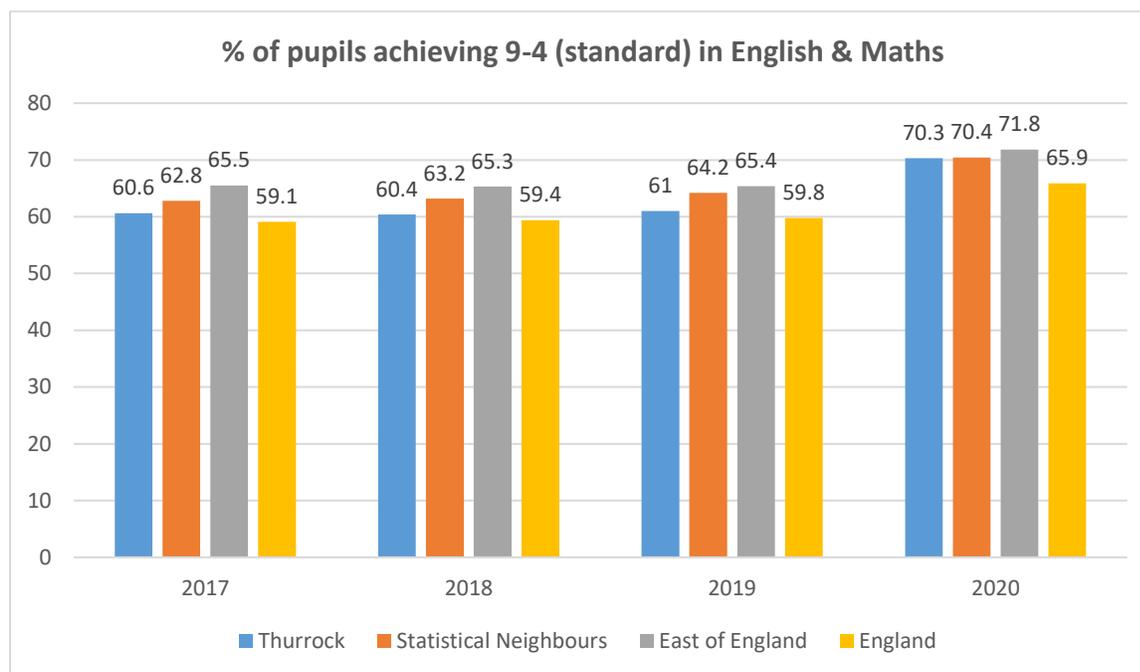
1.1 Whilst there is no attainment and progress data for primary aged pupils from 2019-20 and 2020-21 academic years, we have been able to monitor school attendance throughout this period. There have been periods of lockdown due to Covid where children were not required to attend school and remote learning was in place.

1.2 In secondary schools the government have published local authority data for GCSE results for 2020 but not individual schools' data. The data shows an improving picture.

% of Pupils achieving 9-5 pass in English and Maths



% of pupils achieving 9-4 (standard) in English & Maths



- 1.3 It must be remembered that GCSE results for 2019 were centre assessment grades as no pupils sat GCSE exams.
- 1.4 Due to the pandemic Ofsted suspended full inspections, however they did make monitoring visits to 11 schools in the borough, after which schools were expected to be open fully in September 2020 – December 2020. They made virtual visits to 3 secondary schools and 8 primary schools. These were not inspections but conversations about attendance and the offer of education being made to pupils since their return to school in September. No grades were given but the information from these visits fed into Ofsted's national reporting.
- 1.5 When schools were forced to close again in January 2021, most schools were able to move to remote learning fairly rapidly and the offers were varied across the borough. Most schools offered a blended approach of 'live' online lessons, some pre-recorded lessons and some set tasks.

During this period we monitored the attendance in school of children who were vulnerable (those with Education, Health & Care Plans; those open to social care and those whose parents were critical workers) and therefore able to attend school. Whilst attendance of these groups was low, schools were ensuring they were contacting pupils and their families to check on safeguarding and wellbeing, and also to monitor the engagement with online learning. This information was collected by the School Effectiveness Team and monitored to ensure all vulnerable children had been either attending schools or regularly contacted by the school and the school was satisfied they were safe, well and engaging with

remote learning. Data about children open to social care was also shared with Children's Social Care Managers so that the social workers could follow up. Where concerns were identified schools and parents were contacted.

Throughout the period of lockdown when schools were open to vulnerable pupils, the vast majority of Thurrock schools remained open. Some schools who are part of a Multi Academy Trust kept one site open for all vulnerable pupils allowing their other buildings to be closed.

- 1.6 When schools opened fully in March, well-rehearsed protocols for working in bubbles were in place. However, most schools were affected by Covid with cases of bubbles (classes or year groups) having to self-isolate due to a positive Covid cases. However, since the introduction of regular LFD testing for secondary pupils, staff and families in the borough, cases in schools have been very rare. It should be recognized that pupils across the country have had their education disrupted and in some cases children had lost learning and fallen behind. All of our school staff and pupils have shown great resilience throughout this period. All schools have developed a strong recovery curriculum, ensuring pupil's wellbeing was highest on the agenda as well as a high quality broad curriculum.
- 1.7 Over the Easter period the first sessions of the #HAF2021 Holiday Activities Food programme funded by DfE were rolled out in Thurrock. This provided 440 spaces for eligible children to attend holiday provision with activities, food, advice and signposting to other services. The summer holiday provision is already being organised which will see even more providers across Thurrock delivering this provision.

2. Early Years

There are 236 Early Years providers in Thurrock: 53 Day Nurseries or Pre-schools, 28 School based nursery classes and 155 childminders. Of these, only 3 are not yet rated good or outstanding by Ofsted, which is just 1.7%. Our Early Years Officers are working with those settings to ensure rapid improvement.

During the pandemic many early years providers remained open for the children of critical workers, vulnerable children and children with Education, Health & Care Plans (EHCPs). Our providers provided early education and childcare for approximately 450-500 children per week.

Since January most providers have opened, and numbers of children attending has risen gradually. The numbers of 3-4 years olds attending is in line with pre-pandemic spring terms. However the number of two year olds attending early education and childcare has not yet fully recovered.

Throughout the pandemic Officers have worked closely with settings to ensure their Covid protocols and risk assessments were in-line with the Public Health and Government guidelines.

3. Schools

There are 55 schools in Thurrock: 39 Primary schools, 13 secondary schools and 2 special schools. There is one pupil referral unit offering alternative provision.

As there have been no Ofsted Inspections of schools due to Covid-19, 92% of primary schools remain rated as good or outstanding by Ofsted. This places Thurrock at 49/152 local authorities for primary schools. Of the 13 secondary schools, ten have a current inspection grade whilst the other three are yet to have their first inspection. Of the ten schools, 70% are judged to be good or better by Ofsted. It is unlikely that the two newest schools without an inspection will be inspected in the near future

All of the primary schools are now academies. Twelve out of thirteen secondary schools are academies. Grays Convent High School is a Catholic voluntary aided school. The alternative provision is run by Olive Academies Trust. There are 12 Multi-Academy Trusts operating within Thurrock as well as a number of standalone academies.

4. Special Educational Needs and/or Disabilities. Andrea can you check data?

There was 1810 Education, Health & Care Plans (EHCPs) maintained by Thurrock in June 2021.

The national data for the percentage of EHCPs completed within twenty weeks is now available for 2020, it shows that 58% of EHCPs in England were issued within the twenty week statutory timeframe. Thurrock data for 2020 shows that 86% of EHCPs were completed within the statutory timescales, despite the Covid-19 pandemic interruption to normal working, school closures and the ability to hold assessments and other types of meetings. For the first half of this year 84% of EHCPs were finalised within 20 weeks.

This is a good news story as it places us in the top quartile in the Eastern Region and in the country. The data for East of England is that 59% of EHCPs were completed within the statutory 20 weeks' timescale and the average our statistical neighbours achieved was 65%.

64% of pupils with an EHCP have had their annual review completed so far and we are making a commitment to ensure that all pupils will have had their EHCP amended following the annual review by the end of this academic year.

The Statutory SEND Service is continuing to strengthen practices and works closely with health, social care, parents, carers, schools, colleges and children and young people to improve the quality of Education, Health and Care plans and therefore outcomes for children and young people with SEND.

5. Education Welfare Service

COVID forced the service to reconsider policies, processes and working practice as the service is now delivered remotely. As a result, service delivery became even more streamlined and efficient. The changes have been so positive that many will be retained into the new academic year.

At the outset of COVID all cases were risk assessed and all families received at least one welfare call. The more vulnerable families receiving more regular welfare calls. Officers were proactive and stepped outside of their usual remit to support families to obtain their free school meals & vouchers, addressed laptop and internet need for remote learning and resolved transport issues for those most vulnerable or key workers children needing to accessing face to face provision.

There was a significant impact on the number of referrals for attendance matters as schools shut and, upon reopening, took a more sympathetic approach to absence matters.

Since the start of this academic year the service has received 186 new referrals. There were 27 Admission issues, 18 Attendance, 60 CME (Children Missing Education) & 81 'Missing' (whereabouts of child unknown). 132 of these cases were resolved and closed. There are currently 70 active cases.

There was an unprecedented increase in the numbers of families choosing Elective Home Education and this was reflected across the country.

Since the start of the Academic year there have been 285 new EHE cases of which 84 have been closed. 3 referred as CME out of borough, 3 referred as EHE out of borough, 3 left the UK, 41 were returned to a Thurrock School and 18 were returned to a school out of borough & 16 are CME in Thurrock either in the process of a School Attendance Order or waiting for a school start date.

A further 62 EHE cases, opened prior to the start of this academic year have also been closed.

There are currently 370 EHE open cases. 17 of these have an EHCP and the EHE Officer is proactive in the EHCP review process.

As restrictions are lifting the Officers have resumed 'doorstep visits' and continue to share good practice with neighboring authorities to ensure the best quality service for Thurrock families.

6. Virtual School (VS)

The Virtual School Head Teacher is in charge of promoting the educational achievement of all the children looked after by Thurrock Council.

The school does not exist in real terms, or as a building. Children do not attend it - they remain the responsibility of the school at which they are enrolled. The VS is an organisation which has been created for the effective co-ordination of educational services at a strategic and operational level.

In January 2021 there were 250 children and young people that were monitored during the period of national lockdown. This covered our pupils from Nursery 2 through to year 13 who were placed both in and out of borough across over 130 educational settings.

In April 2021 there are currently 296 pupils who are being monitored and supported to promote good educational outcomes. Of the total number of pupils 38.8% have an identified Special Educational Need or Disability. This is higher than non-looked after children but is lower than the national figure of CLA with SEND which is 55.5%.

6.1 Covid 19 Strategy and Virtual School Response – January to April 2021

There were a number of actions that the VS took as the result of schools closing and lockdown being imposed in January 2021. In order to obtain a clear picture of provision and to be able to respond to the changing situation, the VS put a number of actions and measures in place:

- The Virtual School Head Teacher (VSHT) wrote to all carers and social workers to provide guidance on the local authorities' position regarding education for our children in care. This guidance advised that the ideal situation would be for all of our Children Looked After (CLA) to access a face to face education offer if provided. However, it took into consideration that decisions to attend school were based on a case by case basis which met the needs of pupils and the current home situations. For example, if their foster carer was shielding.
- An expectation was set that all CLA would have an education offer, whether face to face, or online. The decision to keep our pupils at home was a joint one made between the care placement, the social worker, their manager and the Virtual School. If schools/colleges were requesting that pupils attend school, we were supportive of this decision.
- In order to monitor the quality of the education offer and the engagement from our children, we requested that schools/colleges completed a 1 page summary sheet every week which informed the VS team of the situation and enabled the VS to assess the levels of attendance and engagement in learning. Feedback from educational professionals was excellent and they

were very supportive of this process. It enabled the VS to provide challenge, support and resources where necessary.

- For those attending school, the VS continued daily monitoring of attendance through the use of Welfare Call.
- The VS team met weekly to assess risk and barriers to learning in order to ensure that our pupils were receiving the most appropriate educational offer that suited their needs.
- The VS monitored the weekly data to see who was accessing face to face provision. This data showed a steady increase in school attendance during the lockdown as, in the majority of cases, being in the school building was the preferable approach.
- The post 16 pupils, in the main, received an online offer from their colleges or 6th form providers. For any post 16 pupil who was Not in Education Employment or Training (NEET), we held monthly strategy meetings about these young people and organised additional resources such as online courses for them to access. This continued throughout lockdown.
- The VS regularly had contact with carers in order to triangulate a range of perspectives and information around provision and engagement.
- In terms of monitoring mental health and well-being, the VS continued to request that the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) was completed as part of the Personal Education Plan (PEP) process to ensure that conversations and actions were taking place to support emotional well-being. There is a monthly SDQ meeting which takes places with social care, the virtual school and EWMHS to discuss distribution of support for mental health. This continued throughout the period being reported.
- Personal Education Plan meetings continued to take place as normal (i.e. every term) to ensure that this statutory part of the care plan was maintained and that education was formally monitored and recorded through this process.
- As soon as it was possible the VS continued to distribute the Letterbox Booktrust books so that the pupils in Nursery through to Year 9 received their books and learning materials.
- In terms of Pupil Premium Plus funding for Years R to 11 schools were encouraged to apply for this fund in order that they could use it to purchase additional resources and learning opportunities. If this was not applied for, the VS used it to support individual pupils as necessary. This was in the form of IT provision, tuition or additional resources.
- Designated teachers were regularly kept informed and updated throughout the period to ensure that they were aware of the work that the VS was completing and to know that the team were available for support and advice.
- If lack of IT resources was a barrier to learning, the VS team distributed laptops to a range of our pupils.
- The VS continued to commission the use of tuition providers as identified in the school improvement plan in order that key year groups received additional intervention to support with end of year assessments.

Post lockdown the Virtual School has continued to complete the core statutory functions relating to all of the varied work that the team do. Tuition has continued for those pupils who need it, even when returning to school. Additionally year groups 5 and 10 have started their tuition programmes to support their tests in 2022 and a range of resources to support exam revision has been provided to year 10s. To support early reading and phonic development, all of our Nursery age children through to year 2 have received reading and phonics based resources. The VS have recently purchased kindles and will be distributing these in the forthcoming weeks to promote a love of reading and key skills.

For the summer term, we are trialing mentoring for certain pupils who may be finding school difficult to manage. The aim of this is to promote confidence, self-esteem and resilience. Referrals have been made and mentors should be assigned within the next few weeks.

For those transitioning to university this year the VS will be providing laptops to support our young people as they continue their educational journey. One amazing piece of news the VS received during the lockdown period was that one of our Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children, who came to us aged 15, has been accepted to study at Oxford University. A fantastic achievement.

7. Inspire Youth Services

- 7.1 **September Guarantee 2020** stands at 100% ensuring that every 16 year old had a place of learning reserved for them in September 2020. September Guarantee 2021 is on the same trajectory.
- 7.2 **Grangewaters** - This year we have enhanced our exciting SEND offer at Grangewaters – young people with SEND access Grangewaters for a range of training sessions getting them ready for the world of work and preparing them for adulthood. The coming year will see us undertake a comprehensive review of a number of assets including Grangewaters to ensure we are offering the best services in the correct environment.
- 7.3 **SEND Post 16** service is reassessing its post 16 provision and its quality assurance – the service is actively working with the young people to enable provision to meet the young people's needs.
- 7.4 **Inspire** - in partnership with TCHC, have secured **OnTrack2**, a Youth Employment Initiative programme for young people aged 15-25 in Thurrock. It is part funded through the European Social Fund and managed by the Department for Work and Pensions. This 2.5 year programme is a £3.7m match funded project which plans to formally engage and sign up 1088 young people who will be able to benefit from the range of support on offer.

7.5 **Head Start Housing** - provides suitable accommodation to Thurrock's care leavers. It has a portfolio of 26 properties ranging from 1 bed to 5 beds, with varying levels of floating support to 24/7 provision. Each care leavers' skills and behaviours are considered, alongside their needs to enable selection of the right type of accommodation. Care leavers receive support from their PA and from the Head Start officer who ensures the property is, and remains, compliant with health and safety, is furnished with a bed, wardrobe, chest of drawers, wifi is available, utility bills are paid and blinds as well as lamp shades fitted. Care leavers are supported to access housing benefit and, when they are ready, education, employment or training. Since December 2018, working closely with Housing, 20 beds have been identified for exclusive use by care leavers. Working cross directorate, a panel meets to consider suitability of move on into social housing.

7.6 **Kickstart** - Thurrock Council has committed to provide 30 paid work placements for unemployed local young people, aged from 18-24 years. DWP promote the posts and provides advance notification of a young person's interest; who forwards their CV and is invited to attend a pre selection employability skills course. The course is delivered by Thurrock Adult Community College over 25 hours (the same weekly commitment as the placement provides). 15 (of 30) successful applicants were selected on this basis. A different approach has been applied to fill the remaining posts. If all employment checks complete without a hitch, there are 7 opportunities remaining. In the event of more teams creating opportunities, DWP is open to extending the contract to meet the demand. So far, posts have been created by Thurrock Adult Community College, Commissioning, HR, Waste, School Improvement, Housing, Catering and Inspire. Early feedback is extremely positive from both recruiting managers and the post holder. The recruit takes part in the corporate induction, regular peer group meetings, is supported by their team to learn the role and, later on, a Careers Advisor to ensure they secure sustainable employment.

8. **Thurrock Adult Community College**

Graded as Good by Ofsted and as such we offer a range of courses to support getting into employment across the Authority. The college also offers a wellbeing programme for individuals and families and bespoke programmes for young people with high needs to support their transition into adulthood. The adult skills agenda will remain a key focus during the current year as the country works on its recovery plan. The college has started to realise its long term ambition to level up access to learning by opening new localised learning hubs enabling residents to develop essential skills closer to where they live. They will have a choice of online, in person or blended delivery models based on their individual preferences.

9. **Home to School Transport**

9.1 **Covid 19 – Seamless and consistent delivery**

The Passenger Transport Unit is continuing to deliver transport via the DfE funding to all vulnerable children until the end of the academic year, this will include Post 16 SEND, children at the Beacon Hill Academy who travel in hybrid bubbles with support from the public transport operator Ensign, to ensure all children regardless of whether they are entitled or not can continue travel to school.

- **The Furlough scheme** – this ended in March 2021 when transport returned to full capacity.
- **Risk Assessment** – the only aspect of managing risk is that the DfE have suggested that all secondary age students continue to wear masks until the end of the academic year. We are awaiting confirmation of this. There have been no issues and operators have managed risk extremely well.
- **Parental Risk** – there are some parents who continue to feel anxious although the majority are confident in the service being delivered. When schools returned in March the take up of transport was high.

9.2 **Home to School Travel and Transport policy update**

The policy has been updated and reviewed by our legal team. The recommendations from cabinet have been agreed and incorporated into the revised policy. The policy is now available on Thurrock Council's website.

9.3 **Independent Travel Training**

Travel training is not yet in place due to COVID restrictions, however it is planned that this will commence from June 2021, first cohort of post 16 SEND students for September 2020.

9.4 **Travel Demand Management**

A communication plan has been developed and approved in collaboration with an external provider to harness positive behaviours around sustainable travel such as cycling, walking and the use of scooters during the pandemic. The plan will be disseminated to all schools and parents by the end of May 2021 to encourage continuation of the positive modes of travel from home to school.

9.5 **Sustainable Modes of Travel Strategy (SMOT)**

The Children's Transport Team are continuing to work collaboratively with the Transport Management Team, the Road Safety Team and Public Health to revise the 2015 SMOT. It is envisaged that this will be in place for September 2021.

This year we have seen a dramatic increase in the number of schools providing returns to the 'hands up' survey. This survey collected data about how the children and young people travelled to school on the data collection day. In

previous years this data has been collected in a number of ways by requesting travel plans. The last time data was collected only 12 schools responded. This year 37 schools responded via the 'hands up' survey, which is a significant improvement.

- **Accreditation** – There has been no change to the 37% (20 schools) accredited due to COVID, however we are looking to improve this percentage. We have utilised bespoke letters developed by the external provider to support schools in identifying areas they are doing well in relation to sustainable travel as well as areas for improvement.
- **SEND and Active Travel** – there has been no further development in this area due to COVID restrictions. We are looking at Beacon Hill, Treetops as well as Olive AP Academy to run bespoke courses around sustainable travel. This will be re-considered from September 2021.

9.6 Free School Programme and School Expansion

The Council has a statutory duty to ensure that every child in Thurrock has a school place. We continue to achieve this with strong working relationships with our schools.

In relation to pupil place planning we are in the process of compiling the next plan which will include forecasts from 2020-2025. Draft forecasts suggests there are no major concerns at this stage, however pupil data continually changes and this is reviewed on a monthly basis.

In respect of school places for primary and secondary for September 2021, we do not, at this stage, have any requirement to increase school places and therefore no bulge classes are planned this year, again this will be monitored on a monthly basis as we receive late applications for processing.

Following National Offer Day for secondary places 9.5% were offered a school outside of the Thurrock. The percentage for primary out of borough offers this year was 2.26%.

School Capital Programme Update:

- Benyon Primary expansion from 1 form of entry to 2 form of entry completed at Easter this year, taking the schools Published Admission Number to 60. Phase two of the St Clere's expansion programme has now completed.
- Abbots Hall Primary is expanding from 1FE to 2FE as approved by Cabinet. Feasibility works have been completed. Following a procurement exercise an architect to work on the detailed design is about

to be appointed with a view to completing works ready for September 2022.

- Thames Park Free School planning has now been approved and the new school is programmed to open September 2022.
- Orsett Heath Free School is due to go to planning committee in August 2021. The public consultation on this scheme will commence on the 4th June 2021 and complete on 20th June 2021. The delivery programme is in delay and the school is currently scheduled to open January/February 2023.
- The Harrier Free School that will be located in Aveley, which is part of the REAch2 Academy Trust and is currently scheduled to open in September 2022. The planning application for this scheme will be submitted May/June 2021.

10. Specialist Resource Provision

10.1 Beacon Hill

Beacon Hill Special School has a total of 75 places commissioned by Thurrock for pupils with Profound and Multiple Learning Difficulties many of which have complex medical needs. Due to the extreme vulnerability of these pupils the school provided a wide ranging and complex offer of support for the pupils and their families during the lockdown which they accessed from home.

There was a range of equipment and resources sent home to the families and the support for learning and therapies was provided through on-line activities and regular liaison with the children and their families. This included new and highly innovative activities to ensure they were able to continue to access, speech and language, physio and occupational therapy through video guidance and interactive sessions. The school had very close contact with all their children and this program of support was welcomed and much praised by the families of these children.

10.2 Treetops

Treetops special school has a total of 309 places commissioned by Thurrock Local Authority for pupils with complex needs including autism and for pupils with moderate learning difficulties. The school has worked over the year to continue to provide an outstanding service to these pupils who are taught in varying class groupings and on individual programs of highly specialised support. During the pandemic lockdown, the school continued to provide a service for all of its pupils with some attending classes particularly those with the most complex needs and others accessing on-line learning with a range of additional support being provided by the school staff to the pupils and their families. The school managed a highly complex system of separating class groupings whilst enabling those children with autism and complex needs to access school in order to ensure both

the children and their families were supported appropriately during this time. The support provided by the school during this time has been highly praised by parents at the school.

10.3 Treetops Free School

The new Treetops Free School building will now open in Easter 2022 offering places for pupils with moderate learning difficulties and for pupils with autism. During the course of this year we have developed additional places at Treetops School through the provision of temporary accommodation which has allowed two additional classes of pupils to access special school places.

From September 2021 the Free School will officially open with the pupils in the temporary classrooms being joined by 4 other classes of pupils who will initially access accommodation within Treetops school site. This has been enabled by an innovative approach developing a new sports hall to be temporarily converted and used as classroom accommodation until the new building is completed in Easter 2022.

10.4 Mainstream Resource Bases

Thurrock has 6 Primary Resource Bases for pupils with SEND; 2 Primary Inclusion Bases for pupils at risk of, or who have been excluded, and 2 Nursery Resource Bases for pupils with SEND. The Primary Resource Bases cover Speech and Language Communication needs, Hearing Impairment, Visual Impairment; Learning Difficulties and Complex Needs; and Social Emotional and Mental Health Needs.

Thurrock has 4 Secondary Resource Bases for pupils with SEND covering Speech and Language Needs and Autism; Hearing Impairment; Visual Impairment and Social Emotional and Mental Health Needs.

In total we have 168 places in our Special Resource Bases in Thurrock. All of these bases continued to support their pupils and their families through a range of interventions including ongoing attendance at the schools, virtual delivery and work activities all supported through regular contact with parents and the families.

10.5 Independent Specialist Out borough Placements

There are currently 22 children and young people in Residential Non-Maintained and Independent Schools outside Thurrock Local Authority.

There are 14 children under the age of 16 in 52 week residential specialist placements. These children have complex special educational needs that cannot

be met in other settings. There are a further 5 children under the age of 16 in 39 week residential school placement.

We have continued to work closely with all of these providers to ensure these children's needs have been appropriately met including, Quality Assurance visits to all of these schools in addition to the regular series of reviews for all pupils with Education Health and Care plans, and the Reviews, monitoring visits and Personal Education Plan visits for those children who are looked after.

11. Access and Inclusion

We have continued the process of holding 3 weekly Primary and Secondary Inclusion Panels for all schools within the Local Authority. These panels ensure that the Fair Access Protocols are appropriately implemented ensuring that pupils who come under this, who are often particularly vulnerable, get access to a school placement in a timely manner with a fair distribution of these pupils across all schools in Thurrock. All schools in Thurrock have continued to engage positively in this process including during the lockdown period when we continued to offer places to pupils moving into the Borough. The Inclusion Panels also facilitate the process of managed moves for pupils at risk of permanent exclusion to avoid where possible the need for this, and enable a fresh start at a new school. The Panels also oversee the reintegration of pupils who have been previously excluded back into mainstream provision from our Alternative Provision.

Over the course of the lockdown there was an expected significant fall in the number of permanent exclusions from school. However despite the increased emphasis from schools in supporting pupils returning from lockdown, taking into account the difficulties this has presented to them, there has been a pattern of increased exclusions in recent weeks although still below the average for the year. During the course of the year there have been 9 pupils reintegrated back into mainstream education from Alternative Provision and 22 managed moves to new schools for pupils at risk of permanent exclusion.

12. Wellbeing and Mental Health Services

The School Wellbeing Service (SWS) has been fully established this year providing a range of activities and support for schools across Thurrock. There has been close co-ordination and work with the Health services, and Third Sector service supported by input and supervision from the Educational Psychology Service (EPS) to ensure there has been a joined up approach to wellbeing and mental health services in schools. All schools have worked on an action plan for wellbeing and have had access to a range of training and support for school staff and pupil activities with reflective sessions for staff groups being provided which have been very well received.

The DfE sponsored programme of support for wellbeing and mental health developed with the Anna Freud Centre has been supported through a new package of online materials, recorded training sessions and direct support for staff in schools. This has been developed and delivered by the Educational Psychology Service and the School Wellbeing Service as the Well Being for Education Resilience Programme and has proved to be a successful programme building on a range of approaches to support schools. During lockdown the EPS and SWS developed and delivered a telephone support line for schools and parents to provide a point of direct access to these services. In addition to this packages of support and advice, materials have been developed and delivered. The regular network meeting for all wellbeing leads in schools have been well attended throughout the year and have fed back positively on the work being carried out in this area.

13. Dedicated Schools Grant

Nationally, all local authorities and the education system have struggled to meet the additional demand for payments in support of children with Education Health and Care plans (EHCP); for out of borough placements, independent special school residential placements and for special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) top up payments.

The high needs block remained a significant issue for Thurrock, with the number of EHCP's increasing by 9%, in 2020/21. This has required both additional top up funding to be paid to Schools and Academies and an increase in demand for specialist placements.

The DSG has a carried forward deficit into 2021/22 of £1.883m. This is a decrease of £0.095m from 2019/20. Discussions continue with the ESFA and the Schools Forum on options available to reduce demand for EHCP's and to increase Thurrock's Local Offer. A meeting is scheduled with ESFA in July to discuss Thurrock's DSG Management Plan.

CHILDREN'S SOCIAL CARE AND EARLY HELP

14. Keeping children safe

The most significant challenge for the service, and for the children, young people and families we work with, has been the global pandemic during the past year). This has required us to be creative and adaptive in our working practices, in order to ensure children and families have been supported and safeguarded in these difficult circumstances. The service responded quickly and in a child focused way that ensured our most vulnerable children, young people and their families continued to receive a strong service during this past year. The service has worked closely with partners and families of children to both protect and maintain a constant vigilance for those on the edge of care. Practice has been

adapted to ensure the safety and protection of both staff members, and the children and their families and carers with whom we work.

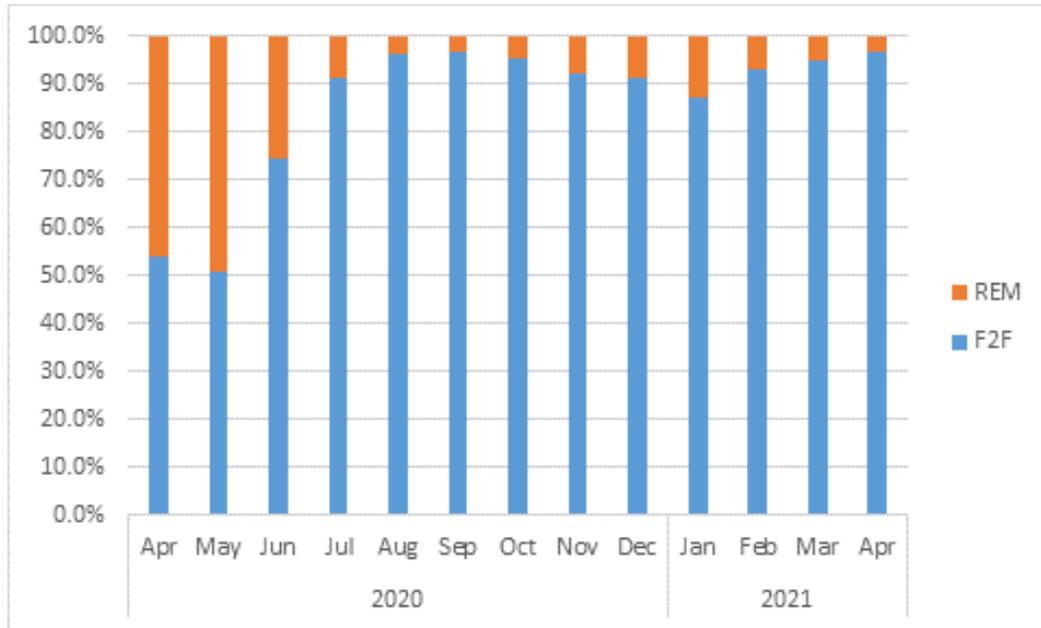
15. Quality of Practice

Thurrock has invested in the development of Signs of Safety (SoS) as a practice approach to provide a focus on recognition of risk, engaging family strengths to deliver safety and wellbeing. The embedding of SoS has led to improvements in practice across the service and improvements in communication and information sharing with partners. The Framework has been applied across services supporting consistency for families and a shared way of working among practitioners.

Feedback indicates the SoS approach is welcomed by practitioners, partners and families providing clarity of goals of the work. The recently published (10.5.2021) "SW Health Check" undertaken by the Local Government Association (LGA), for Thurrock shows a very good score from staff regarding a strong and clear social work framework. The LSCP is taking the lead on the framework being applied by partner agencies.

Quality Assurance and case audit is impacting on social care practice with more cases achieving a good grade or better in 70% of the last audits. Quality of practice is monitored by audit, including multi-agency audits, performance data, service reports and feedback from complaints and compliments from partners and service users. A mixture of themed and routine audits have been used to sustain learning from audit and to strengthen management oversight and feedback to practitioners. A new audit programme has been devised for 2021/22 based upon feedback from the service and discussion with managers. Generic and thematic audits have been replaced with audits focusing on specific service areas, with the aim to maximise the impact of the learning on practice.

Meetings and panels have continue to take place remotely and children physically visited and seen where it is safe and appropriate to do so, and a high proportion of contact with children has remained face to face. The chart below shows visits to children during the pandemic year, starting with almost 50% of visits in April and May 2020 being remote visits, moving to face to face physical visiting almost exclusively through to April 2021. Social workers and managers are clear that children and young people need to be physically seen, in order to effectively safeguard them and at the end of May 2021 98% of children were seen face to face.



REM is remote visits and F2F is face to face visits

16. MASH:

The Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH) has successfully maintained a consistent application of thresholds with a positive culture of providing support and challenge to partner agencies.

We have seen considerable fluctuations in demand this year because of the Covid-19 pandemic. Overall, contacts and referrals have reduced by approximately 10% in 2020/21 compared to 2019/20 impacted by Covid restrictions. However, we are starting to see an increase in demand as restrictions ease.

We have identified greater complexity in the contacts received by our Multi-agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH) and this has resulted in a greater conversion rate to referrals into Children's Social Care.

17. Early Help and Intervention:

Our Prevention and Support Service (PASS) undertakes time-limited bespoke work with families who do not require statutory intervention. The focus is on providing the right level of support at the right time for families to prevent escalation. There is strong partnership working between the PASS Service, statutory teams and partner agencies. We are currently completing an evaluation of the outcomes achieved for families using the service.

The allocations to early help has noticeably increased during 2020/21, this is reflected in the total number of step downs in year at 327 in comparison to

2019/20 when there were 139 cases stepped down to early help. We have also seen a fluctuation in the number of Early Help Episodes started in 2020/21 from 29 episodes started in April 2020 when there were national restrictions to 160 episodes started in March 2021 as restrictions have eased. This is a pattern seen throughout the year as Covid restrictions have changed. There were a total of 1044 episodes started in 2020/21 in comparison to 1099 in 2019/20. This performance would appear to mirror the reduction in contacts and referrals in 2020/21.

18. Children in Need (CIN) and Children subject to a Child Protection (CP) Plan:

Thurrock's CIN cohort was 389 per 10,000 in 2019/20 and has been maintained at 388 in 2020/21. Thurrock is above statistical neighbours at 322 and National performance at 324. We have seen an increased complexity of cases referred during the Covid pandemic which may have impacted on numbers of children open on a CIN plan. This is despite the reduction in contacts and referrals. We are, however, reviewing and working closely with partners and Early Help to ensure that children are not receiving a statutory service where it is not required and universal or early help services are better placed to support children and their families.

The number of children subject to a Child Protection Plan has reduced from 173 in 2019/20 (39.5 per 10,000) to 110 in 2020/21 (24.6 per 10,000), which is below the statistical neighbour average. This represents a 36% reduction over the past two years. This can be attributed to a combination of factors, including the appropriate application of threshold, clear and robust processes, introduction of Child Protection and Child in Need surgeries to provide case challenge and oversee progression, and the impact of Covid-19. There are no children who have been subject to a Child Protection Plan of over two years duration.

19. Strong and Effective Partnership:

The Local Safeguarding Children's Partnership (LSCP) is well embedded following an update of its structure in 2019. It is well-supported by its multi-agency partners. A new independent Chair/Scrutineer was appointed in April 2021.

Our Brighter Futures Early Help strategy is established and led by a multi-agency Board chaired by the DCS. The Strategy is currently being updated.

There is a multi-agency commitment to MASH. A quarterly MASH Strategic Board provides scrutiny and challenge to all partners. The governance of this has recently transferred to the LSCP.

There are effective partnership responses to CE and Gang-related issues. There is a dedicated Gang and CE Senior Practitioner across YOS and Childrens Social Care who works closely and links in with partner agencies.

Throughout the pandemic there has been good and effective communication and collaboration between Children's Social Care and the schools in Thurrock in respect of vulnerable children. Children in Need have been provided with laptops, school meals and food parcels where necessary. Free school meals were provided for those eligible throughout the school holiday periods up to and including Easter. In addition, the Corporate Director and Assistant Directors for Children's Social Care and Education have attended weekly meetings with CEOs of the Academy Trusts and the Leader of the Primary and Secondary forums to discuss any emerging trends and ensure effective communication between schools and Children's Social Care.

20. Care Applications and Children Looked After:

In Thurrock, the rate of care applications per 10,000 children was 14.3 in 2019-20 (62 applications). This was a decrease on the previous year. The rate in Thurrock is higher than the national rate of 10.8 for 2019-20. As of April 2021 there are currently 49 active care proceedings relating to 90 children and Thurrock made 77 care (s31) applications in 2020/21. This represents a 15% (-14 applications) decrease from the previous year.

The number of Children Looked After has remained stable over the past two years from 298 (68.1 per 10,000) in 2019-20 to 301 (67.4 per 10,000) in 2020-21. This represents an increase of 1% which remains in line with the statistical neighbour average [70.0 per 10,000]. Most other local authorities have seen increases in the number of children looked after over the last two years, with the national increase of 2% in this time.

All cases are reviewed to ensure the correct children come in to care; application of thresholds for Children Looked After (CLA) are consistently applied; and court proceedings are only issued where necessary. This oversight of care entry has been effective in supporting timely removal in the best interests of a child, and ensuring all options within the family network are fully explored.

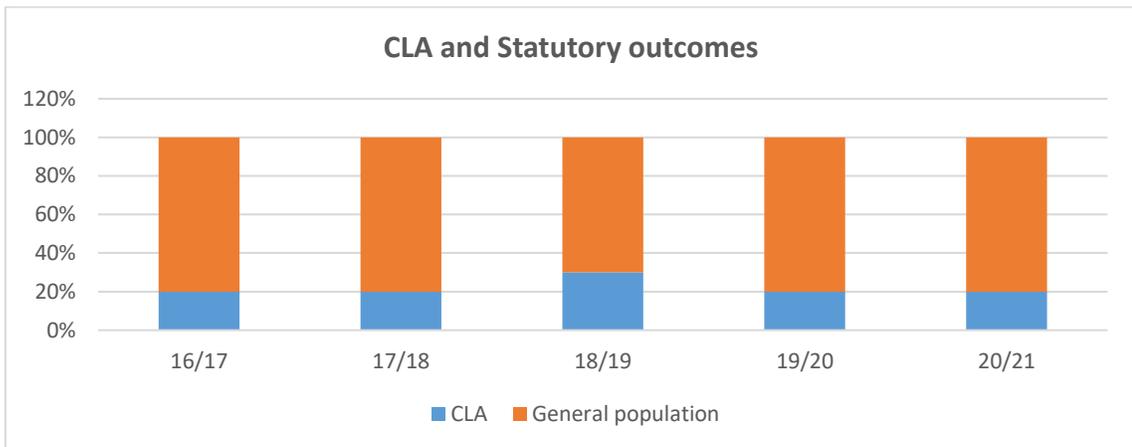
With the ongoing support of the Eastern Region protocol, the overall number of UASC has reduced from previous years and stabilised, as young people are dispersed across the region. In 2018/19 the number of UASC remaining allocated to Thurrock had increased to 35, however in 2019/20 there were 21 UASC and in 2020/21 there were 24.

21. Contact:

During the Covid-19 restrictions we have continued to prioritise contact between children in care and their birth parents and family. We have adopted a blended approach to contact with children under the age of three being prioritised for face-to-face contact. Our contact centre, Oaktree, increased the level of face-to-face contact over the course of the pandemic while adhering to all the government advice regarding safety measures. Contact for older children has been facilitated virtually and in the community, as the weather has allowed.

22. YOS:

In 2020-21 there were 46 children open to the Youth Offending Service with statutory outcomes, out of which 9 were Children Looked After, representing 20%. 2 of these children were looked after by other authorities and placed in Thurrock. Of the 9 Children Looked After, 56% were from the BAME community.



The throughput of the Youth Offending Service in 2020-21 has been significantly affected by COVID-19 and the closure of the Courts. This has resulted in delays in children being sentenced and lower numbers of young people being referred to YOS for statutory intervention.

There has been an increase in youth violence, involving bladed articles, in the last 3 months. The LSCP are undertaking a thematic review on youth violence, with a focus on learning from best practice around youth violence. A multi-agency response is in place and actions are overseen by the Youth Crime Governance Board and the Community Safety Partnership. This will be a focus for 2021/22.

23. Youth Detention Accommodation

Thurrock has had 6 children subject to Youth Detention Accommodation Orders in 2020-21. Under the Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2012, any child that is made subject to a Youth Detention Accommodation Order

(remand in custody) by the Courts automatically becomes looked after by the local authority. Of the 6 children made subject to Youth Detention Accommodation Orders in 2020/21 there was an overrepresentation of young people from Black and Minority Ethnic Groups as 5 (83%) were from the BAME community.

24. Out of court disposal panel

During 2020-21 the out of court disposal panel dealt with 43 offences relating to 33 children, of which 5 children had looked after status. This equates to 15% and is in line with the percentage of children looked after from Thurrock in the criminal justice system. All 5 children were diverted away from the criminal justice system with identified support from the YOS partnership. Thurrock YOS and Essex Police are committed to the national protocol¹ aimed to reduce the criminalisation of Children Looked After. This approach will be supported with a local pan-Essex protocol to ensure there is a focus on diverting any child (where possible) who is Looked After from the Criminal Justice System.

25. Participation:

There have been several very successful Participation and Inclusion events with cohorts of children over the past 12 months, such as the 'Thurrock's Got Talent' event. The Children in Care Council (CICC) have met bi-monthly as a group and the Portfolio Holder, Corporate Director, and Assistant Director have attended meetings to gauge young people's views and feedback. Members of the Children in Care Council have attended Corporate Parenting committee meetings, and have also facilitated children's panels for staff recruitment interviews. In January 2021 the CICC were consulted about the Children in Care Pledge, providing detailed feedback and recommendations.

The 'Mind of my Own' app is promoted at each participation event, as a forum for young people to share their views. The Young Voices bi-monthly newsletter was launched in June 2020 to share learning, good news and promote upcoming participation events and opportunities. This publication includes a young person's blog which highlights topical matters, such as the journey of an unaccompanied asylum seeker. The most recent Blog in March 2021 featured a young person who delivered a training session to social workers about the power of participation.

Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs) achieve very effective participation in CLA Reviews with the majority (85.5%) of over-4-year-olds taking part, or if not, sharing their views prior to the meetings

26. Aftercare:

¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-protocol-on-reducing-criminalisation-of-looked-after-children>

The Aftercare Service has maintained good communication with care leavers to limit their isolation and provide practical and emotional support. The service has provided financial support to the young people, based upon their personal circumstances, with additional financial support made available in early 2021 from the Covid Winter Grant. This has supported 275 young people with food and utility costs.

All Care Leavers are assigned a Personal Advisor at 16 years of age to assist and support young people with transition planning. There has been good partnership working between Social Care and Housing, resulting in a Joint Housing Protocol for Care Leavers, an improved offer to young people supporting them to prepare for Adulthood, early transition planning and improving tenancy sustainability.

Online training and virtual support for Care Leavers has been key through Covid-19. The Aftercare Service has worked hard to 'Keep in Touch' regularly with all Care Leavers to reduce isolation during the pandemic, using the young person's preferred communication method.

The Transition Panel addresses early transition planning for Care Leavers and Young Adults who have a disability and require ongoing support from Adult Social Care.

27. Fostering:

Thurrock Foster carers have shown an amazing resilience, commitment and fortitude during the pandemic, providing safe and caring homes to Thurrock children going above and beyond, promoting contact and making sure that children feel safe.

There is a new brand and marketing campaign, which has moved online. During Fostering Fortnight in May 2021 our campaign, which was driven by social media, was effective in creating enquiries. There were a significant number of "hits" on the council website where Fostering with Thurrock is promoted, including the benefits and support available to Thurrock Foster Carers. We have also had a reach of over 23,000 through Spotify and Facebook and an increase in applications from prospective households.

28. Adoption:

Adoption numbers have been significantly impacted over the past 14 months by the Covid-19 pandemic, as care proceedings have been delayed, hampering conclusion within the court and achievement of permanency and adoption for children.

Adoption is always considered for children, as a way of achieving permanence, and not just confined to children under the age of five. The number of children adopted in 2020/21, is 8. For children moving in with an adoptive family our timescales remain good; Average time between a child entering care and moving in with its adoptive family, adjusted for foster carer adoptions, (From 2018-2021 this averaged 341 days, however for the past 12 months this has been 370 days).

Average days from Court decision to matching has improved further this year from 181 to 138 days [national average of 226 days].

Thurrock is part of a Regional Adoption Alliance (RAA), Adopt East, which brings together eight local authorities, two voluntary agency partners (Adoption plus and Barnardo's), and the charity Adoption UK. This RAA offers Thurrock's children a greater pool of prospective adopters and early permanence carers.

Conclusion:

This report outlines the work of children's services over the past year, the recent changes to portfolio holders means that we have a new portfolio holder for Children's Services. This is an exciting opportunity to provide clear political leadership across the whole of Children's Services. The following year will see the country begin the recovery phase after Covid-19. Children's Services will ensure we continue to support our most vulnerable children and young people whilst working closely with our stakeholders to provide a strong educational offer which will provide opportunity for all.

Appendix A

Children's Services Budget 2021/22		£m
Children and Family Services	Brighter Futures - Prevention Service	3.846
Children and Family Services	Children and Family Services	7.095
Children and Family Services	Children Looked After Service	3.236
Children and Family Services	Safeguarding and Child Protection & LADO	1.022
Children and Family Services	Social Care Grant	(3.327)
Children and Family Services	Placement Support	17.701
Children and Family Services	YOS and Adolescent Services	0.809
Children and Family Services	Children's Centres	0.355
Children and Family Services	Business Support	1.497
Children and Family Services Total		32.235
Head Start Housing Service	Accommodation	0.847
Head Start Housing Service Total		0.847
Learning & Universal Outcomes	Admissions and Welfare	0.236
Learning & Universal Outcomes	Early Years; Families & Communities	0.598
Learning & Universal Outcomes	Learner Support	1.242
Learning & Universal Outcomes	Learning & Skills	2.265
Learning & Universal Outcomes	School Improvement	0.229
Learning & Universal Outcomes	Day Nurseries	0.124
Learning & Universal Outcomes	Education Support Service	1.094
Learning & Universal Outcomes Total		5.788
School Transport	School Transport - Core Funded	2.743
School Transport Total		2.743
TOTAL ALL		41.614

Dedicated Schools Grant 2021/22		£m
Schools Block	Maintained Schools Funding	3.787
Schools Block	Growth Fund & Licences	1.213
Schools Block		5.000
Central Services Block	Statutory and Regulatory Duties	0.558
Central Services Block	School Admissions	0.280
Central Services Block	Contribution to Combined Budgets	0.745
Central Services Block		1.583
High Needs Block	Top Up Funding	16.374
High Needs Block	Non Maintained and Independent Providers	3.328
High Needs Block	Commissioned Services	1.484
High Needs Block	Home to School Transport	1.600
High Needs Block	High Needs Central Team	0.675
High Needs Block		23.461
Early Years Block	Payment to Providers	12.329
Early Years Block	Early Years Central Team	0.548
Early Years Block		12.877
DSG Funding Settlement 2021/22 (after academy recoupment)		42.921
ESFA	Academy Recoupment	140.941
DSG 2021/22		183.862