

12 March 2024		ITEM: 6
Children’s Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee		
Annual Report of Portfolio Holder for Children’s Social Care and Early Help		
Wards and communities affected: All	Key Decision: N/A	
Report of: Cllr Barry Johnson, Cabinet Member for Children’s Services		
Accountable Assistant Director: Janet Simon – Assistant Director Children’s Services		
Accountable Director: Sheila Murphy – Executive Director Children’s Services		
This report is Public		
Version: Committee		

Executive Summary

This report is to update the committee on the work that has been undertaken by Children’s Social Care year to date, service priorities and to highlight the successes and challenges experienced by the service. The following sets out key highlights during the year (April – December 2023) for Children’s Social Care and Early Help, the work undertaken, priorities and challenges.

The most significant challenges for the service, and for the children, young people, and families the service work with, continues to be fostering recruitment and retention, placement sufficiency; recruitment and retention of qualified social work staff, initial health assessments for children who are looked after; and the financial pressures facing the council.

Children’s social care has continued to contribute to savings as set out in Appendix 1, but in doing so have also ensured that there is no negative impact on the effort and progress that has been made by the service over recent years. Caseloads and spans of control remain manageable. The service continues to embed the Think Family operating model and our early help offer to support statutory social work.

Children’s Social Care, Early Help and Prevention

Children’s Social Care and Early Help have a continuous Development Plan which drives consistent good practice and good outcomes for children. The Executive Director of Children Services has continued to chair a monthly Development Board which holds Heads of Service and the Assistant Director to account. I regularly attend the Board which provides me with an oversight of the services, it’s challenges and areas of improvement

and success. The Board reports on Progress and sets stretch targets and provides me the opportunity to ask questions and provide appropriate challenge to the service. I also meet regularly with the DCS and AD for Children Social Care and Early Help and am provided with updates on the services.

Key priorities for the service over the year has included:

1. Keeping children safe by responding quickly and keeping children at the centre of our thinking and actions and ensuring they receive the right service at the right time.
2. Development of a refreshed and increased focus on recruitment and retention to further reduce vacancies for qualified social workers and to achieve a permanent establishment.
3. Reducing the numbers of Care Leavers who are NEET.
4. Ensuring all Care Leavers have a Pathway Plan that makes sense to them and that they have co-produced.
5. Improvement in the numbers of Return Home Interviews which provide quality information to reduce missing episodes.
6. Increasing the numbers of CLA having a timely Initial Health Assessment.
7. Reduction of children and young people at risk of CE and CSE.
8. Increasing placement sufficiency through recruitment to expand our Thurrock based foster carers and adopters and developing local registered residential provision for Thurrock children.
9. The development of the Start for Life, Family Hubs model and embedding the Think Family approach across CSC.
10. Relaunch of the Children in Care Council and development of a Care Leavers Forum.
11. Focus on reflective supervision to promote critical thinking and a better understanding of the quality of practice and areas for practice development.
12. Preparing the service for regulatory external Ofsted inspections.

1.2 Quality Assurance

Quality Assurance is key in maintaining and improving performance and provides a range of services to support and measure quantitative and qualitative information about the services being provided to children, young people, and their families. Learning from audits links directly to training events to improve practice resulting in enhanced outcomes for children. The model of practice is strength-based Signs of Safety which is embedded in practice, processes and planning. This is set in the overarching context of Think family, where working with extended families and networks is part of practice and leads to planning with children and their families.

Child Protection Chairs ensure there are SMART and robust plans in place to safeguard children, one Chair focuses on independent chairing of Child in Need meetings, ensuring that children in need of safeguarding are identified, but also where possible we work with families as children in need.

The Independent Review Officers (IRO) oversee the plans for all children and young people who are looked after and also hear the views of children and young people about their

plans. IROs will, where necessary raise concerns with the operational teams and partner agencies when there are plans that are drifting or not meeting children and young people's needs. IROs also hold a follow on review after a young person has reached the age of 18 to support and monitor the plans during the transition to adulthood. Alongside reviews, family network meetings are encouraged to support young people make links within their network as they move into adulthood.

CLA reviews and CP conferences are nearly always held within timescales with few exceptions and are well attended by partner agencies with only occasional unforeseen situations leading to the meeting being out of timescale. The majority of records are circulated within timescale to ensure the network and the family are aware of the plan. Children young people and their families' views are always taken into account in the planning and where possible Family Network Meeting inform the planning. IROs and CP chairs ensure that advocates are engaged for children, young people and families who need them or who have requested them. This is an independent commissioned service which provides independent visitors for looked after children and young people.

Quality of practice is also monitored by audit, including multi-agency audits, performance data, service reports and feedback from complaints and compliments from partners and service users. Over 70% of Audit's are graded good or better. At least 30% of audits are moderated by senior managers. Those audits graded less than good are tracked and re-audited. A mixture of desk side compliance audits, generic audits and themed dip samples are part of the annual program. The generic audits always include attempts to talk to the child, young person or family and also the allocated worker. The generic audit covers all areas of practice including management oversight and supervision.

The Participation & Engagement Officer engages with children and young people to hear their views. There is an opportunity for participants in CP conferences and CLA reviews to give feedback. Assessments and pathway plans provide an opportunity for providing feedback too and there is also a focus on gaining feedback biannually through a feedback month.

Learning from audits and feedback is shared with relevant teams and managers, where necessary an action plan is put in place and also learning that will support good practice is commissioned and it is ensured that relevant staff attend.

The Local Authority Designated Officer (LADO) who co-ordinates allegations against people in a position of trust – provides a responsive and professional service to all agencies- and tracks any cases to ensure that all the necessary action is taken. The LADO also provides consultation service which is well used by partner agencies especially schools. This ensures that agencies who work with children have robust systems in place and also are clear about safer recruitment requirements.

The Quality Assurance service work in partnership with the Local Safeguarding Children's Partnership (LSCP) and the corporate Organisational Learning and Development Directorate to ensure that the training and seminar events are provided as required and coordinated and partners and council employees are kept up to date with safeguarding requirements. The LSCP runs a number of events to raise awareness about safeguarding children including the Walk online Road show which shines a spotlight and focus at on-line risks to children. All children in school years 5, 6 and 7 are invited

Children Social Care welcomes external review of the quality of services and since January 2023 there have been 3 such reviews. These reviews lead to action plans to develop and improve practice where necessary but also provide assurance about the quality of social work practice already occurring. The Directorate also takes opportunity to learn from individual cases and from national safeguarding reviews.

1.3 Child Protection / Child in Need

MASH

The Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH) has continued to maintain a consistent application of threshold whilst offering support and challenge to partners to promote best outcomes for children. The service continues to ensure relationships within the multi-agency group are strengthened through the sharing of knowledge and skills. Multi-Agency audits remain a system for reviewing and improving practice, and this well embedded across the multi-agency group, ensuring a good understanding and sharing of threshold across the multi-agency. The Audits show that the service is working with the right families at the right time and at the right level. The re-referral rate year to date 23/24 (YTD) is 18.4% which is below Statistical Neighbours (21%) average YTD and the national average of 22% which is an indication that threshold is being appropriately applied.

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

Thurrock has seen a small reduction in contacts and referrals, and we continue to work closely with partners to ensure that children are not receiving a statutory service where it is not required, and where Universal or Early Help services are better placed to support children and their families. We are confident in the threshold decisions being made which are reviewed through audit process and backed up by the rereferral rate of 18.4% against the national average of 22%.

Thurrock's CIN cohort has seen a reduction to end of the third quarter which is indicative of the work done to date to provide services much earlier. The cohort was 333 per 10,000 of the childhood population in 2021/22 and 314 per 10,000 in 2022/23 which was below statistical neighbours at 331, YTD at the end of quarter 3 for 2023/24 per 10,000 children we have a rate of 253.

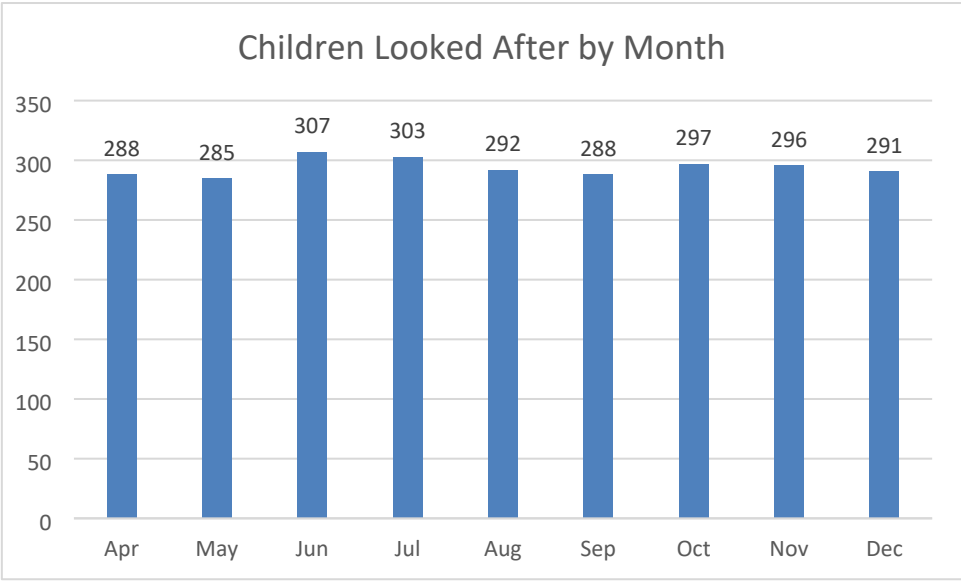
The number of children subject to Child Protection (CP) has seen a small and steady incremental rise YTD and 135 children were subject to a Child Protection Plan at the end of quarter 3 (30 per 10,000). Thurrock's CP cohort was 25 per 10,000 in 2021/22 and 24 per 10,000 in 2022/23. Whilst this is an increase performance remains below statistical neighbour averages of 39 per 10,000 and National averages of 53 per 10,000.

1.4 Children Looked After

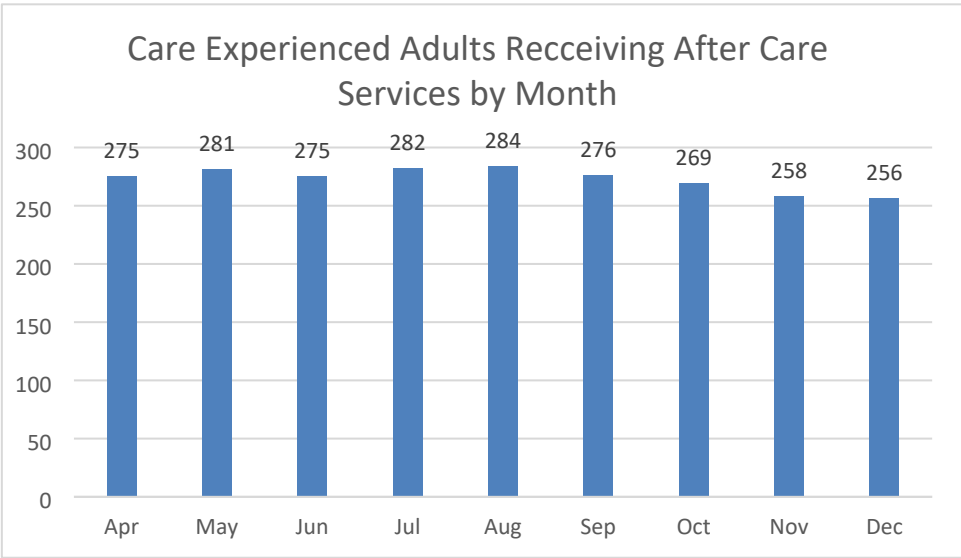
All members and officers, regardless of their role are corporate parents to our looked after children and care experienced young people and I take this responsibility very seriously. Corporate Parenting refers to the collective responsibility of public bodies to act as a parent for children in care, ensuring their well-being and future prospects. The

concept gained prominence with the Children and Families Act 2014, aiming to improve outcomes for children in the care system. Local authorities, health services, schools, and other institutions are designated as "corporate parents" tasked with safeguarding and promoting the welfare of these vulnerable individuals.

The principles of Corporate Parenting underscore the need for collaborative efforts to address the complex challenges faced by children in care. It emphasises the importance of consistency in support, equal opportunities, and a holistic approach to their development. Corporate parents are expected to prioritize the educational, emotional, and physical needs of these children, mirroring the responsibilities of parents. The follow graph sets out the number of children Thurrock Council has been responsible for YTD:



Thurrock Council continues to meet its statutory responsibilities to Care Experienced Young People up to the age of 25; the following graph sets out the number of young adults that have been supported by the After Care Service YTD:



The number of children in the care of Thurrock Council is relatively stable overall. Children enter care for a range of reasons, most commonly due to the need to safeguard their welfare in line with Thurrock Council's statutory duties. Others enter care by voluntary agreement due to a breakdown in relationships with their family, their status as UASC or due to the impact of their disability needs.

Plans for all children are reviewed to ensure the correct children come into 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.

Where children remain in the care of Thurrock Council long term, planning for adulthood begins just before the 16th birthday and continues up to the age of 21 years old. Care experienced young people are entitled to an after care services up to the age of 25 years old. The After Care service has been reviewed in the last year to develop the capacity of the team and a new local offer has been launched¹. The aim for the After Care service is to provide a clear pathway for young people to transition safely and in a planned way to adulthood.

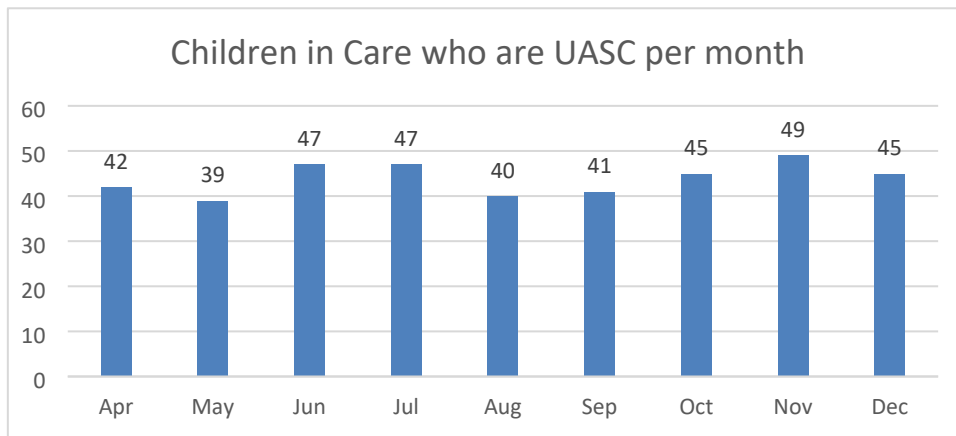
Thurrock Council and Partners provide tailored assistance to young people in education, employment, emotional well-being and developing self-sufficiency. Services ensure a continuum of care offering guidance on housing, mental health, adult social care needs and financial well-being. Over half of our care experienced young people are in education, employment and training, with 23 young people attending University. Young people are offered support to get ready to live independently via Head start Housing, Staying Put (living with their foster carers after 18) and other schemes. Twenty young people moved on to social housing in 2023.

Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children

Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children (UASC) are separated migrant minors seeking asylum without a present parent or legal guardian. Often fleeing conflict or persecution, they face unique vulnerabilities. Thurrock remains a point of arrival for UASC and has developed expertise in supporting these young people. All local authorities are required to support a quota of UASC determined by Central Government at 0.1% of their childhood population to ensure a fair distribution nationally of UASC responsibility. For Thurrock this number is 44. Thurrock has been consistently at or slightly over this quota for much of this year. When Thurrock is over its quota, young people are transferred to another local authority who has not reached 0.1% via the National Transfer Scheme.

The below graphs show the number of UASC that were looked after at the end of each month:

¹ <https://www.thurrock.gov.uk/sites/default/files/assets/documents/care-leavers-localoffer-2023-v02.pdf>



Fostering, Special Guardianship and Adoption

In line with statutory duties² the Council's Sufficiency Strategy³ has been updated in respect of placements for children who cannot live at with their parents. Children and Young People's views have contributed to the development of this strategy and their key messages are set out below:



Services continue to focus on the development of local placements for children in line with these themes;

² Under Section 22 of the Children Act 1989 (amended by the Children and Young Persons Act 2008)

³ <https://democracy.thurrock.gov.uk/documents/s41889/Appendix%201%20-%20Children%20Looked%20After%20and%20Care%20Leaver%20Sufficiency%20Strategy%20Update.pdf>

- Recruitment of Prospective Adopters is positive, with recruitment in line with regional needs
- The number of children's homes within Thurrock has increased and we engage with providers at the earliest stage to use those homes for local children where possible
- The majority of children in foster care are placed with Foster Carers approved by Thurrock Council and there has been a small increase in the number of approved fostering household this year
- The Think Family approach informs our placement decisions ensuring that parents, grandparents and other people close to a child are supported to care for them where possible. This may be as approved foster carers, under an agreement to place with parents or under a court order (Special Guardianship/Child Arrangement Order)

Children with Disabilities and Special Educational Needs receiving support from Children's Social Care

Children's Social Care supports 287 children with an identified disability or Education and Health care Plan across a range of teams. This is in addition to the support provided by Family Hubs, Early Help Services and the Short Break and Outreach Service. Whilst all teams across the service support children with disabilities and their families, the Children with Disabilities Team support children where the impact of the disability is severe or profound. Close links are maintained between social care, education and health to join up services and the service is working towards a one plan approach

A focus this year has been to ensure 'Think Family' is embedded across CWD, offering parenting courses aimed at families who have children with severe and profound needs, increasing the use of family network meetings and reviewing our carers assessments and EHCPs to ensure that they are good quality and helping us to accurately identify and assess need. There is a recognised need to increase the capacity of community and residential short breaks providers, and this will be retendered in early 2024 with the aim of securing greater options for families.

1.5 Youth Service and Prevention and Support

Early Help and Intervention:

Our Prevention and Support Service (PASS) undertakes time-limited bespoke work with families who do not require statutory intervention. There is strong partnership working between the PASS Service, statutory teams, and partner agencies. Early Help Services continue to provide whole family intervention to families at the right time to prevent escalation into statutory services and supporting children to remain at home with their families. Allocations of children into PASS have decreased in line with

the increased capacity and additional resources available through the Family Hub Start for Life Programme.

Family Hubs

In April 2022 we became one of 75 local authorities eligible to join the Department for Education and the Department of Health and Social Care's grant funded Start for Life, Family Hub programme Early Help Services are integral to the Start for Life, Family Hubs Programme. This programme also reflects our Think Family approach.

We opened 8 Family Hubs between April and July 2023. These Hubs and their network provides services for Children and Families aged 0-18, or up to 25 with SEND.

Family Hubs in Thurrock are delivering:

- support to parents and carers in partnership with the Voluntary Service, NELFT, Local Authority Services and Commissioned services, so they are able to nurture their babies and children, improving health and education outcomes for all in the 3 localities.
- contribute to a reduction in inequalities in health and education outcomes for babies, children and families across Thurrock, by ensuring that support provided is communicated to all parents and carers via a dedicated website, including those who are hardest to reach and/or most in need of it
- building the evidence base for what works when it comes to improving health and education outcomes for babies, children and families in different delivery contexts.

There has been a significant increase in Family Hub registrations and the engagement of parents and carers following new services being provided from the Family Hubs. 3 of the 8 Family Hubs were officially opened by the Mayor in October half term.

Think Family Practice approach

We adopted a Think Family approach as our operating model in April 2022, building on the effective and long established 'whole family' approach used by our Early Help services. Feedback from parents and professionals has helped shape this way of working. The approach is strengths and relationship-based and compliments Signs of Safety and our other existing practice models. Regular Family Network Meetings starting from the initial assessment is helping families to develop family plans which underpin their child's local authority plan, and importantly, give young people and families more agency in problem solving in a way that will continue to support them when our involvement ends.

By adopting this approach, we have increased the number of children who can remain living safely within their connected family networks, contributing to the diversion of children from becoming looked after or entering court proceedings. Parenting assessments and Parenting Programmes previously commissioned continue to be undertaken in-house. This has led to tailored interventions with families with the most complex needs, including successful reunification and placement stability work.

There continues to be a focus on engaging with fathers / males, children on the edge of care, and families before they enter pre-proceedings Public Law Outline (PLO).

Youth Justice Service (formerly Youth Offending Service)

The Youth Justice Service changed its name from the Youth Offending Service in January 2024.

The change of name is part of the National Youth Justice Boards emphasis on putting Children first.

A Child First approach in Thurrock means putting our children at the heart of service provision and seeing the whole child, and not just the offending behaviours. This is done by identifying and tackling the influences on offending, and identifying and promoting the influences that will help our children and young people to move to pro-social, positive behaviour. The Multi- Agency Board, chaired by the Executive Director of Children's Services and also attended by myself has also changed it's name and is now the Thurrock Youth Justice Governance Board, in line with the change in emphasis.

Thurrock's Youth Justice (YJS) Service supervises 10-18 year olds who have been sentenced by a court, or who have come to the attention of the police because of their offending behaviour but have not been charged – instead, they are dealt with out of court. YJS's are statutory partnerships , and they are multi-disciplinary, to deal with the needs of the whole child. The service is staffed from local authority social care and education, the police, the National Probation Service and local health services. YJS work is governed and shaped by a range of legislation and guidance specific to the youth justice sector (such as the National Standards for Youth Justice) or else applicable across the criminal justice sector (for example Multi-Agency Public Protection Arrangements guidance). Some funding is provided by the Youth Justice Board for England and Wales (YJB) which also monitors our performance and issues guidance about how things are to be done.

The number of young people sentenced by the courts has reduced during and since Covid 19. YJS do a wide range of things to support young people under supervision. For example, restorative justice schemes, focused on repairing the harm caused by the offender, and we operate a referral order panel, where members of the local community meet with individual offenders to reduce their risk of reoffending. The characteristics of young people under YJS supervision vary considerably, with some offending being transient and unlikely to cause harm to others. However, a minority have committed serious offences or are showing warning signs that they might. We ensure that each young person is assessed by YJS, to judge the extent to which they pose a risk of harm to others in their family or the community. The YJS uses AssetPlus, developed by the YJB, to assess young people and make plans with them. YJS works with young people to reduce the risk of harm, and serious harm, as well as reducing the risk of reoffending. Serious harm is defined by YJB guidance as 'death or serious personal injury whether physical or psychological'. Risk of serious harm is the imminence of this happening, and the impact if it did.

Reoffending rates

	Thurrock	Region	Essex	Family	England
Quarterly (<u>3</u> month cohort)	42.9%	33.6%	34.7%	29.5%	30.4%
Aggregated yearly (<u>12</u> month cohort)	36.4%	31%	25.7%	30.3%	30.5%

The latest MOJ reoffending data published (YDS 115) indicates that Thurrock's annual aggregated reoffending figure is 36.4%. This has reduced since the last quarter but still sits above our recognised comparators. There is no evidence to suggest this is the start of a trend or any obvious rationale as to the increase. The low numbers in the cohort ensures volatility in this figure.

The Ministry of Justice launched the Turnaround Programme in January 2023 which has secured additional funding to deliver a new preventative services. The service aims to divert more young people away from the criminal justice system by offering early intervention. We have an overall target to be met by the end of the programme in March 2025. We are currently on track to meet this target of 58 closed cases. The current figure is 30. A qualified Probation Officer has been recruited on a fixed term contract funded by the Turnaround grant to lead on this area and drive prevention.

Statutory Interventions

A statutory intervention is undertaken when a child has been convicted by the courts or made subject to a Youth Caution or Youth Conditional Caution and consequently has YJS intervention.

As at the third quarter of 2023/24 there were 31 children recorded as having statutory outcomes with Thurrock YJS and 6 of these children were looked after. The 6 looked after children represented 19% of the young people completing statutory interventions. This is in line with the trend for the last five years.

Youth Detention Accommodation

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.

No new children were made subject to Youth Detention Accommodation during the third quarter of 2023/24. We currently have 3 children under the age of 18 in custody, 2 are serving custodial sentences and one is on remand and therefore a Child Looked After due to their remand in custody.

Out of court disposal panel

As at the third quarter of the 2023/24 financial year the Out of Court Disposal Panel dealt with 45 offences relating to 44 Thurrock children, of which one child had looked

after status. Thurrock YJS and Essex Police are committed to the national protocol¹ aimed at reducing 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.

Appendix 1

Children Social Care Budget

Children Portfolio	2023/24 Indicative Budget £'000	2024/25 Indicative Budget £'000
Children and Family Services	35,615	38,335
Children Portfolio Total	35,615	38,335

In determining the Children Portfolio budget, the following levels of growth and savings have been applied, as reflected in the MTFS.

Growth

Children Portfolio Growth	2023/24 £'000	2024/25 £'000
Children's Placements	1,432	2,446
Children's Legal Proceedings	450	0
Children with Disabilities - Short Breaks	0	650
Additional Social Care Grant	0	1,363
Total	1,882	4,459
Additional Social Care Grant funding	0	(1,363)
Total MTFS Growth	1,882	3,096

Childrens Placements

The placements budget continues to experience increased cost and complexity of need. Significant cost pressures are generated by moves within care. Children with the most complex needs are experiencing a high level of placement instability driven by both providers giving notice on their placement and by intervention by the regulator. Thurrock is reliant on external providers for residential and complex care including SEN placements.

Childrens with Disabilities

Demand for short breaks and direct payments to support young people remaining in their home. This is essential early intervention that supports the child to remain with parents.

Savings

The following savings have been identified within Children Social Care for the period 2022/23 to 2024/25:

Savings Narrative	2022/23 £'000	2023/24 £'000	2024/25 £'000	Total £'000
Review of Children's Social Care operating model.	1,337	78	233	1,648
Out of Hours Duty Team - Revised operating model		255		255
Increase the number of Internal Foster Carers	300			300
Review of children with Continuing Health Care to secure appropriate Health contribution		200	250	450
Cross Cutting			390	390
Children Portfolio Total	1,637	533	873	3,043