

Thurrock Council **Sufficiency Strategy**

Children in Care
and
Care Leavers



Foreword

“Our young people have immense talent and potential, and we want them to have the best start in life and grow up well-equipped to take advantage of the opportunities available to them. We also wish to ensure children transition seamlessly into adulthood and are enabled to achieve their potential. To do this, we believe partners need to work in partnership with young people at the heart of all decisions and plans.”

Thurrock Brighter Futures Strategy 2021-26.

“Every child deserves a stable loving home that meets their needs up to adulthood and beyond. Every 'placement' is a child's home, their place for comfort and family life.

In Thurrock, we recognise that the national sufficiency of placements has changed since our last Strategy and so has our approach. Our vision is still to supply sufficient high-quality placements for children and young people that encourages their aspirations and ambitions and can support them to fulfil their potential. We aspire for our Care Leavers to have all the necessary skills and support they need to make the successful transition to adulthood and independence at a time that is right for them and tailored to their unique individual circumstances.

We will build our own placements, build our local independent sector and where needed, develop bespoke placements that meet need. We are focused on delivering the services children and young people need and deserve to achieve safe, happy, healthy, and successful lives.”

Janet Simon, Assistant Director, Children's Social Care and Early Help

Executive Summary

The Law says that Thurrock Council must plan to ensure there are enough foster homes, children's homes and other placements to meet the needs of the children and families living in Thurrock. This document shows that plan

We think one of the best ways to help is to make sure children and young people live with their family; this may stop them coming in to care or help them to leave care. Children and Young people want this too. We have a way of working called 'Think Family' and a dedicated team for children aged 14-18 to help do this.

Finding homes for children to live in has become difficult all over England in the last two years. In response the government has created a plan called "Stable Homes Built on Love." We are working with this plan as it rolls out alongside our own. We think it will take time for things to get better and there will be problems along the way. This plan sets out how we will move forward.

Thurrock needs more local homes for children to live in. Children and Young People have told us they want to be closer to their home and to be able to stay in their school when their home changes.

- We have incentives to recruit local foster carers and have supported more children's homes to open in Thurrock, but there's more to do.
- Other types of homes for children aren't so difficult to find, like families for children who need an adoption.

We will review this plan regularly and our children in care, Council and elected Council Members will get an update each year at the Corporate Parenting Committee.



Part 1 – Setting the scene for Thurrock

Children looked after (CLA) -
March 2023

292

children looked after
(compared to
293 in 2022)

15%

are unaccompanied
asylum seekers
(UASC)

62%

are male

30%

have been in care for
at least 2 ½
years

22%

have been in the
same placement for
more than 2 years

11%

have a disability

16%

are on an educational
health care plan

33%

are black, Asian or
minority ethnicity

37%

are aged 16 to 18

62%

of placements are
outside the Thurrock
boundary

Care leavers – March 2023

276

care leavers
(compared to
300 in 2022)

54%

are aged
19 to 21

54%

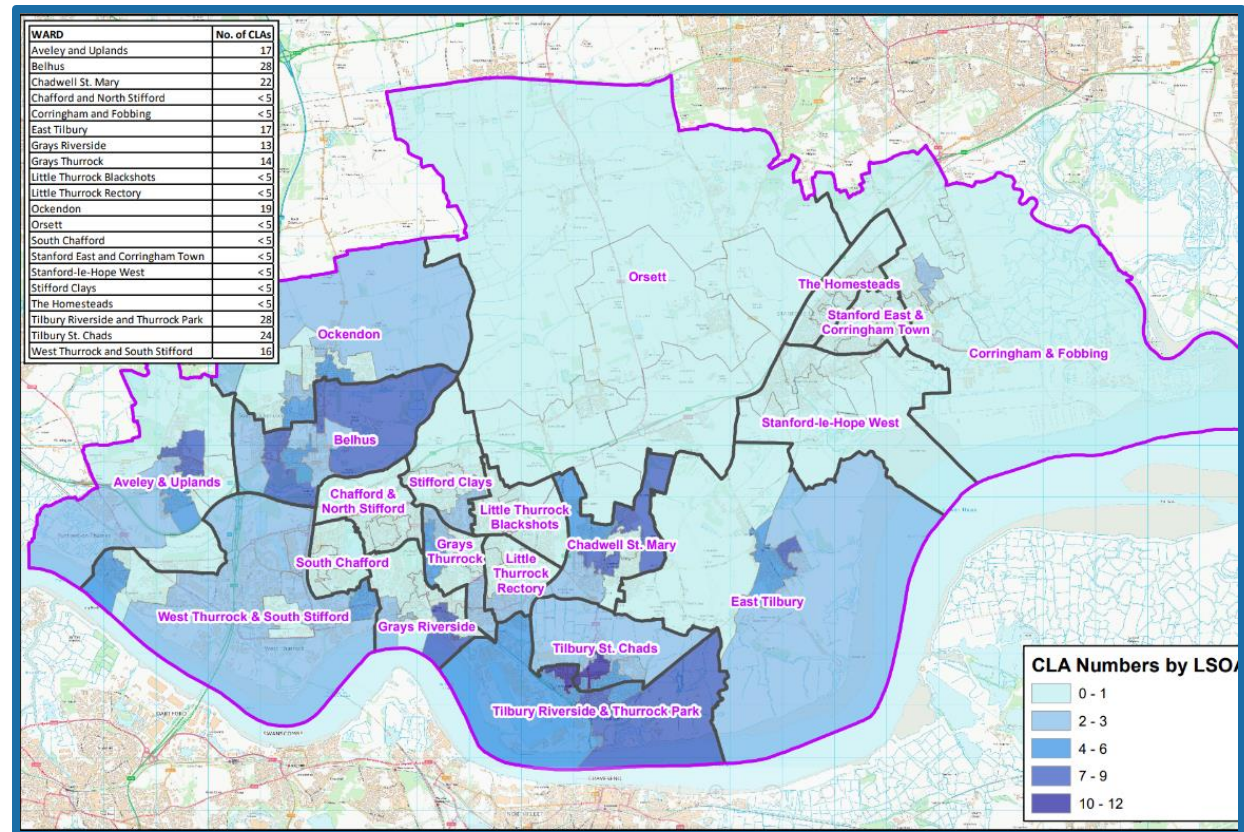
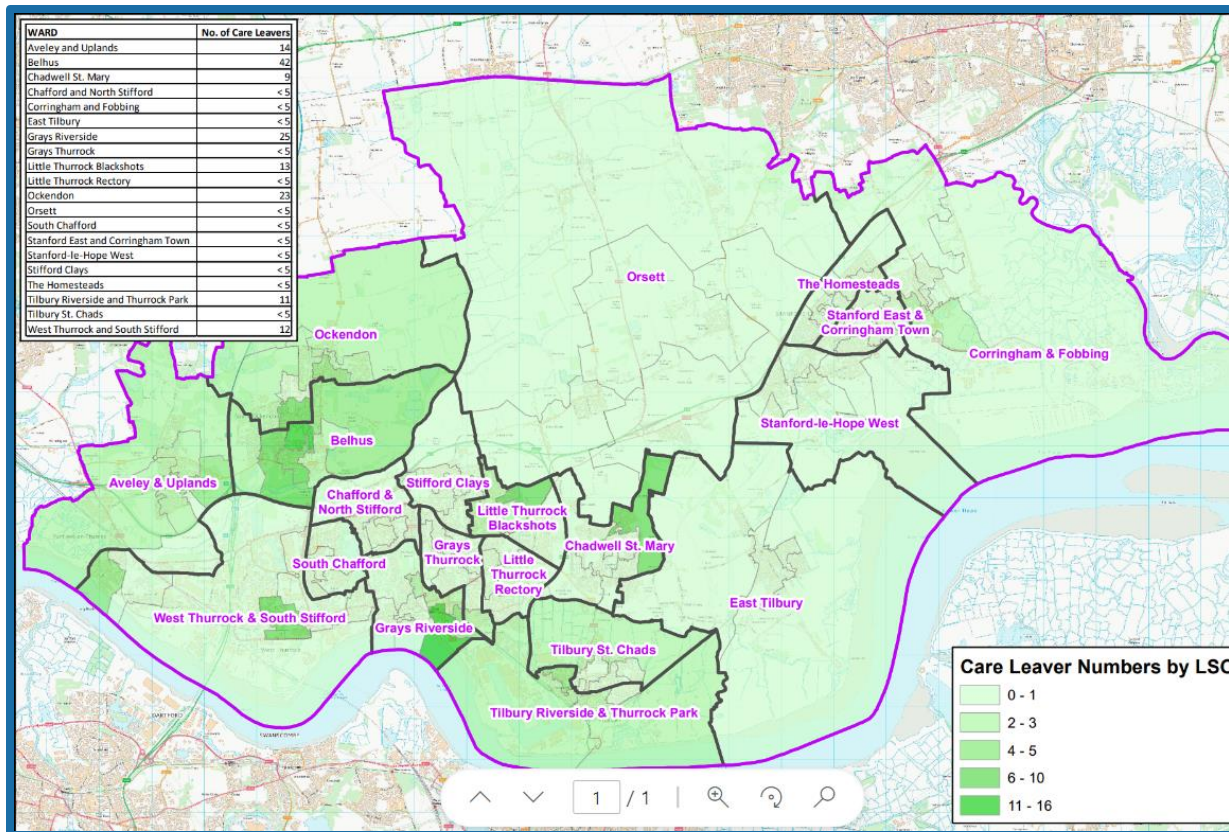
are in education,
employment
or training

94%

are in suitable
accommodation



Location of our CLA and Care leavers



What our young people have told us.....

"Sometimes we don't want to live in a family and would like to have residential care and semi-independent accommodation"

"We would like to live as close to our homes as possible with our foster carers or placement"

"We would like to have a say in where we live and more information about our new foster home or children's home before we go there"

"We would like to live with our family if we can, and we would like to be able to live with our Parents if things have changed"

"We don't want everyone to know we are in care, that's our business"

"We would like to be able to access education without placements changing our school"

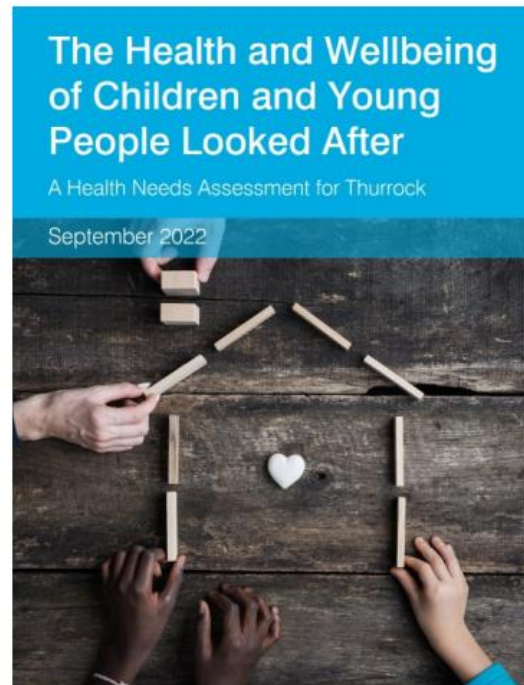


Information from the Thurrock Health Needs Assessment – September 2022

The health and wellbeing needs of looked after children were assessed in September 2022

[Thurrock Council - Health needs assessment: children looked after, September 2022](#)

“Nationally, the prevalence of Children Looked After (CLA) has been increasing year on year. Although Thurrock has had a larger number of children in care than comparator local authorities, this has now stabilised from 2018 and is currently in line with national and comparator local authorities.”



“There is a strong positive association between ward level deprivation and the rate of CLA in each ward in Thurrock with children living in the most deprived area of Thurrock being 4.3 times more likely to be taken into care than those living in the least deprived area of the borough.”

“The difference in the percentage of pupils achieving a 9-4 pass in Maths and English at KS4 between CLA and the general pupil population in Thurrock was nearly three-fold, where CLA averaged 23.3% and the general population averaged 61%. However, performance against national CLA cohorts is positive for Thurrock.”

Thurrock projections

We anticipate that over the next three years, the overall number of children in care will remain steady - assuming there is no greater expectation in terms of the UASC quota.

We anticipate that whilst the overall number remains steady there will be a greater range of need including a need for specialist placements in the Thurrock area. This specifically relates to Special Educational Needs & Disabilities (SEND) residential placements linked to education. We anticipate there will be an increased requirement for short break needs, foster placements and residential placements for secondary age children and a greater range of local parent and child placements.



Our Vision

Our Vision is to provide sufficient high-quality placements for children and young people, taking account of their aspirations and ambitions, and supporting them to fulfil their potential.

We aspire for our Care Leavers to have all the necessary skills and support to make a successful transition to adulthood and independence.



Key Strategies

These key strategies underpin our aspirations for children and young people in Thurrock:

Thurrock Health & Wellbeing Strategy 2022-26

<https://www.thurrock.gov.uk/health-and-well-being-strategy/health-and-well-being-strategy-2022-2026>

Brighter Futures Strategy – Developing well in Thurrock 2021

<https://democracy.thurrock.gov.uk/documents/s31125/Item%208.%20Brighter%20Futures%20Strategy.%20Draft%20Strategy.pdf>

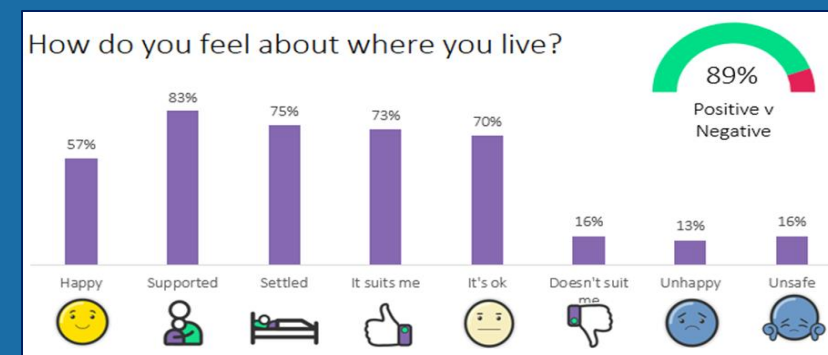
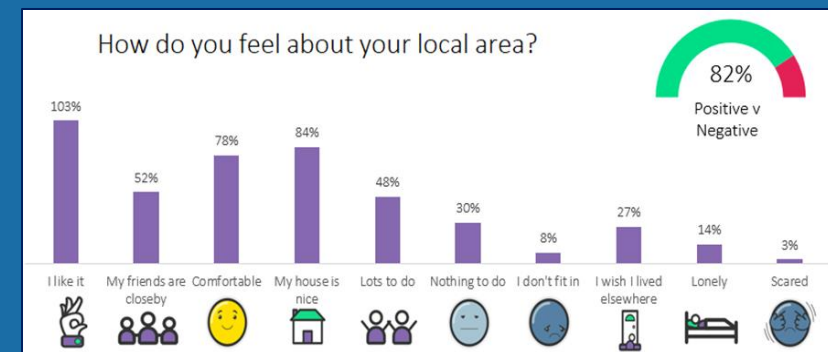
Our pledge to Looked after children

<https://www.thurrock.gov.uk/welcoming-children-into-care/our-pledge>

How are we doing?

Feedback from Children and Young People

- Since 2019 we have used Mind of My Own to track our Children and Young People's satisfaction with their placements. Over three hundred responses have been received.
- Children are overwhelmingly happy with their carers. Some would like to live closer to home or in a different area
- Any young person who reports feeling unhappy, scared or unsafe through using Mind of My Own, triggers a safety link which allows us to identify them and explore the issues further. The system is audited to ensure safeguarding concerns have been addressed and action has been taken.



Part 2 – Our responsibilities

Legal duties

Local authorities have duties towards children under the Children Act 1989 that relate to the Sufficiency Duty, specifically:

- Section 17 - to supply a range of services to children in need and their families which can appropriately meet their needs.
- Section 20 - to supply accommodation for children in need where they are assessed as requiring this
- Section 21 - to accommodate children who are removed from their family to safeguard them.

When assessing the most appropriate placement for a child, Section 22 requires the local authority to give preference to placing with a relative, friend or other person connected with the child who is also a local authority foster parent.

Section 22 has added considerations when deciding on the most appropriate placement (not in order of priority):

- Proximity to the child's home.
- Avoiding disruption of education.
- Where possible placing the child with a sibling.
- To meet the specific needs of disabled children.
- Provision of accommodation within the local authority area where practical to do so.

our “corporate parenting”
duty



How we will fulfil those duties

The Children and Social Work Act 2017 extends a duty on Local Authorities to have regard to a set of Corporate Parenting Principles when exercising its functions in relation to looked after children and care leavers up to the age of twenty-five.

Thurrock Council will review the types of placements that are needed, looking at historical trends and future demand forecast, and match this against the known capacity both locally, and where necessary and appropriate, nationwide. The quality of placements is at the forefront of our policy, ensuring that we commission suitable placements with good providers and that they are subject to robust monitoring processes. A national shortage of places at residential homes for children with complex needs, presents challenges for the Council that will need to be overcome through improved collaboration and innovation, whilst keeping a focus on value for money. The Covid-19 pandemic has also presented its own unique challenges affecting the mental health of young people, emotional wellbeing, and isolation.

Thurrock Council, through this strategy, will work towards understanding our current market position, assessing local and national challenges around placements and start to develop the market. This will be achieved through several approaches including:

- developing closer relationships with providers currently on our Placements Framework
- collaborating with providers to develop new provision within or much closer to Thurrock
- building on recent projects that have developed our own residential placements using local authority housing stock
- increasing our own foster carers to enable less reliance on independent foster care

This will require a more collaborative approach providers and at a regional level to effect change.

Stable Homes, Built on Love

In September 2023, the Government set out its plan to reform children's social care and identified six ambitions:

Ambition 1: Family Help

Ambition 2: Keeping children safe

Ambition 3: Supporting families to help children

Ambition 4: Making care better for children in care and care leavers

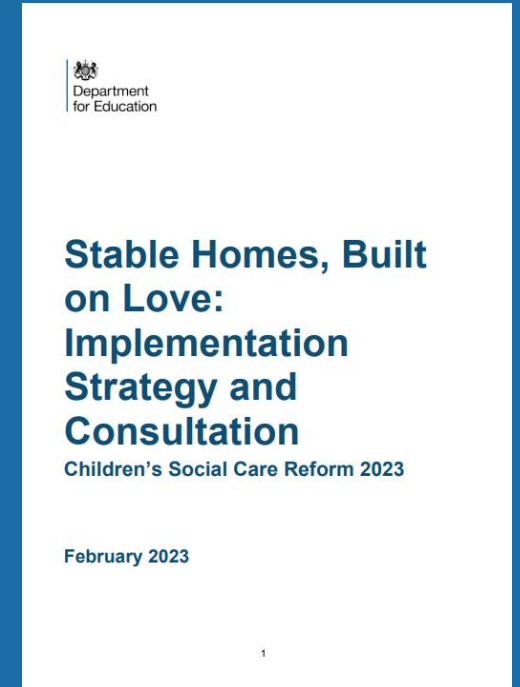
Ambition 5: Children have great social workers

Ambition 6: Improving the whole system for children and families

These themes inform our strategic plan.

This Strategy sets out how Thurrock Council will respond to these duties to ensure it meets the needs of its children in care and care leavers to deliver the best possible outcomes for them.

It will reflect on progress made since the last Strategy (2021-2024) and look forward to shaping future intentions for both commissioned services and our in-house foster care provision.





Children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND)

Children with SEND who are not looked after are not covered within this strategy and are subject to separate priorities contained within relevant strategies.

The current Thurrock SEND key strategic priority areas (that are currently being reviewed), and have been developed through a process of co-production with partners to fulfil our shared vision for SEND are:

1. Ensure that children, young people and families are at the heart of an effective SEND system
2. Ensure every child and young person is making good progress and attends a good place to learn
3. Ensure children, young people and families are well supported
4. Ensure an effective and responsive approach to assessing and meeting children, young people and families' needs
5. Ensure the early identification of and early support for children with SEND
6. Ensure young people are well prepared for adulthood

Part 3 – Local and National context

Challenges

Thurrock is experiencing increasing demand for placements for children due to many factors, including:

Population growth

Between the last two censuses (held in 2011 and 2021), the population of Thurrock increased by 11.6%, from around 157,700 in 2011 to around 176,000 in 2021

The population increased by a greater percentage than the overall population of the East of England (8.3%), and by a greater percentage than the overall population of England (up 6.6%). Thurrock was among the top 45% most densely populated English local authority areas at the last census. Thurrock saw England's largest percentage-point rise in the proportion of lone-parent households (from 11.2% in 2011 to 13.5% in 2021).

Changes in social circumstances

Covid-19 and the public health measures put in place to contain its spread, such as social distancing, temporarily reduced economic activity as firms and households were unable to produce and spend as they usually would. Weaker global economic activity added to these effects, reducing export demand, and disrupting international supply chains. Firm revenue and household income fell as a result, driving up the cost of living.

Changes in economic circumstances

The cost of living increased sharply across the UK during 2021 and 2022. The annual rate of inflation reached 11.1% in October 2022, a 41-year high, before subsequently easing. Recent data shows it was 6.7% in September 2023, unchanged from August 2022, resulting in increasing requests for fee uplifts from our commissioned and spot purchased providers.

Over three quarters of providers reported fee rate increases (77% compared with 62% last year). The majority reported increases in the higher 6-10% bracket. One in five providers (22% down from 35% in 2022) held prices, and nationally only one provider has decreased their fees

Part 3 – Local and National context

Challenges

Thurrock is experiencing increasing demand for placements for children due to many factors, including:

Placement Occupancy:

28% of children's residential care providers reported being at 95% occupancy rate, the highest level recorded since June 2015.

More providers reported stable occupancy rates, and the proportion reporting declining levels fell from 25% in 2022 to 15% this year. The proportion of providers seeing annual occupancy grow by at least 6% also rose by one fifth.

Local Placements:

Providers found that two thirds of children in residential care were placed in a home in their local authority area or a near neighbour. This ratio has increased from 53% in 2021. However, Department for Education research shows that a placement's ability to meet a child's needs is prioritised over the location of the home.

Growth and staffing:

The proportion of providers reporting addition to capacity in the last year increased to 45% from 40% last year but is not yet back to pre-Covid levels. A factor could be challenges around insufficient staff, with 58% of providers reporting vacancy rates of 5% or above, and one in five having employee turnover rates of at least 30%.

Income:

The proportion of providers reporting a rise in turnover and income increased from 39% in 2022 to 46% in 2023, while a further 28% said profit/income was stable over the year. However, one in four providers (26%) reported a decline in income, the same proportion as the year before.

The trend in providers reporting reduced reserves that started in 2022 continued in 2023, with 54% reporting a decline compared to 43% last year. This highlighted the vulnerability of the sector to rising inflation due to its high medium-term fixed operating costs.

Commissioning challenges

Insufficient Placement Capacity: The demand for residential and supported accommodation regularly exceeds the available capacity, leading to delays in finding suitable placements or inappropriate use of alternative arrangements.



A lack of Diverse Placement Options: Limited availability of specialised placements, such as those for children with complex needs or specific cultural requirements, can result in inadequate matching and compromised outcomes.



Inadequate Staffing and Training: Insufficient staffing levels or lack of proper training has affected the quality of care and support provided to children in residential and supported accommodation. The market frequently reports to commissioners' issues with recruitment of appropriately qualified, skilled, and experienced staff to key roles, with some resorting to overseas recruitment to address this issue.



Part 4 – Our approach

‘Think Family’ and Returning Home

The *Think Family* approach was adopted by Thurrock Children’s Service as its operating model in April 2022. It is used widely by both health and social care services to improve outcomes for vulnerable children and adults, including those with complex needs.

The *Think Family* approach does not replace Signs of Safety or Thurrock’s other existing practice models but is a way of working across the department including in Early Help.

It enables practitioners to build strong and effective relationships with parents and children by assessing the needs of each family member and then co-ordinating multi-agency interventions and intensive support in a timely way.

In Thurrock, this process will be strengthened by a series of family network meetings throughout the child’s journey. These meetings align with the Signs of Safety roadmap and build on family strengths. They include members of the family’s connected network, and the process helps parents and their network to create a family plan.

The plan sets out how the family and connected network will support and protect a child on a day-by-day basis to enable the child to remain living within their family or family network where it is safe to do so.

If a child is not able to live safely within their connected network, this approach will enable the local authority to start permanence planning for children at an earlier stage.

An example of our approach can be seen through Fiona’s story.....



We aim to
reduce the
number of
children
becoming
looked after

We aim to
divert children
from entering
court
proceedings
/care

We commit to
the ongoing
review of long-
term care plans
to enable
children to
return to their
family

Fiona's story

Fiona became looked after when she was five years old. The court agreed a plan of long-term foster care for Fiona, and she was settled in a long-term placement. Work was done to build up time with her family, Fiona had expressed she wanted to stay with her foster carer

In 2023, Fiona's foster carer resigned unexpectedly. Fiona's team collaborated with her and her family to plan again. Fiona was now 14 years old. Things have improved a great deal for her parents, and she had adult siblings who were well placed to look after her.

Rather than seek another foster placement, a family plan was agreed. Fiona was initially cared for by her adult brother who was approved as a connected persons foster carer. This placement was used to build up time with her parents and build up positive parenting.

Fiona was able to move back with her parents with support. She loves being at home and feels settled, and we are working to discharge the care order.

Fiona will have the opportunity to grow into adulthood with her family and the support of her network.



Commissioning Priorities

It is important to recognise that further challenges may arise during the implementation of the sufficiency strategy. These challenges can include financial constraints, changes in legislation or regulations, and unexpected shifts in demand. To address these risks, the following measures will be taken:

- **Robust Financial Planning:**

Thurrock will engage in proactive financial planning to ensure sufficient resources are allocated to the implementation of this strategy. This may, in future, involve exploring funding opportunities, seeking grants, or reallocating existing resources.

- **Flexible and Adaptive Approach:**

Thurrock will adopt a flexible and adaptive approach to address changes in legislation or regulations that may affect this strategy. Regular monitoring and evaluation processes will be in place to show emerging trends or shifts in demand, enabling prompt adjustments to the strategy as needed.

- **Stakeholder Engagement:**

Thurrock will actively engage with key stakeholders, including children and young people, families, service providers, regional partners and other local authorities, to gather feedback and input throughout the implementation of this strategy. This engagement will help identify emerging risks and challenges and inform potential adjustments or improvements to the strategy.

- **Continuous Learning and Improvement:**

Thurrock will continue to foster a culture of continuous learning and improvement, including the ongoing use of Human Learning Systems (HLS) and the new operating model adopted by the Council in 2023.

<https://www.humanlearning.systems/>

This will be achieved through regular reviews of the sufficiency strategy, learning from best practices and experiences of other local authorities, and actively seeking research and evidence-based interventions to enhance the effectiveness of the strategy.

By proactively addressing risks, engaging stakeholders, and fostering a culture of continuous learning, Thurrock can mitigate challenges and ensure the successful implementation of the strategy over the next three years.

Through these efforts, Thurrock can provide our CLA with the quality placements and support they need for their well-being and development.

Recommended Strategies and Mitigation Measures:

Collaboration and Multi-Agency Working:

- Strengthen collaboration among local authorities, service providers, and agencies involved in the care and support of children.
- Establish regular multi-agency meetings, joint training opportunities, and shared protocols to improve coordination and information-sharing.
- Develop a comprehensive local offer that outlines the range of available placements and support services, streamlining the referral process and ensuring a comprehensive approach to meeting the needs of children.

Enhancing Placement Diversity:

- Collaborate closely with providers to develop specialised placements to cater to the diverse needs of children, including those with complex needs or specific cultural requirements.
- Strengthen partnerships with organisations that can offer alternative accommodation options, such as supported lodgings or shared housing arrangements.

Continuous Monitoring and Evaluation:

- Implement robust monitoring and quality assurance mechanisms to ensure the provision of high-quality placements.
- Conduct regular inspections, performance reviews, and feedback processes to show areas for improvement and ensure compliance with regulatory standards.
- Continue to seek feedback from children, young people, and families about their experiences and incorporate their perspectives into service evaluations and improvements.

Staffing and Training:

- Ensure that residential and supported accommodation providers have appropriate staffing levels to meet the needs of children.
- Invest in staff training programs, focusing on areas such as trauma-informed care, attachment theory, cultural sensitivity, and interventions for specific needs.
- Provide ongoing supervision, reflective practice sessions, and access to specialist support services to enhance staff well-being and retention.

Increasing Placement Capacity:

- Collaborate with our own housing department, private providers, housing associations, and community organisations to expand the capacity of residential and supported accommodation.
- Explore opportunities for developing new facilities or repurposing existing buildings/ housing stock to meet the demand.
- Invest in recruitment and training programs to increase the number of foster carers and kinship carers.

Dynamic Data analyses:

- It is essential to analyse the current data regularly and proactively with internal partners, most notably our colleagues in Business Intelligence, to understand the ongoing sufficiency challenges and dynamically develop effective interim strategies to address them.
- This analysis will provide valuable insights into the sufficiency gaps and enable evidence-based decision-making.



Progress against previous strategy

Considerable progress has been made since January 2021 in the implementation of our Children in Care and Placements Sufficiency Strategy.

The focus has been on enhancing the involvement of children and young people, achieving placement stability and permanence, effective commissioning and partnership working, developing support for care leavers, and expanding early support for our most vulnerable children.

Part 5 – Our priorities

Priority 1: Elevating the voice of Children and Young People

Efforts have been concentrated on prioritising the active participation of children and young people in decision-making processes. The Mind of My Own App provides a vital platform for them to share their views and feelings. Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs) have been proactively engaging with children and young people through various channels, including face-to-face interactions, mobile phone communication, and the use of a QR code.

Initial feedback from the QR code revealed a 100% satisfaction rate, indicating positive sentiments towards the IRO service.

We anticipate further insights as we continue to use this tool for ongoing improvements. Minutes of reviews have been revamped to enhance child-friendliness, adopting a magazine-style format with contributions and artwork from the children and young people themselves.

Transition planning is now included in reviews for young people at fifteen and half years old to enable improved care planning for their future. Our older young people also receive a personalised letter from their IRO and will have one post 18-year-old review, further demonstrating our commitment to their ongoing care. For older children and care experienced young people a specific participation officer will champion their voices in the development of services



Priority 2: Achieving Placement Stability and Permanence

Our commitment to placement stability and permanence is shown through various initiatives.

A commitment to stable homes within the family network via connected carers and Special Guardianship

A strong Fostering Service providing local placements for children and a robust support offer. The recruitment and retention of foster carers is underpinned by a clear strategy and work plan

Thurrock is developing the children's home Sector in its local area; two directly commissioned homes have opened supporting children with complex needs to have stable homes in their local community. Two further homes are in development.

Priority 3: Commissioning and Partnership Working

Consultation with children, young people, their families, and carers is integral to our contract monitoring process, contributing to planning and ensuring the quality of services. Commissioned services are available for children looked after and care leavers, supported by robust monitoring and quality assurance practices. Our commissioned offer ensures prompt and appropriate support for children, young people, and their families.

Priority 4: Developing the offer for care leavers

Enhanced collaboration with colleagues in the Adult Services Transitions Team facilitates better awareness of ongoing housing or care issues among care leavers. This proactive approach ensures a seamless transition and continued support for this demographic.

Priority 5: Developing Early Support for Vulnerable Children

The implementation of the *Brighter Futures* strategy and *Think Families* approach has strengthened integration with Health and Voluntary sector partners.

This collaborative effort enables targeted services for our most vulnerable children, young people, and their families/carers.

Being one of seventy-five local authorities to take part in the £301 million scheme supporting families post-Covid pandemic, displays our commitment to this initiative.



The formal launch of three Family Hubs in October 2023 received significant media coverage and social media publicity, expanding our reach and impact.

[Family Hubs Start for Life Local Offer | Ask Thurrock](#)

Additionally, our service offer has been extended to include edge-of-care and reunification support, further details of which can be found at:

<https://www.thurrock.gov.uk/childrens-care-professionals-services/prevention-and-support-service>

The outlined achievements reflect our ongoing commitment to the well-being and positive outcomes of children and young people in our care.

Through strategic initiatives, collaborative partnerships, and a continuous focus on improvement, we are creating an increasingly more supportive and stable environment for Thurrock children and their families now, and in the future.



Part 6 –Making a difference

1. Reducing demand on placements - strengthening families so that children can remain safely at home.

We know that children thrive in safe and stable families and where it is achievable, appropriate and safe to do so, we should be doing everything we can to support families to make this happen. Sadly, we know that children in care do not always achieve the same outcomes as those who are not care experienced and our focus must always be on narrowing and eliminating this gap.

This approach will divert families from higher levels of needs and create meaningful change. Our approach has been to develop those teams using a *Think Family* approach within Childrens Services that identify needs early, put in place the proper wraparound support and that focusses on the difficulties the family are facing including domestic abuse, mental health, substance misuse and parenting skills, and how to overcome these.



Our Social Care and Early Help services are focussed on enabling children to remain at home supported by our *Think Family* approach. Since 2019, fewer children are staying in long term care and Thurrock is successful at re-habilitating children home. To build on this success an Adolescent Team has been developed to prevent entry in to care for secondary aged children and to support children back home from periods in care to reduce the number entering the care system.

Our Family Hubs are now established and have brought together a multi-disciplinary approach with improved co-location and co-working across organisations which support families with children aged 0-19.

This work will further look to embed an early intervention approach and reach many more families across Thurrock. Our family network meetings build upon the earlier family group conference processes and work to build and capitalise on the assets within each wider family group to enable a child/young person to remain at home through use of these assets, and to put in place the support that is needed.

1. What we will do

- Build on the Brighter Futures Strategy, *Think Family* approach and development of the Family Hubs to try and keep more younger children safely with their families and prevent children coming into care.
- Work to support families of adolescents on the edge of care to reduce the number of older children coming into care.
- Increase the number of adolescent children who return home after a period of care by providing the right support to families that is bespoke to their needs.
- Increase the number of Special Guardianship Orders and Connected Carers, where appropriate, to ensure children can remain within a family environment that is familiar to them.
- Use family networks and specialist services to support parents to care for their own children when risk is manageable, so children do not remain in placements longer than needed.



2. More children are fostered and remain close to home.

Like many local authorities we know we have an ageing in-house foster carer cohort. We have worked to enhance our offer to new carers through a mix of financial incentive enhancements, a robust offer of training and support and a Council Tax exemption. We must continue to focus our efforts on this work to reduce our over reliance on Independent foster carer agencies.

We have collaborated with regional partners to join a regional Fostering Hub that will see a centralised point of access for prospective carers, oversee a communications strategy and act as a point of excellence, pooling resources and expertise across the region and providing a more consistent approach.

Too many children are placed outside of Thurrock.

As a small borough there will always be children outside of our borders, however we know we need to bring those children placed at greater distance much closer to home. An increase in foster carers who are equipped to look after some of those children will achieve this aim. This will provide children the opportunity to remain local and keep ties they may have with immediate and extended family, friends, and local services. Where we can keep more children closer to Thurrock in appropriate placements, we will deliver improved placement stability which will have a positive impact on those children.

We have collaborated with colleagues in Housing to develop local authority housing stock to provide our care leavers with secure local tenancies with proper support until age 25. We will continue this work to develop more housing stock, provide the opportunity to obtain independence and keep young people in Thurrock



2. What we will do

- Recruit and retain more in-house foster carers through our specialist team and planned Regional Fostering Hub.
- Reduce the number of children and young people who are placed outside of Thurrock and more than twenty miles away.
- Improve the placement stability of children and young people in care and reduce placement breakdown.
- Develop our 'Head start Housing' offer for our care leavers to enable more young people to secure a tenancy and remain within Thurrock.

3. Improve the commissioned offer through closer partnership working and effective monitoring

Where residential care is the best option, we must work much more collaboratively with providers to develop local provision that meets our sufficiency needs, encouraging existing and new providers to the market and communicating our needs more effectively. We are already sharing data on placement type and need across the region and are seeking to develop this further with regional collaborative commissioning of complex placements portraying a 'one customer' approach to providers within the region.

We have collaborated with colleagues in Housing to develop local authority housing stock to provide our care leavers with secure local tenancies with proper support until age 25. We will continue this work to develop more housing stock, provide the opportunity to obtain independence and keep young people within Thurrock.

Our Placements Framework was established in 2019 to address the number of spot purchase placements that were being made particularly for supported accommodation and residential placements. Supported accommodation has moved from all placements being spot purchased to around 10%, and independent foster care to around 40-50% and continuing to decrease every time that our framework is opened. We have been less successful with residential care which still sees around 95% of placements spot purchased. This is a trend seen across the country with local authorities having difficulty in attracting providers to frameworks with fixed pricing.

The establishment of Regional Commissioning Collaboratives will start to address these issues at a regional level and Thurrock has already started this journey through a DfE bid to work together across the Eastern Region to jointly commission places for children with complex needs including mental ill health, learning disabilities and difficulties and those subject to Deprivation of Liberty Orders. Regardless of the outcome of the bid there is a commitment to continue this work and build upon it, expanding to a greater range of placements. We need to communicate a more consistent message to providers that will provide clarity of our needs to them, enable them to supply the placements that are needed, deliver sustainability and commitment, and provide better value for money for local authorities through a 'one customer' approach.

We have successfully developed two local authority housing stock properties and commissioned a care provider for solo placements for two young people with complex needs. As a new provider of residential care this was achieved through a partnership approach with a local organisation, offering support and mentoring throughout their registration process with Ofsted. Registration was obtained in summer 2022 with both homes having received a 'Good' rating at their first inspection.

Through development of this approach these young people have achieved stability in their placement following a history of multiple placement breakdowns, they have resumed education and are engaging in therapy. The use of these homes has negated the need for unregulated placements and produced significant cost savings to the Council. We will seek to develop these arrangements further through the acquisition of further properties, the third of which is now in development.

Ensuring the safety and well-being of children must be a top priority. Providers of residential and post-sixteen accommodation should meet rigorous quality standards, including proper staffing levels, staff training, and regulatory compliance. Robust safeguarding measures should be in place to protect children from harm and enable their holistic development. Providers should invest in regular and comprehensive training for staff members. This training should cover areas such as trauma-informed care, attachment theory, and cultural sensitivity.

By equipping staff with the necessary skills and knowledge, they can better meet the diverse needs of children who are looked after.

To ensure the provision of high-quality placements, robust monitoring and quality assurance mechanisms will be in place. Regular inspections, performance reviews, and feedback processes can help show areas for improvement and ensure compliance with regulatory standards. Feedback from children and young people who are looked after, as well as their families, will be actively looked for and considered in service evaluations and improvements.



3. What we will do

- Take a more collaborative approach to working with placement providers to enhance relationships and improve capacity locally.
- Develop and commission more suitable placements for children and young people with complex needs including mental health difficulties, learning disabilities & difficulties and those subject to Deprivation of Liberty Orders.
- Reduce the need for unregistered placements for young people by developing the market to ensure sufficiency.
- Work with providers to increase the number of residential homes registered utilising local authority housing stock.
- Work in collaboration with providers to design bespoke support placements.

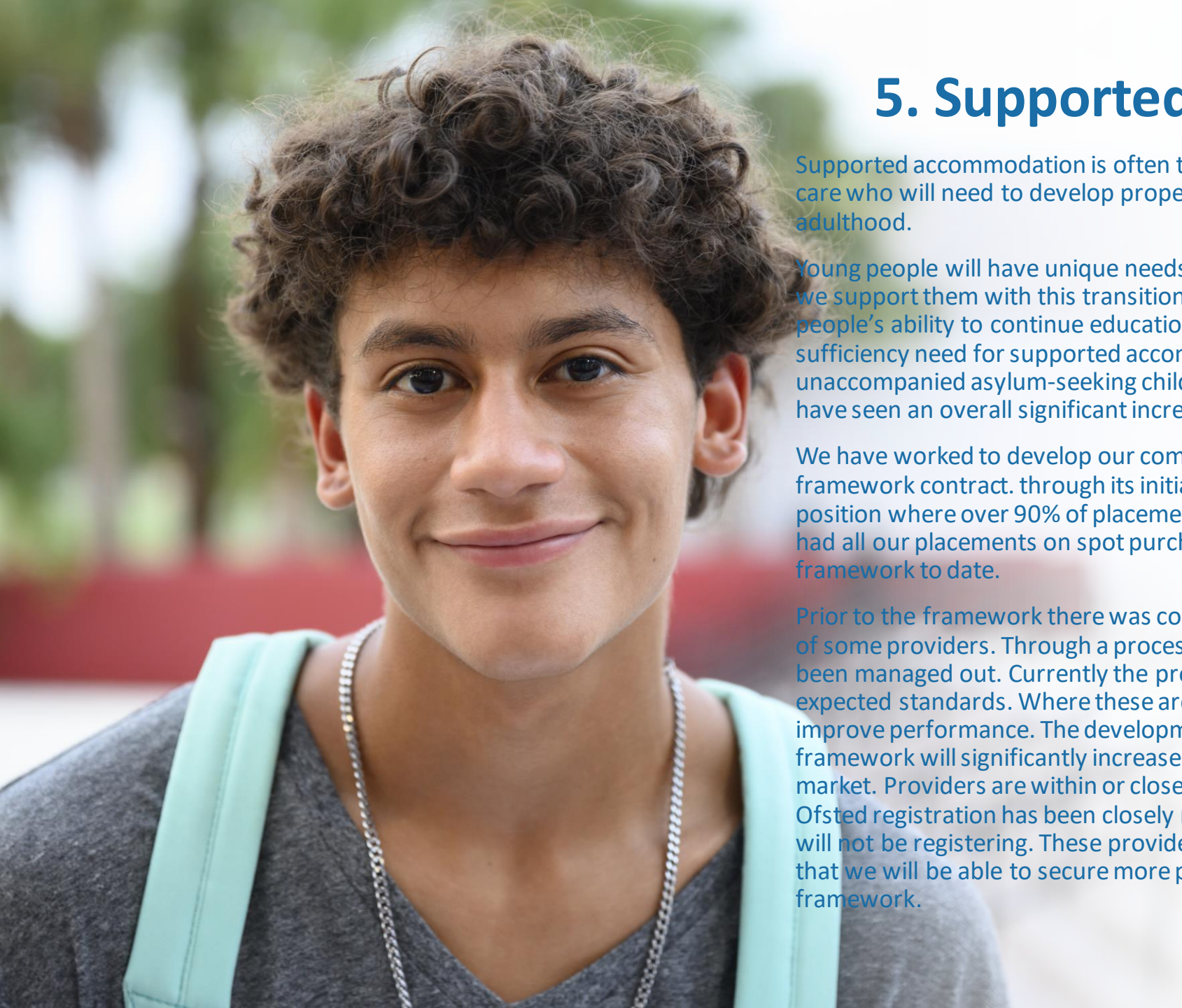
4. Fostering

- Children and young people thrive when within a family setting. Our first choice of placement, where safe to do so, should always be placing a child with suitable and well-matched foster carers in the local area or as close to it as possible.
- Our in-house fostering offer has been re-designed to offer more competitive financial rates, exemptions in Council Tax if living in Thurrock, and a robust suite of training and continued support.
- Despite a challenging market we continue to work at a local level to drive up recruitment rates and have recently agreed to join a Regional Fostering Hub which will provide a centre of expertise across the region, co-ordinating communications, recruitment, and training and improving our foster carer sufficiency understanding and developing this regionally. In-house foster carers can offer placements at a lower cost than Independent Foster Agency (IFA) placements, however we recognise there will be a continued need for IFA placements, albeit at a reduced level, if we achieve our aim of recruiting more in-house carers. Reducing the overall costs of supplying services for children and young people in care enables us to invest more in services for children and young people who are on the edge of care, and in preventative services.



4. What we will do

- Continue our drive to recruit and retain in-house foster carers residing in Thurrock through incentivisation and an effective package of training and ongoing support.
- Transition to the Regional Fostering Hub to further improve recruitment and retention and deliver improved regional sufficiency.
- When considering Foster Care, we look to the network first through Family Network Meetings and viability assessments at an early stage
- Whilst seeking to increase in-house foster carers, it is recognised we will still require IFA placements. We will work with the market to communicate our needs more effectively prior to the 2024 re-procurement of our Placements Framework, to increase participation and reduce spot purchase. This will be driven through a programme of market engagement



5. Supported Accommodation

Supported accommodation is often the most appropriate route for 16/17-year-olds in care who will need to develop proper independence skills as they move towards adulthood.

Young people will have unique needs and readiness to be able to live independently and we support them with this transition. This will be a key stability factor affecting young people's ability to continue education, training and maintain employment. The sufficiency need for supported accommodation includes as appropriate any unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (UASC), where despite fluctuating numbers, we have seen an overall significant increase over the last year and a half.

We have worked to develop our commissioned service through the development of a framework contract. through its initial and subsequent re-openings, we have reached a position where over 90% of placements are made via the framework, having previously had all our placements on spot purchase. This has been the most successful aspect of the framework to date.

Prior to the framework there was considerable variability in the quality and performance of some providers. Through a process of contract management these providers have been managed out. Currently the providers on our framework are in most cases meeting expected standards. Where these are not met there is swift action put in place to improve performance. The development of the Ofsted registration and inspection framework will significantly increase quality standards within this section of the provider market. Providers are within or close to Thurrock for most placements. The process of Ofsted registration has been closely monitored with a minority of providers saying they will not be registering. These provide extremely limited number of placements meaning that we will be able to secure more placements with registered providers on our framework.

- Our placements framework is due to be reprocurd for a spring 2025 start. We recognise the need to further enhance this offer and supply good placements to our unaccompanied asylum seeker (UASC) young people who have their own set of unique needs. As part of the commissioning process, we will look to strengthen the UASC offer as well as build on the existing number of providers that have met high quality standards pre-Ofsted registration. We will work to replace those few providers that have decided not to register with Ofsted and further encourage local provision.
- Our response to 16/17 years old who present as homeless continues primarily to be via the booking of several beds within two local hostel provisions that are commissioned. Bespoke levels of floating support can be put in place whilst a decision is made as to whether hostel accommodation continues to be the most appropriate option or if alternative placements such as foster care would be more suitable where a young person is accommodated under section 20. A current options appraisal is being undertaken to assess if these placements for young people will continue to be via a commissioned offer or delivered through our in-house Housing Team.
- We commission a young parents supported accommodation scheme with the same provider as our hostel provision. The 20-bed scheme is open to former or current looked after children aged 16-25 with Thurrock connections. It supplies floating support for families tailored to individual needs. In addition, two move-on accommodation units are available for families as a transition from the main accommodation to independent living. Options for recommissioning are currently being assessed in line with the hostel provision

5. What we will do

- Ensure that providers receive support through the final stages of the Ofsted registration process and are prepared for their first inspections.
- With increasing numbers of UASC children ensure that placements are effectively meeting their need with a specific focus in the 2025 new framework.
- Further increase the number of providers on the framework to replace those who have decided not to register with Ofsted.
- Support providers to set up in Thurrock through effective market engagement pre-procurement.
- Continue to monitor placements and adapt our approach to utilise the oversight of Ofsted inspection without loss of focus in this high-risk area.
- Have sufficient placement providers to ensure that placements with unregistered providers is a last resort and aim for this to be at zero.
- Explore commissioning options for our hostel and young parent accommodation units.



6. Residential Accommodation

The residential care market is well recognised nationally to have significant weaknesses in respect of placement availability, increasing costs and concerns around not supplying places to our most vulnerable children and young people. Thurrock has no homes registered in its own name but has recently worked in partnership with a local provider to register provision using local authority housing stock. The lack of provision has led us to find new ways of working, however we need to go further until such time as the newly planned Regional Commissioning Collaboratives (RCC) are operational at a regional level and start to positively impact on sufficiency and pricing.

We are seeing a continued increase in young people with complex needs including mental health issues, learning disabilities and difficulties, challenging behaviours, and those children subject to Deprivation of Liberty Orders. This has led to the use of some unregulated placements over the last two years. Whilst these are quality assured, they do not always deliver stability for young people and are some of our most costly placements.

To address these issues, we developed two homes by acquiring local authority housing stock, refurbishing the properties, and commissioning a local care provider to register with Ofsted and run the homes as solo placements under a medium-term licence. This has proved effective and has seen positive outcomes for young people, who are now engaging with education and therapy. A third home is in development with plans to use this as an emergency/crisis placement.

We will need to build on these innovative approaches to further develop this type of provision, working in partnership with providers to develop bespoke solutions to supply placements to our most vulnerable young people. The development of these solutions will ensure that we avoid the use of unlawful placements.

As the re-procurement of the Placements Framework approaches in 2025 we will need to significantly improve market engagement, building closer relationships with providers to deliver sufficiency at a local level. We know that residential providers are hesitant to join frameworks where they are tied to pricing agreements and see little benefit in doing so with the current under-capacity in the market. Whilst working at a local level to provide sustainability to providers we recognise that we will not solve this issue alone and that this affects almost every local authority in the country.

For this reason, the work that we are doing regionally, being led by Norfolk County Council, has significant buy-in from East of England local authorities, including Thurrock. Our sufficiency issues around residential care are similar, and we plan to regionalise sufficiency intelligence, create a single commissioning body to communicate our needs to the market, for them to develop sufficiency at a local level and for us to drive better value for money through a single co-ordinated voice across the region. This work will initially encompass those young people described above who have complex needs and require specialist placements. Over time this will develop into wider residential placements as a forerunner to the establishments of the Government's RCC programme.

We have made initial inks with our Housing Planning colleagues to ensure that any new homes that are intending on setting up locally and have applied for planning permission are brought to the attention of Childrens Services. The purpose in doing so will be to have initial discussions with those providers to forge early relationships and where appropriate, negotiate priority access to placements.

Parent and Baby placements are an effective way to assess parental ability, however there is a lack of these type of placements at a national level, in line with wider residential sufficiency gaps. Often parents and their baby are placed at significant distance from Thurrock, removing their critical support networks, whilst they are in placement. The same approach around improved market engagement and regional collaboration will need to be used.

In line with the wider difficulties around residential care, Thurrock continues to see need for residential school placements for children with Special Educational Needs and/or Disability (SEND) in 38 and 52-week placements. The number of children and young people in Thurrock who are on the Autistic Spectrum continues to increase, largely due to a leading school in Thurrock which attracts families to move to the area to access this well-respected school which is seen as a pioneering centre of excellence.

Our partners across the region have similar sufficiency issues with this being another area of focus on the work we are planning to collaborate on prior to the establishment of the RCC programme. In addition, we are exploring opening a framework for this type of placement but recognise the challenges this presents which will be like those in residential care. If we are to succeed in the development of this, we must improve our market engagement and potentially link this in with our wider placement framework for 2025. Options around this are currently being explored to assess the viability, benefits, and risks of each of these.

Short breaks and respite for disabled children are currently commissioned on a framework which is due to end in 2024. Historically there has been a limited number of providers on the framework necessitating the need to spot purchase regularly. Following market engagement, we are shortly to reprocure these services to attract a larger number of providers to the framework and increasing choice and flexibility in our offer.

Thurrock continues to be part of the Childrens Cross Regional Arrangements Group (CCRAG) partnership sharing monitoring and fee increase responsibilities across local authority partners. Recent work is now emerging around placement fee intelligence, sharing information, and analysing this to drive better value for money where providers may be using inconsistent pricing structures for different local authorities.



6. What we will do

- Work with our regional partners to collaborate on the commissioning of placements for children and young people with complex needs including SEND residential school placements to improve sufficiency and value for money.
- Continue to develop our own local authority housing stock, collaborating with providers to register homes for complex needs placements / emergency/crisis placements.
- Work in partnership with providers to develop bespoke solutions and increase placement sufficiency locally
- Improve the engagement with the market and then reprocure our placements framework in 2025 with a particular focus on residential homes and Parent and Baby placements.
- Work with our colleagues in Housing Planning to identify new homes seeking planning permission locally to start to build early relationships with providers.
- Continue to explore options for a potential framework for SEND residential school placements, whilst considering collaborative regional work in this area.
- Reprocure our short breaks and respite provision to increase capacity and reduce reliance on spot purchase arrangements.

7. Adoption

Our overarching aim is to supply secure and loving homes to children in need of permanence via adoption and to support those children and their families whilst needed. We offer child-led and adopter friendly services by an experienced and motivated professional team. Thurrock is part of the Adopt East Regional Adoption Alliance, the largest Regional Adoption Agency in the UK. We combine the experience, understanding, and professionalism of Local Authorities in Bedford, Essex, Hertfordshire, Luton, Norfolk, Southend, Suffolk, Thurrock with the invaluable insight of two Voluntary Agency partners, Adoption plus and Barnardo's, together with the ongoing support of Adoption UK and New Family Social.

Working as one, we pool our resources, share best practice, and ensure every child is given the best possible chance of growing up as part of a caring, loving family. Thurrock can access prospective adopters from across Adopt East at an early stage which has significantly increased our resource. Thurrock is also a net contributor of approved prospective adopters matched within Adopt East. We continue to recruit a diverse range of adopters to meet the needs of children over the whole course of their lives.

Thurrock Adopt East supports Adoptive families and families formed by Special Guardianship. Our core services and the added services provided by the region such as a respite hub, provides early intervention to families and prevents entry in to care.

7. What we will do

- Continue to recruit prospective adopters with the aim of continuing to be a net contributor to Adopt East
- Increase the offer of early permanence placements using our existing and newly approved adopters
- Increase the use of *Think Family* approach to support families at an early stage
- Continue to provide specialist therapeutic input



8. Care Leavers



Our Aftercare Team provide support to young people leaving care from age 18 up until 25. 'Staying Put' arrangements are promoted to provide a continuation of stability for young people. We will continue to promote this option where this is mutually beneficial.

For those young people who require and accept support to transition to independent living we provide several housing options including the use of local authority housing stock with floating support where this is needed, private landlord arrangements and in a small number of cases hostel provision. Care leavers can develop their living skills, access education and training opportunities and understand what it is like to live independently as an adult and transition towards this. For young people who feel ready to take on their own tenancy without support we provide grants to help set up their new home and will also increase their banding on the housing waiting list to speed up their move to independence.

We provide a local offer to care leavers with advice and guidance about independent living. Currently 94% of our care leavers are in suitable accommodation. We will continue to focus on this and further improve this figure. Just over half of our care leavers are engaged in full or part time employment or training, however this figure has remained static over the last year. Using appropriate accommodation and floating support where needed, we will work towards increasing this.

We will collaborate with our colleagues in Housing towards ensuring sufficiency of suitable accommodation and support for our care leavers to provide the best chance of developing independence skills, securing meaningful employment, training or further education and delivering positive outcomes for our care leavers.

8. What we will do

- Ensure sufficiency of suitable accommodation for our care leavers through a range of accommodation types.
- Commission effective floating support for those young people who require enhanced support.
- Work with commissioned providers of all services across the Council to place care leavers into employment and apprenticeships using social value clauses in contracts

Part 7 – Risk, Governance & monitoring

The priorities and intentions set out in our strategy will need clear monitoring and management to ensure they are kept on track and delivered.

With any strategy there are risks to delivery that will need management and mitigation.

The most prominent identified risks are set out here:

Risks	Mitigation
Difficulty attracting new providers to the Thurrock Placements Framework.	Robust market engagement processes to promote the offer to providers, working more in partnership.
Lack of suitable Local Authority owned housing stock available to develop bespoke placement solutions. Additional lack of properties to meet the needs of our care leavers,	Working with Housing to forecast future need for both looked after children and care leavers ensuring this is completed in a planned way. Utilisation of potential Local Authority buy-back properties When housing stock is unavailable.
increasing number of children and young people with complex needs (including SEND needs) and availability of suitable residential placements.	Continued work on Local Authority owned housing stock with commissioned bespoke solutions. Continued exploration of regional collaboration and joint commissioning to increase sufficiency and value for money.
Difficulty in commissioning a new framework for SEND residential placements, potentially experiencing the same difficulties that have been seen in attracting residential providers for looked after children to the Thurrock framework.	Robust market engagement processes to promote the offer to providers, working more in partnership. Explore the potential to amalgamate the looked after children placements framework with SEND residential placements from 2025.



Governance and Monitoring

Thurrock Council will continue to monitor and track the progress of this Strategy through an action plan with clearly defined accountability and an annual review throughout the life of the document.

The Assistant Director for Children's Social Care and Early Help will own the Strategy and its implementation.

The Executive Director of Children's Services and the Lead Member for Children's Services via the Development Board and Directorate Management Team will oversee Implementation of the Strategy.

Key Team members meet regularly to review the plan to meet our sufficiency duty and review the emerging needs and services available.

The action plan is reviewed every six months. Sufficiency covers a wide range of areas within children services, and it is important that partners, carers, children, young people, and providers are all invested into the actions held, so partnership and collaboration will remain key. Market engagement events will be used to ensure the strategy is kept live.

Members and key stakeholders including Children and Young People will have oversight of the Sufficiency Strategy via the Corporate Parenting Committee. The Sufficiency Strategy will be presented annually to this committee with an updating report for their review.

