

Thurrock Council Participation & Engagement Strategy

2019 –2021

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Our Aim

Our aim is to create a culture of participation, engagement and consultation across our organisation. The voices of children, young people and their families will be included in developing and improving services. We will strive to engage with as many people as possible, so that we can identify trends and patterns within the feedback, which will help us to make the right improvements.

This strategy identifies our priorities, the actions we will take to address them, and the ways that we will evaluate our progress to make sure we're getting it right.

By delivering this strategy, we will have better information to develop and improve our services, because service users will:

- be more involved in designing and developing the services we provide, including key policies and procedures
- be involved in the governance and scrutiny of decision making and performance
- receive feedback and information surrounding the impact their involvement has had on support and services in Thurrock.

Our Principles

These principles will be applied in our work involving children, young people and their families. They have been designed to cover the following 5 stages of participation:

1. Planning and coordination
2. Inclusion
3. Delivery
4. Communication
5. Feedback, Evaluation and Next Steps

Participation & Engagement in Thurrock

Participation and Engagement in Thurrock is based on strong, professional priorities. A variety of methods will be used to engage children, young people and families:

Young people-initiated, shared decisions with adults: This is when projects are initiated by young people and decision-making is shared between young people and professionals. The approach empowers young people and it enables them to access and learn from the life experience and expertise of adults. For example we have planned events and activities involving feedback from young people – young people said they like doing different activities with workers involved, so we have ensured that workers are involved in the activity itself.

Young people-initiated and directed: This is when young people initiate and direct a project or piece of work. Professionals are involved only in a supportive role. This might take place when a group of participating children offer a training session to

foster carers based on their experiences. This is at early stages as young people become more confident but a recent performance activity day- the direction and form of the final pieces work were entirely led by young people including the vote o thanks

Adult-initiated, shared decisions with young people: This happens when projects are initiated by adults but the decision-making is shared with the young people. This might take place at the Corporate Parenting Committee.

Consulted and informed: This happens when service users give advice on projects or issues which are led by professionals. Service users are informed about how their input will be used and the outcomes of the decisions made by professionals. This might be used in specific participation focus groups on topics such as the local offer for care leavers and information for care leavers.

Assigned but informed: This is where service users are assigned a specific role and informed about how and why they are being involved. This approach might be used in the recruitment of staff. Young people have run their own interview panels and planned their own questions.

Pledge to Looked After Children

Our pledge makes 5 promises to children and young people in our care. These cover:

- health
- education
- reaching your potential
- positive relationships
- leaving care

The pledge was written by young people and has been adopted throughout the council.

It applies to all children and young people, from birth to 18 years-old, who are in our care. Some apply to those leaving care from the age of 18 up to 21 years, or 25 years in certain cases.

The pledge applies regardless of sex, race, sexual orientation, disability, age, ability or background. It applies wherever young people are placed, whether this is inside or outside Thurrock.

Our 5 promises

We promise to work to help you to develop healthily by:

- helping you to keep fit and healthy and giving you the resources and information on how best to equip yourself to continue to develop
- making sure you are given support to have regular health and dental checks
- having social workers support you in all aspects of your development and giving you every opportunity to flourish

We promise to do everything we can to keep you safe and feel important to us while in care by:

- making staff available to speak to you when you need to contact them to discuss your problems, anxieties and achievements
- involving you in decisions and plans that are made that will affect your current and future life
- not changing your social worker unless absolutely necessary
- giving you advice and support to stay safe both within your home and community
- calling you back within 24 hours

We promise to help you reach your dreams while in care by:

- celebrating your achievements and recognising your goals and helping to push you further while in care
- supporting you to attend and achieve in education
- providing you with good educational opportunities that best meet your abilities
- providing you with a translating dictionary in your language when you first come into care if your first language is not English
- giving you the same opportunities available to young people who are not looked after

We promise to support your positive relationships and social activities by:

- giving priority when you ask to stay with friends and relatives away from your normal placement
- aiding you in having easy access to libraries, youth clubs and positive activities
- giving you access to an independent visitor/ mentors
- supporting you in being heard throughout the local authority across all departments

We promise to prepare you for adult life and leaving care by:

- supporting you financially up until the time you start work or are entitled to claim benefits
- providing you with a grant to help you settle into your own accommodation when you leave care
- supporting you in higher education at university
- helping you with support to seek employment and training
- helping you with transport for attending education and looked after children appointments
- supporting you to apply for all documentation and providing you with necessary information on your rights

Monitoring the Promises

All parts of the organisation that work with looked after children and care leavers will evidence examples of how they are meeting the Promises. This information will be monitored within Quality Assurance. **Young people's participation groups** will audit this work periodically to satisfy themselves that the Corporate Parents are meeting their responsibilities to looked after children.

Participation and Engagement is Everyone's Responsibility

Officers, Managers and Members all have a responsibility to consult children, young people and families in all parts of their work. This means checking in and asking fundamental questions including 'does this make sense?', 'how do you think we can make improvements?' and 'do you understand your rights?'

Responsibilities of the Wider Organisation

As part of quality reporting, each team and service will provide examples as to how they have consulted children, young people and their families against the Promises identified above. This has begun with feedback weeks and also gathering feedback from service users via the audit programme. Also the Mind of My Own Statements will be analysed to incorporate feedback to teams about what young people are saying.

Corporate Parenting Committee

Two young people are co-opted members of the Corporate Parenting Committee. They are full members who receive all papers in advance of the meetings and give their views. The same young people are part of the Children in Care Council so are well placed to share information to and from the Corporate Parenting Committee.

Responsibilities of the Participation Service

The Participation Service is based in Quality Assurance. This service will manage a significant proportion of consultation and engagement activity across Thurrock. The Participation Service will produce monthly reports that reflect consultation and participation activity and future plans. This is provided to the Development Board and discussed with the Portfolio Holder, Director and Assistant Director.

Children in Care Council

The Children in Care Council (CICC) represents all children looked after by Thurrock. The group meet monthly and is facilitated by an independent advocacy organisation- Open Door and is chaired by Young People, to discuss issues raised by children in care and to develop plans for service development. The CICC is attended by Children Services Senior Managers, including the Assistant Director.

The Chair and the facilitator from Open Door attend the Corporate Parenting Committee held quarterly.

The Participation Service attends this group and seeks to improve recruitment by ensuring there is a wide reach out to young people of different ages, ethnicity and backgrounds.

Care Leaver Forum

The Care Leaver Forum is becoming established with regular drop in consultation sessions and several larger events led by the Strategic Lead for Looked after Children to establish the wishes and feelings of care leavers.

The Participation Service has worked in partnership with the Leaving Care service and Open Door to develop interaction with children and young people to enable their voices to be heard.

How Consultation & Engagement will happen

Targeted Consultation will take place through standard questionnaires and feedback, reports, comment forms and other arrangements. We have consulted young people on some of the information we provide and we will be setting up sessions to review all our literature to make it more accessible and appealing

Feedback Questionnaires have been introduced for service users to complete at different key stages of their journey through our service. This is to understand their experience of services and its impact on their quality of life and outcomes. An example of this the feedback gathered from children and young people after child protection conferences.

Independent One to One Consultations as part of the audit programme will be undertaken by phone or meeting children and young people. The questions are about scaling if we have kept them informed, if we have made a difference and if we have done what we said we would do.

Exit Interviews will be undertaken with a random sample of service users and their parent/carers prior to them leaving a service or no longer accessing it, for example children leaving care. This will provide an opportunity for the service user to review the service they received and to discuss if and how effectively their needs were met. This will enable the organisation to learn from the feedback received to improve services. This mechanism is being developed and will part of the programme for 2020.

Knowing our Children & Accessing Specific Groups

Children with Disabilities

Children with disabilities are included in activities and events for all children, and their participation is enabled by the provision of 1 to 1 workers and adaptations to the activity.

The Participation & Engagement Officer works closely with the Disabled Children Service. All activities are promoted with this group of children and they have been inclusive. To date all children who have wanted to participate have done so safely.

The Inclusion and Support Officer for Special Educational Needs and Disability promotes participation within the service.

The disabled children service has communication tools which they use to gain children and young people's views but they also use Mind of My Own Express.

Children with Disabilities Team gather feedback from parents at the end of completing the 8 week Parenting Course, offered to all parents of children known to the team but also to parents of children open to other teams in the service.

The Short break and Outreach Service gather regular feedback from all parents of children attending their activities (including Saturdays).

Special schools all have school Councils which is another source of young people's views.

Children living outside Thurrock

Due to distances involved, children placed out of area are often unable to access participation groups run by Thurrock. However they can respond to surveys and part of the participation plan is to ensure there is engagement with children who are not able to access services directly in Thurrock. This group of children will be consulted on how they would like to be involved

Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children (UASC)

A participation group for Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children will be held quarterly. The group will be run by the UASC Team and participation workers. It is expected that Service Providers, will actively support the young people they work with to attend these meetings and the Refugee Council and Interpreters will support the Group.

Children from Black and Minority Ethnic Groups

Children, young people and families from black and minority ethnic groups are consulted and invited to attend forums and activities in the same way as all other service users. Representation by minority groups will be monitored to support engagement and inclusivity.

Mind of My Own

Mind Of My Own (App for children, young people and their workers) and the Express App (an accessible app for young people with a learning disability and younger children) are the primary consultation tools for all children and young people using children's social care services to provide feedback about their experiences. This was launched in June 2019 and the take up has been good both in terms of workers enabling young people to use the app, and young people using the app on their own phone

The Participation & Engagement Officer provides Children's Social Care staff with training to maximise the functionality of the app and its efficient use, with smart phones and IT solutions being rolled out to staff.

All new staff are offered a training session on the app. There will be a celebration and promotion of the app lead by young people in December 2019.

The expectation is that Mind of My Own statements will be used prior to Child Protection Conference and Looked after Reviews so that their wishes and feelings are clear.

Child in Need (CIN) and Children Subject to Protection Plans (CP) Targeted Participation

Engaging with families where children are in need/and in need of protection is an important part of this strategy.

The aim is to establish a Service User Forum for children, young people and their parents/carers who are accessing services under these categories. This is planned for 2020.

The forum will support formal participation, co-production and consultation between children's social care and service users. The objective is to listen to actively progress issues, concerns and suggestions.

It is envisaged that an Annual Report for the service user forum will be published. This will detail activity and the influence it has had on service development, delivery and outcomes.

The forum(s) will meet quarterly with agreed terms of reference and a work programme.

Advocacy

Looked after Children and care leavers are entitled to access advocacy services provided by OPEN DOOR. This service has been extended to include children in need and children subject to a child protection plan. The advocacy service reaches out to all children over 5 years old prior to their first Child Protection Conference to allow for their views to be heard and for the Advocate to support and/or represent the child at the Conference.

All children entering care are given the opportunity to speak directly to an Advocate who will explain their role and ensure the young person know how to contact them.

Evaluation and Quality Assurance

Performance Measures

The Quality Assurance service has developed an action plan- based on Intention, Implementation and Impact - to ensure systems and mechanisms identified in this strategy are implemented. The service will use the first year of this strategy to refine the key performance measures and to monitor performance against the objectives.

An annual report will be produced to demonstrate the organisation's annual performance against this strategy.