

The Health and Wellbeing of Children and Young People Looked After

A Health Needs Assessment for Thurrock

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Thurrock Council – The Health and Wellbeing of Children Looked After

A Health Needs Assessment for Thurrock – a summary.

Authors and editors

Authors:

- Elozona Umeh, Senior Public Health Programme Manager
- Juliet Brabben, Public Health Graduate Trainee
- Karen Balthasar, Public Health Graduate Trainee

Editors:

- Teresa Salami-Oru, Assistant Director for Public Health
- Elozona Umeh, Senior Public Health Programme Manager

Contributors

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- Katie Powers, Public Health Graduate Trainee
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- North East London NHS Foundation Trust (NELFT) – Data Team
- Maria Payne, Strategic Lead – Public Mental Health and Adult Mental Health Systems Transformation
- Philip Gregory, Senior Public Health Manager – Health Intelligence
- Smita Nagmoti, Specialty Registrar in Public Health Thurrock Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG)

This needs assessment also features the views and experiences of Children Looked After and their carers. Our thanks to the **66 children and young people who are looked after, 19 foster carers and 15 professionals** who participated in the engagement exercise to obtain information on their views about being in care or caring for children and young people who are in care

The extended version of this needs assessment is available on request. This needs assessment was written pre-COVID-19 with an update to the data and information in 2021. The data contained within this needs assessment is varied and reflective of available data at the time of writing.

Executive summary

Children and young people looked after (CLA), and Care Leavers are a particularly vulnerable group with potentially greater health and social needs than their peers. CLA have long been viewed as one of the most vulnerable populations in society, facing inequalities in health, education and social factors that are harmful to their health and wellbeing outcomes, and ultimately their life potential and fulfilment.

Evidence shows that certain Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) are commonly linked to children entering the care system and increase the chances of poor health outcomes later on in life. ACE include:

- verbal, physical and sexual abuse
- emotional and physical neglect
- household challenges, including:
 - mental illness
 - domestic violence
 - problem drug and alcohol use
 - parental incarceration
 - parental separation

Both chronic stress and increased health damaging behaviour which relieves this stress such as smoking, substance abuse and sexual risk-taking, can be associated with poor physiological development and experience of multiple ACEs.

As a result, there are some children who, for a variety of reasons, are unable to live with their parent/s. In such circumstances, children or young people, may either enter into care through voluntary means or through a court order which enables the local authority to take on corporate parenting responsibilities to safeguard them. These children then become Children Looked After (CLA).

Care Leavers (CLs) are young people who have been cared for by the Local Authority and are on a path to transition into adulthood towards independent living with the option of accessing the support of the Local Authority care leaving services until age 25.

This co-produced needs assessment was undertaken as part of Thurrock Public Health's Joint Strategic Needs Assessment (JSNA) work programme. It utilised intelligence from several sources to understand need at a point in time, create a narrative and make recommendations. A literature review from published evidence was conducted to understand the burden of health and wellbeing issues and risk-taking behaviours among CLA and Care Leavers (CLs).

Local data was gathered to identify needs and the service offer across Thurrock. The JSNA should be read in conjunction with the Looked After Children Sufficiency Strategy, which provides context to the population of Thurrock and the cohort of CLA and Aftercare children and young people.

Lastly, an engagement exercise, in the form of a survey through Healthwatch, was conducted with CLA, carers and professionals who work with them in Thurrock to gather their views. A series of recommendations were drawn from this detailed analysis of needs, and which are listed at the end of this summary.

What we know about our CLA, Care Leavers and local services

Nationally, the prevalence of 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.

The CLA cohort includes children with special educational needs and disability (SEND) and Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children (UASC). For the purposes of this needs assessment, we have referred to children and young people as the population of Thurrock aged 0 -17 or up to 25 years if they have SEND or are receiving an aftercare service.

There were **301 CLA as of 31 March 2021**. This is equivalent to a rate of **66 CLA per 10,000 children under the age of 18**, which is similar to England and our Statistical Neighbours (SN) but higher than the regional average. **As at March 2022, unpublished data shows the number of CLA were 295 equating to a rate of 65 per 10,000 population.**

The rate of children in care in Thurrock declined between 2016 and 2019, from 81 CLA per 10,000 children under the age of 18 in 2016 to 67 CLA per 10,000 in 2020 and has remained stable since. **At the end of March 2021, 286 Care Leavers (compared to 254 in March 2020)**, including those 16-18 being supported, were receiving an Aftercare Service. This is a slight increase from March 2019 but this is largely dependent on the age of children in care.

From August 2020 to February 2021 during international COVID-19 restrictions, there had been a reduced number of UASC, but that trend reversed to reach as high as 33 UASC by September 2021. The number of UASC who were open at the end of each month has increased since September 2021, equating to 11% of the total CLA cohort. This is above the Thurrock ceiling of 0.07% and the allocated number of 31 UASC.

There has been a reduction in this number since March 2022 (Thurrock Council Children Looked After Monthly Profile, 2022). While the new National Transfer Scheme is in place, the Eastern Region transfers are currently paused. However, there are negotiations with the Home Office to ensure that Thurrock does not accept further UASC entrants aiding effective transfers to other local authorities.

CLA and Care Leavers have varying needs depending on their characteristics including gender, age and ethnicity. Understanding this demography can facilitate identification of needs and approaches for effective support. Most of the above information and the data included within this report can be found on the government website (Department of Education, 2021).

In Thurrock:

- Well over half of children in care are male – 62% compared to 38% female.
- A larger proportion of Children Looked After are between the ages of 12 and 16 (44%) with the second largest group being the 5-11 year-olds (24%).
- 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.
- It is good practice to ensure that children remain within their communities. The percentage of CLA children placed within 20 miles of their home address increased by one percentage point, up to 71% between March 2020 and March 2021. This was slightly lower than both SNs (73%) and England (74%) during the same period.
- The fostering recruitment campaign seeks to increase local placements. However, Thurrock along with other authorities across the country are finding the recruitment of local foster carers a challenge. Local placements are scarce, both from Independent Fostering Agencies (IFA) and Residential care homes. The local authority continues to seek Ofsted registered provision and sometimes this is outside of the Thurrock and Essex area.
- According to the Stability Index, over a 24-month period ending in 2017/18 (the most recent data at the time of writing), 49% of CLA in Thurrock had experienced at least one placement change, 3% had experienced at least one school move and 77% had experienced at least one change in social worker. Based on these three stability domains, schools appear to be a more stable environment for CLA.
- The majority of Thurrock Care Leavers are in suitable accommodation. In 2020/21, 86% of Care Leavers who were in suitable accommodation, 19% were not in touch with the local authority and 9% were recorded as living in unsuitable accommodation. Most Care Leavers who were not in suitable accommodation were either in custody or missing UASC – **see section 5.4.1 of the extended CLA HNA for further details.**
- Between 2017 and 2019 there was a 13% increase in Care Leavers accessing Education Employment and Training (EET) opportunities. This was a positive change for Thurrock which suggests that opportunities for Care Leavers to progress into work and further education had improved. However, COVID-19 has impacted negatively on the progress that was made in Thurrock, with the decrease of young people entering EET during the pandemic. Opportunities are being followed up to ensure that post-lockdown, Care Leavers are supported to access EET opportunities. For instance:
 1. There is a close alignment between the Aftercare Service and the Inspire Youth Hub, a partnership which aims to bring about improvements in the number of young people in education, employment and training. The On-Track Thurrock Programme continues to offer a bespoke programme to ensure that Care Leavers can access education, employment and training. The offer of one-to-one in-person support from the Inspire Hub is continuing (subject to risk assessment) for both emotional wellbeing and employment advice. Thurrock offers access to the Prince's Trust programme, which enables young people to build their confidence and have access to apprenticeship opportunities so they can engage in the local communities in which they live.
 2. The government Kickstart programme in Thurrock is spearheaded by Inspire; the programme provides funding to create new 6-month placements for 16-24 year-olds on Universal Credit and at risk of long-term unemployment. The government's Plan for Jobs scheme is hoped to create new jobs. Employers are funded to pay the salaries and National Insurance contributions for each young person's placement, up to 25 hours per week. Additional funding is available to support each young person

to understand the skills that employers need and how to use this opportunity as a platform into sustainable employment. DWP is the conduit for young people referrals and reimbursement for wages. There is agreement for the funding application for the recruitment of up to 90 young people in 2021/22.

- The proportion of Initial Health Assessment (IHAs) being carried out within statutory timelines has declined during 2019/2020, achieving about 92% in quarter three of 2019/20. Progress made to address this has been presented to the Health and Wellbeing Board previously with an action plan for achieving timeliness in the completion of IHAs in Thurrock. Yet, between 01 April 2020 and 31 March 2021 only 57% had been completed in time (Thurrock CCG Safeguarding Team, 2020).
- In 2021, the uptake of childhood immunisations by CLA was **86%** which is below the 95% target but in line with national uptake. While uptake amongst the general population is also below target, actions are required to ensure that CLA are on track to increase uptake alongside non-looked-after peers (Department of Education, 2021).
- The Social Survey Division of the Office for National Statistics estimated that 45% of CLA aged 5-17 years would normally have a diagnosable mental health disorder (Healthy London Partnership, 2020). This equates to approximately **134 (out of 298)** CLA aged 5-17 with a diagnosable mental health disorder in Thurrock in 2021. Although there is no estimated prevalence for Care Leavers, a similar prevalence rate would lead to a figure of **126 (out of 281)** Care Leavers who may have a diagnosable mental health disorder in Thurrock. Similarly, within the general child population, 16% (one in six) children and young people (aged 5-16 years) were identified as having a probable mental disorder increasing from one in nine (10.8%) in 2019 (NHS Digital, 2020). There is a need to ensure that mental health information is used for service and transition planning, in order to improve services offered by adjust them to children's mental health needs.
- Children Looked After accounted for 20% of statutory outcomes in 2020-21. This has slightly reduced to 18% for 2021-22. However, the cohort numbers fewer than 10 in the latest data and more than half of these children are looked after because of Youth Detention Accommodation/remand. This means that CLA status became active as a direct result of their offending.
- Thurrock Youth Offending Team, Essex Police and Thurrock Social Care continue to work together to divert young people away from the criminal justice system via its Out of Court Disposal Panel. It is expected that this will reduce the number of CLA After receiving statutory outcomes as it provides voluntary interventions and support for children committing low level offences.

The needs of Children Looked After and Care Leavers are met through a multidisciplinary approach from health services, social care, and targeted provision and specialist services. At the heart of all of these services is the young person in care and the circumstances families find themselves in.

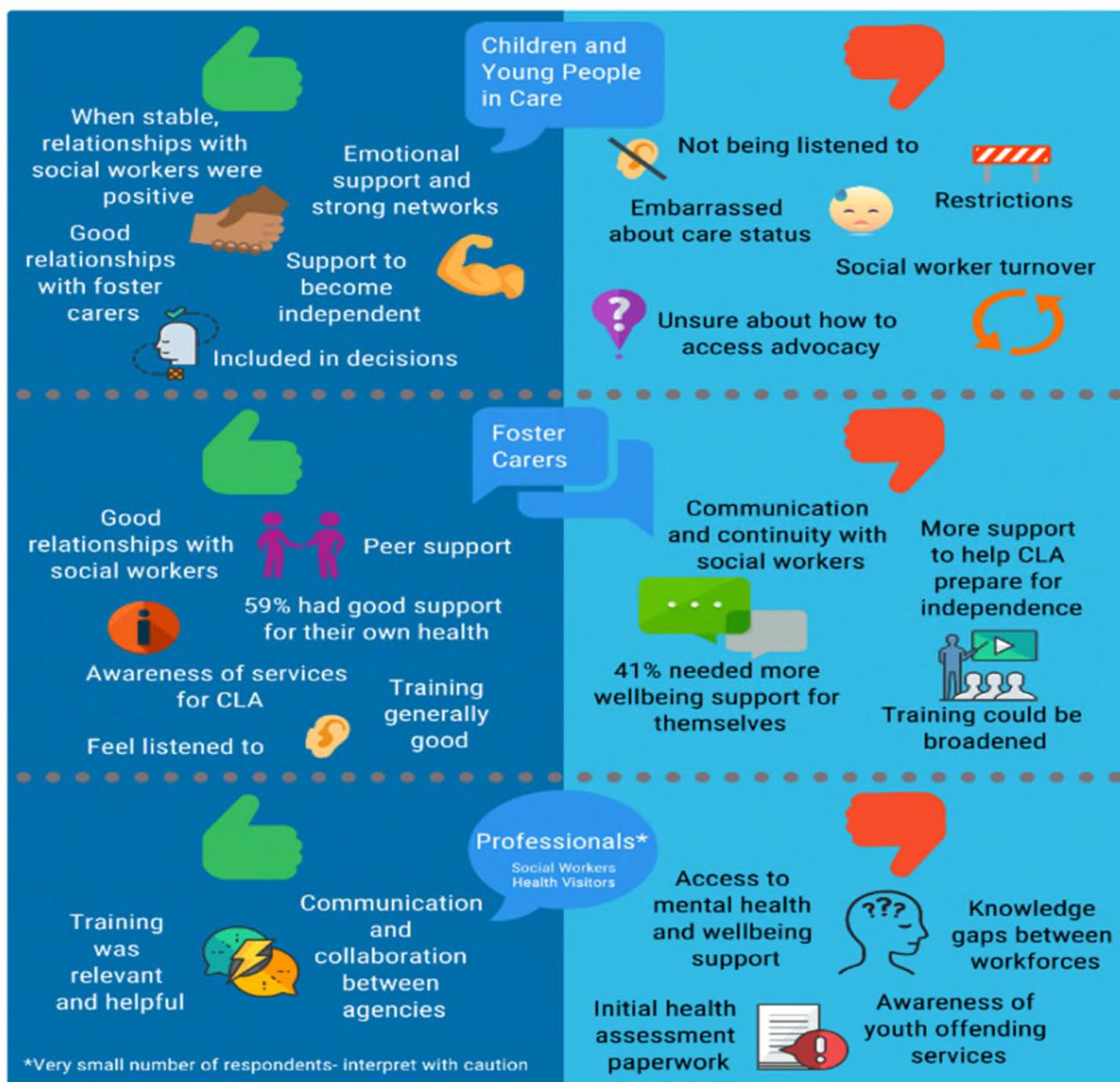
The local service offer is based on the principle of 'team around the child', which is a multidisciplinary approach to addressing the inequalities and improving health and wellbeing needs of CLA. A detailed service mapping and description can be found in **section 8** of the extended health and wellbeing needs assessment.

CLA, Foster Carers and Professional Voice

We set out to understand and listen to the lived experiences of children and young people in care, foster carers and professionals in contact with CLA. The purpose was to give strength to the voice of the child in understanding CLA experiences of being in care, and to identify and understand where improvements can be made from their perspective. All CLA in Thurrock at the time were offered the opportunity to take part in this engagement exercise. This exercise resulted in a response rate of 22% (66 of the 2019 CLA cohort), and 19 foster carers and 15 professionals.

Summary of consultation responses by CLA, foster carers and professionals

The infographic below provides a summary of the responses received.



CLA in Thurrock responded that they feel safe and secure within their placements with the majority suggesting no change needed in aspects of their placement. Most prominently, CLA valued the connection they have with their foster carer which gave them a feeling of being part of a family.

CLA also highlighted some of the advantages and opportunities of being in care such as having access to activities, food and clothes and the feeling of safety. The majority of CLA have good relationships with their social worker when this is stable and felt included in decision making about their care or issues surrounding them.

Foster carers generally reported good to excellent relationships with their Supervising Social Workers and also appreciated the monthly peer groups and clinical support on offer. They highlighted some areas where improvements were required; more communication with the children's social workers and improvement with the continuity of social workers and support in helping CLA prepare for independence after leaving care.

Professionals reported that communication and collaboration between agencies was good and the training they receive relevant to their practice. Areas highlighted as requiring improvement include the time it takes to get initial health assessment paperwork completed, more support for mental health issues and awareness of youth offending services.

There is a gap in our knowledge of the experiences of parents who have had their children taken into care, including those who have voluntarily required the local authority's help in caring for their children. There is also a gap in the voices of Care Leavers in relation to their experience of transition; although national evidence suggests that Care Leavers find the transitioning period challenging.

Way forward, governance arrangements and recommended actions needed to bridge the gaps identified by the HNA

To reduce the gap between outcomes for looked after children and the rest of the child population in the borough it is crucial that entry into care be planned (although in some instances we know that this is not always possible) and that the care experience from the outset be a positive experience for all CLA and Care Leavers.

The CLA Steering Group should act as the strategic group responsible for driving these recommendations ensuring there is good ongoing partnership working with the Mid and South Essex Integrated Care Board (MSE ICB), Public Health and NELFT.

The Thurrock CLA Steering group should act as the accountable operational group responsible for driving these recommendations, with overarching strategic responsibility resting with the Brighter Futures Partnership Board.

As part of this needs assessment, we have also identified that there is an opportunity to evaluate the effectiveness of reunification for children with their families.

The following are proposed actions, informed by this needs assessment, aimed to develop and enhance services for Thurrock's CLA and Care Leavers building on the ongoing CLA support programme.

Proposed actions for the development and improvement of CLA services in Thurrock

A. Risks associated with CLA

Key finding	Recommendation
Positive association between deprivation and the chances of going into care.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The LA must evaluate the Signs of Safety and research in practice approaches in achieving secure attachment, in line with NICE Guidance to ensure exposure to risk is adequately identified
Risk of placement under household with exposure to, or experiences of ACEs and/or Toxic Trio*.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Develop a strategy to apply evidence-based interventions which reduce ACEs – see further recommendation below Interventions must be offered at universal, selected, and targeted levels to address personal, familial, and environmental risk factors and the wider determinants of health
To improve the understanding and identification of vulnerability risk factors experienced by parents and households.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Children's and adult mental health services must foster more collaboration between teams Refining and strengthening the pathway for identification of ACES and/or Toxic Trio* through the Multiagency Safeguarding Hub (MASH) and Adult Mental Health pathways

B. Engagement with CLA, foster carers and professionals

Key finding	Recommendation
CLA reported experiencing three or more social worker changes in a year, contributing to the negative experiences they had whilst in care and reflected within the stability index estimates of social worker changes.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Social care turnover in Thurrock should be reviewed to identify opportunities to reduce turnover and improve care experiences and stability – Children's Social care should continue to initiate steps towards achieving this outcome by conducting benchmarking and a deep dive to understand reasons/local picture and to identify mitigation options A system-wide deep dive could take into consideration examples of good practice from other Local Authorities. Responsibility for this must reside with the CLA Steering Group
CLA are entitled to an advocate who will assist in conveying their wishes to professionals. Thurrock CLA who participated in the engagement process lacked awareness of advocacy services available to them.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Develop a plan to increase understanding, access to and use of advocacy services in order to shape and align the advocacy service into an offer that serves CLA needs

Key finding	Recommendation
Majority of foster carers reported needing help with their health and wellbeing (especially MH) and support in preparing CLA for adulthood or leaving care.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Engage with foster carers on their health and wellbeing through their supervisory social worker – targeted awareness on available wellbeing offer as well as during induction activities Engage both in-house and private foster carers in the planning transition to adulthood – a quick win will be to incorporate this within foster carers training/induction
Professionals reported that access to mental health services is an area that needs more focus.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide the support from clinical supervisor to the foster care community and ensure there is provision through Southend, Essex and Thurrock CAMHS to support care of CLA. This may require further exploration of need and how this can be met

C. Health and Wellbeing

The Initial Health Assessment (IHA) is a key opportunity to identify the health needs of any child or young person in care, in order to achieve and protect their wellbeing. IHAs have a statutory timeframe of 20 working days. However, in Thurrock and between 01 April 2020 and 31 March 2021 just 57% IHAs had been performed in time.

Key finding	Recommendation
Access to the EWMHS service is prioritised for CLA through a triage process however, there is insufficient data on categories of concerns recorded for CLA.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Engage CLA and Care Leavers in participation programmes to improve their emotional and mental wellbeing. An option for consideration could potentially be the survey conducted by the Healthy London Partnership (PDF) of mental health services for CLA and Care Leavers
There is a gap in our knowledge of the extent of sexual health need in CLA and Care Leavers.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The Sexual Health Service – commissioners and provider must work to enhance local data recording and collecting procedures to inform understanding regarding the uptake and usage of the Sexual Health service by CLA and Care Leavers, and this must highlight gaps in provision and relevant adaptations The sexual health service should work in a way that ensures age-appropriate information is available to young people in care either through the local offer website or the NHS App This must be considered within the next re-procurement of the Sexual Health Service

Key finding	Recommendation
<p>Further improvements are needed to increase the proportion of CLA having dental checks each year to 90% (from 82% in 2020) and their outcomes. (Department of Education, 2021).</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Devise a training package of early intervention in collaboration with OHID for foster carers and other main caregivers of CLA to promote good oral health based on consistent evidence • There is also an opportunity to co-produce questions for assessing effective ways to support CLA, foster carers to better access dental health checks during the proposed annual or bi-annual CLA engagement activity
<p>CLA uptake of childhood immunisations does not meet the recommended national immunisation coverage. Although data on up-to-date immunisation status for CLA are now in line with England average this is still not comparable with the general population.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Local and regional strategic plans for increasing immunisation uptake must include CLA as a vulnerable group of interest – an audit of the immunisation status of all CLA and Care Leavers in Thurrock must be conducted to confirm uptake is up-to-date. Capture data collected through the Healthy Families commissioned services on immunisation uptake for CLA
<p>Exploring categories of offences CLA groups engage in, collating appropriate information enable tailored interventions.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Children's Services must continue to review and undertake benchmarking analysis of this data to further understand the type of criminal offences young people in care have been involved in, and with partners identify opportunities for preventative action in line with the Annual Public Health Report 2019
<p>The Virtual School provides support to CLA to ensure there is a focus on closing the gap between the percentage of general pupils and CLA achieving a 9-4 pass in Maths and English at KS4. However, performance against national CLA cohorts is positive for Thurrock.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Key professionals, including the virtual school service, must continue to conduct a detailed analysis of CLA's educational experiences and form an action plan to close the gap in educational outcomes between CLA and the general school pupil population in Thurrock • This analysis can be achieved through the proposed annual engagement programme with Children Looked After in conjunction with the Corporate Parenting Committee

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