

CHILDREN YOUNG PEOPLE AND EDUCATION COMMITTEE

Wednesday, 5 March 2025

Present: Councillor S Bennett (Chair)

Councillors	P Basnett	I Lewis
	P Jobson	C Baldwin
	Cooper	A Onwuemene
	L Luxon-Kewley	J Grier
	V Wilson	C Carubia

92 WELCOME AND INTRODUCTION

The Chair welcomed everyone to the meeting as well as those watching the webcast and reminded them that a copy of the webcast would be retained on the Council's website for two years.

93 APOLOGIES

The Chair informed the committee that no apologies had been received.

94 MEMBERS CODE OF CONDUCT - DECLARATIONS OF INTERESTS

Members were asked to consider whether they had any disclosable pecuniary interests and/or any other relevant interest in connection with any items on the agenda and, if so, to declare them and state the nature of the interest.

Councillor Judith Grier declared a personal interest in the Schools Budget, due to her employment.

Councillor Paula Basnett declared a personal interest as a foster carer.

Councillor Onwuemene declared a personal interest as a close family member was a foster carer.

The Chair declared a personal interest as his daughter worked in child care.

95 MINUTES

Resolved – That the minutes of the meeting held on 22 January 2025 be approved as a correct record.

PUBLIC AND MEMBERS QUESTIONS

Kate Williams asked a question on behalf of Wirral Unison.

She said “Many of our Teaching Assistant professionals, particularly those on term time only contracts, are paid less than £20,000 p.a. Many of these individuals play an invaluable role in supporting the educational and emotional needs of vulnerable individuals in our schools. Given the nature of their work is it fair or appropriate that they are not compensated adequately, especially considering the term-time-only contracts and the limited hours that result in lower earnings?”

The Chair responded by saying: “The local authority would like to take this opportunity to thank all support staff that work in our Wirral Schools and, the support they offer our young people. The decision’s made regarding staffing arrangements at schools is the responsibility of Local Governing Bodies, this will be based on the needs of individual schools.

As chair of children’s committee, I will liaise with the Director to make sure the voice of support staff is heard through our regular engagement with Headteachers, Governors and Academy Trusts, to understand how we make sure the views of this sector are heard as the education system moves forward with the new governments plans.”

The Director of Children, Families and Education added a commitment to meet with the union and the teaching assistants to act as a conduit with head teachers and feedback to the union and the teaching assistants in person. She also noted that the service was undertaking a review of the role of teaching assistants that supported children with Education, Health and Care Plans.

Kate Williams asked a supplemental question, asking whether the Council felt it was appropriate that teaching assistants were undertaking the responsibilities of teaching reading and numeracy, yet remained some of the lowest paid staff in the council.

The Assistant Director for Education responded that the role of teaching assistants were valued by the Council. He noted that the responsibilities were devolved to governing bodies and school leadership teams around the roles that they take and making sure that they fulfil their roles. He stated that different schools did different things regarding staff employment.

CHILDREN'S SERVICES PERFORMANCE REPORT

The Assistant Director for Early Help and Prevention presented the report on behalf of the Director of Children, Families and Education, which provided the latest performance information for the Children’s, Families and Education

Directorate. The design and content of the report was developed following discussions with the Chair of the Children, Young People & Education Committee and party spokespersons at a Performance Monitoring workshop in March 2021.

The Performance Report had been structured around seven indicator groups. The data contained in the report related to Quarter 3 2024/25 (period ending December 2024). Where Quarter 2 data was not available, the most recent information had been provided.

Members asked about the No Comment Pathway Pilot regarding first time entrance to the justice system and wanted clarity on what this meant.

The Assistant Director for Early Help and Prevention responded that the No Comment Pathway was intended to help those young people that may struggle to communicate effectively and still offer the opportunity of an out of court disposal even when they have given a no comment interview.

Members asked if the figures showing that Wirral social workers had a caseload average of approximately 13 was correct, and if so, how it had been achieved.

The Assistant Director for Children and Families explained that the national average case load for social workers was between 16 and 17. Wirral had reduced the case load through a number of avenues. The main reason was due to making sure that children were moved to the correct care that they required and given the right support.

Members questioned the 2024/25 Quarter 3 figures showing that the number of initial Child Protection Conferences taking place in the month and within timescale was shown at 71%, with the national average and statistical neighbour average at 80% and 82%.

The Assistant Director for Children and Families replied that there were various reasons including the availability of service partners or staff or parents having childcare issues. She noted that work was underway to improve those numbers by making sure that families had the correct support to attend the meetings and that partners were held to account if they were regularly unavailable.

Members queried why the number of electively home educated children was rising and whether there was a breakdown available showing the ages of those that were being home educated in Wirral.

The Assistant Director for Education responded that there did not appear to be a single reason and that under current legislation, it was the parents' decision to educate their child from home. He noted that since last year, 36

children had returned to school from home education and highlighted the work that the service did to encourage parents and children to return to school. He also noted that while Wirral had the lowest number of home educated children in the Liverpool City Region, he would have liked to see the numbers reduce further. He stated that he did not have the figures available regarding the age breakdown of home educated children but would provide this information to Members.

Members queried officers on the dental care provided to children and what the figures in the report showed.

The Assistant Director for Children and Families explained that the provisions of dental care was something that the Corporate Parenting Board was looking into and that a dentist had been commissioned specifically for looked after children. She assured Members that work was being undertaken to look into any discrepancies with dental care for those looked after children outside of the borough,

Members highlighted that some of the information was referred to by a letter code with no explanation.

The Director for Children, Families and Education committed to clarifying what those codes stood for in future reports.

Members asked about referrals for keeping children safe, and what reasons they were referred, other than domestic abuse.

The Assistant Director for Children and Families responded that she would provide Members with a breakdown of reasons why children were referred to the service.

Members noted the downward trend shown in the report for children missing episodes and asked if there was a clear reason for this.

The Assistant Director for Early Help and Prevention responded that they were in the sixth year of having a dedicated exploitation and missing service with specialist staff looking into missing children and following up on it properly.

Members asked for further information on the reduction in custody rates and people reoffending.

The Assistant Director for Early Help and Prevention noted that the Youth Justice Team had worked hard to reduce these rates and that Wirral was performing better than similar authorities on the key metrics used to measure youth justice success.

Resolved – That the content of the Performance Report be noted.

98 **SUMMARY OF STANDARDS - OUTCOMES FOR EARLY YEARS, PHONICS, KEY STAGE 2 AND KEY STAGE 4**

The Assistant Director for Education presented the report on behalf of the Director of Children, Families and Education. The report stated that the Standards 2024 reports gave information about the provisional pupil outcomes. There was an executive summary followed by a detailed analysis for the pupil outcomes at the age of 5 (Good level of development), age of 6 (Phonics assessment), the age of 11 (Key Stage 2 SATs) and at the of 16 years old (Key Stage 4 qualifications). This was the first standards report that did not include KS1 as this assessment no longer took place

Comparisons had been made with the results nationally wherever possible. The report provided a detailed analysis of pupil outcomes and analysed the outcomes geographically across Wirral. It was important to treat comparisons with 2019 and earlier with caution, that said, the Council had a number of years post-Covid to begin to identify trends. The Progress 8 score used for KS4 would not be seen again for two years, due to KS2 assessments not taking place in summer 2020 and 2021.

The national comparisons would be used to identify the areas Wirral had to prioritise over the next 12 months. The standards report and educational outcomes would be linked to the refresh of the priorities in relation to the school improvement strategy and the banding of schools across Wirral to identify needing support. It was anticipated that a new school improvement strategy would be developed in the next municipal year.

Members discussed the possible reasons for children living in the Wallasey area attaining fewer qualifications than other nearby areas.

The Assistant Director for Education explained that work was being done with the schools in Wallasey to understand why this was the case and offered to invite members of the committee to meet with the headteachers of the relevant schools to discuss what could be done to improve matters.

Members queried whether there was any correlation between educational attainment and if the school was an academy or local authority maintained.

The Assistant Director for Education noted that nearly all secondary schools in Wirral were academy schools, so there was not much comparison to make. He raised the differences in attainment between selective and non-selective schools as an easier comparison to make.

He noted that in terms of curriculum, primary schools had greater autonomy than secondary schools in how they taught key subjects, and the authority

would not recommend one particular style over another as it was the school's choice.

He also explained that there was a piece of work being undertaken that would allow analysis of maths attainment across all primary schools in the borough that would make it clear what methods were working, and which ones were not, and this could be targeted to specific localities and could pull information on various factors such as disadvantaged children, or those with special educational needs, or whether they had been absent for significant periods.

Resolved – That the report be noted and endorsed.

99 **2024/25 BUDGET MONITORING REPORT FOR QUARTER 3**

The Head of Finance – People presented the report on behalf of the Director of Children, Families and Education, which set out the financial monitoring information for the Children, Families and Education Committee as at Quarter 3 (31 December) of 2024/25. The report provided Members with an overview of budget performance, including progress on the delivery of the 2024/25 saving programme and a summary of reserves and balances, to enable the Committee to take ownership of the budgets and provide robust challenge and scrutiny to Officers and where appropriate, Committees on the performance of those budgets.

At the end of Quarter 3, the financial outlook had improved slightly since quarter 2. Current estimates forecasted an adverse outturn position of £9.657m (£9.996m in Quarter 2) on the Committee's net revenue budget of £97.297m. This position was based on activity to date, projected trends in income and expenditure and changes to Council funding.

The Council had faced a severe financial challenge throughout the year to achieve a balanced budget. All possible measures to curtail spending and generate substantial cost savings had been applied. However, the current forecast showed that the Council would not be in a position to provide a balanced budget by financial year-end. Consequently, the Section 151 officer had submitted an application for Exceptional Financial Support (EFS) to the Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government (MHCLG).

To further stress the critical nature of the Council's financial position, within the Council's recent published Annual Audit Report for the year ending 31 March 2024, the external auditor issued a Statutory Recommendation, stating, "The Council is in an extremely challenging financial situation with significant financial pressures creating budget overspends combined with low levels of reserves. There was a risk that the Council would need exceptional financial support to balance the financial position in 2024/25 and to set a balanced budget in 2025/26. We (the auditors) recommend the Council take immediate action to manage the risks..."

The Head of Legal Services noted that the second recommendation in the report stated that:

“The Director of Finance had made an application to the Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government (MHCLG) for Exceptional Financial Support and that the outcome of the application was still awaited be noted;” She noted that this application for Exceptional Financial Support had been received.

The committee agreed to reflect this in the recommendations below.

Resolved – That

- 1. The adverse position presented at Quarter 3 of £9.657m and the urgent need to examine all available options to address the position be noted;**
- 2. The Director of Finance had made an application to the Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government (MHCLG) for Exceptional Financial Support and that this financial support had been received be noted;**
- 3. The progress on delivery of the 2024/25 savings programme at Quarter 3 be noted;**
- 4. The forecast level of reserves and balances at Quarter 3 be noted; and**
- 5. The capital forecast and budget revisions as at the end of Quarter 3 be noted.**

100 THE CHILDREN'S WELLBEING AND SCHOOLS BILL OVERVIEW REPORT

The Assistant Director for Early Help and Prevention presented the report on behalf of the Director of Children, Families and Education which provided an overview of the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill 2024-25 (the Bill).

The aim of the report was to raise awareness of the Bill, timescales, and next steps.

The Bill stemmed from the Government's 'Plan for Change', under the mission 'Break Down Barriers to Opportunity'.

The long-term activity in the Plan for Change had four key areas, linked to; a best start in life, thriving in school, building skills for opportunity and growth; and building family security. These areas were closely aligned to the responsibilities and priorities for Wirral Council, and the work of Children's Services in particular.

Understanding the Bill would assist Wirral Council in being ready for change, help understand the requirements on the Council of the Bill; and be better prepared to realise the intended benefits from new legislation.

Resolved – That the report be noted, and the receipt of further updates be agreed.

101 CARE PROGRAMME

The Assistant Director for Children and Families presented the report on behalf of the Director for Children, Families and Education which gave an overview of activity undertaken as part of the Care Programme. Over recent years, Wirral had far higher numbers of children in care than its statistical neighbours. This reached a peak in 2018, with 834 children in care. Since then, through practice improvement, investment in early help and prevention services, and the Care Programme, the numbers of children in care had steadily reduced to 699 (January 2025), this was now in line with statutory neighbours. Whilst the number of children in care had decreased, the cost of providing care for those children had increased substantially.

The report noted that proactive steps needed to be taken to mitigate against the forecast overspend for Children's Care. This needed to be delivered at pace, with regular monitoring and oversight from Elected Members.

Members thanked all the officers involved for the work they had done.

Members queried the figures for children in child protection plans and why there was such a drop-off in the numbers for those in child protection plans for longer than two years.

The Assistant Director for Children and Families explained that those on plans for more than two years were much rarer and that they were only kept on the plans for this length of time if there was a valid reason that was agreed through a multi-agency case conference that assessed the individual child's needs.

Members asked how increasing the number of foster cares was going.

The Assistant Director for Children and Families responded that Wirral had joined Foster4, a collaboration of eight other local authorities funded by the Department for Education, which was working towards raising the profile of foster care and what being a foster carer was like. She acknowledged that encouraging people to become foster carers was not easy but that the service was moving in the right direction.

Resolved – the report be noted and the progress to date of the Care Programme be endorsed.

102 **ADDITIONAL FLEXIBILITIES (TECHNICAL QUALIFICATIONS) FOR ADULT EDUCATION FUNCTIONS IN THE LIVERPOOL CITY REGION**

The Assistant Director for Education presented the report on behalf of the Director of Children, Families and Young People which noted that the Department for Education were seeking the Combined Authority agreement to the Combined Authorities (Adult Education Functions) (Amendment) Order 2025. The Order would be made, subject to Parliament's approval, under provisions within the Local Democracy Act, including section 105A, and would confer an additional funding power for adult education functions on all existing combined authorities with adult education functions.

It would enable flexibility for Liverpool City Region (LCR) Combined Authority to use Adult Skills Funding (ASF) to fund new technical qualifications from academic year 2025/26 if required.

This Order would amend the existing education-related statutory instrument for each Combined Authority to add the further funding power, specifically it would concurrently transfer Section 100(1B) of the Apprenticeships, Skills and Children Act 2009 (ASCLA), to enable combined authorities to fund new, high quality technical qualifications alongside others already available to them. This would ensure that adult learners in the Liverpool City Region would have access to the same high-quality technical qualifications as those in other devolved, and non-devolved, areas.

Members queried the purpose of the recommendations and wanted to know if it involved additional funding or the removal of funding.

The Assistant Director for Education clarified that it did not involve new funding but was a technical step required to use funding that was already in place for this purpose due to amendments in the Combined Authorities (Adult Education Functions) (Amendment) Order 2025 that would allow access to new qualifications that were due to come on stream.

Resolved - That

- 1. The Liverpool City Region Combined Authority decision to amend the Combined Authorities (Adult Education Functions) (Amendment) Order 2025, subject to Parliament's approval, under provisions within the Local Democracy Act, including section 105A therefore permitting the local use of devolved Adult Skills Funding to fund technical qualifications be supported; and**
- 2. The Chief Executive be delegated authority to provide consent to the amendment of the Order on behalf of the Council.**

103 SEND IMPROVEMENT

The Director of Children, Families and Young People presented a report which provided an update on the improvement programme for Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) for the Local Area in Wirral. The report covered the period from mid-January 2025.

The January 2025 Local Area SEND Partnership Board (LASPB) meeting was primarily focussed on updates in relation to the recovery plans in place for Improving the Quality and Timeliness of Education Health and Care Plans and Annual Reviews; Reducing waiting times for access to Speech and Language Therapy Services and improvements in the Neurodevelopmental Pathway. The report primarily focused on the areas that were the Local Authority's statutory duties.

The report also provided an overview of the LASPB's Self Evaluation from January 2025

It noted that it had been agreed with Department for Education and NHS England through the revised Terms of Reference for the Local Area SEND Partnership Board that the Health and Wellbeing Board was the appropriate forum to provide oversight of SEND improvement activity in Wirral, ensuring that the Written Statement of Action (WSOA) was fully delivered by October 2025. This report was presented to the Children, Young People and Education Committee to provide assurance of improvement and enable alignment with the business of the committee.

Members thanked the Director for the report and stated that they were happy that the service was moving in the right direction. They asked if the majority of Educational Health Care Plan (EHCP) needs requests received were coming from parents or referred from schools.

The Director of Children, Families and Young People reported that there was a mix but that recently, more had been coming from parents than schools. She noted that the service looked at all requests and where they were coming from each month to greater understand the needs and pressures on the service. She noted that the service would always recommend that parents speak to their child's school and their Special Educational Needs Coordinator before making an EHCP request for their child.

Members asked about the possibility for parents and children going through the EHCP process to be assigned a single point of contact to make the process easier for them.

The Director of Children, Families and Young People responded that the design of the new SEND team was done to better integrate the team into

other areas of Children's Services, which would reduce hand-offs to different teams. She also noted that there would be one case worker that stays with that child up to age 16. She noted that work was underway with Adult Services for an integrated model to ensure that individuals needs were not lost in transition from one service to the other.

Cllr Paul Jobson raised that he sat on the Liverpool City Region Combined Authority Scrutiny Committee and that while this was not a decision making committee, he felt that he should declare this interest for transparency purposes.

Resolved – That the progress of the Local Area SEND Partnership Board in progressing system improvement as required by the Improvement Notice be noted.

104 **WORK PROGRAMME**

The Head of Legal Service presented the report on behalf of the Chair of the Children, Young People and Education Committee. The report reminded members that the Children, Young People and Education Committee was responsible for proposing and delivering an annual committee work programme. This work programme was to align with the corporate priorities of the Council, in particular the delivery of the key decisions which were the remit of the Committee.

The Assistant Director for Early Help and Prevention noted that he would like to include a workshop around the Children's Services performance report, as well as a further report on the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill.

With those additions it was:

Resolved – That the work programme be noted.