

WIRRAL COUNCIL

CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE 16 NOVEMBER 2010

REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR OF CHILDREN'S SERVICES

LOOKED AFTER CHILDREN ACTIVITY

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report, requested by members of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee, outlines the statutory framework and the current level of Looked After Children activity in Wirral.

1 Statutory Framework

- 1.1 The statutory framework for children is governed by the Children Act 1989 which outlines the legal basis under which a child becomes looked after. Children may become looked after under section 20 (a voluntary agreement with the person with parental responsibility or if a person with parental responsibility is unable to exercise it); section 38 Interim Care Order (ICO) and Section 31 full Care Order (CO). The latter two sections arise where the local authority, based on legal advice, believes the threshold criteria that a child has, or is likely to suffer significant harm as outlined in the Act, is met and makes an application to court. The court can also make an ICO of its own volition in private law proceedings where it believes a child may meet the threshold and it will invite the local authority to undertake an assessment and report under Section 37 of the Children Act 1989.

2 Context

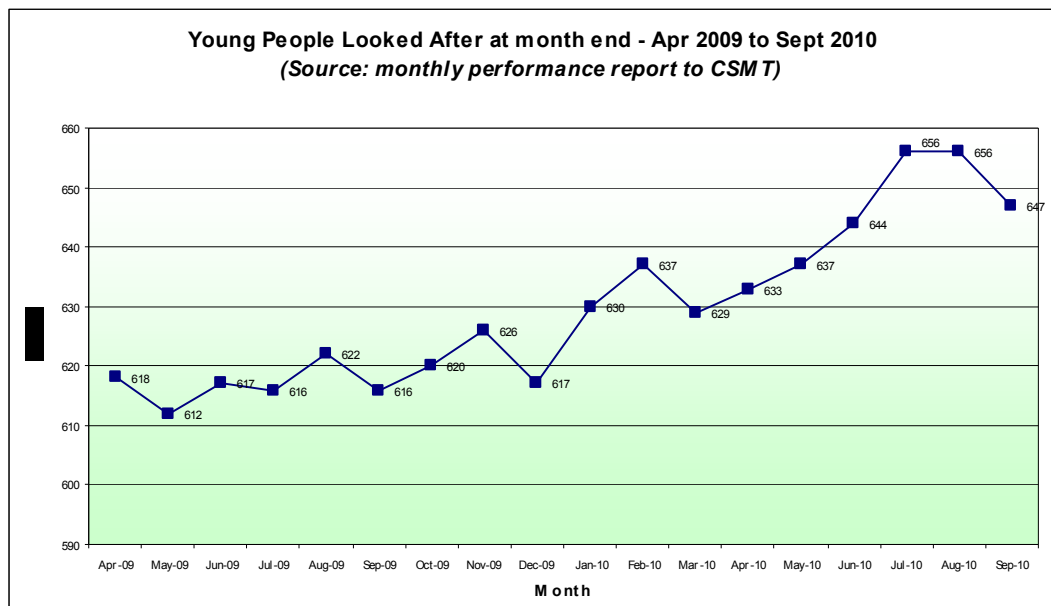
- 2.1 Looked After Children are supported by a range of services. Social workers are the key workers for children in care, family support workers, engage with children to support contact with their families, or to undertake specific pieces of work with children in care, the Family Placement Team recruit, assess and support foster carers, the Adoption and Permanence Team recruit, assess and support Adopters and Special Guardians, the Looked after Children Education Service tracks and monitors the attainment and progress and the Pathway Team work with young people who are leaving care under the Leaving Care Act 2000.

CAMHS also provide specialist advice and support to children in their placement, and provide a specialist intensive treatment and therapeutic

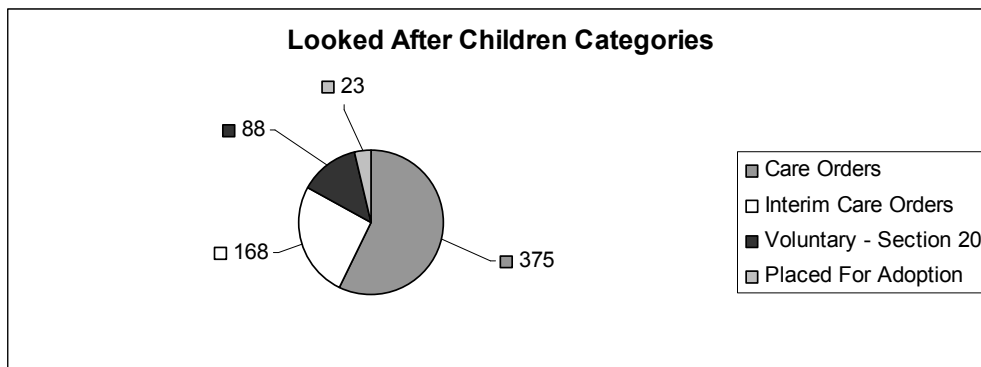
fostering scheme. In addition, Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs) in accordance with the Children Act 2004 and statutory guidance regarding care planning; provide independent oversight of each child's plan to ensure it meets the child's needs, statutory requirements, and there is no drift.

3 Looked After Children Activity

3.1 Since the Baby Peter case, there has been an increase in the number of children looked after. In April 2009 the number was 618 and the number is currently 647.



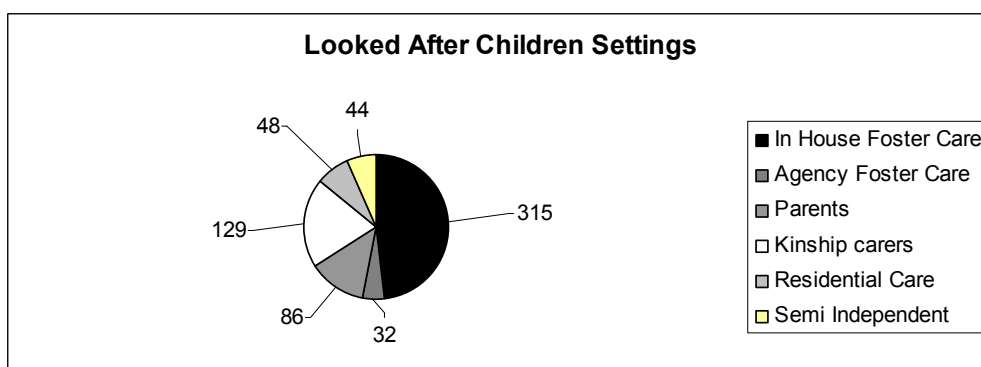
The numbers of children in care by legal category are: 375 Care Orders, 168 Interim Care Orders, 88 children in care under s20 and 23 children placed for adoption. The rise in numbers is common across all Local Authorities; at the end of March 2010 north-west authorities reported an average 5% increase from the previous year. Wirral's rate at that point was a 0% increase, but numbers have risen since that date.



3.2 The reasons behind the increase are complex; increasing numbers of children with a child protection plan (for the reasons referenced in the Child Protection Activity report) means that there are families for whom the plan does not achieve the needed improvement and reduction of risk for children in a timely way and hence there has been an increase in the number of applications to court. The court is also making more orders of its own volition in Private Law cases (where parents are disputing issues of residence and contact for their children).

3.3 Of particular note are the number of applications for children who have suffered neglect and also physical injury and sexual abuse. There are increasing applications to Court for children aged 0-4 years; these are situations where local authority is intervening earlier to address the harm for this group of children by placing children in foster care, placing children with family members or seeking permanent new families for children through adoption.

3.4 Looked After Children live in a variety of settings; foster care (315 in-house, 32 agency foster care), 86 with their parents, 129 with kinship carers, 48 in residential care and the remainder are older young people aged 16 plus, in a variety of semi-independent settings.



- 3.5 Children's plans are tracked and monitored in a number of ways; the IROs have a statutory duty to report any concerns about children they review, and each team has to report the progress of children's plans via a permanency tracker, specifying timescales and highlighting any blocks which are preventing the plan from moving forward.
- 3.6 To ensure we have the right type of placements for children, the Fostering and Adoption Taskforces have focused on advertising and recruiting foster carers and potential adopters. This ensures children remain in their local area but also improves placement stability and timeliness of placements for children. There remain challenges in recruiting sufficient foster carers, from diverse backgrounds, who have the skills and capacity to provide suitable placements for children who need substitute family care. This is particularly the case for adolescents.
- 3.7 Some children's needs are so complex and they present so many risks to themselves and others; that they cannot be cared for in foster care. Residential care is expensive, but can meet children's needs at particular crisis points in their lives; there are also a small number of children who have experienced such difficulties living within their families that they cannot cope with close family relationships, and for whom residential care is the most appropriate placement. The Independent Placement Panel oversees all requests for this provision and reviews all placements made throughout the year to confirm if they are still required or if the child has made sufficient progress makes recommendations for them to move to a foster family.

4. Outcomes for Looked After Children

- 4.1 The Council has a clear priority to safely reduce the numbers of looked after children This area is part of the Strategic Change plan and is an area of intense monitoring and development.
- 4.2 The number of children who are placed with parents at home on a care order is reducing and currently is 86. These children are being reviewed on a monthly basis to check the progress for discharging the orders but also where the placement is no longer safe ensuring plans are in place for alternative care.
- 4.3 A permanency tracker which details all looked after children, their plans and the timescale for discharge from care to parents, family members or via special guardianship and adoption is reviewed on a 6-weekly basis with all managers. The aim is to ensure appropriate urgency is involved for these children in ensuring their plans meet their needs and that any difficulties or barriers to progress are identified and addressed.

- 4.4 On 31 March 2010, 24 children had been adopted during the previous twelve months and a further 24 children had achieved permanence through special guardianship in the same period.
- 4.5 For children who remain in care, it is important for their education, health and emotional well-being that they are in stable placements. Wirral achieves well in this with only 7% of children experiencing 2 or more placement moves in the twelve month period up to 31 March 2010. All authorities also monitor the number of children who have been looked after for more than two and a half years, who have lived in the same placement for two years, the percentage of children for the twelve month period up to 31 March 2010 was 64.5% which was a slight reduction on the previous year's reporting.
- 4.6 Recruitment of foster carers is important to further improving this area, as well as reducing the need for children to be placed out of borough in independent fostering or residential placements. The fostering service has 266 approved fostering households with 517 placements, but 94 placements are currently vacant as these provide respite placements or capacity when a foster carer needs a break. In view of this, the service is at full capacity which makes matching children with carers with the skills to meet their needs challenging for the fostering service. The Fostering Taskforce, which includes current foster carers, is working to address areas such as recruitment of new foster carers and retention of existing foster carers by training and support. Wirral has also participated in a recent regional fostering campaign.
- 4.7 In 2010, KS1 (levels of progress in reading, writing, maths and science) children in care performed below the 2009 national average for children in care and less well than their peer group overall. At KS2 (levels of progress in maths and English) pupils performed better than the national average for Children in Care in 2009 and as estimated by their FFT B targets. Performance at KS4 exceeded 2009 national averages for pupils achieving 1 GCSE (A*-G), 5 GCSEs (A*-G), 5 GCSEs (A*-C) and 5 GCSEs (A*-C including English and Maths).

5 Financial Implications

- 5.1 The total Looked After Children budget is £14,490,500 and there are current budget pressures of £2,513,000. The change programme plans to reduce the budget for looked after children by 2 Million as well as removing the current projected overspend by 2014.

6 Staffing Implications

- 6.1 Wirral has been able to recruit social workers as we have a good reputation for support, supervision and training in this complex and challenging area of work. However, the workload is demanding and presents challenges for staff and Managers. We ensure that where there is long-term sickness or staff absent through maternity leave that agency social work cover is provided to manage the demands on the staff and also to ensure that children are still supported.
- 6.2 Adverts are placed monthly, to ensure social workers are continuously recruited to replace any vacancies. Recruitment to the posts which were established by Cabinet in March 2009, such as extra social workers, Advanced Social Work Practitioners, Practice Managers and Principal Team Managers, is part of the strategy to increase front line social work capacity and increase the level of supervision and oversight. This is making a positive impact, and a further recruitment drive is currently underway to fill the remaining vacancies on a permanent basis
- 6.3 Equally critical services are provided by family support, pathway team, family placement, adoption and permanence teams and Independent Reviewing Officers.

7 Equal Opportunities Implications /Health Impact Assessment

- 7.1 It is essential to promote safeguarding of children throughout all communities in Wirral.

8 Community Safety Implications

- 8.1 Members of the public have also had their awareness of safeguarding raised and are more willing to refer to childrens social care if they are worried about a child.

9 Local Agenda 21 Implications

- 9.1 There are no Local Agenda 21 implications.

10 Planning Implications

- 10.1 There are no planning implications

11 Anti-Poverty Implications

- 11.1 Looked After Children may have experienced disadvantage before coming into care which may have a long-term impact on their future outcomes.

12 Social Inclusion Implications

- 12.1 Looked After Children need support in a number of areas as outcomes for their education, health and well-being are lower than children who are not in care.

13 Local Member Support Implications

- 13.1 Members chair and lead the Corporate Parenting Group which aims to raise the profile and support better outcomes for children in our care.

14 Background Papers

- 14.1 Children Act 1989 (HMSO)

RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended for members to note this report.

David Armstrong
Interim Director Children and Young Peoples Department