

**CHILDREN'S SERVICES AND LIFELONG LEARNING  
OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**

**SCRUTINY OF THE OUTCOMES  
FOR CHILDREN IN FOSTER CARE**

## **Acknowledgements**

The Committee would like to thank all of those people that readily agreed to be interviewed in the course of this study, who made the members welcome and were frank in giving their views. It would particularly wish to thank Julia Hassall, Head of Children's Social Care, for her help and guidance in arranging the interviews and providing the various background documents; Fiona O'Shaughnessy, Children's Involvement Officer, who acted as a vital link in the interviews with children in foster care; and Councillors Sheila Clarke and Tom Harney, who kindly agreed to continue to take the lead with the study following changes in the Committee's membership.

***Councillor Frank Doyle***

Chair of the Children's Services and Lifelong Learning  
Overview and Scrutiny Committee

**April 2008**

# **SCRUTINY OF THE OUTCOMES FOR CHILDREN IN FOSTER CARE**

## **Background**

In September 2006 the Children's Services and Lifelong Learning Overview and Scrutiny Committee agreed as a topic for scrutiny "to investigate the outcomes for children in foster care and to make recommendations for improvement". The impetus for this study arose out of concerns about the numbers of looked-after children, their educational achievements and the need to ensure that they were being given every chance of a fulfilling life, particularly in terms of the five outcomes identified in the Government's "Every Child Matters" (ECM) programme.

At the time the study began Wirral had a significantly higher number than the national average of children in the care of the authority (approximately 50% more than the average for Wirral's statistical neighbour authorities). At the same time, the level of educational achievement of looked-after children, as a group, fell far below the average for Wirral and was in line with the national trend – a problem that the Government was already seeking to address.

"Every Child Matters: Change for Children" was a new approach to the well-being of children and young people from birth to age 19. The Government's aim was for every child, whatever their background or their circumstances, to have the support they needed in order to:

- Be healthy
- Stay safe
- Enjoy and achieve
- Make a positive contribution
- Achieve economic well-being

That meant that the organisations involved with providing services to children, from hospitals and schools to police and voluntary groups, would be teaming up in new ways, sharing information and working together, to protect children and young people from harm and to help them achieve what they wanted in life. It was also intended that children and young people would have far more say about issues that affected them as individuals and collectively.

The Government followed that up with the document "Care Matters", which set out a radical package of proposals for transforming the lives of children in care. Although outcomes for these children had improved, they had not kept pace with other children, a situation regarded as unacceptable: children in care were entitled to receive no less than what one would expect for one's own children. It included proposals to strengthen the 'corporate parenting' role of local authorities; create high quality placements that met children's

needs; ensure a first class education; a positive life outside school; and support for transition into adulthood.

## **Methodology**

The scrutiny study commenced in Autumn 2006, but was suspended while what was felt to be a more urgent study, into the support given to schools before and after Ofsted inspections, was undertaken in 2007. A further delay occurred as a result of changes in the membership of the Overview and Scrutiny committee in May 2007.

This study was conducted by a panel of members of the Children's Services and Lifelong Learning Overview and Scrutiny Committee, the membership of which varied according to availability. The panel undertook a series of interviews involving young people, foster carers and social care and education professionals. It was also provided with a number of documents. Lists of those interviewed and of the documents taken into consideration are included as appendices.

The Panel has noted that a number of improvements have been implemented over the period of this study, many of which have come about as a result of the major restructuring that has taken place in the Children and Young People Department. After a period of upheaval, benefits are being realised. Hence, each section includes, in addition to recommendations, reference to those items that have recently been introduced or which already existed as examples of good practice.

In January 2007 Wirral's Fostering Service was inspected by the Commission for Social Care Inspection, which found no major shortfalls in the service but which identified five statutory requirements to be complied with and made 14 good practice recommendations. An action plan to address those issues was submitted to the Committee in May 2007. A further inspection took place in February 2008, the detailed results of which are awaited.

## **Children in foster care**

The Panel felt that the best point from which to start was by interviewing young people in care. Members agreed a protocol for the interviews and met with two groups, the second comprising those in the process of leaving care. The Panel accepted that those young people did not necessarily represent all foster children – those with whom it was difficult to engage were unlikely to have been willing to be interviewed.

The first group consisted of four children that were participating in the Virtual Classroom, an arrangement supervised by the Children's Involvement Officer, through which they could become involved with a variety of extra-curricular activities, the most notable of which was the production of a video "My Ideal

Foster Family". The 'top ten' points identified in the video by the young people formed the basis of the discussion (see Appendix 1).

Although on balance their experience of foster care had been positive, they did have concerns, including occasions of short notice about placements, their entitlement to pocket money and Christmas and birthday allowances, the bureaucracy surrounding police checks and permissions for activities. Generally they felt that they were not treated any differently by teachers at school and had been well supported in terms of careers advice.

The second group, of five young people in the process of leaving care, had had more chequered experiences, in terms of the number of foster placements and the circumstances in which placements began and ended; feelings of not really belonging to the foster family; educational support - a lack of awareness at school about their family circumstances and a sense of missed opportunities; frequent changes of social worker; problems with police checks. What they most wanted were:

- to be supported, both inside and out of school by someone who was aware of, and sensitive to, their personal circumstances;
- to have a suitable placement with a foster family, where they were liked and could feel they were matched with them;
- to be sure that one was in a definite, as opposed to temporary, placement, with a suitable time for introduction and, if necessary, social worker support to assist in developing the relationship;
- to be placed where one felt confident that the relationship was going to work (being confident enough to call the carers "mum" and "dad" was a good indication of that);
- to get equal time and treatment from foster parents as they gave to their own children, even if they had misbehaved;
- to have their opinions taken into account.

#### **The Panel welcomed:**

- the work of the Children's Involvement Officer and the Cultural Inclusion Officer with children in foster care;
- the videos "My Ideal Social Worker" and "My Ideal Foster Family", produced by young people in care and proposals for further development of the young people's involvement;
- young people's participation and guidance about 'what works' at a training event for designated teachers
- the continuing reduction in the number of looked-after children;
- the specific support offered by the Connexions service to looked-after children

#### **Recommendations:**

- (i) **The Authority should continue to try to improve the stability of placements. This will be achieved by better matching of children and**

**carers, which in turn is made possible by increased recruitment of foster carers.**

**(ii) Ensure that foster children have ready access to their social worker (e.g. via mobile phone, text or email), and are able to maintain good communications, so that they are aware when the social worker might not be available and will know how to contact any alternatives.**

**(iii) Encourage social workers to be more proactive in their dealings with looked-after children. Looked-after children perceive them as the statutory decision makers, but they should also be able to look on them as a friend.**

**(iv) Give as much flexibility as possible to foster carers in relation to permissions for the involvement of looked-after children in extra-curricular and social activities.**

**(v) Ensure that looked-after children are aware of their financial entitlement.**

## **Foster carers**

The Panel met a large number of foster carers in the drop-in group that meets at the Seacombe Children's Centre, and subsequently met a group of members of the Foster Care Association, at the home of Bill and Jean Shackleton (who themselves had been foster carers for 30 years).

The carers raised several issues, including:

- Delays in the payment of allowances
- A lack of crèche facilities when carers are invited to events such as training days
- Other instances where there appeared to be a lack of awareness of the difficulties that might face carers
- Delays in the allocation of social workers to foster children and, whilst family placement workers could be readily contacted, difficulties in getting in touch with social workers
- Carers were often not given all of the necessary information when a placement commenced (sometimes information had been inaccurate)
- Whilst foster carers were offered places on training courses, such places were limited, the content was often aimed more at professionals and the timing of courses (for example, 9.30am to 4.30pm) was not convenient to many carers.
- Carers were having to deal with an increasing number of children damaged from their early experiences in life, and whilst support from the CAMH service was felt to be good, there was a waiting list; carers therefore often had to rely on their own mutual support.

- Carers felt that professionals sometimes did not trust them to have all of the available information about a child, for example, any history of sexual abuse.
- There were invariably emotional upheavals when placements came to an end.
- There were often delays in obtaining the necessary authorisation for foster children to participate in activities or go on holiday; that problem also existed in relation to medical treatments, such as administering basic medicines.

With regard to recruitment, the recruitment process was felt to be too protracted, in that it could take 12 months from application to approval, and it was often difficult for working husbands to fit in the required four day period of training. Other issues, felt likely to deter applicants were the additional costs that carers would face, such as the need for a larger car, a larger house, transport to drop-in sessions and special items such as prams, sports equipment and participation in out-of-school activities.

The Wirral Foster Care Association had its own website and newsletter. However, not all carers were members of the Association. The Department issued an official handbook for carers, but carers complained that it was out of date.

The Panel noted that the majority of foster carers live in the areas of Birkenhead and Wallasey. One factor influencing that appeared to be the availability of larger (four bedrooms or more) houses that were affordable. However, that meant that foster children from other parts of the borough would be removed from their environment and might therefore have either to travel further to school or to change schools.

#### **The Panel welcomed:**

- the results of the Department's latest recruitment drive, which has led to an additional 70 carers in the past year;
- the work of the Foster Carers' Association;
- Wirral's participation in the Children's Workforce Development Council's piloting of National Induction Standards for foster carers; the recent updating of the Foster Carers Handbook.

#### **Recommendations:**

- (i) **The authority should aim to widen the geographical area from which foster carers are recruited and ensure that the necessary network of support is in place to achieve that aim (and consider providing financial support for house extensions).**
- (ii) **Foster carers should be treated and accepted as fellow professionals. That would involve showing more trust in terms of the information that is shared with them – within legal limits they should**

**have all information necessary to ensure the welfare of the foster child, especially medical information.**

- (iii) Also, they should be made to feel valued, possibly by means of an annual awards ceremony or mayoral reception.**
- (iv) Access to training for foster carers should be improved, with courses specific to their requirements (via an individual improvement plan) and convenient in terms of times, location and crèche facilities.**
- (v) Training should include health issues, as they affect both the child and the carer.**
- (vi) The Foster Carers' Handbook should be updated on a regular basis**
- (vii) Ensure that payments to foster carers, in particular Christmas allowances, are paid promptly.**
- (viii) There should be strong encouragement for foster carers to attend schools' Parents Evenings and PEP meetings and provide the means for doing so through additional childcare arrangements. Carers should have regular contact with the Designated Teacher**
- (ix) Whilst it is accepted that they may be necessary in an emergency, in which case additional support should be provided, exemption placements should be avoided.**
- (x) Provide departmental support for the Foster Carers Association in order to help it to represent all carers in the Borough, including taking over production of their newsletter.**
- (xi) Measures should be put in place to ensure that an individual 'contract' (Placement Agreement) is always signed and in place in respect of each new placement'.**
- (xii) The position of kinship carers should be clarified to ensure the correct level of support is provided for the child.**
- (xiii) Foster carers should attend hearings of the Fostering Panel where appropriate.**

## **Professional staff**

The Panel interviewed a wide range of professional staff. Whilst some of the issues raised under this section fell outside of the remit of the study, recommendations aimed at improving the position of social care staff have been made in the expectation that they will also benefit children in foster care. Workload and competing demands on social workers' time led, for example,

to their being less available to respond to the needs of foster children or to attend hearings of the Fostering Panel.

Amongst the points raised by foster carers and foster children were that it was often difficult to get hold of social workers and that there appeared to be a lack of communication amongst the various professionals that were dealing with them. Whilst members of the Family Placement Team could be contacted via their mobile phones, that was not possible in the case of social workers. Another point made was that social workers, particularly new ones, did not fully appreciate the problems faced by foster carers; nor, on some occasions, the difficult role of the family placement officers.

The Panel met with members of the Birkenhead South Planned Word Team No. 2. Their area office was the busiest in the Borough, and dealt with some of the most difficult cases, but what immediately struck the members of the Panel was the fact that the team had little or no access to computers. That was felt to be a major barrier to communications. The introduction of IT equipment had been delayed, to the extent that the staff felt the training they had undergone would have to be repeated.

Another key problem was workload, which was higher than the national average in terms of the number of cases assigned to each social worker, and cases could vary widely in complexity. Until recently, the complement of social work staff across the borough had been well below establishment. That situation has been rectified to the extent that there are currently only a few vacancies. However, the staff that were interviewed at the time referred to a significant turnover. There were financial inducements to assist in recruiting new social workers, but they only operated for two years. There was a feeling that other local authorities offered better rates of pay and smaller workloads. Other points raised were the question of administrative and clerical support, disruption to telephones connections between offices and a lack of office mobile phones.

Reference was made by various staff to the issue of placing children with relatives. Some felt that 37%, as it was then, was too high a proportion of the total. It was often the most expedient option in an emergency, but it could be the case that the family background provided the reasons for the child having to be taken into care. It could also be more difficult to get the appointed carer to conform to the requirements of a fostering placement. A recent Ombudsman case highlighted some confusion over such placements, but had resulted in an action plan to clarify procedures.

### **The Panel welcomed:**

- the reduction in the number of vacant posts, though the number of social workers in post in the Fostering Service, still falls short of the establishment, with long-term temporary contracts and unqualified staff;
- moves to provide proper IT facilities;

- the Central Advice and Duty Team working more effectively; through the new process of providing social work consultation, clarifying thresholds at the point of referral, and consequently reducing the number of inappropriate referrals from other agencies;
- the action proposed, as a result of the recent Ombudsman case, to clarify the support to be given to kinship carers;
- recent improvements in the support for the Fostering Panel, led by the recently appointed independent Chair;
- progress in the working relationship with the Court service.

**Recommendations:**

- (i) **The staffing complement for social workers should be kept under review.**
- (ii) **The effectiveness of financial incentives should be reviewed, in terms of both attracting staff (“golden hellos”) and retaining them, taking account of comparisons with other local authorities.**
- (iii) **Social workers’ concerns about the adequacy of administrative support should be addressed in a review of respective duties. The findings could be reported to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee.**
- (iv) **Consideration should be given to reviewing the system for weighting of social workers’ caseloads.**
- (v) **Full availability of information technology, as a key element of communications and for effective case management, should be a priority for social work staff.**
- (vi) **Improve communications between the Family Placement Team and social work teams, including a better understanding of each team’s role.**
- (vii) **Social workers’ relationships with foster carers and looked-after children should be a key element of their training.**
- (viii) **Social workers should be contactable by mobile phone in the same way as Family Placement Team members.**
- (ix) **Consideration should be given to combining, to a greater or lesser extent, joint care meetings – LAC reviews and PEP meetings – in order to make more effective use of professionals’ time.**
- (x) **Every effort should be made to reduce the time taken for assessments of foster carers.**
- (xi) **The Team Manager for Family Placement should not have to carry an individual caseload, in order that she can have a proper overview of the service and be able to ensure that assessment deadlines are met.**

**(xii) There should be no reason why the social worker or family placement worker does not attend hearings of the Fostering Panel, or, if they are not available, are represented by a senior or fellow professional who has a full understanding of the case in question.**

**(xiii) Every effort should be made to continue the improvement in the quality of reports to the Fostering Panel.**

**(xiv) The Family Placement team should provide a regular report to the Panel that brings its attention to any breakdowns on placements, in a format that is acceptable to the Panel.**

## **Educational achievement of looked-after children**

A major concern has been the low level of academic achievement among looked-after children. That was in part due to low expectations amongst professionals, a view that has, it is hoped, now been banished. Additional support has been targeted on pupils in Year 11, and it should be noted that the proportion achieving five or more A\* to C grades at GCSE improved substantially in 2007.

Additional support for looked-after children in school is provided through the LACES Team. The role of the Team has evolved from providing direct teaching support to one where a substantial amount of their time is spent in preparing Personal Education Plans (PEPs) for looked-after children. The panel queried whether it might be more appropriate for other professionals to undertake that task, but on balance it was thought that LACES staff were currently best placed to continue with that task. However, it was reported at the most recent meeting of the Virtual School Governors that, following discussions with a range of professionals, there is broad agreement that schools are best placed to manage the Personal Education Planning process and will undertake this task. This recognition coincides with the allocation to schools of an extra £500 for each looked after child and also provision in the Children and Young Person's Bill which will make the role of the Designated Teacher a statutory requirement.

Social workers will have to initiate the Personal Education Plan by informing schools as soon as a child is received into care and attend a meeting with the school and carer at which arrangements and plans for each looked-after learner's education are established. Social workers already have a statutory responsibility to ensure that the Personal Education Plan is completed and is fully integrated into the care planning and that it is reviewed with the care plan.

The LACES team will cease to write PEPs (except where the child/young person is not on the roll of a school) but will continue to monitor the attainments and achievements of looked-after children in order to identify under-achievement and to support strategies to address this. They will

monitor PEPs for completion and quality on behalf of the local authority, will support and advise schools with when requested to do so and will support schools' Designated Teachers by organising and supporting cluster group meetings for Designated Teachers.

Foster Carers will take part in the planning process, where the specific tasks that they are to undertake to promote the attainments and achievements of their 'charges' are identified and discussed. Training will be offered to carers to support this through CWDC Standards, skills banding, supported by Lifelong Learning. The young person will be involved in the PEP process to the fullest extent possible, given their age and level of understanding

A particular issue for looked-after children is the level of attendance. Poor attendance inevitably leads to poor academic performance. A view often heard among looked-after children, as they leave care, is that they wished they had been made to attend school. The Governors of the Virtual School receive regular statistics on attendance, which show the average to be equivalent to that for a below average secondary school. The latest figures showed a clear trend of attendance falling off from Year 7 (94.95%) to year 11 (79.92%). Attendance in Years 10 and 11 are of particular concern. It was not reported what percentage of the pupils in question were in foster care.

### **The Panel welcomed:**

- the revised procedures in respect of responsibilities for preparing Personal Education Plans;
- the new statutory role to be accorded to Designated teachers;
- the evidence of regular contact and the working relationship between members of the LACES Team and Designated Teachers in schools;
- the inclusion of the Head of the LACES Team in the ECM Enjoy and Achievement Group;
- the allocation of an Educational Welfare Officer with direct responsibility for LACs' attendance;
- the additional funding provided for schools to assist with looked-after children, which recognises the additional workload;
- the significant improvement between 2006 and 2007 in the proportion of care leavers achieving five or more A\* to C grades at GCSE.

### **Recommendations:**

- (i) **There should be tighter and more robust controls on school attendance of LACs, supported by timely and accurate information.**
- (ii) **Emphasis should be given to identifying what skills looked-after children might have in relation to extra-curricular activities such as sport and music.**

## **The Virtual School**

In January 2004, the Council's Cabinet agreed to establish a Virtual School, in order to strengthen the role of elected members as "corporate parents" and to establish robust arrangements for the management of the education of looked-after children. Looked-after children would already be on roll at an actual school, and all schools would have identified a 'designated teacher', whose responsibility would be to keep their educational progress under review. However, that was felt to fragment the arrangements, and the establishment of a "Virtual School" could, it was hoped, overcome that difficulty and enable elected members to see how the education of looked-after children collectively was progressing. The school roll would consist of all looked-after children of school age.

The School has a headteacher, who is also Head of the LACES Team, and a governing body, which first met in April 2004. It has the responsibility for the conduct of the arrangements for the education of looked-after children. Although it has no powers, for example to set targets or reinstate excluded pupils, it is able to make recommendations with respect to the education and welfare of looked-after children.

### **The Panel welcomed:**

The establishment of the Virtual School.

### **Recommendations:**

- (i) The profile of the Virtual School should be raised in order to ensure that all members of the Council are aware of their role of corporate parents.**
- (ii) The Governors should continue to act as the driving force in improving standards for looked-after children.**
- (iii) The additional support being given to looked-after children in Year 11 should be extended as soon as possible to earlier years.**

## **Welfare**

The Panel interviewed the two 'Named Nurses', who are employed by the Primary Care Trust and are part of the Safeguarding Team. They are responsible for the welfare of all looked-after children in Wirral, and at the time of interview the total was 658, which included 187 children from other area placed within the Borough. They explained their working methods, which included undertaking a statutory examination within 28 days of each child coming into care and responsibility for the preparation of a health care plan

and regular assessments – every six months up to the age of five and every 12 months after that.

They explained that the assessments were holistic and took into account the child's emotional health; for older children a screening tool was used to try to identify drug or alcohol abuse; and note was taken of issues of sexual health or obesity. The work of the nurses involved regular contact with GPs, health visitors, school nurses and other agencies such as the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service. The health care plan was made available to those professional that had regular contact with the children, including the Independent Review Officer.

The nurses had some concerns about the numbers of children to be dealt with, which made adherence to statutory deadlines difficult, delays in their receiving medical records and the varying approach of carers to health issues. They stressed the importance of work to ensure that children were involved in exercise and leisure activities.

#### **The Panel welcomed:**

- The work of the Named Nurses.
- Partnership working with the Primary Care Trust.

#### **Recommendation:**

**That procedures for the provision of all necessary medical information to Named Nurses, and other appropriate professionals and foster carers, be reviewed.**

#### **Leaving care**

The Panel became aware that a number of serious issues face looked-after children as they leave care, for example they might have problems in finding suitable accommodation; the fact that a disproportionate number fall into the NEET category (neither in employment, education or training); that they are subject to different criteria for eligibility for services as they move into adulthood; and there is a danger of their becoming disengaged from those services that exist to support them.

#### **Recommendation:**

**That the subject of leaving care be deferred for consideration in the wider context of services to assist in the transition to adulthood.**

## **Appendix 1 - “My Ideal Foster Family”**

According to Wirral’s looked-after young people, an ideal foster family comprises all of these things:

- 10 A good cook providing a balanced diet**
- 9 Helpful with homework and other things ... approachable.  
*(we may want to talk about personal things which are making us unhappy)***
- 8 Understands fashion and keeps with the times (*we like to be clean and take pride in ourselves*)**
- 7 Understands who and what we are**
- 6 Doesn’t shove us aside and be selfish, thinks of us as part of the family**
- 5 Provides fun and family nights in ... so we know we can have a laugh. Doesn’t shout a lot**
- 4 Respects us in all cases (*we need you to listen*)**
- 3 Doesn’t invade our privacy when we need it, gives us space and trusts us**
- 2 Cares, is there, and cares for our things (*there are times when we will need you to lean on*)**
- 1 Doesn’t try to replace our Mum and Dad, but is there for us, through the good and bad.**

## **Appendix 2: List of interviewees\*** (in chronological order)

Young people in care (Rob, Craig, Paul and Martin, accompanied by Fiona O'Shaughnessy, Children's Involvement Officer, and Ruth Harper, LACES Learning Mentor)

Young people in process of leaving care (Cherie, Katie, Lorraine, Sarah and Andrew, accompanied by Fiona O'Shaughnessy)

Foster carers (14 present at regular Drop-in Centre meeting)

Wirral Foster Carers Association (seven representatives)

Marie Stacey (Head of Learning and Achievement Branch)

David MacKinnon (Head of LACES Team and Virtual School Headteacher) and Mark Winnington, Gaynor O'Donnell, Phil Wilson (LACES Team)

Julia Hassall (Head of Children's Social Care)

Simon Fisher (LAC Services Manager) and Sheena Doyle

Sheila Khan (Team Leader, Family Placement Team)  
Tracey Coffey (Service Manager, Quality Assurance)

Family Placement Officers (Norma Cohen, Heather Holbrook, Sue Kerry and Rachel Harrison)

Named Nurses (Anne Powell and Bernie Chapman)

Julian Dowling (Independent Review Officer, Children's reviews)

Rose Rogers (Independent Review Officer, Foster Carers' reviews);

Huw Wilkie (Staff Development Team Manager) and Suzanne Cottrell (Staff Development Officer).

Peter Tomlin (District Manager, Birkenhead).

Ann Gainer (Team Manager, Birkenhead South Planned Work Team 2)

Birkenhead South Social Work Team (ten members)

Ian Rush (Chair of the Fostering Panel)

Councillor Jean Quinn and Dave Boddison (members of the Fostering Panel)

Caroline McKenna, Principal Safeguarding Manager

Philip Cooper (Deputy Headteacher and Designated Teacher, Park High School)

\* Note: some job titles may have changed over the course of this study.