

**THE OUTCOMES FOR LOOKED AFTER CHILDREN
SCRUTINY REVIEW**



A report produced by
**THE FAMILIES AND WELLBEING
POLICY & PERFORMANCE COMMITTEE**

***August 2013
FINAL REPORT***

WIRRAL BOROUGH COUNCIL
THE OUTCOMES FOR LOOKED AFTER CHILDREN
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1. INTRODUCTION

At the meeting of the former Children & Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 7th November 2012, Members agreed to undertake an in-depth Scrutiny Review to investigate the outcomes for Looked After Children in the Borough. As a result, a Task & Finish Group comprising three Members has held over twenty meetings with relevant officers and partners as well as some children in care and care leavers in order to obtain appropriate evidence.

An Executive Summary of the findings follows, together with the recommendations arising from this Review. The Report then sets out the background to the original brief, as well as the methodology adopted for gathering the evidence. This is followed by the main body of the Report which details the key findings of the Review and the evidence gathered in support of the recommendations of the Task & Finish Group Members.

2. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Context: The primary focus of this Scrutiny Review is to assess the outcomes for the Borough's Looked After Children, of which, as at 12th August 2013, Wirral Council had responsibility for 670. Central to the evidence-gathering for the Review were meetings with young people currently in care and with care leavers. This evidence has been under-pinned by the information gained from meetings with foster carers and officers. This Report aims to reflect both the positives and the concerns of the young people supplemented by the views of the service providers. There is much evidence that the Council discharges its duties well. However, some challenges remain and the recommendations included in this Report are aimed at improving the service further.

Aspiration: A recurring theme throughout the Review has been the need to provide greater aspiration for the Borough's Looked After Children. Concerns of a similar nature were expressed by young people, foster carers, teachers and officers, summarised by one care leaver who told the Members that "when you are in care, you are always put down and told that you could not achieve". Whilst the Task & Finish Group Members were told of many examples of aspirational support provided to the children in care, challenges clearly remain. There is a desire that greater aspiration for the Borough's Looked After Children becomes embedded within the practices of the Council and its partners. As well as ensuring that children in care are kept safe, there should also be a goal to inspire those children, especially those in long-term care. There was a view among Members that the Local Authority, as the Corporate Parent, should aim to deliver care that is "what you would want for your own children".

Foster Carers: The young people told the Members that they experienced very strong support from their foster carers but this was not universal. There was some anecdotal evidence of very strong relationships which had formed between carers and the young people, some continuing well beyond the time period when the young person was formally cared for by that carer. One area of development for the Local Authority is to enable foster carers to further enhance their skills in order to meet the considerable challenges which they can face.

The provision of training for carers is obviously a key role which the Council undertakes. It is proposed that greater emphasis could be placed on increasing the attendance at training sessions. An option for the future could be to change the policy so that fees will continue to be paid only if minimum training requirements are met on an annual basis. At the same time, there could be further encouragement for carers to attend sessions in other ways. This may involve holding sessions at different times of the day, at different venues, offering childcare facilities, ensuring sessions are always of high quality, offering the availability of peer mentors and so on. Specific areas where some foster carers could play an enhanced role include the teaching of life skills to the young people, such as budgeting, cookery skills and so on. Additional support and advice from foster carers in helping young people to evaluate options for training and employment is also encouraged.

The Members heard from a number of professionals who argued that foster carers and social workers should have special training if the child in care has designated special needs. As a consequence, the Members have concluded that there should be greater training and monitoring for foster carers who care for children with certain medical and behavioural needs. A programme should be put in place to identify those carers who have specific skills and enable further training to those carers who require enhanced skills. In terms of placements, it is clearly advantageous if the individual needs of the child can be best supported by foster carers who have relevant skills.

The Social Care Process: Key to the outcome for children in care is the stability in placement and in contacts. The Members were informed that, in recent years, the Council has been able to retain more children in stable placements. However, there were a significant number of comments related to the importance of continuity of social worker contact for the children in care. One young person told the Members that "there are so many people in and out of your life". There was anecdotal evidence that, for a number of young people, social workers had changed more often than they would have preferred. One professional agreed when saying "for many Looked After Children, their stories are fragmented with different schools and different social workers".

Members have been informed of the steps that are being taken by the Strategic Directorate to hopefully address the high level of turnover in some teams, including the enhancement of the role, improved training opportunities, reduced manager to social worker ratios as well as remuneration. However, in addition, the organisational structure can contribute to the stability of care for a child. Therefore, the Members request that further consideration be given to organisational changes that could be made with the aim of keeping transitions for the child to a minimum.

Communication between social workers and the young people was highlighted on a number of occasions. The ability of young people to contact their social worker was repeatedly emphasised. The availability and consistency of information relating to financial entitlements for the young people was also stressed. Consideration should also be given to enhancing the modes of communication by considering the use of Apps and texts as well as the Internet, in order to consolidate information flow.

Post-16 Support: A number of witnesses expressed concern regarding the timing of the transition of the transfer of Looked After Children to the Pathways Team in preparation for leaving care. For 16 and 17 year olds, there is a lot of change when they are doing GCSEs and looking for further education, training or employment. In the case of Looked After Children, they are also expected to prepare for leaving care by transferring to the Pathways Team once they are 16 years old. Members have, therefore, concluded that it would be beneficial for there to be greater flexibility around the timing of transition to the Pathways Team, based on each young person's individual needs.

Although there was positive feedback from young people regarding the role of the Pathways Team, there was also a strong message from a number of young people of a desire to have someone available to provide additional support if needed. "It is silly that at 18 years old, they assume that you are OK to be on your own"; "in a normal family, you do not get told to go when you are 18" and "not having a family to turn to is very hard" were comments from three young people. Perhaps the pointer towards improving the service is emphasised by further comments from two young people: "we need someone to listen and to come to your flat if necessary" and "I am unusual because I want to be on my own. However, there is still a need for someone to be available if you need them".

Members warmly welcome the proposals to support payments based on the Staying Put principles that are now being developed for Wirral. This should enable those young people who wish to stay with their foster parents post-18 to do so. However, the Task & Finish Group Members urge that, although personal advisers are available post-18, further options be considered in order to provide young people with access to more one-to-one support and opportunities for "drop in" facilities for Care leavers. This could include a greater use of peer mentoring for Care leavers or further use of the independent Visitor Service.

Education: The value of educational outcomes to any young person is clearly important. This is no different for Looked After Children. However, at both national and local levels, there is a dramatic difference between the educational attainment of Looked After Children and non-Looked After. In Wirral in 2012, 64.8% of all children achieved 5 or more GCSEs at A*-C including English and Maths. The equivalent attainment for Looked After Children was 12%. For many of these young people, there are so many significant events taking place in their young lives.

During this Review, the Members visited both the Observatory and Woodchurch High School. The ethos and the extensive support provided to support Looked After Children at both schools was hugely impressive. However, among the wider cohort of young people attending schools across the Borough with whom the Members met, there was a very mixed response regarding the relationship with the Designated Teacher at their school. Some young people had a supportive relationship whereas some young people did not know who their Designated Teacher was and others had a poor relationship.

Evidence arose that partnership working was not always strong and that improved mutual understanding of the roles of teachers and social workers would be beneficial. The Members heard observations that a closer working relationship between schools and social workers, in the interests of the children in care, would be beneficial. Therefore, in order to strengthen the relationship between schools and social care, the Members recommend that lines of communication are strengthened, commencing with regular meetings between Designated Teachers and District Managers.

In order to enhance the educational outcomes of Looked After Children, it is expected that a Personal Education Plan (PEP) will be prepared for each child in care. The PEP is a record of what needs to happen for Looked After Children to enable them to fulfill their potential and reflects any existing education plans, such as a statement of special educational needs. Members urge that a greater emphasis should be placed on raising the profile of the PEP and ensuring that the value of the plan is better understood by all those responsible for the welfare of a young person.

The attention of Members was also drawn to the need to identify children who require additional support at the earliest opportunity and subsequently to provide the appropriate early interventions. Looked After Children are at high risk of having missed out on early years provision. There is recognition that a greater emphasis should be placed on ensuring that screening is improved to ensure that all vulnerable children, including Looked After Children, are identified and receive appropriate interventions to make sure that children are more able to communicate and to promote emotional literacy at an early age.

16+ Employability: Members heard from several sources of the excellent work being carried out by the Employability Team in order to encourage Care leavers in their journey through education, training and employment. Despite that, some challenges remain. As at April 2013, the proportion of care leavers aged 16–19 in Wirral being in employment, education or training was 62%.

The importance of building self-confidence in Looked After Children was heard repeatedly throughout the Review. One way of achieving increased confidence levels is to provide relevant experiences in order to prepare a young person for further training and eventually for work. It is understood that there is an offer of one week's placement to Looked After Children to work with the Inclusion Team based at Moreton Family Centre. However, a similar process is not repeated across other parts of the Council. It is suggested that, as the Corporate Parent, the Council could provide greater opportunities for internships and job experience across all Departments, in addition to apprenticeships. It is also suggested that procurement arrangements could be used to encourage companies to offer work experience, internships and apprenticeships to care leavers.

Housing: Some of the young people reported low expectations about finding “somewhere nice to live in the future”, while other Care leavers highlighted instances of concern regarding the quality of accommodation. The Members, therefore, stress the importance of Care leavers needing a safe and suitable place to live of their choosing.

In considering the evidence found during the Review, the Panel Members have formulated the recommendations identified on pages 7 to 10.

RECOMMENDATIONS

It is anticipated that the Strategic Director for Families & Wellbeing will be responsible for delivering all of the approved recommendations. As a result, this is not specified individually for each recommendation.

Aspiration

Recommendation 1 – Aspiration for Wirral’s Looked After Children

As part of its role as a Corporate Parent, Wirral Council will place aspiration for the Borough’s Looked After Children at the heart of its decision-making processes. The Council will work with all relevant partners to encourage them to adopt the same principle.

(Reference Section 6.1, page 16)

Foster carers

Recommendation 2 – Incentivising Attendance at Training Sessions for Foster Carers

In order to ensure the continuous professional development of foster carers, consideration should be given to amending the policy so that fees for foster carers will continue to be paid only if minimum training requirements are met on an annual basis. A revised training strategy and coordinated programme should be put in place to support this proposal.

(Reference Section 6.2, page 17)

Recommendation 3 – Promotion by Foster Carers of Independent Living Skills and Employment / Training Opportunities

Greater emphasis should be placed on assisting foster carers to promote independent living skills to Looked After Children who are approaching the time of leaving care. Foster carers should also be encouraged to become more aware of the employment and training opportunities available to young people and provide appropriate support.

(Reference Section 6.2, page 18)

Recommendation 4 – Enabling Foster Carers to Support Each Other

Further consideration should be given to ways in which foster carers can be empowered to support each other, either through face-to-face discussions or the greater use of the online environment, such as the development of an online Forum.

(Reference Section 6.2, page 18)

Recommendation 5 – Care Placements for Looked After Children with Special Educational or Behavioural Needs

When care placements are being considered, it is important that potential carers have the appropriate skills to support children with special needs or behavioural issues. Suitable training and support should be made available to relevant carers and placements should be made with those carers who have the specific skills.

(Reference Section 6.2, page 19)

Social Care

Recommendation 6 – Organisational Structure and Stability of Social Worker Contact

Consideration should be given to whether the realignment of Social Care teams can contribute towards greater stability of care for a child with regard to social worker contact so that transitions from one team to another are kept to a minimum. It is hoped that the current re-modeling and realignment of the social care workforce will contribute towards this aim.

(Reference Section 6.3, page 21)

Recommendation 7 – Financial Entitlements for Looked After Children

Advice to Looked After Children regarding financial entitlements should be available, consistent and timely. The North West Regional initiative on financial support and entitlements is welcomed.

(Reference Section 6.3, page 21)

Recommendation 8 – Communication with Looked After Children

In order to improve the provision of information to the Borough's Looked After Children, Wirral Council is encouraged to further develop the 'Right Side of Care' website alongside the introduction of new forms of communication such as Apps and texts.

(Reference Section 6.3, page 22)

Post-16 Support

Recommendation 9 – Transfer to the Pathways Team

Recognising the educational importance of Year 11, an assessment should be carried out regarding the merits of providing a gradual transition to the Pathways Team focused on both the school year and the needs of the young person rather than on the 16th birthday of the care leaver.

(Reference Section 6.4, page 24)

Recommendation 10 – Post-18 Support

The reduction of support for Looked After Children at 18 years old represents, to some care leavers, a "cliff-edge". Whilst the planned introduction of a 'Staying Put' policy in Wirral is warmly welcomed and although personal advisers are available post-18, the Strategic Director for Families & Wellbeing is asked to consider options for the ability of young people to access more one-to-one support and opportunities for "drop in" facilities for Care leavers.

(Reference Section 6.4, page 24)

Recommendation 11 – Independent Visitor Service

The profile of the Independent Visitor Service should be raised in order to provide additional support for young people and to present opportunities for greater continuity in support.

(Reference Section 6.4, page 25)

Recommendation 12 – Ownership of the Pathway Plan

In order to remove the sentiment held by some young people that the Pathway Plan is targeted at them rather than with them, more attention is needed to ensure that the young person 'owns' the Pathway Plan, with enough support being provided by the social worker to enable that to happen. It is suggested that development work is undertaken with the Pathway Team to enable this transformation.

(Reference Section 6.4, page 25)

Education

Recommendation 13 – The Relationship between Schools and Social Workers

More emphasis should be placed on developing stronger working relationships between schools and social workers, enabling better lines of communication. In particular, regular meetings between Designated Teachers and District Managers would provide a basis for progress.

(Reference Section 6.5, page 27)

Recommendation 14 - Raising the Profile of the Personal Education Plan (PEP)

A greater emphasis should be placed on raising the profile of the Personal Education Plan (PEP) and ensuring that the value of the plan is better understood by all those responsible for the welfare of a young person.

(Reference Section 6.5, page 28)

Recommendation 15 – Consistency of Reviews for Looked After Children

Consideration should be given to holding the PEP Review and the LAC Review at the same time wherever possible. The Task & Finish Group welcomes the work underway to improve the PEP in line with best practice in other Authorities and recommends ways are found to enhance sharing of the data required between school and social worker.

(Reference Section 6.5, page 28)

Recommendation 16 - Attendance at Parents' Evenings

The expected arrangements for attendance at Parents' Evenings ought to be specified in the Personal Education Plan (PEP).

(Reference Section 6.5, page 29)

Recommendation 17 – Personal Education Allowance

Alongside Pupil Premium, the Personal Education Allowance (PEA) represents a valuable resource to help Looked After Children achieve the educational results of their peers. The Looked After Children Education Service (LACES) team is encouraged to both analyse the effectiveness of the PEA funding and seek to ensure the funding is accessed by all of the Looked After Children who would potentially benefit.

(Reference Section 6.5, page 29)

16+ Employability

Recommendation 18 – Increasing the Capacity of the Employability Team

As the statutory duty to provide support to 20 and 21 year old Care leavers is introduced, the proposal to increase the capacity of the Employability Team with a peer mentor and an apprentice is fully supported.

(Reference Section 6.6, page 31)

Recommendation 19 – Opportunities for Work Experience

Wirral Council, as a Corporate Parent, is encouraged to identify and promote opportunities for internships and work experience for Looked After Children and Care leavers within the Council. Consideration should also be given to the Council's procurement arrangements in order to encourage similar opportunities in other companies.

(Reference Section 6.6, page 31)

Recommendation 20 – Higher Education

Greater emphasis should be placed on inspiring more Care leavers, for whom it is the appropriate route, to attend Higher Education. Consideration should be given to the opportunities that there may be to provide Care leavers with appropriate experiences early in the sixth form (or before).

(Reference Section 6.6, page 32)

Recommendation 21 – Employment Opportunities for All

The principle of seeking the right opportunities for individual Care leavers is supported, with an equal emphasis being placed on vocational avenues as well as academic learning.

(Reference Section 6.6, page 32)

Housing, Health and Youth Support

Recommendation 22 – Screening for Vulnerable Children

Consideration ought to be given to ways in which screening can be improved to ensure that all vulnerable children, including Looked After Children, are identified and receive appropriate interventions to make sure that children are more able to communicate and to promote emotional literacy.

(Reference Section 6.7, page 34)

Recommendation 23 – Supporting Care leavers in obtaining tenancies

Models of good practice from elsewhere should be explored in order to further support care leavers in obtaining tenancies.

(Reference Section 6.7, page 34)

Recommendation 24 – Sharing Accommodation

The feasibility of using the 'Right Side of Care' website to include the facility for offering opportunities for sharing accommodation should be investigated.

(Reference Section 6.7, page 34)

Recommendation 25 – Monitoring of the Quality of Accommodation

The process for housing young people who are leaving care should ensure that adequate monitoring and checking is taking place with young people to make sure that reasonable expectations of accommodation are being met.

(Reference Section 6.7, page 35)

3. MEMBERS OF THE TASK & FINISH GROUP

Councillor Wendy Clements (Chair)



As we began this Review, we were conscious that every Councillor is a Corporate Parent to the children and young people who are in the care of Wirral Council. This responsibility is not only to keep them safe, but to ensure that their lives are better than they would have been if not Looked After. Those of us who are parents know how much we strive to give our children opportunities to thrive and make their way in the world.

This Scrutiny Panel has spent a great deal of time to discover how that works for our Looked After Children. Thank you to all the people who gave so generously of their time, including Children and Young People. In particular, we are very grateful to the following young people who gave us their time and shared their views so powerfully: Kim, Katie, Beth, Dawn, Amy, Liam, Chantelle, Matt, Sarah, Shannon, Davina, Liam and Steven.

We have heard about excellent work and we've found areas to celebrate, but also have recommendations as to how things could be better. In reading our recommendations please remember that the whole Council is the Corporate Parent and our call to each Member and Officer of the Council is that the work of the Corporate Parent should affect every area of operation in order to care properly for our children.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Wendy". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Other Panel Members were:

Councillor Walter Smith



Councillor Pat Williams



4. BACKGROUND AND ORIGINAL BRIEF

At the meeting of the former Children & Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 7th November 2012, Members discussed the possibility of commencing an in-depth Scrutiny Review regarding the outcomes for Looked After Children.

An in-depth Scrutiny Review had been previously undertaken regarding the Outcomes for Children in Foster Care. A report of the work done by a Members' working group was produced in April 2008. Subsequent reports have been provided to the former Children & Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee in November 2008 and January 2010 giving an officer response on the progress towards implementing the recommendations from the Members' Report.

By November 2012, it was considered appropriate to undertake a follow-up review on this related issue. The three Party Spokespersons volunteered to form a Task & Finish Group to undertake the Review. The Scope Document for the Scrutiny Review, attached as Appendix 1 to this Report, was agreed by the meeting of the former Children & Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 21st January 2013. It was intended that the new Review will investigate the steps which the Council and other partners are already taking and consider further actions that may be feasible in order to improve the outcomes for Looked After Children.

5. METHODOLOGY FOR THE REVIEW

The Panel has employed a number of methods to gather evidence:

5.1 Meetings with Young people and carers

- Care leavers (Children in Care Council) at Moreton Family Centre
 - A group of Care leavers at the Conway Centre
 - A group of Looked After Children at the Observatory School
 - A group of Foster Carers plus Sheila Khan (Team Manager, Wirral Fostering Service)
- In addition, a short questionnaire was completed by 11 members of the Children in Care Council.

5.2 Visits to Schools

The following schools were visited:

- Woodchurch High School
 - Rebekah Phillips (Headteacher, Woodchurch High School)
 - Dan Heydon (Designated Teacher, Woodchurch High School)
 - Elaine Reeve (Teaching Assistant / Learning Mentor for Looked After Children, Woodchurch High School)
- The Observatory School
 - Elaine Idris (Headteacher, Observatory School)
 - Tom Harney (Chair of Governors, Observatory School)
 - Suzanne Furlong (Designated Teacher, Observatory School)
 - Ann Baird (Pastoral Manager, Observatory School)
 - A group of Looked After Children

During these visits, issues have been discussed with Headteachers, Designated Teachers, Governors and some Looked After Children. Both of the visits were very constructive and highlighted issues relevant to the Review.

5.3 Meetings with Officers

A series of individual meetings has taken place at which the Task & Finish Group Members could discuss relevant issues with key officers from Wirral Borough Council. In addition, Simon Garner, Acting Head of Children's Social Care Branch) provided advice to the Panel Members during both the initial planning stage and the closing phase of the Review. Those interviewed during the course of the Review were:

- Tuesday 8th January 2013
Vivian Stafford (Strategic Service Manager: Post-16 Commissioning and Economic Generation, Wirral Borough Council)
- Tuesday 8th January 2013:
Brian Ronson (Team Manager, Pathway Team, Wirral Borough Council)
- Monday 14th January 2013:
Fiona O'Shaughnessy (Inclusion Manager, Children's Inclusion Service, Wirral Borough Council)
Dave Walker (Inclusion Officer, Children's Inclusion Service, Wirral Borough Council)
Jeanette Geary (Inclusion Officer, Children's Inclusion Service, Wirral Borough Council)
- Monday 21st January 2013:
Simon Garner (Acting Head of Children's Social Care Branch, Wirral Borough Council (and Chair of the North West After Care Forum)

- Tuesday 5th February 2013:
Anne Patterson (Acting Service Manager, Quality Assurance & Safeguarding Unit, Wirral Borough Council)
Deborah Caulfield (Independent Reviewing Officer)
Joanne Leighton (Independent Reviewing Officer)
Rebecca Hardy (Independent Reviewing Officer)
- Tuesday 5th February 2013:
Pat Rice (Head of Response, Wirral Borough Council)
Joanne Day (Operations Manager, Response Team, Wirral Borough Council)
Pat Manning (Specialist Substance Misuse Worker, Response Team, Wirral Borough Council)
- Wednesday 20th February 2013:
Pat Jones (Head of Targeted Youth Support Services, Children & Young People's Department, Wirral Borough Council)
Kathy Gill (YISP - Youth Inclusion Support Panel Manager, Children & Young People's Department, Wirral Borough Council)
Steve Pimblett (Strategic Service Manager, Integrated Youth Support, Children & Young People's Department, Wirral Borough Council) – Part meeting only
- Monday 4th March 2013:
Phil Sheridan (Virtual Headteacher – Secondary, Children & Young People's Department, Wirral Borough Council)
Steve Dainty (Virtual Headteacher – Primary, Children & Young People's Department, Wirral Borough Council)
- Tuesday 12th March 2013:
Paula Basnett (Manager, Invest Wirral and Foster Carer)
- Tuesday 12th March 2013:
Julie Webster (Deputy Director of Public Health, NHS Wirral)
Gareth Hill (Public Health Manager, NHS Wirral)
Lucy Tomlinson (Public Health Manager, NHS Wirral)
- Monday 18th March 2013:
Sheila Jacobs (Supported Housing Manager, Wirral Borough Council)
- Wednesday 27th March 2013:
Simon Fisher (Service Manager Children with Disabilities, Wirral Borough Council)
Graham Teare (Residential Homes Manager, Children & Young People Department, Wirral Borough Council)
Debbie Pearce (Children with Disabilities Team Manager, Children & Young People Department, Wirral Borough Council)
- Tuesday 23rd April 2013:
Hazel Griffiths-Jones, (Clinical Lead for Looked After Children, Wirral Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services - CAMHS, Cheshire & Wirral Partnership NHS Foundation Trust)
- Tuesday 23rd April 2013:
Gareth Jones (Apprenticeship and Skills Manager, Children & Young People Department, Wirral Borough Council Manager)
Paul Arista (16 – 19 Manager, Children & Young People Department, Wirral Borough Council)

5.4 Written Evidence

The Review was also informed by written evidence including committee reports, Government documents and briefing papers from officers.

6. EVIDENCE AND RECOMMENDATIONS

6.1 Aspiration for the Borough's Looked After Children

What the young people said....

- “There is a stereotype about Looked After Children and there are few positive messages.”
- “Tell a Looked After Child that they will do bad and they will do bad”. “When you are in care, you are always put down and told that you could not achieve.”
- “There should be more aspiration for Looked After Children. A friend went to College but was kicked off the course because she did not work. She did not work because she was told that she could not do it.”

What the Members welcomed....

- Work to raise the aspiration of Looked After Children towards higher education is taking place in schools and in the Employability Team. However, more remains to be done.
- Aspiration towards educational attainment for Looked After Children is a high priority in those schools that were visited.
- The successful Takeover Day which gives children, including those Looked After, the opportunity to get involved with decision-making and to aspire to become future leaders for their community.

What the Members suggest for future developments....

One of the recurring themes throughout the evidence-gathering stage of the Review has been the need to provide greater aspiration for the Borough's Looked After Children. In addition to the comments received from the young people, as highlighted above, other comments were received from a variety of sources:

“It is important to give them positives and to give them confidence”. Foster Carer

“There needs to be greater aspiration among partners for these children”. Social Care Professional

“The numbers going to university are increasing but are still relatively small. It is an issue that is discussed at the Children in Care Council in order to spur on other young people. However, there are still young people who believe that they cannot go to university because they are in care”. Social Care Manager

“In some cases, although there is good care provided by the foster carer, some carers do not have aspirations for education”. Teacher

Whilst the Task & Finish Group Members were told of many examples of aspirational support provided to the children in care, challenges clearly remain. A teacher at one school described the opportunities for some Looked After Children to undertake a visit to Liverpool John Moores University in order to raise aspirations. At an individual level, there were very positive examples of foster carers encouraging young people to succeed.

In October 2012, the Department for Education issued the Charter for Care leavers. In particular, the Charter focuses upon aspiration in the following statement:

To believe in you

We will value your strengths, gifts and talents and encourage your aspirations. We will hold a belief in your potential and a vision for your future even if you have lost sight of these yourself. We will help you push aside limiting barriers and encourage and support you to pursue your goals in whatever ways we can. We will believe in you, celebrate you and affirm you.

Wirral Council has responded by agreeing to sign up to the principles of the Charter. The delivery of these principles into a practical Action Plan remains a challenge for the Council as is the measurement of the future impact of the Charter. However, the Panel Members stress that, in particular, greater aspiration for the Borough's Looked After Children should be embedded within the practices of the Council and its partners. As well as ensuring that children in care are kept safe, there should also be a goal to inspire those children, especially those in long-term care.

Recommendation 1 – Aspiration for Wirral's Looked After Children

As part of its role as a Corporate Parent, Wirral Council will place aspiration for the Borough's Looked After Children at the heart of its decision-making processes. The Council will work with all relevant partners to encourage them to adopt the same principle.

6.2 The impact of foster carers

What the young people said....

- Some young people experienced very strong support from their foster carers but this was not universal.
- “My foster carer spoilt me rotten”.
- Some care leavers were still with their foster carer post-18. Others were able to stay only if they paid weekly lodgings.
- Priority and additional resources being given to foster carers’ own children were seen as unfair. “Foster carers treat us far from their own”.
- “The foster carer used to lock the kitchen door at night”
- Attendance of foster carers at training sessions could be improved. This was particularly noted for connected carers.

What the Members welcomed....

- There were very clear demonstrations of appreciation towards their Foster Carers shown by some of the children in care.
- The numbers of foster carers attending training sessions has improved, although it is recognised that further work remains to be done.

What the Members suggest for future developments....

Training for foster carers

Training for foster carers is delivered by a number of different providers. Each foster carer is expected to complete ‘core’ training as a part of their registration. Currently, all registered foster carers receive a ‘skills’ based fee, which is separate from the fostering allowance.

Although the numbers of foster carers attending training sessions has improved it was reported that there is a significant shortfall in attendance. This is most pronounced among connected or kinship carers (extended family members) among whom there is a particular reluctance to participate in formal training sessions as the child is viewed as part of the family. In the period between July 2012 and July 2013, of the total of 536 foster carers, only 154 (approximately 29%) had attended formal training sessions. However, of the 154, many had attended a number of different sessions. Therefore, it is clear that there is good engagement in the training process from that minority of carers.

An option for the future could be to change the policy so that fees will continue to be paid only if minimum training requirements are met on an annual basis. At the same time, there is also a strong case to provide further encouragement for carers to attend sessions in other ways. This may involve holding sessions at different times of the day, at different venues, offering childcare facilities, ensuring sessions are always of high quality, offering the availability of peer mentors and so on. It is important that the Council reinforces the importance of training to all foster carers.

Recommendation 2 – Incentivising Attendance at Training Sessions for Foster Carers

In order to ensure the continuous professional development of foster carers, consideration should be given to amending the policy so that fees for foster carers will continue to be paid only if minimum training requirements are met on an annual basis. A revised training strategy and coordinated programme should be put in place to support this proposal.

Preparation for Independence

Some of the young people reported their uncertainty regarding life skills, such as budgeting, cookery skills and so on. Further comments from young people are documented later in Section 6.4 (Post-16 Support) particularly with regard to money management and budgeting. Although the provision of life skills training is available from providers such as the Youth Offending Service, additional support would be beneficial. Foster carers have an opportunity to help prepare young people for greater independence. As an example, one care leaver has reported that the strangest experience was being in a room on their own for the evening, as in a busy foster home you were rarely alone. Such experiences could be prepared for in advance. The Members suggest that carers are in an ideal position to provide additional support to promote and develop independent living skills in those young people approaching the time to leave care.

There was also evidence that increased engagement with the Employability Team may enable foster carers to become more aware of employment and training opportunities that may be available to Looked After Children. Additional support and advice from foster carers could help young people to evaluate options for training and employment. A regular network, parents' evenings and newsletters for foster carers would provide the basic information for the carers to undertake that role more fully.

Recommendation 3 – Promotion by Foster Carers of Independent Living Skills and Employment / Training Opportunities

Greater emphasis should be placed on assisting foster carers to promote independent living skills to Looked After Children who are approaching the time of leaving care. Foster carers should also be encouraged to become more aware of the employment and training opportunities available to young people and provide appropriate support.

Enabling Foster Carers to Support Each Other

As outlined above, there is obviously a major role for a formal training programme in order to enhance the skills of foster carers. However, there was also evidence that some foster carers may benefit from greater empowerment in the form of learning from other carers. It has been proposed greater networking and the development on a local online forum, available only to foster carers in Wirral, could help to provide additional support to carers. One foster carer explained:

“Fostering can be lonely and the Forum will enable foster carers to swap ideas. Although there is supervision available from the social worker every six weeks it would be very helpful, in addition, to talk to other foster carers”.

Although the Fostering Network provides an online forum, it is understood that, as the annual fee is £86, many foster carers do not subscribe. Members, therefore, support the principle of developing a localised online Forum which has already been proposed by a group of foster carers in Wirral. It is anticipated that company sponsorship could offset the costs of the Forum.

Recommendation 4 – Enabling Foster Carers to Support Each Other

Further consideration should be given to ways in which foster carers can be empowered to support each other, either through face-to-face discussions or the greater use of the online environment, such as the development of an online Forum.

Looked After Children with Special Needs

A significant number of the children placed into care have special needs or behavioural issues. Referring to foster carers, one witness who works with children with such requirements explained:

“If they understood the trigger points and the special needs of the young people it would make my job so much easier”.

The Members heard from a number of professionals who argued that foster carers and social workers should have special training if the child in care has designated special needs. As a consequence, the Members have concluded that there should be greater training and monitoring for foster carers who care for children with certain medical and behavioural needs. A programme should be put in place to identify those carers who have specific skills and enable further training to those carers who require enhanced skills. In terms of placements, it is clearly advantageous if the individual needs of the child can be best supported by foster carers who have particular skills.

Recommendation 5 – Care Placements for Looked After Children with Special Educational or Behavioural Needs

When care placements are being considered, it is important that potential carers have the appropriate skills to support children with special needs or behavioural issues. Suitable training and support should be made available to relevant carers and placements should be made with those carers who have the specific skills.

6.3 The Social Care process

What the young people said....

- Some difficulties in contacting social workers were experienced.
- Contact with all social workers was not a positive and supportive experience.
- “The level of support varies depending on the social worker”.
- “There needs to be better social worker contact. The social workers always have other things to do”.
- “If a young person is not rebellious they are not seen as a priority. There needs to be a way of contacting the social workers and being treated as a priority”.
- Social workers have been changed too often.
- “There are so many people in and out of your life”.
- “Over time, we have contact with so many social workers”. One care leaver had been in care for approximately ten years. During that time she has had 6 or 7 social workers.
- Being cared for out-of-borough resulted in one young person feeling isolated.
- Foster care is definitely not the solution for all children in care. Residential Care has been far more suitable for some young people.
- There was some positive feedback regarding the continuous relationship provided by the Independent Reviewing Officers (IRO).
- Confidentiality was a big issue for some of the young people. “Lots of stories about why you are in care are made up”.
- “It would be good if Looked After Children got a travel card”
- The questionnaire showed that only some of the young people do discuss their future plans with social workers and foster carers.
- There was some negative feedback regarding young people being told what they are entitled to, including financial support.
- “The Inclusion Service is brilliant”
- The Children in Care Council is a very positive experience for those who participate. “It shows that the professionals are now listening to the young people”.

What the Members welcomed....

- There is a high level of engagement with the Children in Care Council.
- The successful implementation of the ‘Right Side of Care’ website for the use of Wirral’s children in care.
- The Inclusion Team is able to build strong relationships with young people over a long period of time.
- In recent years, the Council has been able to retain more children in stable placements.
- There is recognition of the strong challenge that is provided by the Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs) in Wirral.
- Staffing levels among the Independent Reviewing Officers has been increased in order to further support the challenge which they are able to provide.
- The successful Residential Providers Forum has become a template for other Local Authorities.
- Although there needs to be more joined up thinking between health, education and social care, it is anticipated that the new organisational structure for Special Educational Needs will assist in this process.

What the Members suggest for future developments....

Stability of Social Worker Contact

During the Review, there were a significant number of comments related to the importance of continuity of social worker contact for the children in care. The availability of social worker time to individuals when required was equally highlighted. One young person summarised the comments of several others when he told the Members that:

“There are so many people in and out of your life”.

A professional reinforced the point by stating:

“Some Looked After Children have a large turnover of social workers. As a result, some of those children see themselves as inconvenient baggage”.

And another added:

“For many Looked After Children, their stories are fragmented with different schools and different social workers”

Members have been informed of the steps that are being taken by the Strategic Directorate to hopefully address the high level of turnover in some teams, including the enhancement of the role, improved training opportunities, reduced manager to social worker ratios as well as remuneration. However, in addition, the organisational structure can contribute to the stability of care for a child. For example, if there is a separate assessment unit from the care management team, then due to the transfer to the new team, the child will be subject to a change of social worker. Therefore, the Members request that further consideration be given to organisational changes that could be made with the aim of keeping transitions for the child to a minimum.

Recommendation 6 – Organisational Structure and Stability of Social Worker Contact

Consideration should be given to whether the organisation of Social Care teams can contribute towards greater stability of care for a child with regard to social worker contact so that transitions from one team to another are kept to a minimum. It is hoped that the current re-modeling and realignment of the social care workforce will contribute towards this aim.

Financial Entitlements

The Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Children and Families wrote to all Local Authorities in October 2012 requesting that Councils consider increasing the care leavers' grant to at least £2000 and review the figure annually with the Children in Care Council. At that time, the rate in Wirral was £1500 and approval is now being sought to raise it to £2000. The Members support this approach.

Comments emerged during the Review from the young people and from some professionals to suggest that there is a lack of clarity regarding the financial entitlements for children in care and care leavers. It is acknowledged that work is taking place among Local Authorities in the North West Region to review guidance to financial support and entitlement. It is understood that a local guide will be produced based on the regional model. Again, this approach is welcomed. However, it is suggested that further work is required to ensure that consistent information is available and is actually received by the young people. It is also interesting to note that the previous Scrutiny Review, entitled 'Scrutiny of the Outcomes for Children in Foster Care, produced in 2008, included a recommendation to "Ensure that looked-after children are aware of their financial entitlement".

Recommendation 7 – Financial Entitlements for Looked After Children

Advice to Looked After Children regarding financial entitlements should be available, consistent and timely. The North West Regional initiative on financial support and entitlements is welcomed.

Communication with Looked After Children

Linked to the previous recommendation is a more general point on communication to the children in care and to care leavers. It was suggested that there should be a greater emphasis placed on monitoring and evaluating the information that Looked After Children are actually receiving. Much of the information to carers and young people is currently delivered by email, telephone and written communication. It is perhaps timely to consider the use of Apps and texts as well as the Internet, in order to consolidate information flow.

Recommendation 8 – Communication with Looked After Children

In order to improve the provision of information to the Borough's Looked After Children, Wirral Council is encouraged to further develop the 'Right Side of Care' website alongside the introduction of new forms of communication such as Apps and texts.

6.4 Post-16 Support

What the young people said....

- Those who had already left care recorded that they had very little money at that time.
- Care leavers should be better prepared, for example, in budgeting.
- There was some very positive feedback regarding the Leaving Care Team. “The Leaving Care worker was brilliant”; “The social worker from the Pathways Team has been great”.
- When leaving care, one young person felt isolated and without any emotional support. “There was no help with money or support”
- “It is silly, that at 18 years old, they assume that you are OK to be on your own”.
- There is a perception of a “cliff-edge” at 18 years old for some young people. “We have to move out at 18 even if you’re not ready. We’re still kids”.
- “In a normal family you do not get told to go when you are 18”.
- More support should be available post-18. There were requests for more financial support to be available until the age of 21.
- “Not having a family to turn to is very hard”.
- Some young people welcomed the First Home Grant (also known as care leavers’ grant).
- “There should be a benefit for care leavers”.
- “We need someone to listen and to come to your flat if necessary”.
- “I am unusual because I want to be on my own. However, there is still a need for someone to be available if you need them”.

What the Members welcomed....

- There was positive feedback towards the work of the Pathways Team, not only from some young people, but from Foster Carers too.
- There was evidence of strong partnership working between different agencies. This was apparent in the work taking place between the Pathways Team and the Social Landlords and also with the Youth Offending Service.
- The Pathways Team has worked alongside Job Centre Plus to develop the Care Leaver’s protocol, which aims to support care leavers into work.
- Positive outcomes from the Independent Visitor Service were reported.

What the Members suggest for future developments....

Timing of Transfer to the Pathways Team

In October 2012, the Department of Education issued the Care leavers in England Data Pack alongside the Charter for Care leavers. This documentation states that, nationally, too many young people are leaving care at age 16, particularly from children’s homes. Although many go home, 26% move to independent living. The government expects all Local Authorities to support and prepare young people for adulthood in a measured and flexible way so that young people move to independence when they are ready.

A number of contributors expressed concern regarding the timing of the transition of the transfer of Looked After Children to the Pathways Team in preparation for leaving care. One professional who works closely with care leavers explained:

“The age of 16 is a time of massive uncertainty for all children regarding exams, etc.. For Looked After Children, we add to that by them leaving care. The timing of transition is not that flexible”.

The case was made strongly that there was a need for additional support for Looked After Children through the period around 16/17 years old when they are doing GCSEs, looking for further education, training or employment and, for many, leaving foster care to become more independent. A huge amount of change is taking place simultaneously. In fact, some of the foster carers with whom the Members met suggested whether earlier contact with the Pathways Team may help. Members were also informed that as the Pathways Team get involved with a Looked After Child, at their 16th birthday, for some children, depending on their date of birth, that is not early enough to provide support to the young person in making their post-16 applications.

Members have, therefore, concluded that it would be beneficial for there to be greater flexibility around the timing of transition to the Pathways Team, based on each young person's individual needs.

Recommendation 9 – Transfer to the Pathways Team

Recognising the educational importance of year 11, an assessment should be carried out regarding the merits of providing a gradual transition to the Pathways Team focused on both the school year and the needs of the young person rather than on the 16th birthday of the care leaver.

Post-18 Support

The care leavers in England Data Pack released by the Department of Education (in October 2012) stresses the importance of ensuring that the young person has a network of support so that they do not feel alone and experience loneliness. Comments from both young people preparing to leave care and from others who have been through the process (see 'What the Young People said....' above) suggest that more could be done in this regard. Indeed the point was made that, once a child in care is 16 years old, the system assumes that planning starts for them to leave care. Members warmly welcome the proposals to support payments based on the Staying Put principles that are now being developed for Wirral. This should enable those young people who wish to stay with their foster parents post-18 to do so. However, concerns remain among professionals:

“There is a need to ensure that back-up is available to Looked After Children if “they have had a bad day” to prevent them giving up on opportunities”.

“There are real concerns about what will happen to some of the young people when they leave school and have less day-to-day support. What will stop them going off the rails?”

Members were informed that those children in care who are under 18 years of age are unable to claim benefits. Therefore, they tend to maintain contact with the Pathway Team in order to maintain financial support. However, once they reach 18, “they have to live in the adult world” and contact is often lost.

Recommendation 10 – Post-18 Support

The reduction of support for Looked After Children at 18 years old represents, to some care leavers, “a cliff-edge”. Whilst the planned introduction of a ‘Staying Put’ policy in Wirral is warmly welcomed and although personal advisers are available post-18, the Strategic Director for Families & Wellbeing is asked to consider options for the ability of young people to access more one-to-one support and opportunities for “drop in” facilities for Care leavers.

Independent Visitor Service

The Independent Visitor Service is a statutory service providing volunteers who befriend, support, advise and guide children or young people (aged 6-21) who are in the care of the Local Authority and who have little, irregular, poor quality or no contact with parents or where an appointment is seen to

be in the child's best interests. The Service is independent of professionals involved in the care of the young people and anything discussed during the visits remains confidential subject to safeguarding practices. Referrals can be made from carers, social workers, Independent Reviewing Officers, other professionals and from the young people themselves. Referrals are made usually because the young person is isolated or they are experiencing a number of changes in their lives and an Independent Visitor is someone who can provide consistent support over a long term basis. The service in Wirral is currently provided by Wired and is supporting 20 young people. The youngest currently supported is 11; the oldest is 20. Young people are in a variety of settings such as foster placements or residential care and can be in Wirral or out of Borough.

The service is promoted through a variety of means such as the distribution of information leaflets, Wired's website and attending foster carer forums. However, particularly given the evidence presented in Section 6.4 (Post-16 Support) it is suggested that the Independent Visitor Service may be able to play a greater role in reducing some of the concerns expressed by the young people at the time of leaving care.

Recommendation 11 – Independent Visitor Service

The profile of the Independent Visitor Service should be raised in order to provide additional support for young people and to present opportunities for greater continuity in support.

Ownership of the Pathway Plan

During meetings, Members heard that there was a perception that for a significant number of Looked After Children, the Pathway Plan was "targeted at them rather than with them". The Department of Education stresses that there should be sufficient focus on the young person's Pathway Plan to ensure it clearly maps out the needs and ambitions of the young person. Based on the evidence available to the Members, it is suggested that further work is required in this area.

Recommendation 12 – Ownership of the Pathway Plan

In order to remove the sentiment held by some young people that the Pathway Plan is targeted at them rather than with them, more attention is needed to ensure that the young person 'owns' the Pathway Plan, with enough support being provided by the social worker to enable that to happen. It is suggested that development work is undertaken with the Pathway Team to enable this transformation.

6.5 Education

What the young people said....

- Some young people experienced strong support from their school but this was not universal.
- There was a very mixed response regarding the relationship with the Designated Teacher. Some young people had a supportive relationship whereas some young people did not know who their Designated Teacher was and others had a poor relationship.
- “Additional money goes to the school but you don’t see it”.
- Some young people received support from the school in the form of equipment such as laptops.
- There was evidence from the questionnaire that young people do feel encouraged to do well at school by their carers, although this was not universal.
- Attendance by some foster carers at Parents’ Evenings was limited.
- Some care leavers felt that they were not encouraged to succeed at school as they would not be able to cope with the academic stream. For example, “they picked my career for me at that age”.
- Being treated equally in school and not being stigmatised would help.
- “A Looked After Child in school is seen as problem child.”
- There was evidence of some bullying related to young people being in care.
- Referring to the instability in her life, one young person commented “How can they expect you to be stable at school when all that is going on?” followed by “Why do they want to move you when you are expecting exams?”

What the Members welcomed....

- The ethos and the extensive support provided towards Looked After Children at both the Observatory and Woodchurch High School was hugely impressive. The staff at the school clearly know the children very well, trying to understand individual needs and making reasonable adjustments. The schools act as very strong advocates for their children in care.
- The re-alignment of the Looked After Children Education Service (LACES) has led to the monitoring of data on a pupil by pupil basis. This has enabled detailed conversations with schools which, hopefully, will facilitate the effective targeting of resources and lead to improved attainment.
- The new working methodology of the LACES Team will hopefully encourage long-term planning for individual Looked After Children in schools.
- There were reports that Independent Reviewing Officers are now regularly asking how the Pupil Premium is being spent.
- There is some evidence that the additional support, including mentoring, is leading to improved results for Looked After Children at GCSE (Key Stage 4). This is demonstrated by the table below. In 2012, 4 LAC (Year 11) achieved 5 A*-C (including English and Maths) out of a cohort of 33, that is 12%. The target for 2013 is to increase this performance to 20%. However, attainment levels remain well below the average for non-Looked After Children.

The attainment of Looked After Children achieving 5+ GCSE A*-C, including English and Maths is demonstrated by PI 101:

PI 101	Wirral LAC 2010	Wirral LAC 2011	Wirral LAC 2012	National 2010	National 2011
5+ A*-C including English and Maths	8	9	12	12	13
5+ A*-C	29	26	42	26	31

Source: ‘Review of Attainment & Progress at the End of Key Stage 4’, Children and Young People’s Overview and Scrutiny Committee 21st January 2013

As a comparator, the equivalent data for all Children is demonstrated by PI 75:

PI 75	Wirral 2010	Wirral 2011	Wirral 2012	National 2010	National 2011	National 2012
5+ A*-C including English and Maths	58.7	64.1	64.8	53.5	58.9	58.3

Source: 'Review of Attainment & Progress at the End of Key Stage 4', Children and Young People's Overview and Scrutiny Committee 21st January 2013

What the Members suggest for future developments....

Relationships between Schools and Social Care

It was clear during the course of the Review that many of the social care and educational professionals have a great desire to meet the needs of the children in care. However, evidence arose that partnership working was not always strong and that improved mutual understanding of the roles of teachers and social workers would be beneficial. The Members heard observations that there needs to be a closer working relationship between schools and social workers in the interests of the children in care. There were requests for faster response times to queries and a better way of contacting social workers. It is interesting to note that the Scrutiny Review of Literacy Levels at Key Stage 2, which reported in January 2010 found similar evidence. That report concluded:

"With respect to the care of vulnerable children, there was evidence of some frustration regarding the relationship between schools and the Children's Social Services Department of Wirral Borough Council. This frustration could be heard in the words of one head teacher, who commented that "There is a desire for people from different departments (education, social care and health) to work together but there are still barriers. Sometimes people can be reluctant to open out and work together. There are lots of little islands"."

The Literacy Scrutiny Review included the following two recommendations:

"Greater emphasis should be given to the provision of a consistent link between schools and Children's Social Care Services. A Social Worker should be allocated to either a Children's Centre or a School Cluster Group, wherever is most appropriate".

"The Council is encouraged to promote more multi-agency working, specifically by improving protocols for the sharing of information between health, social care and education professionals. This should apply particularly to 'hard to reach' families".

Therefore, in order to strengthen the relationship between schools and social workers, the Members recommend that lines of communication are strengthened, commencing with regular meetings between Designated Teachers and District Managers.

Recommendation 13 – The Relationship between Schools and Social Workers

More emphasis should be placed on developing stronger working relationships between schools and social workers, enabling better lines of communication. In particular, regular meetings between Designated Teachers and District Managers would provide a basis for progress.

The Personal Education Plan (PEP)

In order to enhance the educational outcomes of Looked After Children, a Personal Education Plan (PEP) should be prepared for each child in care. The PEP is a record of what needs to happen for Looked After Children to enable them to fulfil their potential and reflects any existing education plans, such as a statement of special educational needs. The PEP is the joint responsibility of the Local Authority and the school, although the process should be led by the child's social worker.

The Members heard a number of suggestions from professionals that the completion and value placed upon the PEP needs to be improved, with greater emphasis on ensuring that the PEP has identified where additional support is required and that the support is actually provided. It was also suggested that the process requires greater consistency. Although positive work is taking place to further develop the plans in consultation with foster carers and social care teams, more progress is needed. One Manager concluded that:

“Whilst the social worker’s major focus is on the safety of the child, there are challenges to ensure that the PEP is not seen as a low priority”.

In terms of the process, there was a proposition that the PEP process works better if there is continuity in attendance at meetings and that the process will only be successful if fully supported by social work managers, social workers and Designated Teachers. It was also emphasised that the success of the PEP in schools can rely on the relationship between the Designated Teacher and the class teachers.

Recommendation 14 – Raising the Profile of the Personal Education Plan (PEP)

A greater emphasis should be placed on raising the profile of the Personal Education Plan (PEP) and ensuring that the value of the plan is better understood by all those responsible for the welfare of a young person.

Consistency of Reviews for Looked After Children

An LAC Review is held a minimum of every six months. In Wirral, the PEP Review is a separate process, although many of the same people are involved. It is understood that in some Local Authorities, for example, Bristol City Council and Norfolk County Council the PEP Review takes place in conjunction with the LAC Review. The purpose is to ensure that these two strands of the child’s care plan are in alignment.

This was also a recommendation of the 2008 Scrutiny Review, ‘Scrutiny of the Outcomes for Children in Foster Care’:

“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 professional’s time”.

However, the Officer response reported in the Fostering Service Progress Report for the Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee, 21st January 2010, is also noted:

“Wherever possible, LAC Reviews and PEP meetings are combined. Social workers and Independent Reviewing Officers do consider whether this is possible when LAC reviews are booked. It does however remain the case that combined reviews are not always an option. For example, statutory timescales cannot be changed to enable a combined review. In addition, some LAC Reviews are called to consider specific issues other than education. It would not be appropriate to combine such a review with a PEP meeting”.

Recommendation 15 – Consistency of Reviews for Looked After Children

Consideration should be given to holding the PEP Review and the LAC Review at the same time wherever possible. The Task & Finish Group welcomes the work underway to improve the PEP in line with best practice in other authorities and recommends ways are found to enhance sharing of the data required between school and social worker.

Engagement of Foster Carers in the education of children in care

The previous Scrutiny Review, referred to earlier, which investigated Literacy Levels at Key Stage 2 again commented upon importance of education and, in particular, literacy skills for children in care. At that time, the Panel Members sought to encourage the Authority to raise the profile of literacy specifically for Looked After Children in order to enhance their life chances. It was suggested that foster parents should be given greater support specifically to help them assist their fostered children in improving their literacy skills. The Literacy Review recommended:

“Training courses for Foster Carers and staff in Residential Homes should include a module on literacy and raising standards”.

In addition, the ‘Scrutiny of the Outcomes for Children in Foster Care’ Report (2008) included a recommendation:

“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”.

During the current Scrutiny Review, concerns were again raised among professionals regarding the role of foster carers in emphasising the importance of education. There were calls for some foster carers to become more aspirational towards education. Evidence emerged that attendance at school parents’ evenings by foster carers was partial. One way in which greater emphasis could be placed on education is by providing clarity regarding the responsibility for attendance at parents’ evenings, whether it be the foster carer or the social worker. It was also suggested that more could be done to give foster carers the confidence to go into schools and ask questions.

Recommendation 16 - Attendance at Parents’ Evenings

The expected arrangements for attendance at Parents’ Evenings ought to be specified in the Personal Education Plan (PEP).

Personal Education Allowance

Funding for Looked After Children is available to schools via a number of streams:

- Pupil Premium - £900 per Looked After Child per year is payable to the school (2013/14 rate).
- “First 500” – The Wirral School Forum has agreed that an addition £500 per Looked After Child is payable to the school for each Wirral child in care (although not Looked After Children from other Local Authorities).
- Personal Educational Allowance – Schools can apply for specific amounts of funding to support individual Looked After Children for activities such as additional tuition, educational equipment and educational trips. This fund is administered by the Social Care Branch.

The Members suggest that further emphasis is given, by working effectively with the schools, to ensure that this additional funding is used as effectively as possible to improve the educational outcomes for the Borough’s Looked After Children.

Recommendation 17 – Personal Education Allowance

Alongside Pupil Premium, the Personal Education Allowance (PEA) represents a valuable resource to help Looked After Children achieve the educational results of their peers. The LACES team is encouraged to both analyse the effectiveness of the PEA funding and seek to ensure the funding is accessed by all of the Looked After Children who would potentially benefit.

6.6 16+ Employability

What the young people said....

- In several cases, college has been very supportive.
- Several care leavers recognised the importance of apprenticeships as they provide experience. “Apprenticeships set you up for a proper job.”
- There were several examples of young people struggling to settle into a job.

What the Members welcomed....

- Within the Employability Team, it is a big asset to have a former Looked After Child acting as a peer mentor. “The issue is not about throwing money at it. It’s about getting the right people to work with the children”. The use of peer mentors is now being replicated by other Local Authorities.
- The percentage of Looked After Children at the age of 19 who are in education, employment or training (Performance Indicator NI148) continues to improve. The last three years has seen an increase from 36% (2010/11) to 52% (2011/12) to 61% for NI148 in Wirral for 2012/13.
- The Inclusion Service aims to create work experience for Looked After Children.
- The Brathay Project, and subsequently the use of Oaklands as the partner organisation in delivering the NEET Participation Programme. This programme received excellent feedback and was recognised as being superb for building confidence in Looked After Children.
- The work that is taking place to achieve the FromCare2Work Kitemark.

What the Members suggest for future developments....

The Employability Team is responsible for providing support to both Looked After Children who are still in education post-16 in addition to those who are NEET or on the edge of NEET. Comparative information is available in the following table regarding the activities of 19 year olds.

	Cohort of 49 young people who were 19 in Wirral as of November 2012	Activities of 19 year old care leavers in 2011 (England)
Percentage in education, employment or training	61%	65%
Percentage not in education, employment or training (NEET)	31%	30%
Percentage not in education, employment or training (NEET) because of disability or illness	8%	5%

Source: Care leavers in England Data Pack released by the Department of Education (Oct 2012 and 2012 Care leaver in Education, Employment and Training (Wirral) Briefing paper

It is also interesting to note that the Care leavers in England Data Pack reports that young people in education at age 19 are more likely to have had stable care periods than those in other activities. 80% of the young care leavers in higher or other types of education had a single period of care compared with 72% of those in training or employment and 69% of those who were NEET.

The Local Authority has set a target of 65% of care leavers aged 16–19 being in employment, education or training in 2012 / 2013. As at April 2013, the level was 62%, with a caseload of 105 Care leavers in the 16–19 age group. A challenge for the future is the extension of the duty to ensure that support is also in place for 20 and 21 year olds. On current figures, this will increase the caseload to 179. In order to maintain the level of service, there is a proposal for additional capacity to be provided by peers who have been through the care system in order for the team to cope with the expected additional demand.

Recommendation 18 – Increasing the Capacity of the Employability Team

As the statutory duty to provide support to 20 and 21 year old Care leavers is introduced, the proposal to increase the capacity of the Employability Team with a peer mentor and an apprentice is fully supported.

Opportunities for Work Experience

The importance of building self-confidence in Looked After Children was heard repeatedly throughout the Review. Members were informed that, for some children in care, there is a need to improve self-esteem and confidence levels, for example, to help with interview skills. This can be a significant problem at the age of transition (16–17 years old) when the young person is moving to semi-independence; a period which can be particularly difficult when there is no parental input.

One way of achieving increased confidence levels is to provide relevant experiences in order to prepare a young person for further training and eventually for work. One foster parent commented:

“Work experience is very important for Looked After Children as a confidence builder”

It was noted that there is an offer of a one week’s placement to Looked After Children to work with the Inclusion Team based at Moreton Family Centre. However, it appears that this process is not replicated across other parts of the Council. It was suggested that, as the Corporate Parent for these young people, the Council could provide greater opportunities for internships and job experience across all Departments. Furthermore, it was also suggested that procurement arrangements could be used to encourage companies to offer work experience, internships and apprenticeships to care leavers.

Recommendation 19 – Opportunities for Work Experience

Wirral Council, as a Corporate Parent, is encouraged to identify and promote opportunities for internships and work experience for Looked After Children and Care leavers within the Council. Consideration should also be given to the Council’s procurement arrangements in order to encourage similar opportunities in other companies.

Apprenticeship Scheme

The past success of the Wirral Apprentice scheme has been widely recognised. Members were informed that the previous scheme, in order to support the needs of the Borough’s Looked After Children, was able to ensure ring-fenced interviews for care leavers as part of the Council’s Corporate Parenting responsibilities. As the Apprentice scheme is now being offered on a Liverpool City Region basis, Members welcome the news that the principle of ring-fencing interview opportunities for Looked After Children has been retained. The report, Wirral Apprentice Programme, supporting a delegated decision made by the Portfolio Holder for Economy and Regeneration on 29th July 2013, includes the following statement:

“To open up apprenticeship places for care leavers a limited number of £500 premium payments will be available to businesses recruiting via the Wirral Apprentice programme. The purpose of the premium is to enable officers to incentivise employers and secure ring-fence interviews for care leavers”.

The Financial Planning Assumptions in the report show that, in the current financial year, it is assumed that four Looked After Children will benefit from this premium payment. This approach is warmly welcomed by the Members undertaking this Scrutiny Review.

Higher Education

It is recognised that the Employability programme, delivered by the Looked After Children Employability Team, arranges for the provision of academic mentoring support to those still in full-time education. As an example, Liverpool John Moores University provides mentors from among the undergraduates, for example, to improve exam techniques. University visits are also arranged to show children in care that university is within their range. Nevertheless, in 2012, three Looked After Children progressed to higher education. In September 2013, it is hoped that six former children in care will go on to higher education with a further four identified as potential university entrants in September 2014, with there being potential for the latter figure to be higher. As a comparator, the Care leavers in England Data Pack released by the Department of Education (in October 2012) reported the activities of 19 year old care leavers in 2011. Nationally, 7% were reported to be in higher education. The report also noted that young people who were in foster placements immediately before leaving care are the most likely to be in higher education aged 19.

It is recognised by the Members that a lot of work is taking place to raise aspirations among this cohort. Nevertheless, as Corporate Parents, it is reasonable to aim to raise aspirations even further. It is noted that Local Authorities have a duty to pay a higher education bursary of £2000 to any care leaver who started a course after September 2008.

Recommendation 20 – Higher Education

Greater emphasis should be placed on inspiring more Care leavers, for whom it is the appropriate route, to attend Higher Education. Consideration should be given to the opportunities that there may be to provide Care leavers with appropriate experiences early in the sixth form (or before).

Employment Opportunities For All

The Department for Education has been funding the FromCare2Work Programme run by the National Care Advisory Service which provides care leavers with employment opportunities. The Department is encouraging all Local Authorities to actively work with the programme. It is encouraging to note that Wirral Council is actively engaged in working towards achieving the From Care2Work Kitemark. Although Members in the previous recommendation have stressed the importance of aspiration towards higher education, they also heard evidence of the importance to support the aspirations of all children in care, whether that be on an academic or vocational basis.

Recommendation 21 – Employment Opportunities for All

The principle of seeking the right opportunities for individual Care leavers is supported, with an equal emphasis being placed on vocational avenues as well as academic learning.

6.7 Housing, Health and Youth Support

What the young people said....

- The Council should take more care about where they let young people move to. For example: “There was no central heating or double glazing. It was very cold”.
- Semi-supervised living is a good way to prepare for leaving care.
- There were low expectations about finding “somewhere nice to live in the future”.
- In some cases, the social worker provided little support towards care leavers finding accommodation.

What the Members welcomed....

Housing

- The floating support model enables care leavers to have some independence but with some support being available.
- The Supporting People Programme provides support to vulnerable young people. Currently there are 289 units of supported accommodation for young people, some of whom will be care leavers.
- Wirral Supported lodgings, provided by Local Solutions, is recognised as a cost-effective way of providing supported accommodation to those moving towards independent living.
- The establishment of the Homelessness Gateway has been a very positive development. Since August 2012, the Response team has been the lead agency on the Homelessness Gateway for young people aged 16 /17yrs. The Gateway ensures that young people are given the support they need to prevent homelessness and also encourages young people to stay with their families if possible and safe to do so.

Health

- There were only three definite matches of recorded pregnancies among Looked After Children in Wirral between 2007 and 2012. No national data of the incidence of teenage pregnancy among Looked After Children is available to be used as a comparator.
- The Healthier Homes Programme resulted in all residential homes in Wirral becoming accredited. Other Local Authorities are now implementing similar programmes using the Wirral scheme as a model.
- The successful Health Challenge Champions Programme has been devised to support young people on the edge of care.
- Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) have recently produced an assessment of gaps in training for foster carers. This has resulted in the production of a training pack aimed specifically at foster parents.
- There is recognition of the need for more detailed screening for vulnerable children with regard to the early identification of communication issues and the promotion of emotional literacy.

Youth Support

- The impressive work of the Response Team supports some of the most vulnerable young people in the Borough, which includes some Looked After Children.
- Preventative services, such as those provided by the Response Team, are vital for vulnerable young people.
- The successful introduction of a protocol to prevent Looked After Children obtaining a criminal record has, since 2008, led to the reduction in the numbers of Looked After Children offending.

What the Members suggest for future developments....

Screening for Vulnerable Children

It has been recognised, over the years, how quickly young children fall behind in school, for example, when they miss out on early years provision. Therefore, without adequate early years provision the child is behind when they start school and they tend to stay behind. Due to their background circumstances, there is a greater risk of Looked After Children not succeeding at school. In 2012/13, an application was made for health funding to employ a Speech & Language Therapist to work with three geographical clusters of Looked After Children aged between 4 years and 7 years in Wirral. The views of foster carers were sought and an assessment of gaps in training for foster carers was produced. Of 15 children in one cluster, three of the children had not previously been identified by the normal screening. The outcome was recognition of the need for more detailed screening for vulnerable children. As a consequence, a training pack for foster carers has been developed.

Recommendation 22 – Screening for Vulnerable Children

Consideration ought to be given to ways in which screening can be improved to ensure that all vulnerable children, including Looked After Children, are identified and receive appropriate interventions to make sure that children are more able to communicate and to promote emotional literacy.

A Guarantor for Private Landlords

It was reported during the Review that, initially, care leavers are likely to move to some form of supported accommodation. There is a limited supply of single room accommodation in Wirral. Therefore, it can be difficult for clients to move on from supported accommodation. As a result, some care leavers will approach the private sector for accommodation requirements. However, Members were informed that as most private landlords require a guarantor and the Local Authority is not able to act as a guarantor, care leavers are disadvantaged. It is suggested that the extent of this problem may be an issue worthy of further investigation on which the Corporate Parenting Group may be well placed to lead.

Recommendation 23 – Supporting Care leavers in obtaining tenancies

Models of good practice from elsewhere should be explored in order to further support care leavers in obtaining tenancies.

Prospects for Sharing Accommodation

It was suggested during the Review that, in order to enhance the opportunities for care leavers to find suitable housing, sharing accommodation with fellow care leavers may be an appropriate option. In order to facilitate this alternative, it may be feasible to extend the 'Right Side of Care' website to provide a forum for placing online advertisements.

Recommendation 24 – Sharing Accommodation

The feasibility of using the 'Right Side of Care' website to include the facility for offering opportunities for sharing accommodation should be investigated.

Monitoring the Quality of Accommodation

Some concerns were raised by care leavers regarding the quality of accommodation that they were expected to move to. This argument was supported by one professional who argued:

“The process for housing young people who are leaving care should ensure that adequate monitoring and checking is taking place to make sure that reasonable expectations are being met”.

Members are concerned that checks should be adequate to ensure that reasonable expectations are being met.

Recommendation 25 – Monitoring of the Quality of Accommodation

The process for housing young people who are leaving care should ensure that adequate monitoring and checking is taking place with young people to make sure that reasonable expectations of accommodation are being met.

***This Report was produced by the Looked After Children Scrutiny Task & Finish Group
(which reports to The Families and Wellbeing Policy & Performance Committee)***

Appendix 1: Scope Document for the Looked After Children Scrutiny Review

Date: 6th December 2012 (Draft 4)

Review Title: Outcomes for Looked After Children

Scrutiny Panel Chair: Cllr Wendy Clements	Contact details:
Panel members: Cllr Walter Smith Cllr Pat Williams	
Scrutiny Officer: Alan Veitch	Contact details: 0151 691 8564
Departmental Link Officer: Simon Garner	Contact details:
Other Key Officer contacts:	
<p>1. Which of our strategic corporate objectives does this topic address?</p> <p>The Council's Corporate Plan 2012/13 includes the following statements:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We will continue to work with our partners to protect children and young people from harm and improve the lives of the children and young people already in our care. • We will ensure that children in care and care leavers have appropriate support which best suits their needs, including fostering and adoption. <p>Specific targets quoted in the Corporate Plan include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase the numbers of looked after children achieving Level 4 at Key Stage 2 to 50% in English and to 50% in Maths) and those achieving 5+ GCSE A*-C (including English and Maths) to 20% • Increase the numbers of care leavers in education, employment and training to 65% 	
<p>2. What are the main issues?</p> <p>How well are Looked After Children prepared for adult living, with particular reference to outcomes including the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Educational attainment • Employment and training (as opposed to NEET) • Home / accommodation circumstances • Social / emotional development • Rate of entry to the Justice System (Note: Children, under the age of 18, in custody or on remand are deemed to be Looked After Children) • Problems relating to drugs and alcohol • Incidence of teenage pregnancy • Transition for children with disabilities <p>Note: Reference will be made during the review to the impact of welfare reforms on care leavers.</p>	

3. The Committee's overall aim/objective in doing this work is:

The Council has a responsibility, as corporate parents, for the Borough's Looked After Children. Data consistently shows that outcomes for Looked After Children are poorer than the national average. As an example, the percentage of Looked after Children achieving 5 A*-C GCSEs (or equivalent) at Key Stage 4 (including English and Maths) in 2012 is 12%. This equates to 4 out of 33 children in the cohort. This review will investigate the steps which the Council and other partners are already taking and consider further actions that may be feasible in order to improve the outcomes for Looked After Children.

4. The possible outputs/outcomes are:

- 4.1 Understand the current issues for both Looked After Children and the service providers.
- 4.2 Identify ways in which outcomes for Looked After Children, as listed in section 2 of this document, can be improved.

5. What specific value can scrutiny add to this topic?

Scrutiny will give members the opportunity to assure themselves that the Council and partners are taking all possible steps to ensure that the outcomes for Looked After Children are improved. Scrutiny will enable the experience of those directly impacted by the reforms to help identify any recommendations for changes. These recommendations will be referred to Cabinet.

6. Who will the Committee be trying to influence as part of its work?

- 6.1 Appropriate Cabinet members and Directors, Wirral Borough Council.
- 6.2 Partners of the Council, for example, Housing partners, schools and NHS Wirral.

7. Duration of enquiry?

- The Scope document will be reported to the meeting of the Children & Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee to be held on 21st January 2013.
- Evidence-gathering will take place between November 2012 and February 2013.
- A progress report will be presented to the meeting of the Children & Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee to be held on 18th March 2013.

8. What category does the review fall into?

- | | | | | |
|------------------------------|---|--------------------------|------------------------|--------------------------|
| Policy Review | X | <input type="checkbox"/> | Policy Development | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| External Partnership | | <input type="checkbox"/> | Performance Management | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Holding Executive to Account | | <input type="checkbox"/> | | |

9. Extra resources needed? Would the investigation benefit from the co-operation of an expert witness?

The review will be conducted by councillors with the support of existing officers. However, the panel are looking for advice from people with expertise on this topic.

10. What information do we need?	
<p>10.1 Secondary information (background information, existing reports, legislation, central government documents, etc).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Relevant Government Departmental reports • Relevant national documents • Previous Cabinet / Scrutiny Committee reports • Scrutiny Reports from other Councils into similar topics, for example, Haringey, Hartlepool, Cheshire East • Care leavers Data Pack, published by Department of Education, October 2012 • Educational Achievement Performance Data for Wirral and statistical neighbours • Evaluation of the Staying Put: 18 Plus Family Placement Programme - Final report (Department of Education) 	<p>10.2 Primary/new evidence/information</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interviews with key officers • Interviews with current and former Looked After Children as well as foster providers • Examples of best practice from other Local Authorities • Information relating to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Access to leaving care grants • Access to bursaries for those staying in education and higher education • Pathway Plan
<p>10.3 Who can provide us with further relevant evidence? (Cabinet portfolio holder, officer, service user, general public, expert witness, etc).</p> <p>Potential witnesses include the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Julia Hassall, Acting Director of Children’s Services, Wirral Borough Council • Simon Garner, Acting Head of Children’s Social Care Branch, Wirral Borough Council (and Chair of the North West After Care Forum) • Fiona O’Shaughnessy / Dave Walker / Jeanette Geary, Children’s Inclusion Service, Wirral Borough Council • Brian Ronson, Leaving Care Service– Pathway Team Manager • Simon Fisher, Transition Team, Wirral Borough Council • Anne Patterson, Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO), Wirral Borough Council re. What are children saying about the leaving care process? • Vivian Stafford, Strategic Service Manager: Post 16 Commissioning and Economic Generation, Wirral Borough Council (Also to cover the Apprenticeship scheme) 	<p>10.4 What specific areas do we want them to cover when they give evidence?</p> <p>How well are Looked After children prepared for adult living, in particular with reference to the outcomes listed in section 2 earlier?</p> <p>Do care leavers have access to information about their care leaver entitlements?</p> <p>How does the Council work with the FromCare2Work programme run by the National Care Advisory Service?</p>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Phil Sheridan, Consultant Headteacher (Secondary) and Virtual Headteacher, Wirral Borough Council. To also include the Looked After Children's Education Service (LACES) team, Wirral Borough Council • Anne Tattersall, NHS Wirral and Head of Being Healthy Outcome Group (regarding health and teenage pregnancy issues plus funding arrangements and commissioning arrangements with CCGs) • Housing Team, Wirral Borough Council – Sheila Jacobs, Supported Housing Manager plus Catherine Green, Rehousing Services Manager • Pat Rice, Response, Wirral Borough Council (Lead for 16-17 Protocol Group) • Patricia Jones, Youth Offending Service • Sue Brown, Assistant Chief Officer, Merseyside Probation Trust (or nominee) • Members of the Children in Care Council (Contact: Fiona O'Shaughnessy) • Former Looked After Children (Contact: Brian Ronson) • Foster carers (Contact: Sue Leedham) • Private Foster Carer (if possible) • Teachers / staff from schools, for example, Observatory School, Woodchurch High School, Wirral Alternative School Programme (WASP) (Role of Designated Teacher re. LAC in schools) • Job Centre Plus re. guidance for supporting care leavers • Residential Providers Forum 	
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11. What processes can we use to feed into the review? (site visits/observations, face-to-face questioning, telephone survey, written questionnaire, etc).

11.1 Meetings with officers listed in 10.3 above

11.2 Meetings / Focus groups with current and former Looked After Children and with foster carers

11.3 Desk-top research / analysis

11.4 Possible survey of members regarding their role as Corporate Parents, including training opportunities

11.5 Possible questionnaire of potential and former care leavers

12. In what ways can we involve the public and at what stages? (consider whole range of consultative mechanisms, local committees and local ward mechanisms).

Meetings / Focus groups with current and former Looked After Children and with foster carers (as described in section 11.2 above). This will include the Children in Care Council