

**CABINET PORTFOLIO SUMMARY REPORT**

<b>REPORT OF</b>	Councillor Bernie Mooney
<b>CABINET PORTFOLIO FOR</b>	Children and Families
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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

This report is an update from the Cabinet Portfolio Holder to Members of the Council on matters relevant to her portfolio.

**1 VULNERABLE CHILDREN REACH THEIR FULL POTENTIAL**

Across the entire country, but particularly in the North West of England, vulnerable children and families are being hardest hit by austerity policies. Earlier this month I, along with my colleagues at almost every council in the region, wrote to Chancellor Philip Hammond to once again lobby, in the strongest possible terms, for this situation to be tackled in the next budget.

The facts are stark: in the North West there are now more than 13,000 'Looked After' Children. This represents a 20 year high and is the greatest number of children in care of any region in England. This has been driven by growth of 12% since 2013 alone, double the 6% increase in the rest of the country.

Analysis from the Placements Northwest Census identifies sharp escalation in costs, with a £45m increase in expenditure on residential care placements this year alone.

This is the reason why we have been forced to invest a further £20 million into children's services, to make sure that these huge increases in demand are met and our vulnerable children and families can get the services they so desperately need.

As the Finance Bill makes its way through Parliament, myself and other cabinet members for children's services are asking the Government to respond to the crisis of children's social care, and provide adequate funding to meet these needs. I would urge all Members in this Chamber to support us in our efforts to properly fund children's social care for our residents.

I am pleased to inform the Chamber that our work to recruit new social workers continues at pace. Our new offer, comprising new pay scales, conditions, training and supervision, has been agreed and we are moving forward with a new recruitment campaign. We are also making good progress on reducing the number of agency staff we employ in social care with, at the time of writing, more than 20 agency staff moving to permanent contracts.

You can read more about our social work recruitment campaign on our [recruitment microsite](#).

## **2 CHILDREN ARE READY FOR SCHOOL**

Engaging disadvantaged groups in early education has once again improved, with the take up of the 2 year old funding increasing to 95%. The progress of these children is being supported through the roll out of the cohort tracker tool. The percentage of providers engaged in using the cohort tracker has increased to 60% over the previous 2 quarters.

I am pleased to inform Council that a nationally pioneering 'pop up' birthing unit based in Seacombe Children's Centre will provide enhanced choice to expecting mothers in the area. Containing facilities for women to give birth, the community unit will offer women a safe alternative to hospital birth in a more family-friendly environment closer to home.

Based at the local children's centre, the unit will encourage women with a low risk of complications (something established clinically during discussions between a woman and her midwife) to give birth in a non-medicalised setting where wrap around services are also available to support families postnatally and beyond. Read more in [Wirral View](#).

Every month, Wirral View carries stories and features to provide parents with helpful information on services available to them. The most recent edition can be found [here](#).

## **3 REDUCE CHILD AND FAMILY POVERTY**

I think it is important all Members are aware that new criteria affecting working parents who claim Universal Credit and free school meals for their school aged children will be introduced on April 1. Members should advise their constituents to claim free school meals as soon as possible.

Children affected by the new eligibility criteria will continue to receive free school meals until the end of their current phase of education. This protection lasts until 2022.

More information, including how to apply, is available through [Wirral View](#).

Staying with Universal Credit, it is important all Members are aware of the work which is being done to support residents. Many Members will have attended the recent workshop, so will be aware that we are offering advice and guidance at all of our One Stop Shops. Assistance with on line applications is also available at our libraries. In addition the welfare rights team offer advice and assistance including support with appeals.

A great deal of partnership work is taking place both with the DWP and key partners in the Borough, including making sure that HB claims are not made in error and signposting to UC as appropriate.