



**COUNCILLOR
BERNIE MOONEY**

CABINET

Monday, 25 March 2019

**CHILDREN LOOKED AFTER SUFFICIENCY
STRATEGY 2019 -2022 AND MARKET
POSITION STATEMENT**

Councillor Bernie Mooney, Cabinet Member - Children & Families, said:

“The numbers of children in care across the North West remains an issue of huge concern and, combined with a decline in the number of available foster care places, means too many young people having to be cared for in children’s homes.

“This new strategy sets out how Wirral will support every child we look after. It demonstrates how we will ensure more foster care places are available, how we will improve how we will develop more alternatives to care, and how we will work with families earlier to prevent the need for children being taken into care in the first place.”

REPORT SUMMARY

Cabinet members will be aware of the increase in numbers of children looked after in Wirral over the last 3 years. This trend is replicated across the North West. The increase has coincided with a decline in the number of recruited foster carers across the region resulting in all local authorities having difficulties in providing sufficient placements. The supply and demand issue in foster care has resulted in children’s home placements being used for children who previously would have been looked after by foster carers. The overall placement market is therefore more challenging than at any point in recent or distant history. In order to respond to the challenges outlined it is essential that we develop a robust approach to commissioning services, and that we work in a transparent and collaborative manner with placement providers.

Wirral's Looked After Children Sufficiency Strategy 2019-2022 sets out how the local authority and its partners work together to provide the best environments for children in care and care leavers over the next three years. Part of that will include ensuring that there are enough alternatives to care, through for example supporting families to stay together or finding alternative permanent homes for children. It will be about ensuring, where that is not possible, children stay locally and in family-based settings. It will also include ensuring that there is a choice of high-quality provision for all children, at whatever stage in their life, that is designed around their needs and wishes so that they can grow into independent, healthy and successful adults.

The Strategy is aligned to Wirral's Market Position Statement (MPS) which provides an overview of current position and predicted demand for provision over the next two years. This Strategy seeks to outline the Council's overall approach to managing that demand and focusing on the right solutions and choices to provide children with the best possible outcomes.

Children Looked After by Wirral have left their birth family homes and are placed in accommodation across the borough. In this regard, the approval of the Strategy and Market Position Statement is a key decision for Cabinet.

RECOMMENDATION/S

Cabinet is recommended to

- (1) Approve the Looked After Children Sufficiency Strategy 2019 – 2022 attached at appendix 1 to this report; and
- (2) Approve the Market Position Statement attached at appendix 2 to this report.

SUPPORTING INFORMATION

1.0 REASON/S FOR RECOMMENDATION/S

- 1.1 The recommendation to approve the documentation is based on the legal requirement to publish a Sufficiency Strategy. The Sufficiency Strategy and Market Position Statement set out our commissioning intentions so that the external market has an opportunity to better respond to identified need.

2.0 OTHER OPTIONS CONSIDERED

Not applicable.

3.0 BACKGROUND INFORMATION

- 3.1 When children come into care, they become the responsibility of the local authority as the Corporate Parent. As Corporate Parents, we need to ensure that we can offer and provide appropriate accommodation to support our children and young people through their journey to adulthood and beyond. This means ensuring that their welfare, emotional and physical wellbeing is protected and promoted within environments which will support them to reach their full potential.
- 3.2 The duty to provide or procure placements for Children Looked after (Children in Care) is explicit in the Children Act 1989. The introduction of Sufficiency Statutory Guidance (2010) and the Care Planning, Placement and Case Review Regulations (implementation April 2011) has provided further clarity on the implementation of section 22G of the Act. These regulations require a strategy to be in place that describes how local authorities intend to provide sufficient care placements for its children in care.
- 3.3 The Statutory Guidance sets out a requirement for local authorities to work with key partners to be in a position to secure, where reasonably practicable, sufficient accommodation for children in care which meets the needs of children and whose circumstances are such that it would be consistent with their welfare for them to be provided with accommodation that is in the local authority's area.
- 3.4 The Guidance requires local authorities to do more than simply ensure that accommodation be 'sufficient' in terms of the number of beds provided. They must also have regard to the benefits of securing a number of providers and a range of services. Fundamentally, the accommodation available must meet the needs of children.
- 3.5 The Guidance also sets out the commissioning standards for securing sufficient accommodation for children in need who are at risk of care or custody (referred to as children on the edge of care). This is important since it is preferable (where it is in the best interest of the child) to provide support to avoid the need for them to become children in care.

3.6 Attached at appendix 1 is Wirral's Looked After Children Sufficiency Strategy 2019-2022. The Strategy is intended to support the Wirral 2020 Plan and its key themes and deliverables in relation to children and families. The Strategy is dedicated to ensuring that vulnerable children achieve their full potential by providing them with the right conditions and environments in which to thrive. In order to do this, the Strategy outlines eight key objectives to strengthen commissioning and provision over the next three years. These include:

1. Children will be supported to stay with their families where it is safe to do so
2. We will focus on achieving permanency in a timely manner through adoption and special guardianship
3. Most children will live in a local, family placement
4. All children will be matched with good quality placements which meet their needs
5. A range of targeted, universal and specialist services will be available in adequate quantity to respond to children when they need them
6. All children looked after will be prepared for independence and a healthy adulthood
7. We will strengthen our strategic approach to commissioning
8. We will review externally commissioned placements

3.7 The Strategy is underpinned by a set of corporate parenting principles which guide how we work and support children and young people.

3.8 The Looked After Children Sufficiency Strategy is aligned with the Market Position Statement (appendix 2). The Statement provides an overview of our current position in terms of care provision for children in care e.g. foster care, residential care and forecasts demand for this provision over the next few years. This forecast is based on detailed analysis of data based on applied methodology. The Position Statement also sets out our commissioning intentions which will ensure that we can meet demand. These have been incorporated as part of the Sufficiency Strategy overarching strategic objectives.

4.0 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

4.1 Having a clear and robust commissioning approach is essential to maintaining control over placement costs and achieving better outcomes for children and young people. A number of factors affect our numbers of children looked after and the associated costs. These factors will be kept under regular review to ensure this strategy fully reflects their impact.

5.0 LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

5.1 The Sufficiency Duty and publication of the Sufficiency Strategy is a legal duty as set out in the report.

6.0 RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS: ICT, STAFFING AND ASSETS

6.1 A small amount of work will need to be undertaken by the media team to prepare and publish the documents.

7.0 RELEVANT RISKS

- 7.1 There is a risk that the predicted need changes over the course of the 3-year strategy which could impact on our strategies to manage demand. To mitigate this, the MPS and Sufficiency strategy will be subject to annual review in March each year to test that our plans and actions are appropriate and relevant to meet need.
- 7.2 There is a risk that the market does not respond as required and so it is essential that we continue to engage with local providers in a proactive and transparent way. We will also ensure that our own in-house services are equipped to respond to the challenges currently faced. Consideration will be given to either block contracting with one or more providers of residential care, and Wirral re-commissioning its own in-house residential provision.

8.0 ENGAGEMENT/CONSULTATION

- 8.1 Work has previously been undertaken with children and young people about what makes a good placement. Consistently young people tell us that they a) want greater opportunities for them to remain living with their birth family members, or b) for placements to be provided locally.
- 8.2 Work will be undertaken via our regular provider forums to outline our commissioning intentions to local service providers and we continue to establish relationships in order to help shape the market appropriately.

9.0 EQUALITY IMPLICATIONS

- 9.1 While this matter has not been subject to formal equality impact assessment, the commissioning intentions are aimed at ensuring as many children as possible have their needs met at home with their parents, with extended family members, or in local placements.
- 9.2 There are a small number of children and young people who have such specialist needs that placement on Wirral will not be possible. For these children we will aim, through work with Liverpool City Region authorities to jointly commission services as close to Wirral as possible.

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APPENDICES

1. The Wirral Children Looked After Sufficiency Strategy 2019-2022
2. Wirral's Market Position Statement (MPS) based on current and predicted need

BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS

SUBJECT HISTORY (last 3 years)

| Council Meeting | Date |
|------------------------|-------------|
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