

# WIRRAL CHILDREN LOOKED AFTER SUFFICIENCY STRATEGY

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*"Making Wirral great for children, young people and their families."*

#BETHE  
DIFFERENCE

## FOREWORD

**“We are committed to securing the best possible outcomes for children in care in Wirral.**

We know that most of our children in Wirral can thrive and be safe in their own families and communities. Where children and young people do need to come into our care, it is essential that we are able to act as responsible corporate parents and support them in their journey to adulthood and beyond. This involves providing the right conditions to allow them to flourish and lead independent, healthy and happy lives.

The Wirral Looked After Children Sufficiency Strategy sets out the Council and its partners plans to secure safe and supportive accommodation for children in care and care leavers over the next three years. This includes plans to manage demand in the market by working to reduce the number of children within our care system. We want to ensure we are considering plans for children to have permanent, stable loving homes right from the start. Part of this will include continuing to work with families so that children and young people can return home as soon as possible. It will also be taking timely decisions around adoption to maximise successful matches at the earliest opportunity.

For those children who do need to come into care, we want them to feel the benefit of living in secure family-focussed foster care households. We are proud of our in-house foster carers and we want to do all we can to improve this provision. However, we recognise that for a small number of older children and young people residential care best meets their needs. We want Wirral children to be placed in Wirral. We will work with our partners and the provider market to develop more locally-based places for older children with more complex needs. We will keep a sharp focus on these children through crisper outcome focused care planning, listening to children’s voices and encouraging their ambition.”



A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'B. Mooney'.

**Councillor Bernie Mooney**  
**Cabinet Portfolio Holder for Children and Families**

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## INTRODUCTION

Most children in Wirral are brought up in their own families but a small number of children require the help and support of additional services.

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.

Wirral's Looked After Children Sufficiency Strategy sets out how the local authority and its partners will 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 which provides an overview of the current position and predicted demand for provision. 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.

### The Sufficiency Duty

The duty to provide or procure placements for Children Looked after (Children in Care) is explicit in the Children Act 1989. 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. 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.

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.

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.

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.

### **Current context**

Over the last 2 years, the number of children in care in Wirral has increased by around 25%. While this increase has been mirrored both regionally and nationally, the situation in Wirral is slightly more acute due to the baseline being higher than in most other local authorities (i.e. the rate of children looked after in Wirral has always been higher than comparator authorities). This has put increasing demand on local authority children's services and partner organisations who provide support and care for families.

At the same time, for the past two years, Wirral's Children's Services has been subject to intervention by Ofsted and has embarked on a rigorous improvement drive to strengthen core services for children. This has involved significant investment in the workforce and in building capacity within key teams. It has focussed on clarifying processes to ensure their consistent application and building key relationships with partners across the sector.

It is essential that this Strategy reflects the good practice which has taken place to date and outlines an approach which focusses on building on improvement in all areas so that we can continue to embark on improving outcomes for Wirral children.

### **Link to strategic framework**

The Wirral Council Plan: A 2020 Vision sets out a number of key themes and deliverables specific to Children, Young People and Families.

- Wirral is a place where the vulnerable are safe and protected and every child gets a good start in life
- Vulnerable Children Reach Their Full Potential
- Reduce Child and Family Poverty

The Looked After Children Sufficiency Strategy intends to support the delivery of the key priorities for children in the 2020 Plan.

## PROFILE OF WIRRAL LOOKED AFTER CHILDREN

- There are more children looked after in Wirral than in similar authorities with 842 children looked after on 1 January 2019. This equates to a rate of 124 per 10,000.
- The highest demand for children becoming looked after currently is for children under the age of one.
- The largest cohort of children in care by age is the 10 to 15 age group. This is also the hardest group to find placements for.
- Our use of foster placements is slightly higher than in similar authorities 75% compared to 73% nationally.
- 62% of Children Looked After are placed with Wirral foster carers in either mainstream or family and friends care. This is still slightly higher than similar authorities who have 55% of their children placed with their own foster carers.
- 16% of Children Looked After are placed with Independent Fostering Agencies which is slightly lower than in similar authorities.
- Use of residential placements is slightly higher at 9% (England Average 8%).
- 12% of children looked after are placed with their parents which is higher than the England average which is 6%.
- 10% of CLA discharged from care were adopted in 2017/18 which is lower than the national average (13%).
- 93% Wirral children are placed within 20 miles or less of their home, which is a higher number than in similar authorities.
- 10% of children looked after are placed outside Wirral.
- At any one time there are between 175 and 221 children placed in Wirral by other authorities. This is more children than Wirral places outside of Wirral.
- It has become increasingly hard to find placements for Wirral children as the overall demand across all sectors is outstripping supply. Independent Fostering Agencies in the North West have reported having 3 referrals for every vacancy they have. Some Wirral children needing a move to a permanent placement have been known to wait several weeks if not months for the right option to become available.
- Wirral has experienced increased numbers of children in residential care reflecting the lack of available foster placements as the fostering market has become saturated.

## VISION

Our vision is to:

### ***“Make Wirral great for children, young people and their families”***

In order to do this, we have outlined 8 key objectives to provide focus for activity:

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

## PRINCIPLES

Wirral Council and its partners are committed to the seven principles of corporate parenting outlined in the 2017 Children and Social Work Act. These are:

1. To act in the best interests, and promote the physical and mental health and wellbeing of children and young people.
2. To encourage children and young people to express their views, wishes and feelings.
3. To consider the view, wishes and feelings of children and young people.
4. To help children and young people gain access to and make the best use of services provided by the local authority.
5. To promote high aspirations, and seek to secure the best outcomes, for children and young people.
6. For children and young people to be safe, and for stability in their home lives, relationships and education or work; and,
7. To prepare children and young people for adulthood and independent living.

These principles will guide how we work to support children in care in order to deliver the aims and objectives we have identified.

## ACHIEVING THE VISION

### 1. Children will be supported to stay with their families where it is safe to do so

Wirral has started to develop more robust edge of care practices through the establishment of effective early and pre-birth pathways. We are embedding earlier identification of pre-birth concerns and providing additional support to children and parents. This is becoming widely recognised as effective practice. To build on this, we are establishing an infant edge of care team to ensure that the needs of children in their very early stages of life can be addressed without recourse to public care where it is safe to do so.

We have also established an Adolescent Support Hub which encompasses a range of targeted and additional youth support projects and activities for young people aged 11-19 years old. We need to strengthen this support by establishing a team which will provide counselling, key worker and substance misuse support and interventions for young people across levels 2-4 of the continuum of need.

To strengthen and build on our approach to supporting young people aged 11-19, we are establishing a more robust Targeted Youth Support service which can offer a vibrant, flexible and modern youth offer for young people that meets their needs at levels 2/3 on the continuum of need. For those children at levels 3/4, we are redesigning current services to develop an Edge of Care Service which provides intensive support for young people to de-escalate risk and work alongside families to enable children to remain safely at home within their family and community. The Adolescent Edge of Care Team will also work with homeless 16/17-year olds to support them to remain at home where it is safe for them to do so.

Wirral is also committed to developing processes for the considerations of opportunities to reunify children in short term foster care with their families. This will include in-depth work with families and the child to facilitate their return home. We will develop a targeted approach to reunification, based on the principles of the NSPCC reunification approach. This will help us to identify and embed effective early help practice in some of our most challenging families.

### 2. We will focus on achieving permanency in a timely manner through adoption and special guardianship

21 Wirral children were adopted in the financial year ending 31st March 2018 and this amounts to 10% of all children who were discharged from care in the year. The national rate of children adopted is 13%. Over the next 3 years we aim to achieve a proportion of children adopted from care that is at least in line with the national average. As at 1st January 2019 Wirral has 62 children subject to a placement order, while a number of these are now actually placed for adoption, we are aware that progression to adoption has not always occurred in a timely manner. In 2018 we introduced new tracking arrangements to ensure improved performance in this area of work and by the end of March 2019 we anticipate increased numbers of children adopted in the current financial year.

We have consolidated our practice for recruitment of adopters through the Regional Adoption Agency (4 local authorities) which means we can co-ordinate a much better campaign approach. The new agency - AIM (Adoption in Merseyside) has a mission to successfully place children with a plan for adoption more quickly. Every year, the four local authorities approve around 100 adopters and place approximately 140 children for adoption. The pooling of resources and consolidating good practice will enable us to make the most of key events such as National Adoption Week, local and national media campaigns. The next stage in the joint plan is to appoint a Marketing Officer to spread the word across Merseyside with the view that this person will attend and organise a whole host of campaign activity.

AIM brings together a team of around 50 staff from across the four councils under existing terms and conditions. Staff will continue to have a presence in each of their local authority areas to ensure they retain close links with social work staff. By working regionally, we will be able to reach a wider group of potential adopters, share expertise and ideas and make sure adopters and children get a consistent level of support, regardless of where they live. We are confident, both as individual authorities as well as a Regional Agency, that this will lead to permanency via adoption for an increased number of Children Looked After.

### **3. Most children will live in a local, family placement**

We currently place 75% of Children Looked After overall in foster placements, of which 62% are placed with Wirral carers. We will continue to build on that figure in our ongoing recruitment efforts which will be especially focused on securing in-house carers for the most complex and challenging Looked After Children. Our overall aim will be to increase the proportion of children in foster placements to 78% of the Children Looked After population, and to increase the in-house market share to 68%.

We are acutely aware that to achieve this, will require a significant increase in the overall number of applicants we can attract and take through the assessment and approval process. We are restructuring our fostering service to ensure an improved focus on recruitment and developing a targeted approach that seeks to attract carers who match the profile of current and predicted future need.

This will specifically include a focus on placements for larger sibling groups in order to avoid the need for separating siblings when it is in their best interests to be placed together; respite arrangements to better support our Edge of Care offer and wider support to our own foster carers; a scheme aimed at step down from residential care for children who's needs can be better met in family-based substitute care.

Wirral's current use of residential care (not including Residential Special Schools) extends to around 8.5% of the Children Looked After population. This is slightly higher than the national average (8%) and similarly slightly more of this provision is outside the local authority boundary although a significant amount is within the Liverpool City Region and therefore within 20 miles of Wirral.

At the present time all residential provision is externally purchased mainly through the North West Framework. While this enables a sustainable average cost for some placements, mainly those within Wirral those that are further afield and with larger national providers have become increasingly costly.

Our key aims in relation to residential care are to

a) ensure that only those children who's needs are best met in residential care utilise such accommodation and

b) that where residential care is the placement of choice, a greater proportion is provided locally.

This will ensure greater consistency and access to local health and education services. We plan to reduce our reliance on residential care from the current level of 62 placements to 50 over the timeframe of the 3-year plan, and further to ensure that a higher proportion of provision is available within Wirral. Our means of achieving this will be via

a) improved collaborative working with local providers, and

b) looking at the feasibility of Wirral starting to provide its own in-house children's home service.

#### **4. All children will be matched with good quality placements which meet their needs**

We know that to secure the most appropriate placements for looked after children, we need to understand their needs and capture their views effectively and make decisions for placements that will meet those needs/wishes. This will help to prevent and reduce the risk of placement breakdown. This also means identifying and securing the 'right' placements as quickly as possible so as not to prevent drift and delay.

We recognise that in order to do this we need to identify, gather and supply good quality information which details their needs and views accurately. We have already been working with social workers to help them understand the need to improve the quality of our commissioning documents in order to avoid children being inappropriately matched and/or placed out of the borough. We now need to continue to involve them in improving the quality of information supplied to the placements commissioning team so that providers fully understand the needs of the child in order to achieve good matching.

We will continue to work with social workers to understand how to use the commissioning process to get the right placement and support for their child; and understand what their responsibilities are before, during and after a placement. We also need to review our internal decision-making processes to assure ourselves that there is no duplication of effort or unnecessary hurdles that might introduce undue delay to the timeliness of securing placements on offer.

Further work will be carried out to review and improve the documentation we use when finding placements for children to make the matching of a child's needs with what a placement offers better and review the placement finding function in the context of reach, resource, processes and skills to ensure we maximise access and opportunities to secure best fit local placements, as and when needed.

We have and continue to collect and collate data about local placement quality and availability, but we are aware that we need to adopt a much more proactive and rigorous approach in this area of work; to this end we are increasing our capacity by recruiting to a number of data analyst and management information posts that will help inform strategic commissioning intentions going forward. Moreover, these posts will increase our confidence in the validity of data that is critical to ensuring local sufficiency. We want to ensure that our residential placements are not just meeting national minimum standards but are of high quality to secure the specific outcomes identified in the care plans of looked after children.

In relation to Semi-Independent Accommodation for post 16 and care leavers, we are acutely aware that this remains an unregulated area and, therefore, needs careful oversight and robust commissioning processes to ensure young people are appropriately safeguarded. We are already in regular and routine discussions with our current providers to ensure quality and consistency in delivery and they are keen to explore with us increased local provision. Our colleagues in Housing are also involved in monitoring lease agreements with the providers. Our plans moving forward include looking for new and innovative approaches to partnership working that will ensure better quality provision for this cohort of young people.

## 5. A range of targeted, universal and specialist services will be available in adequate quantity to respond to children when they need them

We know that a high proportion of our looked after children have complex needs, which include:

- Mental health issues, particularly those not meeting the threshold for Tier 4 services and/or those who are stepping down from Tier 4 provision and assessed as fit for discharge.
- Young people expressing trauma through violence towards other young people, carers and/or staff, these young people tend to have a label of ADHD, ODD etc. which is often a misrepresentation of their presenting difficulties that are more likely to be attachment based.
- Young people stepping down from secure welfare or Youth Justice Board provision.
- Young people with a pattern of missing, risk of CSE, self-harm, risk of criminality.
- Young people who need an evidence-based model of therapeutic support.

It is essential that the emotional, social and physical needs of children and young people are considered when matching placements. This is part of our commitment as corporate parents to provide them not just with appropriate accommodation but also with places to live which meet their developmental needs. We need to work with partners to make sure there is a holistic offer of support available to respond to children and young people involving the full range of universal, targeted and specialist services.

Providers tell us that they are sometimes unable or unwilling to take our more complex young people as they feel Ofsted do not recognise small step changes for these young people as good outcomes. Providers therefore view complexity as a business risk which may lead to a lower regulatory rating. We are also aware that one of the challenges foster carers are experiencing relates to problems with children with complex challenging behaviours where additional support from services is required.

In order to mitigate this, we want to ensure that providers are linked into and have a good understanding of the full support offer available from universal, targeted and specialist services and are able to work with the local authority to identify and access what is required to support young people in their care. We want to be able to emphasise the unique selling point of looking after children in Wirral, knowing that children placed will be Wirral children, with a "holistic service all under one roof".

Part of our approach to delivering this will be to continue to pursue our work in partnership with Health and provide a more responsive CAMHS service. This will support carers better where behavioural, mental health, and attachment issues are causing placement instability.

## **6. All children looked after will be prepared for independence and a healthy adulthood**

Young people approaching adulthood need nurturing care, positive boundaries and guidance to make that transition. We will ensure they are well-prepared to leave our care and have a good range of options for their accommodation.

The unregulated SAILs market poses potential risks for children leaving care and work is underway across the Liverpool City Region with our partner Registered Social Landlord providers to understand and monitor the Supported Accommodation and Independent Living sector. Our aim is to work collaboratively with this sector to ensure good quality and appropriate accommodation for care leavers.

Part of this is engaging with care leavers about the type of accommodation they require but also what other services can be provided to ensure that they can enjoy independence. This includes for example, assistance with looking for employment opportunities, financial advice, health support which could be provided by social landlords or personal advisors.

## **7. We will strengthen our strategic approach to commissioning**

It is essential that we can develop our commissioning intentions and strategic relationships in a coherent and constructive manner. We have recognised a gap in our strategic commissioning capacity and are taking steps to address this. Our aim is to become “The Customer of Choice” where our providers are concerned. We have already established good relationships with providers through our co-designed provider forums. We now need to have more ‘mature’ conversations about sharing future predicted need to inform their business models and to help shape our market.

Part of this will be understanding what it is like for them to do business with Wirral and enable us to establish better relationships with the best providers to support them in wanting to offer places to our children looked after. What would make the difference between an offer and a refusal, what are the constraints and considerations they must consider and what measure we might need to undertake to improve our chances with them

A specific focus for us will be securing provision that meets the need of children looked after who are aged over 16. We have identified that the current SAILs market has potential to pose risk and as previously outlined, are working collaboratively with colleagues to put local regulatory measures in place to address this.

We also need to engage with local IFA's to consider such issues as duplication of effort, over/under supply of targeted placements, shaping recruitment to Wirral's needs and development of complimentary rather than competitive strategies. We will also consider the advantages or otherwise of trying to recruit in-house carers for our most complex and challenging children, knowing that to do so would mean any success would be exclusively ours and, equally, that IFA's find it no easier to recruit these carers than we do.

Where it is not reasonably practicable for a child to be placed on the Wirral it is important to ensure there are mechanisms in place to widen the range of provision in neighbouring areas, the sub-region or region. Wirral Council and its partners continue to collaborate with neighbouring authorities and their partners to shape the market for services for children looked after and commission regionally or sub-regionally. We are committed to pro-actively engaging with partners both within Wirral and across the city-region and will continue to build relationships with the clear purpose of shaping local solutions to meet local need.

## **8. We will review externally commissioned placements**

As outlined in Wirral's Market Position Statement, one of the key challenges for Wirral is the number of children placed on Wirral who are from other local authorities. At present, between 175 and 221 CLA from other authorities are placed on Wirral. This has had an impact on the ability for us to place children within local placements.

We need to market profile where the children from other authorities placed in Wirral have come from in order to establish a full and deep understanding of why and how the children have become placed in Wirral. This also needs to include obtaining a full understanding of how the impact the current situation might have on local services. i.e. CAMHS, Youth Services, Police, and Health.

We will engage with the full range of partners, including local schools and colleges to develop our knowledge and to explore new and innovative solutions to address the current placement challenges outlined.

### **ACTION PLAN**

Attached at Appendix A is proposed action for how we will achieve and co-ordinate our objectives outlined.

### **CONCLUSION**

This strategy sets out the overall approach to managing demand and focusing on the right solutions and choices to provide children with the best possible outcomes.

## APPENDIX 1: THE ACTION PLAN

NO.	ACTION/S	BY WHOM	BY WHEN	STATUS
1	Review internal decision making/sign off to assure ourselves that there is no duplication of effort, unnecessary hurdles or other aspect that might introduce undue delay to the timeliness of searching for, agreeing to and securing of placements	CLA Lead Commissioner	31 March 2019	RED
2	Establish strong and routine engagement with front-line colleagues to increase and maintain understanding of their responsibilities in the process	Placements Commissioning Manager	31 July 2018 and Ongoing	AMBER
3	Review referrals and the current template in the context of quality, balance, context and mitigation to ensure we are "selling" the child in a manner that will maximise the chances/choices of placement offer/s	Placements Commissioning Manager	By 31 July 2018	AMBER
4	Engage with our local providers to the extent that we understand what it is like for them to do business with Wirral, what would make the difference between an offer and a refusal, what are the constraints and considerations they must take into account and what measure we might need to undertake to improve our chances with them	Lead Commissioner/ Placements Commissioning Manager	Commenced in 2019 Ongoing via regular provider forums Commencing	GREEN
5	Establish a full and deep understanding of why and how 175 CLA from other LA's are placed in Wirral. What specific placements they are occupying set against our own projected needs. Why we have not accessed those placements for Wirral children. What impact those placements have on local resources, i.e. CAMHS, Youth Services, Health, Police etc.	Lead Commissioner	31 March 2019	RED
6	Establish at the earliest opportunity, a clear remit for the Liverpool City Region in the context of sufficiency	Placements Commissioning Manager	Work has commenced. Regional Group meets regularly and will be ongoing	GREEN

NO.	ACTION/S	BY WHOM	BY WHEN	RAG STATUS
7	Review the placement finding function in the context of reach, resource, process, skills etc. and establish a one stop shop for placement referrals to ensure we maximise access and opportunities to secure best fit local placements as and when needed	Placements Commissioning Manager	By 31 March 2019	AMBER
8	Introduce permanent capacity to interrogate, validate, interpret and report on data and management information, including but not limited to, trends analysis, market pressures, regulation and inspection etc.	Lead Commissioner	Completed	GREEN
9	Ensure that we have all the possible tools available to aid effective and efficient placement searches, i.e. databases (CHARMS), access to market intelligence/ monitoring information, strategic relations etc.	Placements Commissioning Manager	By 31 March 2019	AMBER
10	Develop a process/tool to understand why placements breakdown to reduce the instances of breakdown and inform the matching process	Placements Commissioning Manager	By 31 March 2019	RED

