

Statutory Care Plans Scrutiny Review

A report produced by the
Children and Families Overview & Scrutiny Committee

July 2019 Final Report



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1. Introduction

The Ofsted report of 2016 raised specific areas of concern relating to care planning in Wirral. As such, Members of the Children and Families Overview & Scrutiny Committee requested a comprehensive review of Care Planning in Wirral. This task and finish took over 10 months and panel members spoke to over 30 officers, foster carers and service users across Wirral. The review kept in mind the Ofsted inspection framework of 2018, and the following Key Issues.

Key issues in care plans highlighted by Ofsted in 2016

- There are widespread and serious failures in the services provided to children who need help and protection in Wirral. Services for care leavers are inadequate, because the local authority does not know where many of its care leavers are living or what they are doing, and some of the most vulnerable have not received a service that adequately recognizes risk. Services for children looked after and children in need of adoption require improvement. This demonstrates a significant deterioration in the quality of all services that children and young people receive since Wirral was last inspected in 2011 and 2012.
- Despite significant investment in training for frontline and middle managers and Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs), managers do not clearly communicate good practice standards to social workers through managerial oversight of case records and workers' supervision files. IRO challenge, while increasingly present, is ineffective and does not lead to positive change for children. As a result, a culture of over-optimism often goes unchallenged.
- Case recording is sometimes so poor that it is not possible to tell how decisions have been reached or even what has happened as a result of intervention in children's lives. Assessments and plans are often insufficiently focused on what will make the most difference for children and young people within a timescale that is right for them.
- While most social workers' caseloads are not excessive, they are often complex. The local authority has high levels of staff changes for a variety of reasons, including sickness absence and staff turnover. As a result, children and young people experience too many changes of worker, making it difficult for them to form enduring, positive relationships with staff.
- The Children in Care Council is active and influential and is well supported by an effective inclusion team. The contribution that children and young people make to strategic planning is a strength.

2. Membership

Members of the Task and Finish Review Panel

Cllr Tom Usher (Chair)



Chair's Personal Statement

"After the 2016 Ofsted inspection, in which "widespread and serious failures" were found in children's services, scrutiny of these areas became ever more important in order to track progress on the improvement journey. One of the key issues of the 2016 report was that care plans needed to be specific, realistic, and achieve change, as well as being informed by the views of children and young people.

In the spirit of this comment, our approach as a scrutiny committee since then has been to engage with those children and young people, to speak with frontline staff, and to ensure we are making specific and realistic recommendations to decision-makers. This new approach was designed to ensure that we knew the services within our remit better than before, and that we could speak to officers about the strengths and challenges they face.

With this in mind, it was paramount to ensure that the central document would inform professionals about a child's life and that the decisions taken around that child were improving at pace. The Children and Families Overview and Scrutiny Committee set about a major piece of work in reviewing Statutory Care Plans.

This review has run alongside the improvement journey in Children's Services and has been informed by conversations with the Care Leaver's Council, as well as engaging with professionals responsible for creating, challenging and using care plans to inform their decision.

Ultimately this review has now been completed. What has been demonstrated by the professionals and young people we engaged with, as well as the panel members themselves is this: Much work has been done to get things right, but our responsibility to do better by the children in our care is never done."

Other members of the panel include:

Cllr Jean Stapleton, Cllr Cherry Povall, Cllr Chris Carubia, Cllr Chris Meaden



3. Scope

At a meeting on 1st August 2019, the scope and meeting schedule was agreed by the panel and can be found in the appendix of this report.

4. Methodology

The scrutiny review was informed through:

- An overview of care planning – Held in September 2018
- Reviewing of 5 individual care plans – Held in December 2018
- A meeting with the Children in Care Council – Held in January 2019
- Meeting with key frontline staff: Service Managers, IROs, Education Group, Social Workers, Team Managers and Foster Carers - Held in March 2018
- Reality Check Visits to Health Providers – Held in December 2018
- A meeting with Housing providers and Legal Services – Held in April 2019
- The Ofsted inspection of 2016, and subsequent monitoring visits.
- The review was also informed by the Centre for Public Scrutiny Guidelines on reviewing children's services

5. Overview of Care Planning

The making of a care plan is central to the requirements set out in the Care Planning, Placement and Case Review Regulations 2010. The care plan should contain information about how the child's current developmental needs will be met as well as the arrangements for the current and longer-term care for the child. It ensures that there is a long-term plan for the child's upbringing (referred to as 'the permanence plan') to which everyone is working, including the team around the child, the child and, where appropriate, the family. There should be clarity in the care plan, particularly about the desired outcomes for the child and those expected from services and other actions identified. This clarity will support effective reviews of the child's case to monitor the progress made towards meeting the short- and long-term goals for the child and their family and carers.

Key Points

1. To ensure that children and their families and the child's carers are treated with openness and honesty and understand the decisions that are made.
2. To provide clarity about the allocation of responsibilities and tasks, in the context of shared parenting between parents, the child's carers and the corporate parents and ensure that actions lead to improved outcomes.

3. To demonstrate accountability in the way in which the functions of local authorities under the 1989 Act are exercised.

When looking at care plans members were asked to consider the following;

Child Focused - is the child at the centre of the plan? Are they in care because they need to be? Has the child been consulted about their wishes and feelings? Are parents consulted about their children? Are key agencies involved, e.g. schools or CAMHS?

Members were also asked to consider whether care planning was **SMART focused**.



Part of the Ofsted recommendations for Wirral focused on the lack of Personal Education Plans (PEPs) and Strengths & Difficulties Questionnaires (SDQs) in order to assess the educational and health needs of each CLA as part of care planning. SDQs are a screening tool used to measure vulnerability to emotional and mental ill health. Progress regarding SDQs has been made since Ofsted and now 88% of SDQs are complete for Wirral' s CLA. The next challenge is to ensure the quality of education and health assessments and to measure how these assessments inform care plans and make a positive difference.

Ofsted also identified a lack of effective planning for permanence. Wirral should be better at planning for going home or planning other permanent arrangements for children and young people in our care. Care plans for CLA should be focused on outcomes e.g. adoption plans for younger children and for older children exploring all solutions including parental support.

Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs) play a key role in the review of care plans and in ensuring that there is a focus on permanence. Wirral has recently changed the way that IROs look at care plans to give a greater emphasis to permanence. The Panel was informed that questions such as "So what?" and "What difference has this made?" would challenge officers to demonstrate that care plans have a positive impact on children's lived experience.

6. Care Plans

In December 2018 Member viewed 5 Care Plans. Consent forms were issued to the carers of all children involved; it was agreed that anonymity would be maintained, and the report would not contain identifying details.

The first area of focus was whether children are in care for the right reasons. Ofsted rated Wirral as good in this area in 2016. There should always be a clear purpose for children becoming looked after. It should be stated clearly why we have taken these decisions and include an assessment of all relevant risks. The 5 care plans looked at had clear and evidenced reasons for care proceedings, and members were satisfied as to the reasons for the child being placed into care.

The new policy in Wirral is for all children looked after to have annual care plan re-assessments to update their care plan. This should take place annually, or more often if there are significant changes to a child's circumstances. This represents a change in culture and practice for front-line staff. Additionally, it is important that assessments are child focused, with an emphasis on identifying the child's needs rather than identifying what services are needed. An example was given that a poor plan would state that a child 'needs therapy'. A child focused plan would explain why the child needs therapy, such as 'recognising that the child needed support with attachment issues.

It was noted that, whilst initial assessments of children's needs when they came into care were made, Wirral had not historically reviewed these assessments or periodically repeated assessments for children in care over a long period of time. It was therefore possible for a child who enters the system at four years old to still be in the system ten years later without a reassessment taking place. In cases where the child had social worker continuity this was less of an issue as the social worker will be familiar with the child's changing needs and circumstances and will continually review needs and make piecemeal changes to care plans. However, the lack of systematic, periodic and documented reassessments of children's needs to inform care plans had been identified as weakness. Members were advised that work around auditing had picked up since 2016, and this was emphasized again by the service leads during the stakeholder session. The auditors assisting members had a wealth of experiences and were able to pick up issues in the care plans.

When several children are from the same family are looked after measures should be taken to ensure information held in each child's file is clear. Members recognised that certain information recorded on sibling plans needs to be identical, whilst some needs to be individualized. It was noted that the child's individual needs can get lost in care notes and the audit trail is not always clear enough. Concerns were raised by the auditors regarding one case involving a large sibling group that procedure had not been followed as well as it might, and the individual care plans were fragmented.

Officers highlighted problems with care plan recording and the importance of accurately updated care plans. They highlighted concerns that whilst chronologies are held on system, a glitch in the liquid logic meant that they can be wiped accidentally when not saved correctly. It would appear that cases are updated and submitted, but due to a system quirk information would sometimes get lost.

It was agreed that higher caseloads cause problems and members queried how often relationships between social Workers and Children Looked After break down. It was confirmed that previous high numbers of agency staff and interim managers had caused problems, and that it was now better having static management teams.

Members queried the 20 million cash injection into Children's Services and asked whether this has led to an increase in Social Workers. There are still around 40 vacancies, but these are filled by agency staff. This is a reduction from 101 vacancies in October 2017. Officers advised that social workers in the

permeance team should have no more than 23 cases. Further information received from Children's services confirmed that Wirral has an average of 17.3 cases per worker compared to a North West average of 19.4. Within the average figure there is variation as newly qualified workers hold a much lower caseload than more experienced workers. Occasionally they will have significantly more cases once a Social Worker has been on the duty team for the week. This is the case in the assessment and intervention team not the permeance teams. The officers questioned felt that the case injection had made a difference, but the effects were still coming through.

Difficulties arise when different agencies have separate priorities and targets. For example, Police priorities are obviously to reduce criminal and anti-social behaviour, whereas Children's Services may view this behaviour more as a safeguarding concern. Agencies must ensure the right help comes at the right time. Officers expressed concerns especially around the disenfranchisement of young men within the care system, and the effect this has on their long-term prospects once they left care. Young care leavers are often open to criminal exploitation, such as County Lines. In order to look at this issue more closely, Members attended a 'reality check visit' to Merseyside Police, Child Criminal Exploitation Teams and Early Help at the Solar Campus. A report for this has been produced separately.

Members looked at one care plan involving an unaccompanied asylum seeker. It was noted by members and officers that plan was missing significant details. Members questioned how they got here, and whether they were trafficked.

Members requested more details regarding this case and were provided with it outside of the committee. It was agreed that the Modern Slavery Scrutiny Review undertaken by Environment Overview & Scrutiny Committee be shared with Children and Families Overview & Scrutiny Committee.

Recommendations

- The gaps in the chronology and care plan for the unaccompanied asylum seekers raised concerns regarding modern slavery, trafficking and exploitation. The draft Modern Slavery Strategy that is due to go to Cabinet should be cascaded down to Children's Services once agreed and steps should be taken to ensure there is correct training and process in place to deal with this.
- Concerns have been raised by officers that there are glitches within Liquid Logic which can mean that information is entered incorrectly or accidentally deleted. Members requested that the system is reviewed to ensure it is being used to its full capacity and that it is fit for purpose.

7. CIC Council

In January 2019 Members visited the Children in Care Council at Pilgrim Street in Birkenhead. The Children in Care Council and Care Leavers Council are groups of young people who have all been in care, who have had different experiences and would like things to change for the better. Members met with 5 young

people to discuss their care plans and experienced. As promised, all identifying details have been removed. Members asked 5 questions, which they felt covered all relevant aspects.

Discussion

1. How much do you know about your care plan, and how much input did you have into it?

Opinions differed among the young people questioned. Some felt they had a good understanding of their plan and were given the opportunity to provide input should they want to. However, some respondents advised that they knew bits about their care plan and was offered some input but only felt like they knew the basics.

One child questioned advised that they themselves didn't ask too many questions or know any details regarding their care plan; they advised that they had trust issues involving social workers and did not like to open or ask questions. When questioned, Members were advised that this was because they had a rotation of social workers, and no warning over changes. However, Members were reassured that the Young People were aware of the reasons they had been taken into care.

2. What was your relationship like with your social worker?

There was no clear consensus when it came to relationships with social workers, perhaps due to variations in situation and personality. One child advised that their first social worker was excellent, but that changed when a temporary social worker was introduced.

The young people interviewed advised that most social workers were good, consistent, and good listeners but this was hindered by high caseloads. Members commented that there had been an increase in permanent full-time staff in recent years but acknowledged that case work was still high. They understood that changes had been made, but understandably still found it difficult to repeat their personal history to a rotation of social workers, only for them to be changed with no warning.

They also found it difficult when social workers went off sick or on holiday and advised they were not informed of longer absences and didn't always know details of anyone else they could contact in times of need. Some situations were described where social workers had helped them introduce or maintain family relationships. One example given was being reunited with a parent and meeting new siblings. This had been a very positive experience for the young person and had been encouraged and facilitated by the social worker.

3. How well do you think your foster care/residential placement arrangements work?

Two main issues were raised regarding placements which were of concern to members.

- One young spoke of problems with certain housing services. Members were advised that they were supposed to visit accommodation with their Personal Assistant (P.A) to view rooms. however, they are offered accommodation and feel compelled to accept it immediately in case

they lose it. This does not make them feel like they have any choice when choosing accommodation.

Members were also advised that once a young person is over 18 and working then they pay a high weekly charge to the housing provider. They felt that they were being penalised for working and needing supported accommodation. One young person advised that if they had paid then they would have been -£44 a week down (Assistance was provided and Children's services offered to contribute £11 per week towards this, but this did not cover the full cost). One CLA advised they were back living with a parent in overcrowded accommodation due to this.

Further to this, problems were cited navigating Property Pool Plus. Members were advised that some CLA sat on band E until they could supply enough documentation, after which they were placed on band B. This issue was raised at a later session with housing providers and an explanation of explanation of the current situation provided in section 8 of the review.

- Members questioned the Staying Put scheme. One young person advised she wanted to stay but now has her own flat as her foster carer "wanted more money". The young people interviewed questioned the motivation of some foster carers and that once CLA turn 18, Foster Carers can change rent. One Foster Carer was quoted as saying;

"He works full time, why am I funding him?"

Members endeavoured to raise this issue at the stakeholder meeting.

4. How were your educational/medical needs met?

The Young People questioned were aware of their Personal Education Plan (PEP) but did not indicate that they had much input into it or discussed it with their co-ordinator. Members were advised that CLA had bi-annual meetings with the School nurse, and they were registered to their GP. They spoke positively about their health passport and confirmed it was very helpful to have their medical history in one place.

The care leavers questioned confirmed they had access to an employability coach via the 14-19 service and confirmed that they had found this useful. They also mentioned previous problems with employers (which have been omitted due to confidentiality) and advisers where they felt they could be given more support navigating employment and that they were conscious of being spoken to differently as Children Looked After

5. What more could the council do to help Children looked after?

The young adults questioned were enthusiastic about the session and advised they would like more contact with the Councillors. They appreciated the opportunity to be heard and were pleased to hear that local politicians were taking an interest in them

Recommendations

- Members suggested that a meeting could be held regularly between scrutiny members and the children in care council to discuss issues. This suggestion was welcomed, and the CIC were enthusiastic about Members attending other events.
- Corporate parenting training for all Councillors, regardless of Committee Membership should be kept up to date.
- Communications – There was a notable lack of understanding of their individual care plans and their agency over it. Changes to care plans, staff and policy are not communicated to CLA as well as they could be.
- Committee to explore the resources given to children leaving care on employment readiness

8. Stakeholder Sessions

Overview

In March 2019 Members met the following stakeholders to discuss care planning with a wide range of staff and service users.

- Heads of Service: Members met with the heads of Commissioning, Ian Godfrey and Permanence, Eifion Burke for an overview of their services
- IRO's: Responsible for providing Health Challenge and accountability to social workers over their Care Plans, and the subsequent decisions made.
- Social Workers: The Most regular point of contact for a child and chiefly responsible for the writing and co-ordination of care planning.
- Team Managers: experienced Social Workers who carry out the day to day management of teams, supervising the work and ensuring decisions are made in a timely and appropriate manner
- Education Group: consisting of the Virtual Head Teacher and the improving educational outcomes team. Their remit is to raise the attainment of Children Looked After, Reduce absence and tackle exclusions.
- Foster Carers: are responsible for the care of children in their homes, who have been placed there by the Local Authority. This can be either respite or short-term care, or a longer arrangement.

Heads of Service

Ian and Eifion noted that the culture of the organisation has changed significantly over the last few years, and the aim to promote a positive culture and ensure permanency across the service. Processes are now in place and the workforce is more stable. It is certainly much better than before. Legacy had a sense of drift; care planning processes have improved dramatically.

Members were reassured that there is now more training in place, as well as a significant increase in permanent staff and senior management. There is now a permanent senior leadership team supported by a team manager group with currently one vacancy. This is assisting in providing more stability to social workers. There was an agreement that there is still significant work to be done to improve the quality of care plans, but the momentum in recent years is bearing fruit.

There was discussion around utilizing the individual skill sets of social workers and foster carers and that care planning around the needs of the child needs embedding. Queries were raised around care leavers further to a meeting with CIC council. It was agreed that more work needed to be done regarding housing for care leavers. The issues raised at the care leavers session were put to the heads of service and addresses a later session with housing providers (see part 8)

Members also raised questions about Children who have had the worst experience, trauma or complex needs, and how officers deal with those who won't engage. Officers responded by acknowledging there were problems when care leavers don't meet the criteria for adult social care. From the feedback received about ownership of the care/pathway plans, they would be more likely to respond if they had more understanding of the plans in the first place.

Members questioned how children are paired up with the correct social workers and foster carers. There have been negative stories with bad matches. Officers responded that this is the most challenging environment in 30 years. Some foster carers have an approval range and age range. But often they do not have the luxury of choice, due to the number of children in the care system and the availability of Foster carers.

Members queries whether considerations given to matching children with foster carers with the same ethnic background? The majority of CIC are white British or white European. There is a small cohort of unaccompanied asylum seekers. In these cases, it can be difficult to meet needs, but Children's services aim to do this as much as possible. Semi-Independent living can be useful if appropriate. It can be difficult as Wirral as a community is not that ethnically diverse.

Members mentioned the Staying Put scheme, which enables Care Leavers aged 18 and above to stay on with their former foster carers. Officers responded by confirming that there are currently 40 children in Staying Put arrangements, but Wirral must be careful not to force it on them. It was noted that due to the massive number of CLA officers would rather not utilize the Staying Put scheme as they would rather have the 40+ foster carers. However, if it's the right thing for the child then obviously that would be the priority.

It was noted that a lot of children in care have been in care for a long time. When opening these care plans up, it is worth noting that there is a lot of historic negative information – new care plans are better quality but there are some legacy issues. Historically care planning has not been of a high quality but are now being audited more frequently and rectified.

Members questioned how care plans were audited and were advised that there has been an increase in audits, which has offered a better understanding of where issues lie. The themes that have emerged are now being tackled, with more rigorous processes put in place. However, processes are now in place and there is a more stable workforce.

There was also cause for celebration. Officers noted that care planning to achieve positive outcomes was improving, with 10 children going into higher education this year. This is the highest number of Children Looked After and Care Leavers achieving this milestone to date.

IROs

Independent reviewing officers (IROs) are an independent safeguarding unit and their role is to scrutinize and ensure care plans are consistent. Their role is one of accountability and they offer social workers friendly challenge on the effectiveness and appropriateness of care plans. IRO's undertake Child Protection Conferences where they have oversight of the care plan. They make sure the plans work for the child and that risk is reduced. Once the plans have reached LAC stage, they can escalate concerns and take the case back to court. IROs must ratify the care plans and challenge. They also must ensure that contingency planning is also on the agenda.

There are now 15 full time staff alongside 3 agency staff. This is a significant change from 2016 when care leavers were supported by a much smaller number of staff. The number of children looked after is not coming down quickly, However, it was agreed that the co-location of staff has meant that challenge is easier. Care Planning processes and policy are embedded now, which means it should be harder to get it wrong.

Members were reassured to hear the IROs felt that accountability, praise, leadership and process had improved since 2016, which has had a cumulative effect on service. They were also pleased to hear that the IROs felt they could effectively challenge and escalate issues. The focus is now on quality, and the IROs felt that care planning is now more aspirational. Concern was raised by members over the IROs workload and whether this impacted on the amount of time they could spend getting to know the children – they advised that they can have up to 80-90 cases each. This raises capacity concerns, but officers advised that some children require less contact dependent on their circumstances.

The IRO's Identified that Drift and delay are still issues, and some CLA have been in care for too long, however this was acknowledged as mostly a legacy issue and because of the 'risk averse' nature of the Local Authority.

Social Workers

A number of social workers participated in the stakeholder's session, with various levels of experience. There were also permanent and voluntary staff. The Social Worker's volunteered how much the new agile working kits are assisting them with care planning as they help them to connect and that CLA are now more involved and engaged. Children are happy to work alongside Social Workers using the agile working kit.

Members asked whether the Social worker felt that the care plans were more child focused. It was agreed that they were more holistic and that there has been a massive change in the collective mindset. Casework is still high, but not as high as it used to be. Members queried time scales regarding workloads and were advised this is very issue dependent. For example, there are time scale differences between making and chasing up a CAHMS Referral and filling out a passport form.

Training around care planning has improved with an emphasis of SMART planning (see item 1.3). Social Workers now need to question whether reports can be easily read by Children and Carers. It was agreed

by Officers and Members that it is important not to be too process driven: Social Workers don't feel they are micromanaged. Individuality is there but it now underpinned. Officers add praise and acknowledgement of achievement.

There are legacy issues, but processes are in place and there is less 'firefighting'. New frameworks have been reviewed and the STEF model is in place, so less time can be spent sorting issues and more consideration given to the quality of individual care plans. Staff are less transient and there is now more support. Members were advised that there is reflective supervision in place, regular team meetings and a significant change is communication. There has been historical communication issues, especially around multi-agency working. This is not perfect, but it is improving. There is often a difference of priority, for example the Police often focus on crime figures and prosecutions, whereas social workers are focused on the needs and safeguarding on the child. However, this has been noted as a concern and is being driven forward. It was also mentioned that officers often struggle to get a direct line through to the Police and must use the main 111 Phone-line which often causes delays.

Officers confirmed that there have been communication problems between agencies, but now everyone is required to give input. Again, Officers highlighted problems with other agencies using Liquid Logic. It is either not used, or not updated properly. However, members were reassured that the I.T support systems for Liquid Logic are good.

Members asked how much emphasis is there for contingency in the care plans. For example, when a Foster Carer gets rushed into hospital. However, it should be noted that 'contingency plans' are not appropriate terminology and can increase anxiety. It needs to be normalised, similar to what you'd tell any child to do in an emergency.

Team Managers

Members queried the Team Managers' perspectives on care plans and whilst it was agreed that caseloads are still high, co-working is assisting with this. It was agreed that they are focusing on getting the language right. Team Managers expressed the opinion that caseloads were better. When asked about cases that suffered from legacy issues (e.g. a poorly written care plan) they explained that the process was to give this case to a permanent social worker and to review all aspects of the care plan to ensure the legacy issues were dealt with. Complex cases of 2 or 3 within a caseload of 20 is not unusual.

Queries were made about ensuring the voice of the child was captured, and Team Managers expressed that it was an integral part of their role to ensure this was done. It was not unusual now for Team Managers to send care plans back to their respective social workers multiple times before being satisfied that the voice of the child had been sufficiently captured.

Care planning can be creative, but plans are now more robust. It is now easier to challenge the courts, often with excellent outcomes.

Several points were raised relating to partners. One Team Manager noted that the timeliness of partner contributions had improved due to stronger partnership working. A specific example of this was that Health professionals being located at the solar campus (unsure which team at the solar campus they were referring to specifically) had ensured their attendance at meetings.

“We are acknowledging where we are, and where we want to be”.

Children’s services take on everything from safeguarding to education, and for they must provide a quality service. There are new processes in place for everything. Team managers are flagging problems swiftly and can set targets for improvement. Skills analysis identifies training, and officers try and use resources already available. There have been changes in departments, processes and procedures. Members were reassured to hear the officers receive regular feedback through the Children in Care Council, and young people were able to contact senior managers directly to highlight concerns. It was pointed out that a pack given to members of the CICC included information on how to raise concerns if needed.

Education group

Members enquired how well the education group can contribute to the Personal Education Plan (PEPs).

The new PEP forms focus on several different things:

- The first part of the form is filled out with vital information.
- The second contains the care plan and holistic info.
- There is also a section on how to reassure the child when they are exhibiting challenging behaviour
- A further section to be completed by the social worker regarding their care plans
- The final part contains Pastoral targets such as support outcomes and methods.

Regarding the educational outcomes of CLA, members were advised that once in a secure environment progression is good. However, it is attainment that is the problem; the benchmark is lower, so whilst progression is good attainment is still lower. However, the this is not treated as an excuse. Extra work is undertaken to accelerate and track progress.

It was noted that the work Fiona O’Shaughnessy did was so important, to view the child as a whole person and help them learn to live normal lives. Regarding partnership working, overall it was agreed that agencies have been very receptive to changes and are on board with this philosophy.

The importance of joint training was emphasized, to ensure a coordinated approach It was also noted that the new early help scheme Community Matters will assist greatly to help the young person and support families. Community Matters will see new ways of helping families and children get help they need, when they need it, through partnership working and maximising existing resources. The Fender Primary School and other Community Hub Schools are working with the Big Brother Big Sisters group to provide mentoring to vulnerable children. This scheme aims to help children reach their potential by offering one- to -one mentoring services. Officers work with the pastoral leads in schools so they are more attuned to the needs of CLA.

Regarding mental health/CAHMS provision for CLA, every school in Wirral now has access to a Primary Mental Health Worker. The advice line has reduced hospital admissions overall by 50%. There are also early help provisions available to children whilst waiting for a CAHMS referral, such as mindfulness

training. However, it was noted that there is still a delay between referrals and appointments and Members raised this as a concern.

Foster Carers

The Foster Carer panel initially expressed concerns regarding the allocation of new social workers. They felt the support they had received up to this point had been amazing, however they were concerned about the changes.

This had caused some upset, as a few of the foster carers had worked with their social workers for years and felt they had an incredibly close bond. The Foster Carers understood the restructuring that had occurred within Children's Services, and they understood the need to put the right people in the right places, but they did not feel this had been communicated in the best way. It was apparent that trust and experience are essential to the Foster Carers so issues can be flagged quickly. Regarding the communication of changes within the service, some felt that they only heard undercurrents, and felt they were the last to find out.

There was discussion around the allocation of support and training for Foster Carers, with some advising it was excellent whilst other felt they had to seek it out or relied on peer-to-peer networks. One of the Foster Carers has two young boys with complex needs. They felt they lacked support regarding additional and noted that some professionals don't understand the need for this, which can cause placement breakdowns.

Foster Carers felt they should be able to make recommendations more effectively, and it was noted that when they felt listened to and appreciated, they worked better. Others stated that they did not feel like they were treated as professionals. Foster Carers are often thought of as volunteers and there is a little professionalism attached to the role. It was agreed that Foster Carers come from all walks of life, but some cases it's a full-time role and financial side needs to be considered.

Members asked if the foster carers felt listened to. They responded by saying they need to be able to make recommendations. It was agreed that best practice should be that children are placed with the most appropriate foster carer, for example people with expertise in therapeutic care - there must be Foster Carers with talents that are not utilized. There were concerns about needs that are not being addressed: some children need therapies but there is also demand for peer mentors (for children and carers).

Members were reassured that the Foster Carers felt they had total visibility of the care Plans. There was a mixed response when asked if they involved the children, they foster in the care plans. One foster carer stated she thought that her children were sufficiently involved and aware of the content of their care plans. However, another foster carer stated that she did not involve the children in her care involved in care plans, as she deemed it inappropriate. Another issue picked up was that for some of the foster carers' children, circumstances and needs had changed, and this was not reflected in their care plans or in the support they received. It was unclear how to feed this new information into social services so that these new needs were captured, and support forthcoming.

Generally, foster carers have a positive view of the role of IROs. IROs won't put therapies in place until a child has permanency. However, IROs will fight for the children. They will be assertive with both the foster carers and social workers if they see a problem is not being addressed.

Recommendations

- Members request that achievements of CLA are celebrated in Committee (mindful of confidentiality) and praise fed back to young people.
- Thresholds in Wirral are low, and the authority is naturally risk averse. As such, edge of care services should be embedded.
- Steps should be taken to ensure foster carers are treated professionally. Members would also support the introduction of an anonymous feedback form for foster carers.
- The panel would welcome a Foster Carers' session, so that members can gain an understanding of the challenges Foster Carers face.
- Committee to take a closer look at CAMHS referrals and waiting times.

9. Partner agencies

Health

Members and officers expressed concerns during the care plan session that information was not shared between health partners and social workers as easily as it could have been, which is especially concerning as younger infants and children are the most vulnerable and at risk.

In December 2018 Members visited St. Catherine's Hospital, Birkenhead as part of the Children & Families Overview and Scrutiny Committee's Programme of 'Reality Check' visits.

It was noted by members that the high number of children looked after had an impact on service pressures, which was complicated by notifications, systems and processes which are not as streamlined as they could be. It was explained to members that when a child comes into care, clinicians should be advised within 48 hours. However, this does not always happen if the notifications aren't right.

There were several scenarios which could mean that there would be late, incorrect or inconsistent info provided. Data anomalies were of concern to members, such as the NHS systems not being compatible with Local Authority systems. For example, a difference in requested dates can mean that thresholds do not appear to have been met.

The medical professionals interviewed also advised that both the NHS and LA officers were looking at hot desking in both Cheshire Lines and St. Catherine's. It is hoped that this will help gain insight into the respective areas. Members commented that during a previous reality check to Cheshire Lines, officers had noted that the co-location of staff and hot desking facilities had led to greater rapport and communication between existing social services teams. It was hoped that by moving NHS staff into Cheshire Lines will further relationship building and positive outcomes.

Members were shown a copy of a Health Passport which was created in partnership with Children in Care. This is an easy reference booklet, a similar size and format to regular passports which contains children looked after's medical history and healthcare needs. This aims to help children looked after's take ownership of their medical needs and help them transition into adulthood.

Like the 'Red Book' handed out to new mothers, this is a national initiative and can be filled out by doctors, nurses and medical practitioners. This is a useful and easy-to-read reference for carers and clinicians. However, the main aim of the passport is that it is a document created with the child's input. Members queried if this took the place of medical records, but it was explained that it was more of a reference tool, for example to check family health or birth history etc. Health history is important, but CLA do not always have parents to ask.

In previous years, as Children's services have been in a state of flux, it has been difficult to foster long standing relationships. As the LA endeavours to promote a more stable operating structure within Children's services, it has been agreed that senior officers will shadow each other in the New Year to increase understanding and build relationships.

NHS staff also noted that there had been a change, and they now saw more stability with social workers and team managers. It was agreed that it takes a long time to build trusting relationships but were hopeful that this would be achievable in the future.

Housing

Further to concerns raised at the Children in Care Council, Members were keen to meet with officers from Operational Housing Services and a team manager from Leaving Care Services to discuss housing provision.

Officers advised that the range of accommodation varies depending on the age of the care leaver. The conduit for referrals is via Leaving Care team. There are challenges faced by the benefit system as it currently stands, such as the single room rate for under 35's with no dependents. Supported accommodation is available, there are a number of commissioned services by the housing department which are available however these are not all for the sole purpose of care leavers albeit there is some provision specifically for care leavers. However, once care leavers are in employment they fall into a classic 'benefit trap' situation if they remain in the supported accommodation, whereby it is often more financially advantageous to stay out of work as they cannot afford the rent levels and intensive housing management costs that previously would have been covered by their full benefits.

As mentioned above, most of the supported accommodation commissioned by housing services for young people is not designed solely for care leavers, it is designed for initial access or move on for homeless young people. There is high demand for single accommodation from homeless young people

generally. Care Leavers often do not like hostel accommodation offered and due to the demand on move on accommodation there are issues with longer-term offers of accommodation. Members queried whether there is anywhere care leavers can live independently. It was explained that there is a move-on accommodation offer in Tranmere and Wallasey. This offers self-contained flats and 24 hours on site support and peripatetic support is available.

It was noted by officers that at the time of the meeting there are currently no care leavers presenting as street homeless in Wirral. If a care leaver does present as street homeless, then emergency accommodation can be found, however it may not always be what is considered suitable by care leavers or social workers, but it is an emergency response to respond to the presentation of homelessness.

Currently the offer for care leavers is Forum Housing, housing associations or the private sector. One issue is that a young person cannot hold a tenancy agreement in their own right until they are 18. The Local Authority can enter into a tenancy agreement with young people – but the corporate parent would be trustee.

Finding suitable accommodation is one of the biggest challenges the Local Authority has, and there are significant challenges attached to move on accommodation. Additionally, accommodation available to young people up to the age of 24 is now silting up due to single room housing benefits and also demands and legal obligations to young homeless people generally.

It was agreed that there needs to be strategic future planning, for the 13-15 year-old Children Looked After. Overall there are currently 8.5 thousand people registered on Property Pool Plus, and approximately 10-15% get housed per year. For care leavers registered this statistic is higher, with 34% of care leavers registered being rehoused and securing tenancies. Members were assured that Care Leavers are put on a higher banding which is also backdated to their 16 Birthday to give them a greater chance of being housed. A Property Pool Plus officer is also part of the Leaving Care Monthly Panel Meeting.

Officers stated that they needed to get smarter at advising care leavers – more joined up thinking is required. Different levels of support should be available, and what are the housing offers should be on one page. It was agreed that introducing a workbook would be a good idea – This would manage expectations, provide young people with a guide to tenancies and signpost support.

Members queried private renting and noted that the same offer of support should extend to landlords. Estate agents are reassured by the PAs, but it was agreed they may need to put more in place. Previously, the Local Authority has paid the price when properties have been left in a state of disrepair.

Whilst the Staying Put scheme in Wirral is successful, there are still approximately 50-60 care leavers per year. There is a pilot project being undertaken with Regenda Housing, where there is a house with 24-hour support provided for care leavers who need substantial level of support when leaving care. There are currently 3 bed spaces in this unit and between Children's and Housing they are looking to commission a further scheme to link up to a further 8 bed spaces across potentially a further 2 properties. This will be able to provide further semi-independent living for people to move on from the main 24-hour support. The Local Authority and Regenda have now identified 2 suitably sized properties which they are looking to take forward

There was a discussion around how to provide care leavers with life skills. Some are not that clear about the housing options available to them and they often have not been provided with guidance or budgeting skills. Clearly, this is advice the PAs give; however, it does depend on how challenging the case is. Members were concerned that caseloads meant that there was limited scope for regular contact with the child. Some care leavers do need multiple visits a week, and there is a statutory minimum for visits which is once every 46 days. This has a compliance rate of 89-99%, and a grant received to recruit more staff. Officers are keen to improve the quality and innovation of the pathway plans.

Recommendations

- Housing for care leavers is put on the work programme and partnership working explored.
- Scrutiny to put support behind the supported living pilot and to receive updates.
- Members would endorse the introduction of a guidebook to help care leavers navigate housing.
- Committee would put its support behind the use of Discretionary Housing Payments to help care leavers cover the first 6 months of their tenancy.

10. Overview from Legal services

Wirral has 4 solicitors and 2 temporary solicitors who work with Children's Services. The only family court in Cheshire and Merseyside is based in Liverpool. It is a notably difficult area of law, and this can be compounded by factors such as witnesses being overseas. As part of the final session in April 2019, Members requested an overview of care planning from Legal Services at Wirral Borough Council

Care plans have an 18-point check list and there are several factors which should be well defined:

- Time scales should be in place
- The arrangements should be clear, and decisions should be evidenced
- Information regarding the IRO should be included
- Details of PEP and Medical should be clear
- There should be a robust contingency plan

The Solicitor explained that court orders cannot be made until the care plan has been scrutinized by the court. The court plan may not need as much detail as the corporate plan, but the decisions must be robust and evidenced in all plans, especially in cases of adoption.

There is a time scale of 26 weeks from application, however there is provision to extend proceedings. There are several hearings: a case management hearing, issue resolution hearing at week 20, and a final

hearing. The court must consider all options at the end of the final hearing. The outcomes can go from no care orders being implemented to an adoption order. The court will look closely at the parent's capacity to discharge care.

Sloppy case work is not acceptable, as the court requires a detailed analysis of each option to evidence everything has been considered.

Members expressed concern about adoptions falling through, and whether this was to do with poor case work. The care plans should emphasize the benefits and risks and, in some cases, children do come back into the care system when adoptions breakdown

In one case a child was not placed for adoption because the child was found to have siblings cared for by other family members - the Local Authority Care Plan was for adoption, but the court concluded that the sibling relationship was more important.

Questions were asked about historic issues around care planning. It was noted that at times the court and the guardian does not always agree, and it must be argued out in court.

There are significant issues in keeping to the times scales, and legal often need to request extensions. There can often be a failure to keep to time, or the evidence is not robust enough – it has ticked the boxes, but it is not a thorough analysis. It was also noted that some officers are uneasy about going to court.

Concerns were raised about the Family Courts going with what the guardians want, rather than the plan the LA has set out. It was noted that the Courts do not always have confidence with the plans and will put a care order into place instead of a supervision order. However, members were reassured that the plans are getting better, evidence is more robust, and that officers now understand analytics. The use of risk/benefit management has also improved.

The quality of work is still variable but is largely due to individuals rather than processes. The quality of social work has improved dramatically in recent years.

Legal services raised concern that there is not sufficient training provided by universities in term of court writing skills, and a training session was run for existing social workers to improve quality – written evidence should be of the highest quality, as this will help the officer when they are in the witness box.

As an example, if the plan only contains negative information regarding the parent's then barristers will use this in cross examinations to undermine the credibility of the witness. Officers should be wary of using the word 'concerns', as this is not specific enough – there needs to be evidence, facts, analysis and conclusions. There should be no use of vague jargon and phrases such as 'parents won't engage'.

Members enquired as to whether these issues were solely a problem in Wirral. It was explained that some local authorities are quicker at meeting the deadlines for court, however outcomes suggest the court may not always approve the initial care plans presented.

All local authorities are challenged at some point. Judges have spent years working in legal environments and may not have worked in organisations as large as local authorities. As such they may not always sympathise with the processes required in making a decision within the Local Authority,

Member queried why a decision can't just be made. It was explained that there can be differences of opinion within children's services.

It was noted that there are high levels of children subject to care orders placed at home in Wirral. Analytics have failed to pinpoint exactly why this is happening. There is no evidence to suggest there is a difference between authorities, and the judges are independent and make their own decisions.

The key is good evidence, excellent written work and the ability to present in court. There have been 'mock court' training sessions held in WTH.

Recommendations

- Continue to invest in training and support for court readiness.
- This should include help writing plans for court and 'mock court' to ensure social workers have experience of being in the witness box.
- Student Social workers should be encouraged to attend family court during training.

11. Closing summary & full list of recommendations.

In order to complete this scrutiny review, Members visited and spoke with many officers, service users and stakeholders over the course of 2018 and early into 2019. It was apparent throughout the sessions that turnover in the organization is directly linked to children's ability to form long lasting and positive relationships with their social workers, and it effects the quality of care plans and the extent to which both professionals and children know their care plans.

Practice has improved, and so too has the quality of care plans and the care planning process, however quality still varies. It is also encouraging to note that some of the findings in this review are already out of date and issues have been addressed.

Ultimately, care plans are one part, albeit a significant part of an improvement in the health of an organization's practice and culture, which is a constantly shifting paradigm. Even if all the issues outlined in the review are addressed, there will still be much work to be done to ensure that as an organization, we are doing everything we can to deliver first rate care and support to our young people. Care planning is an important aspect of this and will need to be monitored vigilantly by scrutineers and decisions makers alike to ensure we are constantly driving forward the quality of children's social care on Wirral.

Recommendations

- The gaps in the chronology and care plan for the unaccompanied asylum seekers raised concerns regarding Modern Slavery, trafficking and exploitation. The draft Modern Slavery Strategy that is due to go to Cabinet should be cascaded down to Children's Services once agreed and steps should be taken to ensure there is correct training and process in place to deal with this.
- Concerns have been raised by officers that there are glitches within Liquid Logic which can mean that information is entered incorrectly or accidentally deleted. Members requested that the system is reviewed to ensure it is being used to its full capacity and that it is fit for purpose.
- Members suggested that a meeting could be held regularly between scrutiny members and the children in care council to discuss issues. This suggestion was welcomed, and the CIC were enthusiastic about Members attending other events.
- Corporate parenting training for all Councillors, regardless of Committee Membership should be kept up to date.
- Communications – There was a notable lack of understanding of their individual care plans and their agency over it. Changes to care plans, staff and policy are not communicated to CLA as well as they could be.
- Committee explores the resources given to children leaving care on employment readiness.
- Members request that achievements of CLA are celebrated in Committee (mindful of confidentiality) and praise fed back to young people.
- Thresholds in Wirral are low, and the authority is naturally risk averse. As such, edge of care services should be embedded.
- Steps should be taken to ensure foster carers are treated professionally.
- Members would support the introduction of an anonymous feedback form for foster carers.
- The panel would welcome a Foster Carers session, so that members can gain an understanding of the challenges Foster Carers face.
- Committee to take a closer look at CAMHS referrals and waiting times.
- Housing for care leavers is put on the work programme and partnership working explored.
- Scrutiny to put support behind the supported living pilot and to receive updates.
- Members would endorse the introduction of a guidebook to help care leavers navigate housing.
- Committee would put its support behind the use of Discretionary Housing Payments to help care leavers cover the first 6 months of their tenancy.
- Continue to invest in training and support for court readiness.
- This should include help writing plans for court and 'mock court' to ensure social workers have experience of being in the witness box.
- Student Social workers should be encouraged to attend family court during training.

A special message of thanks goes to the Children in Care Council whose openness to questions contributed significantly to the direction of the review. Members appreciate the time taken to discuss issues with that may have been upsetting and difficult to disclose, or that they had repeated many times before.

Attendees:

Panel:

Cllr Tom Usher (Chair of Children & Families OSC 2018/19 and chair of this review)

Cllr Cherry Povall

Cllr Chris Carubia

Cllr Jean Stapleton

Cllr Chris Meaden

Anna Perrett (Scrutiny Officers)

Care Plan session:

Auditors

Sian Hudson

Charmaine Morrison

Children In Care Council:

Kerry Mehta (Head of Children's safeguarding unit)

Julie Smith (Inclusion Support Worker)

7 Members of Children in Care Council (names removed to ensure confidentiality)

Stakeholder Session

Ian Godfrey (Head of commissioning)

Eifion Burke (Head of permeance)

IROs

Anne King

Cheryl Taylor- Crossley

Eva Wollaston

Karen Gray

Education Group

Trish Lewis (Head of Education)

Diane Hollis (Strategic Manager – Improving Educational Outcomes for Vulnerable Children)

Catherine Kerr (Senior Manager – Schools Improvement)

Social Workers

Bridgita Riziva

Hannah Myles

Chris Hardisty

Nicola Hingham

Team Managers

Kenny, Julie

Lesley Coulson

Samantha Greenhalgh

Gaynor McCoubrey

Foster Carers:

Four Foster Carers – names removed for confidentiality.

Housing Session:

Lisa Newman (Head of Operational Housing Services)

Chris Pentecost (Team Manger – Leaving Care)

Legal Services:

Vicki Shaw – (Group Solicitor -Litigation and Safeguarding)

Special Thanks for their help facilitating sessions:

Anna Jones (Performance and Improvement Manager)

Fiona O'Shaughnessy (Involvement Manger)

Appendix

Scope Document

Review Title: Statutory Care Plan Scrutiny Review

Responsible Committee: Children & Families Overview & Scrutiny Committee

Date: Wednesday 1st August 2018

1. Contact Information:	
<p>Panel Members:</p> <p>Cllr Tom Usher (Chair)</p> <p>Cllr Chris Carubia</p> <p>Chris Meaden</p> <p>Jean Stapleton</p> <p>Cherry Povall</p>	<p>Key Officers:</p> <p>Lead departmental officers:</p> <p>Simone White (Deputy Director for Children)</p> <p>Ian Godfrey (Senior Manager, Children in Care)</p> <p>Anna Perrett (Scrutiny Officer)</p>
2. Review Aims:	
<p>Wirral Plan Pledge/s:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Vulnerable children reach their full potential <p>Review Objectives:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• To review the quality and effectiveness of Statutory Care Plans for looked after children.• To involve and consult with children and young people in order to ensure that services reflect their needs and that they are helped to reach their potential. <p>To measure the extent to which Statutory Care Plans:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Are individualised▪ Have stretching targets▪ Are outcome and goal focused▪ Are regularly reviewed and up to date▪ Evidence children’s participation in developing their plans▪ Are shared with young people and reflect their wishes and feelings	

Scrutiny Outcomes:

- Members will receive assurance about the quality and effectiveness of the Statutory Care Plan.
- Identify areas for service improvement and make recommendations to this effect.
- Ensure service user feedback is incorporated within the outcomes of the review.

3. Review Plan**Review Approach: Workshop, Evidence Days**

The Task & Finish Group will undertake the following activities:

- Meetings with relevant Council Officers (see below)
- Meetings with external stakeholders (see below)
- Attend the Children in Care Council and Care Leavers Council
- The Panel Will look at individual care plans and meet with the service users.

Review Duration:

- It is planned to complete the review before the end of the 2018/19 municipal year.

Scheduled Committee Report Date:

- Children and Families O&S Committee, 3rd July 2019

Scheduled Cabinet Report Date:

- Cabinet, to be arranged

4. Sources of Evidence:**Key Witnesses:**

Wirral Council Staff:

- Social Workers (ranging in experience)
- Team Managers
- Independent Reviewing Officers
- Virtual Head Teacher

External Stakeholders:

- Head Teachers representative
- Safeguarding lead with the Clinical Commissioning Group

Service Users

- Foster Parents
- Children in Care
- Special Guardians

Supporting Papers / Documentation:**Documents will include:**

- Relevant policies, procedures and practice standards
- Young Persons Guide to Care Planning
- Staff training documents – including “What Makes A Good Social Worker” document being developed by Wirral Children in Care Council
- Sample of care plans

Involvement of service users / public:

- The views of service users, in this case a sample of looked after children will be captured through the Children In Care Council
- Views of foster carers.

5. Key Communications:**Cabinet Member:**

- The scope document will be shared with the relevant portfolio holder at the start of the review (Portfolio folder for Children’s Services, Cllr Bernie Mooney).
- The draft report will also be discussed in advance of being finalised by the task & finish group, before being presented to the Children and Families Overview & Scrutiny Committee for approval.

Press Office:

- The scope document will be sent to the press office on approval.
- The final report will be referred to the press office for information.