



CHILDREN, YOUNG PEOPLE & EDUCATION COMMITTEE

Wednesday, 29 November 2023

REPORT TITLE:	CHILDREN LOOKED AFTER SUFFICIENCY STRATEGY
REPORT OF:	DIRECTOR OF CHILDREN, FAMILIES AND EDUCATION

REPORT SUMMARY

The 'sufficiency duty' requires Local Authorities and children's safeguarding partners to ensure sufficient local accommodation and support to meet the needs of children and young people in care, or to ensure that there is a plan in place to move towards that position.

The report presents an overview of the children in care, how long they have been in care and some of the reasons why children need to become looked after. The report details the current level of provision for children who are looked after which includes foster placements, residential homes and semi supported accommodation.

This strategy has been developed and incorporates the five themes within the Wirral Plan 2021 – 2026.

Safe & Pleasant Communities- We want our children to remain living in communities they are from with carers from those communities who will support children into activities within the community and leisure.

Brighter Futures – we want to build on the Early Help offer and improve the residential offer provision for our children.

Active and Healthy Lives - we want to narrow the gap of health inequalities by enabling our children in care to live active healthy lives and to have all of their health needs met.

Sustainable Environment - we want our children to live in the communities they were born into and reduce the number of children living out of borough.

Inclusive Economy - we want to grow the number of foster carers this is an opportunity to enter the labour market and provide a service to our most vulnerable children.

RECOMMENDATION/S

The Children, Young People and Education Committee is recommended to:

1. Endorse the Children Looked After and Care Leavers Strategy 2023-2026; and,
2. Agree to receive an update on the progress of the Strategy in 12 months.

SUPPORTING INFORMATION

1.0 REASON/S FOR RECOMMENDATION/S

- 1.1 The 'sufficiency duty' requires Local Authorities and children's safeguarding partners to ensure sufficient local accommodation and support to meet the needs of children and young people in care, or to ensure that there is a plan in place to move towards that position. This duty is set out in law through the Children Act 1989. It has since been strengthened by the introduction of Sufficiency Statutory Guidance (2010) and the Care Planning, Placement and Case Review Regulations (implementation April 2011).

2.0 OTHER OPTIONS CONSIDERED

- 2.1 The Local Authority are legally obliged to produce a sufficiency strategy. The Local Authority would not be fulfilling their statutory responsibilities if a strategy was not presented, not producing a strategy is not an option.

3.0 BACKGROUND INFORMATION

- 3.1 Finding the right home. Our primary goal is to ensure that children remain with their families, where this is safe and appropriate to do so. Where decisions have to be made where children live apart from their families, there needs to be the right provision range of accommodation commensurate to meet children's needs based upon their developmental history, as well as their anticipated future needs. who develop positive, caring and loving relationships with children. We want our children to feel a sense of belonging to where they live, belonging to families, belonging to communities, belonging to schools, belonging to friendship groups.

3.2 Profile of Looked After Children

Wirral are in line with statutory neighbours in relation to the number of children becoming looked after. This is in part due to the robust early help support available. There had been a significant increase of children becoming looked after following the 2016 inspection, but these children have now been supported and many have reached or will soon reach the age of adulthood.

3.3 Placement Types

As at the 31st March 2023 there were 772 Children Looked After (CLA) cared for by Wirral Council, of which 533(69%) were in foster care.

Of these children, 436 (57%) were living with Wirral Council approved foster carers, 216 were placed with mainstream carers and 220 with connected carers (family/friends who are foster carers), a further 97 children were living with Independent Agency Foster Carers. Out of the remaining 239 children - 89 children were placed in a residential setting, 45 semi-independent, 85 placed with parents and 17 subject to adoption placements.

3.4 Sufficiency trends

- a. There has been a steady decrease of children becoming looked after with a peak of 850 in 2018 to a figure of 773 in May 2023.
- b. There is evidence to highlight that some of the children coming into care have more complex behaviors than ever before particularly in relation to mental health issues and trauma.
- c. There has been a reliance on residential care and supported living for some young people where there has been insufficiency in terms of the numbers of foster carers. The data highlights a small increase in the number of children in residential care.
- d. More children now live with family members under kinship care arrangements.
- e. There is an increased demand in the local housing market with a short supply of available homes for young people and families.
- f. The numbers of unaccompanied and separated children have increased due primarily to the national transfer scheme of which Wirral is a member.

3.5 Forecast

Regional and National neighbours have shown an upturn in their figures potentially associated with austerity. Wirral has not followed this trend, and has seen a decrease in the number of children looked after. There is a direct correlation between areas of deprivation and children in care. There is clear evidence that the current strategies and early help offer are having an impact on reducing the looked after children and preventing children becoming looked after. Increased referrals over time normally have an impact further up the continuum of need which may translate into an increase in children becoming looked after. There has been an increase in the referrals, however, this has not converted into children becoming Looked After yet. We need to be very cautious in predicting future demand. Other Local Authorities have seen an increase of demand by 3% , with future predications that this may rise to 6%.

3.6 Predicting future resource needs

Our ambition is to ensure that 80% of children in care are placed in foster care. Currently 70 % of children in care are in foster placements.

3.7 Residential Children's Homes

Our ambition is to reduce the number of children requiring residential provision by 15% and place them in foster placements which have been tailored to meet their needs. If children need to go into residential care we will ensure that is the highest quality and we will continue to work closely with Juno. We will also progress the NHSE collaboration to develop a residential provision for children with a learning difficulty and/ or autism. Wirral will continue to work alongside our Liverpool City Region colleagues to reviewing the arrangements of a bespoke Partner Provider Arrangement (PPA) which seeks to encourage providers to work within the region to ensure that children looked after within the city region remain as close to home as possible.

- A. **Providing the right support for children with additional needs**
We have increased the capacity of our Willowtree provision. This facility now supports six (long term) placements for children and three placements for respite support. This means that we have increased the capacity of our local service to make sure that more children remain in Wirral and do not have to be placed outside of the borough.
- B. **Family reunification**
Wirral is committed to supporting children coming into our care to be protected from harm. However, we are also committed to supporting children to return home where it is safe to do so.
- C. **Residential to Foster Care**
Currently there are 10% of children in residential homes. Our ambition is to reduce numbers of children in residential care by 15% through targeted recruitment of specialist foster carers and the use of regulated supported accommodation for those children where this model of care is relevant and appropriate for their needs.
- D. **Supported Accommodation**
The Supported Accommodation sector will become a regulated environment by 2024. The forthcoming changes will mean that from April 2023, all providers will have had to register with Ofsted by the end of October 2023. From April 2024, Ofsted will commence a programme of inspection.
- E. **Adoption and Special Guardianship**
For those children where return to their birth family is not a viable option, adoption is a secure form of permanence. Adoption In Merseyside (AIM) is the regional adoption agency covering for local authorities.
- F. **Special Guardianship**
Wirral is committed to support connected carers as well as foster carers to pursue special guardianship orders where appropriate. Special guardianship

is a more secure form of permanence than a child remaining looked after when there is no necessity for this to continue.

3.8 Care Leavers

We want care experienced young people to live in safe, stable, and affordable homes which will provide their foundation for independent life. Alongside the housing department, we as corporate parents are responsible for supporting young people into appropriate accommodation.

There is a range of accommodation for our care leavers and we will continue to work with providers to give our young people more choice of accommodation provision.

3.9 Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children (UASC)

There has been an increase in unaccompanied and separated children within Wirral. This is primarily as a result of Wirral's engagement in the National Transfer Scheme. Our goal is to provide more accommodation locally and more support locally for young people who are separated from their families.

4.0 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

4.1 There are financial risks in relation to the cost of placements. Currently the cost of residential placements can have a significant impact on the budget. If the level of spending on residential placements is not managed and controlled, this could result in a significant financial overspend

5.0 LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

5.1 The Local Authority are legally obliged to write a sufficiency strategy. This duty is set out in law through the Children Act 1989. It has since been strengthened by the introduction of Sufficiency Statutory Guidance (2010) and the Care Planning, Placement and Case Review Regulations (implementation April 2011).

6.0 RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS: STAFFING, ICT AND ASSETS

6.1 There are no resource implications.

7.0 RELEVANT RISKS

7.1 The risks of not having a strategy would mean appropriate provision for children would not be considered on a strategic level, which would result in gaps of provision for children. The Local Authority would not be able to forward plan to identify the most suitable, cost-effective provision and could impact significantly on the budgets resulting in an overspend.

8.0 ENGAGEMENT/CONSULTATION

8.1 The Children in Care and Care Leavers council have been engaged with the accommodation options. There has been consultation with foster carers in relation to the revised offer.

9.0 EQUALITY IMPLICATIONS

9.1 Wirral Council has a legal requirement to make sure its policies, and the way it carries out its work, do not discriminate against anyone. An Equality Impact Assessment is a tool to help council services identify steps they can take to ensure equality for anyone who might be affected by a particular policy, decision or activity. There are no equality issues arising from this report.

10.0 ENVIRONMENT AND CLIMATE IMPLICATIONS

10.1 The sufficiency strategy aims support children to remain within their communities. When children are placed outside of their community Social Workers are travelling out of the area for visits and contact arrangements, this has a bigger carbon footprint with the travelling.

11.0 COMMUNITY WEALTH IMPLICATIONS

11.1. An increase of foster carers can mean employment opportunities for local people.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1 – Wirral Children Looked After Sufficiency Strategy
Appendix 2 – Fostering Annual Report
Appendix 3 – Young Person’s Guide to the Sufficiency Strategy

BACKGROUND PAPERS

Children Act 1989
Sufficiency Statutory Guidance (2010)
Care Planning, Placement and Case Review Regulations (implementation April 2011).

TERMS OF REFERENCE

This report is being considered by the Children, Young People and Education Committee in accordance with Section A of its Terms of Reference; “exercising management, oversight and delivery of services to children and young people in relation to their care, wellbeing, education or health, with the exception of any powers reserved to full Council”.

SUBJECT HISTORY (last 3 years)

Council Meeting	Date
Children, Young People & Education Committee	15.06.2021
	04.10.2021
	10.03.2022
	07.03.2023

