WIRRAL CHILDREN LOOKED AFTER SUFFICIENCY STRATEGY

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

#BETHE DIFFERENCE

WIRRAL

2023 – 2026

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FOREWORD

I am delighted to launch the Looked After Sufficiency Strategy 2023-2026 for our Children and Young People. As a corporate parent and Lead Member for Children, it is important we have the right type of home for our Looked After Children. We want our children and young people to feel supported, safe and have a sense of belonging to the communities and homes they live in. We are fortunate to have very committed and professional Foster Carers who provide wonderful homes for our children and young people. We will continue to recruit Foster Carers to enable more of our children and young people who need looking after to be cared for by our highly trained carers. For those children and young people who require a different type of home, the Providers of these homes will ensure they have a clear understanding of their roles and responsibilities in providing this provision for our children and young people. We will work with supporting our Foster Carers and Providers to ensure that any home our children and young people are placed in, that they feel safe, secure, and supported.

S A Powell-Wilde

Councillor Sue Powell-Wilde
Lead Member for Children

1. Duties and Responsibilities

We have a responsibility, by law, to provide sufficient accommodation and support which meets the needs of children and young people in care, and those who have recently left our care at the age of 18. This Sufficiency Strategy sets out how we will deliver on our duty to be good corporate parents for children and young people who are care experienced.

1.2 The Sufficiency Duty

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. Commissioning standards on securing sufficient accommodation and support for children in care also apply to children in need who are at risk of entering care or custody. We are required to produce a strategy that describes how we, working with our local partners, intend to meet this duty for the children and young people in our care. 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).

1.3 Corporate Parenting

Corporate Parenting is the responsibility of Wirral Council, working with our partners, to be loving, caring and aspirational for all children and young people who are in our care, or who have recently left our care as young adults. Our Corporate Parenting Strategy 2021-2023 sets out our vision for all care-experienced children and young people, the principles which underpin our approach to corporate parenting, and the outcomes we will work together to achieve. Our vision is the same for all children and young people in Wirral regardless of whether or not they have experience of living in care.

Every child and young person in Wirral should have the best possible start in life and the opportunity to thrive. We want to ensure children and young people receive the right support, at the right time, and in the right place. Being responsible and effective corporate parents, above all else, means protecting children and young people from harm and keeping them safe. It is also about always striving for their best interests, nurturing their ambitions, and helping our children and young people get the most out of life. Ultimately, it means they grow into independent and thriving young adults. At its heart, Corporate Parenting means always asking ourselves "would this be good enough for my child?".

1.4 Our Corporate Parenting Outcomes

As corporate parents, it is our responsibility to make sure that children in Wirral, who cannot live with their birth families, live in homes where they are safe, nurtured, loved and can be supported to meet their potential. To do this, we have to have enough of the right kinds of homes: foster homes, crisis care homes, residential homes, kinship carers, adopters, and a range of suitable and affordable accommodation for care experienced young people as they become young adults.

2. FINDING THE RIGHT HOME: A Sense of Belonging

Our aim in Wirral is to support children and young people to be cared for by people who develop positive, caring and loving relationships with children. We want our children to feel a sense of belonging. Belonging to families, belonging to communities, belonging to schools, belonging to friendship groups. 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.

- **Supporting children to remain at home with family/carers** - Strengthening families to support children remaining living at home.

- **Finding a place called home** - Identifying caring homes in Wirral the children to live safely and meet their potential.

- **Supporting stability at home** - Safe and stable homes mean that children remain secure and build positive attachments.

- **Steps to independence** - Promoting independence based upon the individual needs of children.

2.1 Guiding principles

1. Children and young people are best brought up in families.

2. Children and young people have a right to have their voices heard in decision-making that relates to their lives.

3. Children and young people who are in Wirral's care should be able to live and grow up in Wirral wherever possible.

4. Improved outcomes depend upon the building of trusted relationships with children, young people, and their families.

5. Working with children and families in a restorative way and with trauma informed approaches leads to better outcomes the trauma. Working with children restoratively and in trauma-informed ways, leads to better outcomes.

3. Profile of Wirral

Wirral is a large metropolitan area covering the northern 60 square miles of the peninsula between the Dee and Mersey Estuaries. Wirral is well known for the high quality of its countryside and coast, and transport links to Liverpool, Chester and North Wales.

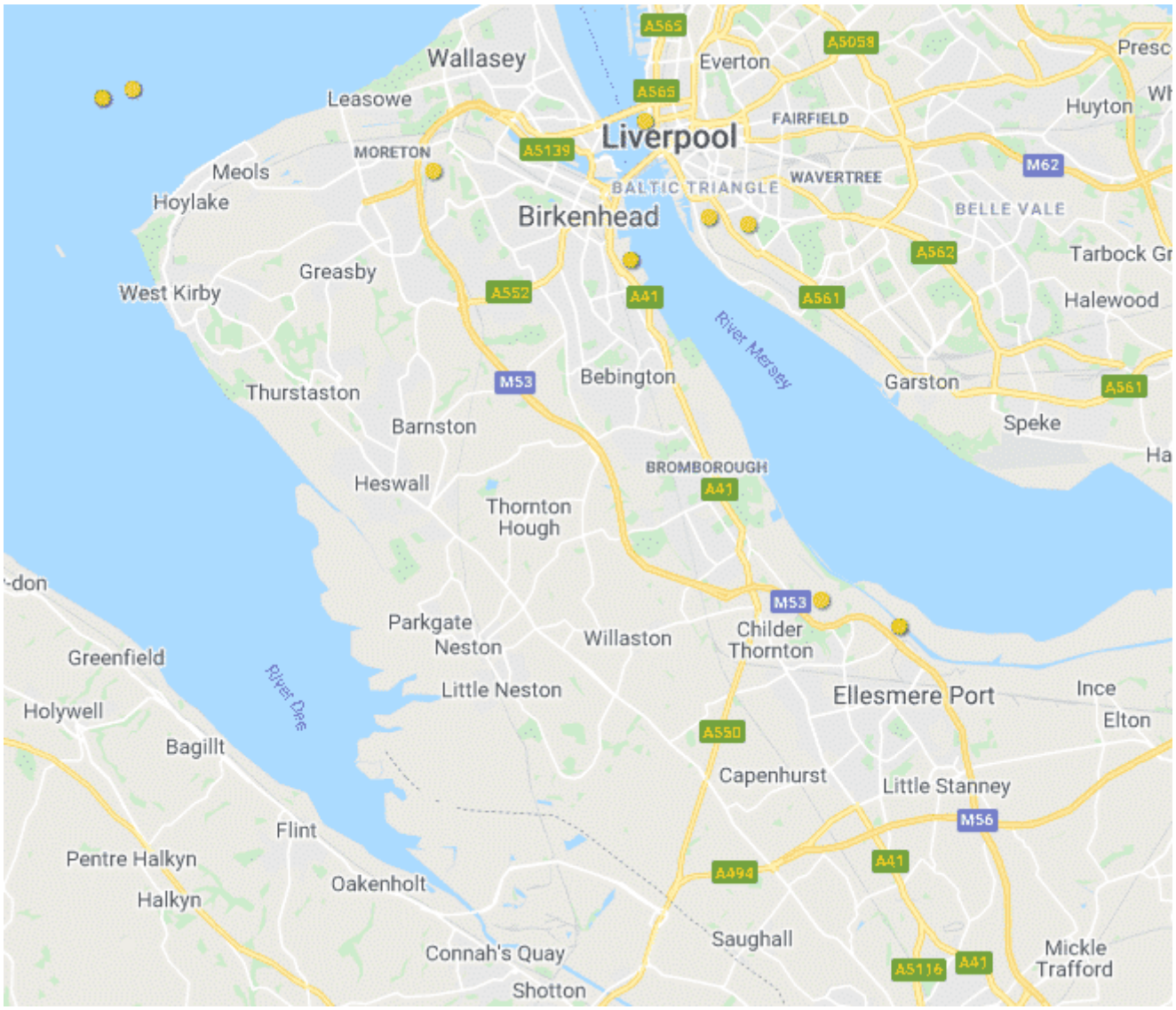
The borough is less well known as an area of strong contrasts. The predominantly built-up eastern area opposite Liverpool, forms part of the core of the Merseyside conurbation. Almost two-thirds of the population live within the urban area to the east of the M53 motorway, between the coastal resort of New Brighton in the north, to the entrance of the Manchester Ship Canal in the south. Birkenhead, located at the heart of east Wirral, is the largest town within the area, historically built around the maritime trades associated with the Mersey docklands, which have steadily declined since the 1960's. The majority of statutory work for partner agencies is with families from the 'dockland' areas of Wallasey and Birkenhead.

The population of Wirral is 322,796 (ONS, 2018) with an economically active population of 155,300 (ONS 2018). The proportion of people of working age, particularly of younger adults, is at its highest in central and inner areas of east Wirral. The proportion of older age groups is generally larger in the west. The population is predominantly white British (90%) but significant ethnic minority groups exists, particularly Irish, Chinese and Polish.

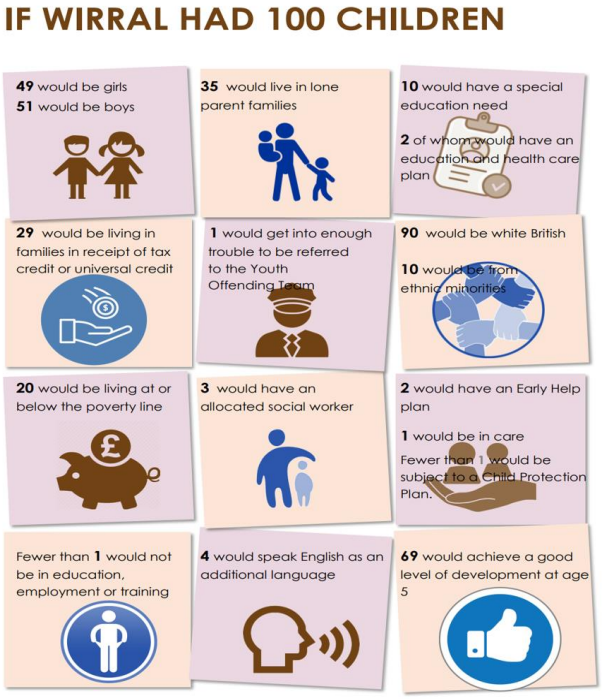
There are approximately 67,508 children (0 to 17 years) living in the borough. Of the total population, this equates to 21% of the population being aged under 18. Of all children, 17.4 % live in poverty (**Wirral Compendium of Statistics, 2021**). The current rate of Children Looked After is 120 per 10,000 with 567 children in Foster Care.

In the latest Index of Multiple Deprivation, Wirral was ranked 77th most deprived authority out of 326. Although Wirral's overall ranking for deprivation has gone down between 2015 and 2019, the number of LSOAs in the most deprived 20% of areas in England has increased by 10. This means that an additional 20,000 residents are now classed as living in deprivation compared to 2015 (IMD 2019).

3.2 Map of Wirral

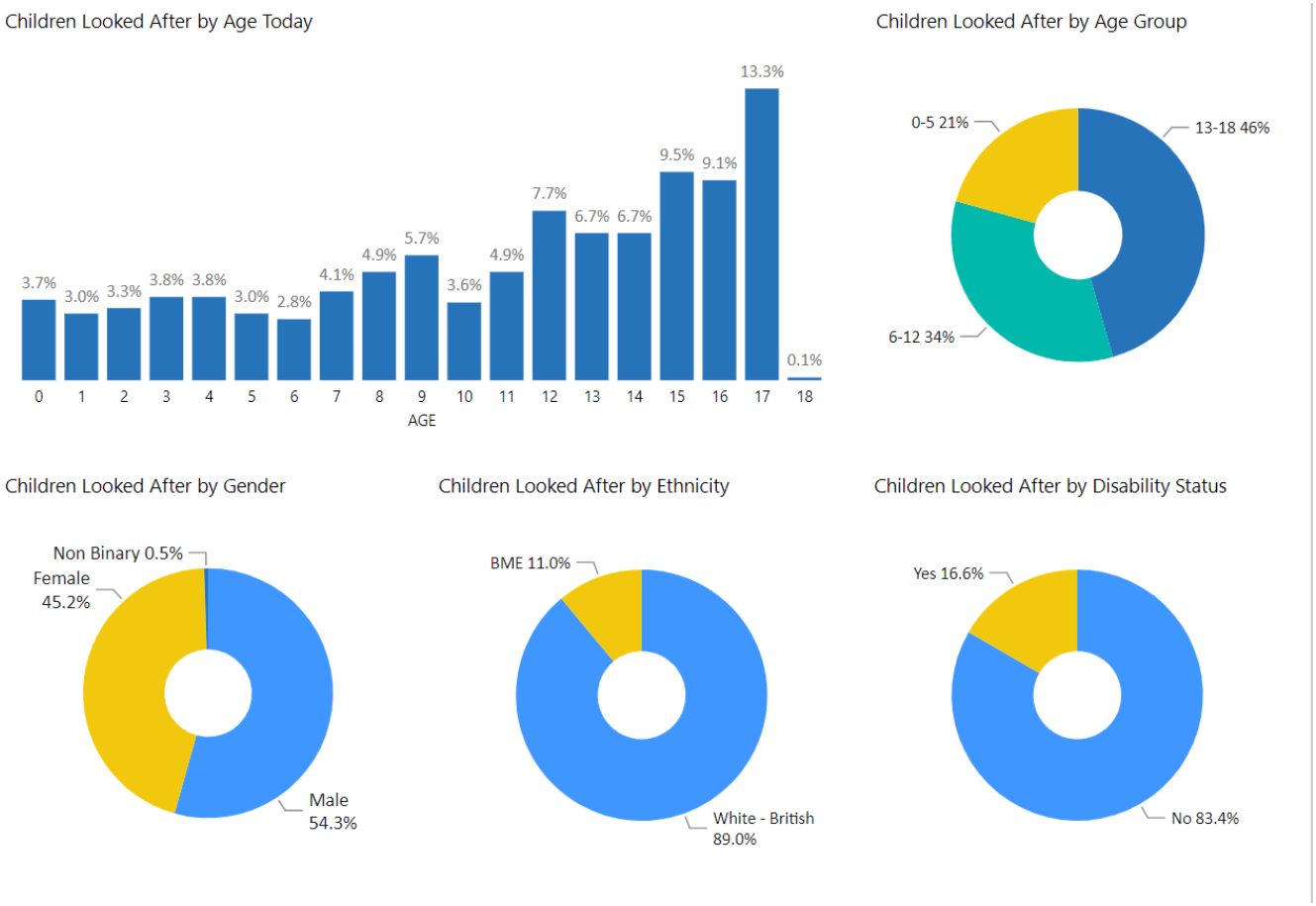


3.3 Disparity in Wirral



4. Profile of Looked After Children

Table 1 (October 2023)



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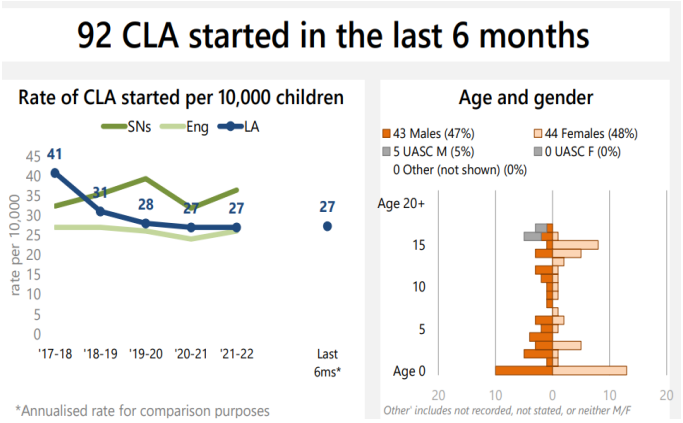
5. Number of Children becoming Looked After

5.1 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.

Table 2 (August 2023)



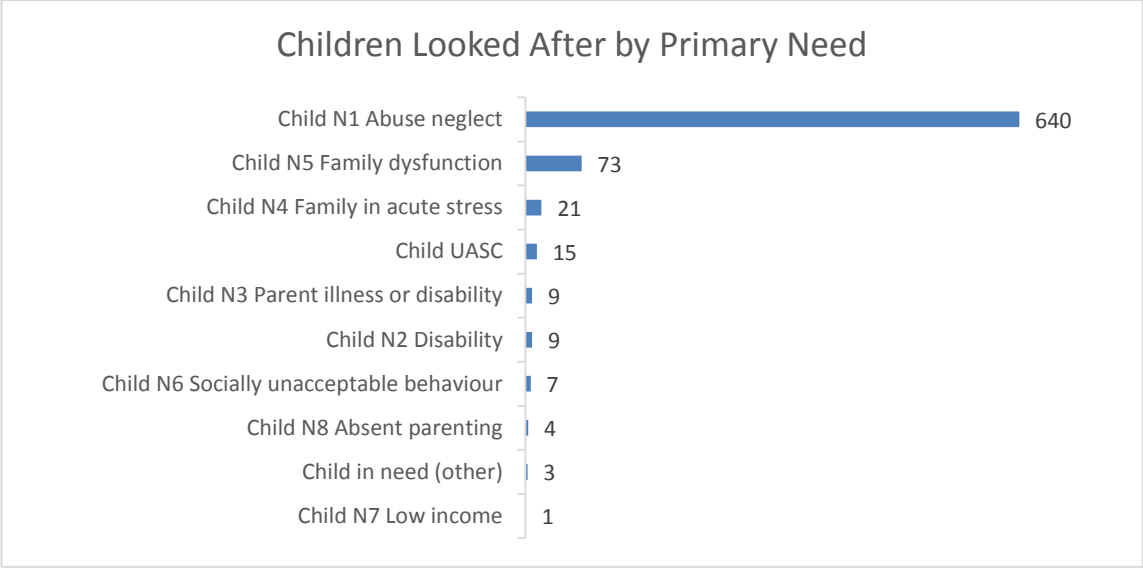
5.2 Wirral has seen a decrease in the number of Children Looked After. This has been a combination of less children becoming looked after and high numbers leaving care which in the main was in relation to the number reaching the age of 18 who were brought into care following the 2016 Ofsted Inspection. As can be seen from the graph below the rates of children becoming looked after within Wirral is decreasing compared to statistical neighbours and the England average both of which are showing an upturn in numbers

Table 3

Rate of Children in Care per 10,000	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23	2023/24
Wirral	123.0	120.0	122.0	120.0	115.8	114.0
Target Range*	92 - 104					ABOVE
Stat Neighbours	94.8	100.9	101.8	104.7		
North West	94.0	97.0	97.0	97.0		
England	65.0	67.0	67.0	70.0		

* Based on +/- 1 SD from the SN group for the last five years

Table 4 (August 2023) Primary Reason for Children becoming Looked After



6. 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.

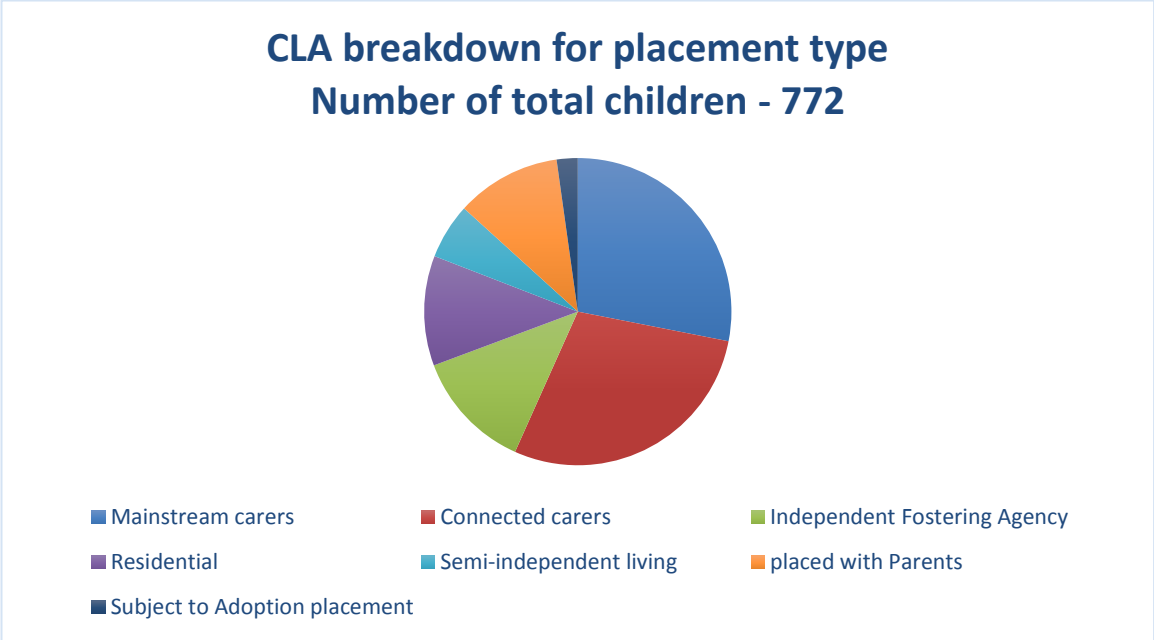


Table 5 (Data August 2023)

Wirral is broadly in line with neighbouring authorities in relation to the number of children ceasing to become Looked After, but we are ambitious and want to build upon and increase the support available which has had an inpact on children coming into care. We want to safely reduce the number of children in our care by providing the right support to parents and safely discharging care orders when appropriate.

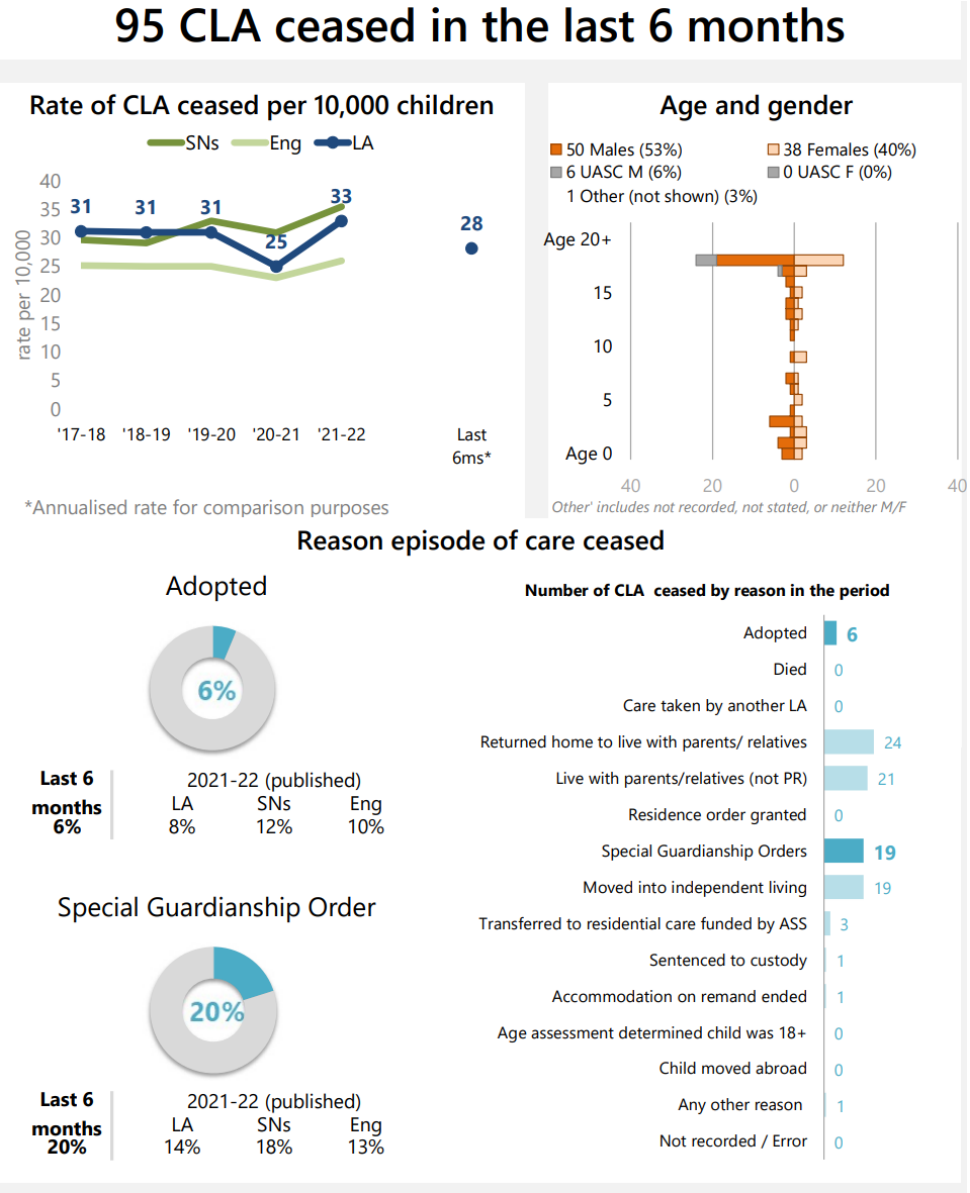
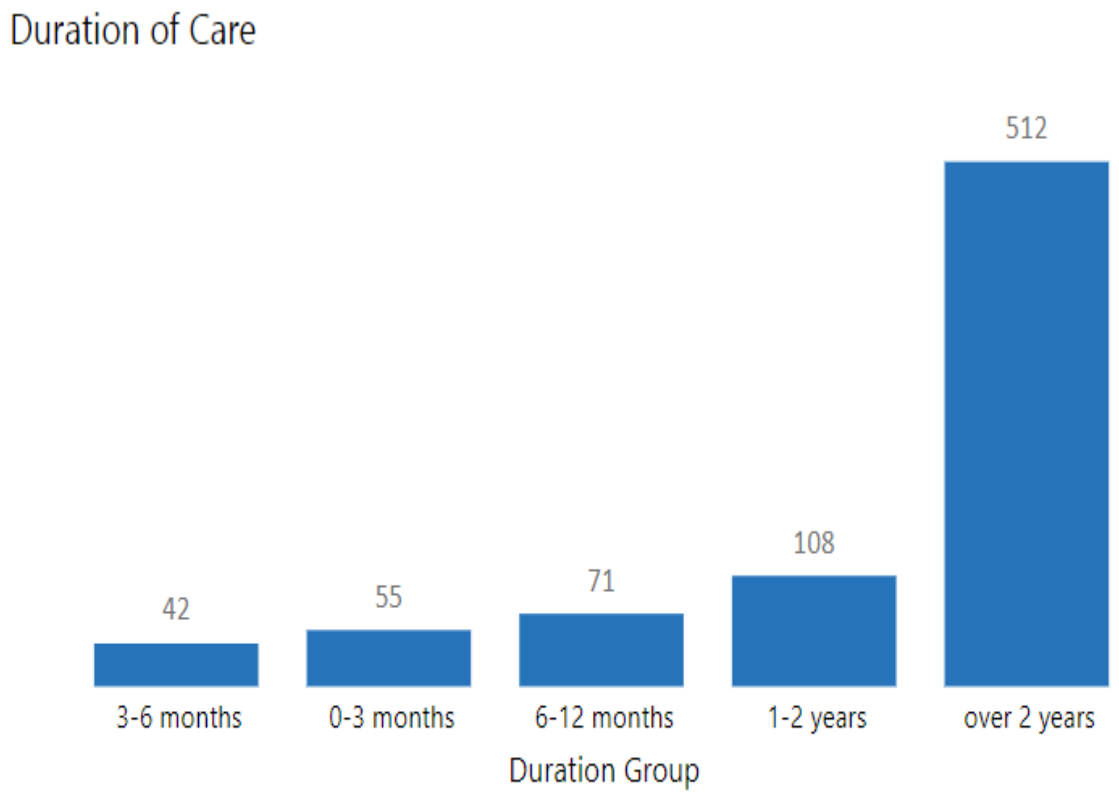


Table 7 (August 2023)

This table shows the majority of our children remain in care over 2 years.



7. Analysis of the demand

- The highest demand for children becoming looked after as of 31 March 2022 is for children aged 10 to 15, 35% which is higher than both National 27% and North West 26% figures.
- The largest cohort of children in care by age is the 10 to 15 age group, 340 on 31 March 2022, this equates to 43.1% of the total CLA. This is also the hardest group to find placements for.
- Our use of foster placements is 71%, which is comparable with the National figure of 70% but higher than North West figure of 66%.
- Use of residential placements is 13%; England Average 16% and North West 14% (Secure Units, Children's homes and Semi-independent accommodation).
- 12% of children looked after are placed with their parents, which is higher than the England average which is 7%, but comparable with North West average which is 12%.
- 2% of CLA are placed for adoption which is lower than the National average 3% but comparable with North West 2%.
- 80% of Wirral children are placed inside the LA boundary within 20 miles or less of their home, which is a higher number than in similar authorities. England average is 49% and North West 56%.
- 9% Wirral children are placed outside LA boundary within 20 miles or less of their home, which is a lower number than in similar authorities. England average is 23% and North West 26%
- Wirral has experienced increased numbers of children placed in semi supported accommodation, currently (August 23) 5% of our CLA population. This increased demand carries increased costs as expensive packages of care are required to support vulnerable young people when there isn't foster placement availability.
- We have 13% of our Looked After Children aged 17 who will require appropriate accommodation when they leave care.
- 65% of our children have been looked after longer than 2 years.

8. Sufficiency trends and challenges

a. Less children are coming into our care. If we look at the data from the last five years in 2018 numbers approach the peak of 850 CLA. In March 2023 there were 772 children Looked After. It has been difficult to predict the impact of COVID, however, we are seeing children with a range of complex needs, particularly poor mental wellbeing. Ongoing support and the impact of early help and prevention has seen less children becoming Looked After and safely returning children back home to parents or family which in turn has reduced numbers.

b. There is a limited number of specialist mental health units, in addition many children do not meet the criteria for this provision, but still have very high levels of need, particularly in relation to mental health. This in turn has meant significant and expensive packages of care for children who are Looked After and have to remain in residential placements.

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. We have supported more children to remain living locally to Wirral, and this aim is embedded within our placement finding practice with only a small proportion of young people placed outside of area contingent on specific issues and risks. We want to

ensure we continue to place more children locally and not out of borough. This is to maintain local connections and local support available.

e. There are more children coming into care who have additional support needs. Many of these young people have an EHCP or are being assessed for disabilities and complex mental health issues.
f. Fewer children are being placed for adoption. This is as a result of overall numbers of people wanting to adopt being lower. This appears to be a national trend.
g. More children now live with family members under kinship care arrangements.
h. There have been examples of 'exceptional care packages' provided for children with complex mental health issues where they are not deemed to be the criteria under section 2/3 of the mental health act. These young people are sometimes provided with inadequate care in terms of the staff supporting them, the environment in which they are being placed/held, and there is often a delay in finding the right placement match for these young people.
i. There is an increased demand in the local housing market with a short supply of available homes for young people and families.
j. The numbers of unaccompanied and separated children have increased due primarily to the national transfer scheme of which Wirral is a member. Our aim is to support more young people to be placed locally and not in Liverpool, developing links with local communities here in Wirral.
k. The legislation has changed which will mean supported accommodation providers will need to be registered with Ofsted by October 2023- This is likely to impact on the availability of appropriate accommodation, as not all providers will pursue this.

9. Forecasting July 23

Original predications whilst still true, do not take into account the impact of covid and coming out of the pandemic. Over the past couple of years, the National rate of CLA has increased by 3%. It is predicted that this demand will at least double to 6%. We know that the rate of inflation is estimated to rise by 9% which will mean the cost of living will increase and will have a significant impact on our residents living in the most deprived Wards of the borough.
There is a direct correlation between areas of deprivation and children in care. With an increase in the cost of living, we can expect to see increases in domestic violence, parental mental health and drug & alcohol abuse which can all impact the number of children we see required care.

The following table/chart looks at the anticipated, future CLA numbers (as per the 22/23 savings target) but also takes into account the following predicated increases in demand:

1) +3% increase in demand based on National trend over past two years.
2) +6% forecasted increase in demand as demand is expected to double as we come out of covid and deal with inflation rise.

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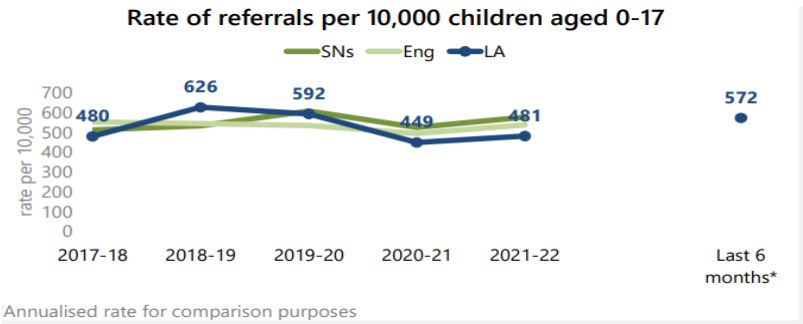
1) +3% increase in demand based on National trend over past two years.
2) +6% forecasted increase in demand as demand is expected to double as we come out of covid and deal with inflation rise.

Year	Anticipated CLA outturn	+3% (if Wirral were to follow National Trend)	+6% (Anticipated increase in demand)
22/23	792	816	840
23/24	768	791	814
24/25	750	773	795
25/26	730	752	774
26/27	716	737	759
27/28	706	727	748
28/29	695	716	737
29/20	681	701	722

10. Predicted Future Demand

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. The figures in the table above have a revised set of numbers which is in the medium range to forecast. Wirral has not seen the upturn like statistical neighbours, however, what is emerging is the increasing demand. An additional 3% upturn has been added to these projections to take into account the increased projected demand associated with austerity, this is the current increase in demand seen by statistical neighbours.



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. Currently Wirral are not seeing this trend as there are a number of initiatives in place and a strong early help

offer, however the LA has to be cautious in setting the figures too low to effectively safeguard children. It is important to maintain support to families at the earliest point to prevent children coming into care. We also need to look at support available to children and families who are currently looked after to try and have them safely returned home, and not requiring statutory services.

11. What our Young People are Telling Us

- Decisions about 'Staying Put' and the way in which it is communicated, if there is no plan for Staying Put this can lead to feeling insecure in placement. Young people need transparency around future planning and honest conversations with foster carers and their social worker.
- Accommodation after University can be difficult to resolve as young people will lose accommodation and go on to the bottom of property pool lists.
- There is a lack of supported accommodation.
- Young people would like trained mentors to help with a wide variety of issues from housing, to accessing health needs and talking through their employment and training options.
- Young people would like more training for foster carers to happen in the evening so that young people are able to attend.
- Young people often struggle to get a guarantor when trying to move into a property.

What are we doing?

- The Care Leavers team are communicating with the fostering service to establish improved and supportive communication on the issue of 'Staying Put.'
- Accommodation post University is supported by the PA service to ensure that Young People who are care lavers are prioritised so strong links with housing colleagues are integral.
- Supported accommodation is being expanded with the commissioning service ensuring that new providers meet regulations.
- 'Staying Close' service will provide mentors aimed at intensive support for care leavers (implementing July 2023).
- Many foster carers have caring responsibilities in the evening, so it is hard to fit training in the evening consistently, but some courses are being considered by the foster service.
- The Guarantor scheme is being implemented in July 2023 as part of a long-standing Corporate Parenting Operational Group Action.

12. Sufficiency Priorities

12.1 Early Help

Working across Wirral our multiagency early help services support children and families to get the right help at the right time. Families are supported to avoid the need to receive support from statutory children's services. Developing our early help support is a key priority and we have developed a blend of online resources and direct work with families aimed at supporting children and families in the community. The support in place is also aimed at

reducing the number of children young people entering care as well as reducing the number of children experiencing harm within Wirral and improving their experience of childhood.

What are we doing?

- We are moving into a locality-based model supporting multiagency teams to offer support children and families at the earliest opportunity.
- We are rolling out systemic practice across children services and partner agencies are building on the strength and resilience of families.
- We are working 'with families' not 'doing to' families.
- We are continuing to build on our online resources in terms of the 'Family Toolkit'.

12.2 Finding The Right Home: A Sense of Belonging

12.3 Fostering

For children in care fostering can be a short-term or long-term option depending on their individual circumstances. We want to meet the individual needs of children and young people living with fostering families. This means ensuring that their racial and cultural needs, their learning style, their age and stage of development and ability is reflected in the fostering placement provided. Our ambition is to enable 80% of children in care to live in foster care.

Context

- Wirral Council's in-house fostering service has a total of 150 fostering households registered, with 152 connected carer households.
- Fostering recruitment in the past two years has managed to keep pace with ensuring the numbers of foster carers remain relatively stable, however there has not been overall growth due to the number of de- registrations at the same time as recruitment increases.
- New funding for foster carers were agreed during May 2023. This has meant that there has been uplift for all foster carers of 11% across the skills banding payment received. This is to assist with the retention and recruitment within our foster carer cohort. Additionally, we have provided to other payment bandings focused on children with specialist/therapeutic needs. These are teenagers where residential would otherwise be the only option, and complex children, who are children with disabilities and complex care needs.
- We have developed a 'Staying Put' offer for young people to remain at the foster carer's home once they become 18 years old.
- We have developed the SKillZ programme to support children in foster care to gain life skills and independent skills. The next phase of this program is being promoted online and with completion actively with the foster carer.
- We have developed links between foster carers and our mental health well-being services -Polaris and Open Door, ensuring that foster carers are aware services, the support they offer to children and young people as well as foster carers in terms of consultation and support around children's emotional health and well-being.
- We are also rolling out additional therapeutic and attachment-based training through a

variety of methods to support consistency of our therapeutic parenting approach across foster carers ensure we have a consistent approach to fostering recruitment across Wirral carry out targeted recruitment within Wirral for specific cohorts.

- Historically there has been a lack of foster placements that work with teenagers who may have a range of complex needs and be involved in criminal exploitation, substance misuse, and antisocial behaviour additionally there has been a lack of available foster placement for children with complex needs such as learning disabilities.
- Wirral has provided two additional banding payments for foster carers who can be recruited to these skill sets. These will be experienced carers and be offered an additional layer of support from the fostering service to enable his placement to progress long-term. Additionally, these carers will be engaged with peer mentor support.
- Wirral has a dedicated offer of support to former foster carers through the staying put programme.
- The data highlights that Wirral is doing benchmarked against the rest of England but in the past year there has been a 3% drop in 'Staying Put' placements.
- We have recently collaborated with regional neighbours and have been awarded a bid from the DfE which will support recruitment and retention and the development of the mockingbird model.

Staying Put Published Data

		Total living with former foster carers in the current year									
		Aged 18					**Aged 19-20**				
		2018	**2019**	**2020**	**2021**	**2022**	**2018**	**2019**	**2020**	**2021**	**2022**
England	**Number**	1,810	1,970	1,980	2,140	2,240	1,620	1,700	1,890	2,060	2,190
	Percentage	55%	57%	58%	60%	62%	26%	26%	28%	30%	31%
North West	**Number**	250	260	260	280	280	280	280	290	300	300
	Percentage	62%	60%	62%	64%	61%	35%	34%	34%	35%	35%
Wirral	**Number**	14	10	18	17	16	21	22	15	21	21
	Percentage	47%	50%	53%	71%	52%	38%	38%	30%	39%	36%

- We want to equip and support our young people to develop independent life skills through their transition into adulthood.
- We have supported staff with therapeutic life story training so that young people can better understand their history and experience and support management of their emotions and feelings in relation to their history.
- We want to better understand the skills of foster carers and build on them with a new training offer harnessing online training, but also balancing this with high quality face-to-face training particularly in areas around attachment, therapeutic parenting where

the learning from one another, the conversations and the face-to-face training will be vital. A new training framework for foster carers will be available by June 2023 expanding and enhancing the previous offer.

- We want to make sure that foster carers have the right support financially and payments for foster carers have been uplifted during May 2023 recognising the key roles that they hold and the support and care they offer our children. The payments are also aimed at recruitment and retaining our foster carers.

12.4 Residential children's homes

We understand that to secure the most appropriate placement for our looked after children, it is important to capture their views alongside their needs effectively within the placement referral. This aids the decision making to ensure their wishes and feelings are met. This should be done within a timely manner to avoid unnecessary delay. Ultimately the aim is to prevent the risk of placement breakdown.

Wirral has worked closely with Juno which is a community interest company and in May 2023 first home opened in Oxton in Birkenhead. The model of care is a social pedagogy model where children will fully feel part of the home, and the aim is to create a family/community feel where children experience love and nurture and that their placements are planned to be supported for the duration they are needed. There are 10 homes planned for the Liverpool city region and a second home has been purchased in Wirral and is in the process of being re-developed.

In collaboration with the NHS Wirral is in the process of purchasing a three bedded home focusing on short-term/respite/crisis care for children with a learning difficulty and/or autism. A clinical care team has been commissioned to provide the service the home is in the final stages of purchase completion.

A further development for short-term care for children experiencing mental health problems is available to the jointly commissioned between the NHS and the Local Authority. This home is in the early stages of development and data analysis is underway to ascertain the specific cohort of children the home is aimed at supporting. Initial scoping is identified that an integrated care team including NHS and Social Care staff with a heavy emphasis on community outreach support is likely to be the best model to meet local need and support young people to avoid Tier 4 accommodation and stays within hospital settings.

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.

What we will do

- Continually review the placement referral and risk assessment consultation with regional colleagues and providers to ensure that we are clearly capturing the voice of the child and presenting clear and accurate information that aids the identification and matching to a placement.
- Support social workers to access external training from the Care Leaders organisation

to help them understand the importance and need to improve the quality of commissioning documents in order to avoid children being inappropriately matched and/or placed out of borough.

- We will continue to work with social workers to understand how best to utilise the commissioning process in order to achieve the right placement and support for their child.
- Support social workers to understand what their responsibilities are before, during and after a placement is made.
- We will, always, seek to avoid placing children in unregistered and unregulated settings within accommodations that are unsuitable and could place children at risk.
- Carry out regular monitoring to ensure that placements are delivering the best outcomes for children and that all of their identified needs are met.
- Develop a commissioning link with local providers to build on already established relationships as we work to ensure children and young people have access to the services they require and to develop programmes of independence to begin developing independence skills.

12.5 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 is 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. There has been significant investment in terms of the infrastructure of the building, as well as investment in making the home feel more 'homely' with redecoration and new furnishings.

12.6 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. Where parents/carers are able to be supported and ongoing assessment and analysis alongside a regular reviewing process via the Independent Reviewing Officer service, then rehabilitation plans can be successful.

12.7 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.

12.8 Supported Accommodation

Young people, although approaching adulthood still need to feel cared for, have positive boundaries and guidance in place to support them in making that transition. We will ensure they are well-prepared to leave our care and have a range of accommodation options available to them. Our aim is to work collaboratively with this sector to ensure good quality and appropriate accommodation for our care experienced young people.

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.

The current purchasing framework, facilitated by Placements Northwest, will close and re-open in October in line with the application window for providers to register with Ofsted. After October 2023 we will no longer be able to place young people in unregulated settings. By having a purchasing system in place, this ensures that young people are placed in accommodation that is safe and of high quality and ensures that young people are supported by appropriately qualified and trained support staff.

What we will do

- We will work with colleagues across the Liverpool City Region and with our partner Registered Housing providers to develop an approach that understands 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 experienced young people.
- This will include engagement with young people 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.
- Ensure that we engage with providers and support them to work together to understand and apply the new regulatory framework and the associated responsibilities.
- Review all young people placed in supported accommodation to ensure there is no negative impact should any of our current providers not meet the regulatory standards.
- Continue to work with our partner Registered Provider to deliver a step-down from residential care before they transition into adulthood. The scheme aims to develop the independence skills and build resilience within a group living environment initially before having the opportunity to test their skills within self-contained accommodation which is also a part of the scheme.

12.9 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. This footprint creates a larger pool of potential adopters and shares resources. The AIM annual report outlines the agency's performance, activity, and future development year to year.

What we will do

- Ensure that where adoption is the right plan for children that we work tirelessly in collaboration with AIM to make this happen.

- We will ensure that children will have effective permanence plans when they come into our care
- Increase the numbers of Adopters regionally through targeted recruitment.
- Ensure timely assessment for both prospective Adopters and for children.
- Ensure appropriate therapeutic services and assessments for children and carers to support the stability of our adoptions.

12.10 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.

What will we do

- Ensure that children are identified early where special guardianship is a potential permanence plan
- Skill up the workforce to ensure training and support available to practitioners to promote special guardianship.
- Continue to develop supportive packages to carers in order to promote special guardianship. This can include some financial elements (which can be a barrier for some carers), as well as development of the special guardianship team to provide support to carers prior and following a special guardianship order being made.
- Develop a team with specific expertise in relation to special guardianship to support carers as well as frontline teams in improving outcomes for these children.

13. Leaving our care as a care leaver

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.

August 2023

Care leavers by age and eligibility

(where numbers appear red, please check eligibility/age criteria)

	Eligible	Relevant	Former Relevant	Qualifying	Other	**Total**
16	75	0	0	0	0	75
17	92	7	0	2	0	101
18	0	0	75	0	0	75
19	0	0	99	0	0	99
20	0	0	79	0	0	79
21	0	0	26	0	0	26
22	0	0	17	0	0	17
23	0	0	5	0	0	5
24	0	0	0	0	0	0
Other	0	0	0	0	0	0
Total	167	7	301	2	0	477

Care leaver eligibility summary (please refer to DfE guidance for full eligibility criteria)

Eligible	~ Age 16 or 17 ~ Has been looked after for at least 13 weeks since age 14 (can be multiple periods) ~ Currently looked after
Relevant	~ Age 16 or 17 ~ Has been looked after for at least 13 weeks since age 14 (can be multiple periods) ~ Looked after on or after their 16th birthday ~ No longer looked after
Former Relevant	~ Aged between 18 and 25 ~ Previously an eligible or relevant child (see above definitions)
Qualifying (Annex A requires only those requesting and receiving a service)	~ Aged between 16 and 21 (or 25 if in education) ~ Looked after on or after their 16th birthday ~ **Not** looked after for at least 13 weeks since age 14 or ~ privately fostered after the age of 16 but before the age of 18 or ~ were looked after prior to becoming subject to a SGO

Most of the council's care leavers will access local accommodation through one of the following pathways:

Staying Put
An agreed arrangement between the former foster carer, young person and children's services, which enables the young person to remain with their former carer up to 21. This is a funded arrangement.

Mainstay
A mainstay application is made for Care Leavers who require supported accommodation, which is provided by partner agencies such as Forum Housing, Wirral Supported lodgings. Following the application, a mainstay assessment is undertaken, and an appropriate

accommodation offer will be made by one of the agencies. This process is managed by the Council Housing Options team.

Property Pool
Young people can register on Property Pool from 16+ and as Care Leavers they will be awarded a" Band B status" for housing. There is limited capacity in this option locally.

Private rented accommodation
Young people can be supported if they are tenancy ready to apply for privately rented properties within the community.

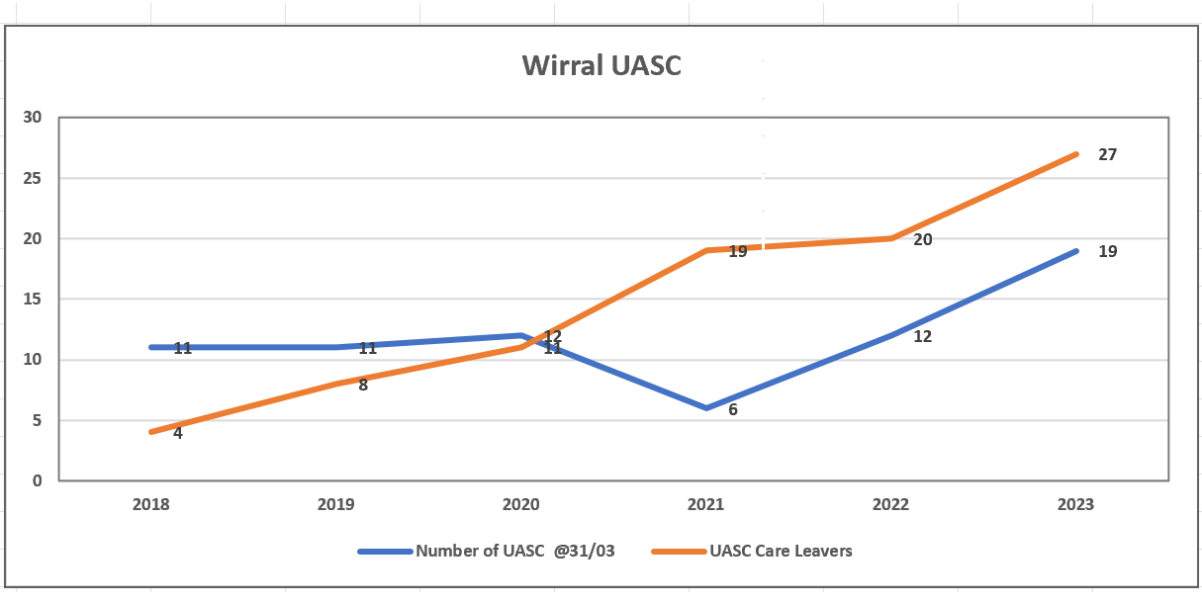
One of the identified barriers for some younger 17 and 18 year old independent care leavers who are tenancy ready is the requirement from some private rented and social landlords is for a tenancy guarantor. The Leaving Care Service is currently working with the Council's Housing Department to pilot a rent guarantee scheme with a small number of private landlords where the Council acts as the guarantor for a limited period. The scheme has a strict application and independent living competency based assessment with ongoing support for both landlord and young person from the Leaving Care Service.

What we will do

- We will support young people to move into suitable properties prior to being 18 where the local authority will act as a guarantor to the landlord.
- We will develop our SKILLZ programme moving some aspects of it online, to be supported via residential and fostering staff within the community in order to make it more accessible to young people.
- Continue to set targets and development plans for young people to engage in education and training.
- Continue to support young people who are care experienced into apprenticeships within the council whilst also working council corporate procurement services to secure further employment opportunities with council contractors through social value measures.

14. 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. Wirral are expecting an increase in UASC- from 13 to 67.



What we will do

- Increase the offer in Wirral to reduce the reliance on accommodation in Liverpool for our UASC population.
- Work with providers to ensure a blend of residential and supported accommodation locally that meets children's needs.
- Reduce the reliance on accommodation in Liverpool for our UASC population.
- Support children to be placed within communities where they can access and gain support from their cultural background.
- Ensure foster carers receive appropriate training on supporting young people from a range of ethnic and cultural backgrounds to support children to receive the care they need and to promote placement stability.

15. Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND)

A transformation of SEND services in Wirral is currently in progress. There has been a redesign of SEND services with an improvement plan and a new strategy in place. We have designed a system to provide care and support close to home, linked to local communities and personalise as far as possible. A significant proportion of children are care and care experienced young people have SEND. Our focus is on ensuring providing the right support the right time for Social Emotional and Mental Health (SEMH) needs and in relation to Autism and speech and language and communication needs (SLCN). Our aim is to build individual, family and community resilience to support young people to thrive and become independent adults within their community and family settings.

16. Mental Health and Emotional Well Being

We know that children looked after and care experienced young people often have high levels mental health problems than the wider population. As a result of that Wirral has provided bespoke commission services to provide mental health and emotional well-being support to children and young people in care and who are care experienced since April 2020.

This has been provided through Polaris (private provider) and Open Door (local charity) under the banner of Oomoo. Oomoo has worked in collaboration with CAMHS and other mental health providers locally to ensure cohesive and collaborative support to children looked after and care experienced young people, as well as their wider support network including foster carers.

What we will do

- The service is being reviewed Mid 2023 with a view to either focus on recommissioning services, or a blend of recommissioning and providing services in house potentially providing a more integrated support system for children, foster carers, other caring professionals such as residential workers, and social work staff and allied professionals.
- The plan is to ensure that some of the savings in reductions in children being accommodated in residential care take the wider support for children to focus on prevention of mental health and emotional well-being problems, and to improve placement stability across the cohort.
- Continue the collaborative work with CAMHS and allied mental health professionals.
- Develop the Single Point Of Access (SPA) for all children in relation to their mental health and emotional well-being.
- Continue to develop the Alliance model of commissioning supporting local providers in ensuring a collaborative, wide-ranging and holistic network of support to children in a timely way. CLA and Care experienced young people will be able to access services in the same way as everyone else with this model, and also experience the additionality of the bespoke offer specifically for CLA and care experienced young people currently being developed and implemented early in 2024

17. Conclusion

We want all our children to grow up and have a strong sense of belonging to their families, communities, schools, and friends. We want families to have the right support to prevent our children becoming Looked After. The robust Early Help offer has enabled children to be safely supported at home, we need to build on this. When children do need to become Looked After we will look at the highest quality of provision to meet their needs.

Wirral has made great strides forward in the provision of high-quality fostering and residential placements across the locality in recent years. The provision of Wirral's own in-house fostering service allied to a strong commissioning team who maintain the quality assurance of a range of providers and are engaged in the matching process for children and young people ensure there is a strong base to operate from.

Our aim is to increase the availability of high-quality care placement options for children, improving the placement stability, and available wider support particularly around mental health available to our children looked after and care leavers. In tandem with this we will continue to ensure only the right children enter care, and that where appropriate children are supported to be rehabilitated home safely.

The proportion of our children in foster placements also is better than our statistical

neighbours. A significant pressure for Wirral are individual care packages and placements that go beyond the average unit costs.

Local Authorities use this provision to support young people 16 +. Whilst this is cheaper than residential it is a real area of risk due to the changes requiring them to register with Ofsted from October 23. Whilst the DfE have provided an additional £250k as with the residential provisions, it is anticipated there will be some “uncontrollable costs” from providers as seen within the residential cohort.

Finally, whilst there is a downward trajectory of CLA this could change with the emerging increase in referrals. The LA have not seen the upturn other authorities have, this in part is due to the comprehensive early help offer. The newly formed Emergency Response Team that has already evidenced significant impact and cost avoidance on preventing children becoming looked after, or maintaining their current placement whilst a more appropriate placement is identified. We will continue to be innovative in striving for the best for our children and young people.