

# Public Document Pack

## CHILDREN, YOUNG PEOPLE & EDUCATION COMMITTEE

Monday, 23 September 2024

Present:

Councillor S Bennett (Chair)

Councillors	P Basnett	I Lewis
	P Jobson	C Baldwin
	Cooper	A Onwuemene
	L Luxon-Kewley	J Grier
	V Wilson	C Carubia

40 **WELCOME AND INTRODUCTION**

The Chair welcomed everyone to the meeting as well as those watching the webcast and reminded them that a copy of the webcast would be retained on the Council's website for two years.

41 **APOLOGIES**

The Chair informed the committee that no apologies had been received.

42 **MEMBERS CODE OF CONDUCT - DECLARATIONS OF INTERESTS**

Members were asked to consider whether they had any disclosable pecuniary interests and/or any other relevant interests in connections with any item on the agenda and, if so, to declare them and state the nature of the interest.

Councillor Paula Basnett declared a personal interest as she was a foster carer.

Councillor Amanda Onwuemene declared a personal interest as a close family member was a foster carer.

43 **MINUTES**

Councillor Graeme Cooper noted that he was not listed as attending the meeting held on 23 July 2024 and that he would like it to be recorded that he had attended that meeting,

With that correction accepted, it was:

**Resolved – That the minutes of the meeting held on 23 July 2024 be approved as a correct record.**

#### 44 **PUBLIC AND MEMBERS QUESTIONS**

The Chair noted that no public questions, statements or petitions had been received.

#### 45 **CORPORATE PARENTING ANNUAL REPORT**

The Head of Service Permanence presented a report on behalf of the Director of Children, Families and Education. The report provided the Children, Young People and Education Committee with an account of progress for children in care and care leavers. As Corporate Parents, members would appreciate the need to provide effective care and support to children and young people, ensuring that their outcomes are appropriately monitored. Whilst the Corporate Parenting Board provided regular oversight, it was appropriate that all members of the committee were sighted on progress through an annual report.

The Corporate Parenting Annual Report covered the four priority areas from the local strategy:

- Emotional and Physical Health & Wellbeing
- Independence and Transition to Adulthood
- Positive Lived Experiences
- Education and Employment

Areas of improvement and those for development were highlighted within the annual report, and priorities for the following 12-month period were identified.

Members queried what was covered within the Personal Education Plans (PEPs) mentioned on pages 29 and 30 of the report, and asked what was being reviewed; targets of the paperwork or the delivery of outcomes.

The Assistant Director for Education responded that both were considered and noted that the service worked closely with schools to ensure that the PEP was well tailored to the pupil and then they checked in with the school throughout the academic year to ensure that it was being followed and was of benefit to the pupil.

Members thanked officers for a comprehensive report on Corporate Parenting and asked if Members that had not previously seen the care leavers hub; Our Space would be able to visit to get a better understanding of how it worked in practice.

The Head of Service Permanence agreed that a visit would be welcomed and noted that officers would arrange a visit with Members.

Members queried whether Wirral has had any unoccupied asylum seeking (UAS) children that have not been able to be referred through the National Transfer Scheme (NTS), and whether Wirral was performing at a similar level to other councils in this respect.

The Head of Service Permanence noted that the majority of UAS children were coming to Wirral via the NTS as part of this national scheme. He noted that Wirral was still relatively low in terms of the number of UAS children in the borough compared to some other local authorities.

Members asked how the service intended to deliver a wide range of opportunities for Leaders, Elected Members and Council Officers to live their Corporate Parenting responsibilities as mentioned in paragraph 3.11 of the report.

The Head of Service Permanence noted that a training workshop had been scheduled with Members and had been postponed. He noted that Members needed to consider how any decision made might impact of Wirral's children and that their responsibility as a corporate parent meant that they had a duty to make decisions in those children's interests.

Members noted that there was a disparity between costs for kinship care and other forms of care such as foster care and requested that information be provided on this at the next meeting of committee.

Members queried what was available to those children that did not attend school or did not attend the activities mentioned within the report.

The Assistant Director noted that for those children that were electively home educated, then their needs should be picked up with the attendance service. The report did not capture children who are looked after but they would be overseen by the virtual school team, with officers allocated to each young person.

Members asked for clarity on the term 'wait well' as mentioned on page 21 of the agenda pack (page 5 of the appendix to the report).

The Head of Service Permanence suggested that this likely referred to how well informed children and young people were kept on their progress while they were on a waiting list for services.

Members asked how many of Wirral's care leavers were homeless, and what support would be available if they were.

Officers responded that they were unaware of any but would supply members with details outside of the committee. They noted that a lot of work was undertaken before a care leaver turned 18, including a Leaving Care Panel

that would ensure that everything was already in place to avoid that eventuality.

Members discussed the possible services available to fostered children after they turned 18 and what accommodation options might be open to them.

Members noted that there was a situation for care leavers that went onto employment and were then expected to pay for the same accommodation they might be sharing with someone that was not working, and therefore not paying rental costs. They asked if any work had been undertaken to address this issue.

The Assistant Director for Children and Families noted that it was a difficult situation for such young people, and added that while a solution had not been found, work was being undertaken to look into how best to address this.

**Resolved – That the Corporate Parenting priorities identified for 2024-25 be endorsed.**

#### 46 **SEND IMPROVEMENT**

The Assistant Director for SEND and Inclusion presented a report on behalf of the Director of Children, Families and Education. The report provided members of the Children, Young People and Education Committee with an update on the improvement programme for Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) for the Local Area in Wirral. The Local Authority, Cheshire and Merseyside Integrated Care Board, education settings, parent carer forum, and other relevant stakeholders that were considered members of the Local Area.

The report included the Written Statement of Action Impact Group Tracker which monitored progress against the areas identified for improvement in the Local Area SEND Inspection and Improvement Notice.

The report noted that it had been agreed with the Department for Education and NHS England through the revised Terms of Reference for the Local Area SEND Partnership Board that the Health and Wellbeing Board was the appropriate forum to provide oversight of SEND improvement activity in Wirral, ensuring that the Written Statement of Action was fully delivered by October 2025. The report was presented to provide assurance of improvement and enable alignment with the business of the committee.

The Chair queried what might happen to the Council's SEND Improvement plans if funding from the Cheshire and Merseyside Integrated Care Board (ICB) was not secured. He also asked for timescales to be confirmed on Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCP's), and finally, he queried if

investment in this scheme and the EHCP scheme cost more money elsewhere.

The Assistant Director for SEND and Inclusion noted that the ICB was looking to release funds in-year to support their changes. He stated that the Partnership Board had requested mitigations if that funding was not received. Regarding timescales for EHCPs, he stated that delays were caused by a number of origins, with high demand for assessments and resources not being high enough, he suggested that with a growth in staff, coupled with sufficiency growth should help to improve the timescales. Regarding the Chair's final question, he noted that a high level of money was spent on out-of-borough education and that early intervention would reduce the need for this, allowing money spent there to be reinvested in Wirral schools.

Members queried whether it was more difficult to place children in the primary school sector compared to secondary schools.

The Assistant Director for SEND and Inclusion noted that it was generally more challenging to find places for Key Stages 3 and 4 compared to 1 and 2.

Members noted reference within the report to a five day response target for all communications and queried if this related just to EHCPs or all communications in general. They also queried whether the target to fill staff vacancies within the SEND team by the end of May 2024 had been met.

The Assistant Director for SEND and Inclusion noted that the 5 day response was a target was specific to SEND related communications. He also responded that the staffing of the team was slightly delayed due to committee timelines, it was currently moving forward with a fully staffed team expected by January 2025.

Members queried why EHCP pupils in mainstream Wirral schools were only at 19%, which was much lower than other areas.

The Assistant Director for SEND and Inclusion noted that this was an important issue and that work through the Delivering Better Value programme was trying to improve confidence in mainstream schools to understand and meet the needs of more pupils with special educational needs. He also noted that as Wirral had a number of special schools, there was a tendency to fill those before looking to place children in mainstream education. Work was being done to improve parents confidence that mainstream schools could provide for the needs of their children.

Members note that target dates were given within the report but not results and queried if KPIs were being met.

The Assistant Director for SEND and Inclusion noted that results could be included in future reports.

Members noted that the number of children with EHCPs reported as consistently absent had increased and asked why this was.

The Assistant Director for Education noted that they were working with special schools to support them around attendance, He noted that the responsibility fell on schools, absence was followed up with pastoral / welfare officers that made home visits. He noted that he would bring back more information to committee with clearer information on the issue.

**Resolved – That the progress of the Local Area SEND Partnership Board in progressing system improvement as required by the Improvement Notice be noted.**

#### 47 **CARE PROGRAMME**

The Assistant Director for Children and Families presented the report on behalf of the Director of Children, Families and Education. The report noted that over recent years, Wirral has had far higher numbers of children in care than its statistical neighbours. This reached a peak in 2018, with 834 children in care. Since then, through practice improvement and investment in early help and prevention services, the numbers of children in care had steadily reduced to 747 (August 2024). Whilst the number of children in care had decreased, the cost of providing care for those children had increased substantially.

The aim of the Care programme was to safely reduce the Council's reliance on residential care placements by, wherever possible, enabling children and young people to be raised by their families, within their family network, or in a family environment.

The Care Programme sought to align good quality care with proactive work to mitigate against significant budget pressures within Children's Services.

Members noted that a lot of aspects of the Care Programme was prevention and was non-statutory, and they were concerned that some services might be lost due to financial pressures.

The Assistant Director for Children and Families noted that Wirral received funding via a Pathfinder programme from central government which allowed Wirral to feedback to the DfE on the needs of local authorities. The funding was secured currently so should not be a pressure.

Members discussed the progress of Mockingbird and were provided with an update by the Assistant Director for Children and Families, who said that she would bring an update to committee in future.

Members commented on the level of expertise held by foster carers across Wirral with some having fostered over a hundred children.

The Chair requested further information on the initiative to get a further room open with foster carers and queried how many rooms this might make available.

The Assistant Director for Children and Families responded that since April 2024, four additional rooms had been opened, giving four formal placements. She said that Wirral's foster carers were excellent and the service had received really good feedback from their foster carers.

Members noted that once actions were delivered, a review needed to be undertaken to show Members if it had worked or not.

The Assistant Director for Children and Families explained that the report gave details of governance arrangements, and said that the service would be evaluating and reporting back the performance of any initiatives.

Members queried the costs and timeline of increasing the banding rates for payments to foster carers to help recruit and retain those carers.

The Assistant Director for Children and Families said that the banding rates had been increased in July 2024, and that they have had positive feedback from foster carers and believe it was helping the retention of carers already in the system. She noted that Wirral were now in-line in terms of payments with its neighbouring authorities.

Members discussed their concerns on meeting financial targets while still delivering all the services that needed to be. They agreed it was a difficult position for the Council.

The Assistant Director for Children and Families told members that officers were working to try and achieve everything that they had set-out to, however, she noted that there were many challenges and it was impossible to know what challenges may come up in the future.

Members queried how many Wirral children were placed in private fostering care, and what the cost was per child.

The Assistant Director for Children and Families said that private fostering cost approx. £900 per week at an independent fostering agent. The Head of

Service Permanence confirmed that Wirral currently had 97 children in such care.

### **Resolved – That**

- 1. The report be endorsed.**
- 2. Regular progress updates to committee be agreed.**

## **48 WIRRAL ATTENDANCE AND ELECTIVE HOME EDUCATION SERVICE**

The Wirral Attendance Manager presented a report on behalf of the Director of Children, Families and Education. The purpose of the report was to provide members of the Children, Young People and Education Committee with an overview of school attendance and Elective Home Education within Wirral for the 2023-24 academic year.

It was accepted that consistently high school attendance gave children and young people the best opportunity to learn and achieve their potential. Supporting high levels of attendance and tackling persistent absenteeism was an objective of the Children's Services Directorate Plan and aligned with the Wirral Plan priority 'working for brighter futures for our children, young people and their families' and supported the Health and Wellbeing Strategy Priority 3, 'best start in life for children and young people.'

The report considered those children and young people who were electively home educated, recognising that it was a parent's right to withdraw their child from the school system as the Education Act 1996 only required a parent to ensure that their child received an education either at school or otherwise.

Members thanked the officers for the report and asked if concerns were monitored only when someone raised a concern, or whether there are systems in place to pick up on those concerns.

The Wirral Attendance Manager said that young people that had been withdrawn from the education service were asked about any safeguarding issues. He also noted that since his team had moved to the Mallory office building, they were in close proximity to social care staff and conversations regarding safeguarding of children was much easier.

Members queried what was in place to monitor the educational attainment of home-schooled children and ensure it was to a high standard.

The Wirral Attendance Manager explained that there was no requirement for home-schooled children to follow the national curriculum or to sit GCSE exams. The service monitored the education being provided on an annual basis. When a child was removed from a school, they would ask the school



for a copy of that child's most recent progress report, so that officers could then match that to the progress being made at home. If the education received was deemed to be of a low standard, an officer could intervene to give advice or even push to return the child to a school.

Members asked the Wirral Attendance Manager to confirm where money received from attendance fines was used. He responded that until August 2024, money from penalty notices received could only be used for the implementation of penalty notices, however since August the money could now be used to support wider attendance support.

**Resolved – That oversight and scrutiny of Wirral Attendance Service, its performance in improving school attendance, and monitoring of elective home education, be exercised and the report be noted.**

#### 49 **WORK PROGRAMME**

The Head of Legal Service presented the report on behalf of the Chair of the Children, Young People and Education Committee. The report reminded members that the Children, Young People and Education Committee was responsible for proposing and delivering an annual committee work programme. This work programme was to align with the corporate priorities of the Council, in particular the delivery of the key decisions which were the remit of the Committee.

The Assistant Director for Education noted that Members would have been expecting a report on an annual review of Ofsted Inspections. He explained that on 2 September 2024, the DfE announced changes to the Ofsted framework. While officers were working through those changes, and how they impact Wirral's schools, he did not feel it was appropriate to bring a report based on Ofsted's previous guidance. He noted that once the new guidance was confirmed in full, he intended to bring a report to committee.

**Resolved – That the work programme be noted.**

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