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CHILDREN YOUNG PEOPLE AND EDUCATION COMMITTEE

Wednesday, 22 January 2025

Present: Councillor S Bennett (Chair)

Councillors	P Basnett	I Lewis
	P Jobson	C Baldwin
	Cooper	J Grier
	V Wilson	C Carubia

76 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.

77 APOLOGIES

Apologies were received from Councillors Louise Luxon-Kewley and Amanda Onwuemene. Councillors Tony Murphy and Chris Cooke attended as substitutes.

78 MEMBERS CODE OF CONDUCT - DECLARATIONS OF INTERESTS

Members were asked to consider whether they had any disclosable pecuniary interests and/or any other relevant interest in connection with any items 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.

79 MINUTES

Resolved – That the minutes of the meeting held on 29 November 2024 be approved as a correct record.

80 PUBLIC AND MEMBERS QUESTIONS

No questions, statements or petitions from the public or Councillors had been received.

81 **CHILDREN'S SERVICES PERFORMANCE REPORT QUARTER 2**

The Assistant Director for Early Help, Prevention and Effectiveness presented the report on behalf of the Director of Children, Families and Education which outlined the recommendations arising out of phase 3 of the pupil place planning review.

In March 2021, the Committee endorsed the Pupil Place Planning Strategy 2021-2026. This Strategy had set out a planned framework for the review of school places in both primary and secondary mainstream schools over the next 5 years.

Phase 3 of the primary phase of the review commenced in October 2023 looking at small planning areas in and around Wallasey, specifically, North Wallasey and South Wallasey. A detailed review framework and process had been undertaken and had included information gathering, stakeholder discussion. This had culminated in the recommendations presented within the report.

Recommendations relating to schools controlled under the auspices of both the Diocese of Chester – Church of England, and the Diocese of Shrewsbury – Roman Catholic, had been presented, discussed, and approved as well as proposals relating to Academy Trusts. This had demonstrated the strength in partnership working and collaboration across the education sector which would be harnessed as the parties progressed as a local education partnership.

Members discussed the data comparing Wirral with other Authorities within the report and queried why some charts showed blanks information.

The Assistant Director for Early Help, Prevention and Effectiveness stated that any blank areas were due to a lack of comparative data. He noted that if Members wished for specific information, they could contact him directly and officers would look into it.

Members asked why school attendance and attainment figures were lower than national statistics.

The Assistant Director for Education noted that a more detailed report would be coming to Committee in March 2025. He noted that the service was working hard to drive up attendance.

Members discussed dental care for young people and asked if there was any work being done to encourage them to sign-up to their local dentists.

The Director for Children, Families and Education responded that dental care was good for the majority of children in Wirral, however low rates of dental care were specific to those looked after children that were living out of borough. She noted that this was being picked up by the Safeguarding Lead through the Children's Partnership.

Members noted that the report showed that the percentage of domestic referrals had gone up, while the number of children in need had gone down. They queried if this was a seasonal occurrence as it had not happened before.

The Assistant Director for Early Help, Prevention and Effectiveness responded that the report covered the summer period and did not include the recent Christmas period. He felt that the increase in contact from those seeking support for domestic abuse was a good thing and that it showed that early prevention work was working. Those increased contacts were generally for lower levels of need, this meant that services were making contact earlier and helping children before issues escalated.

Members sought clarity on whether a rise in repeat referrals fitted in with early the success of early prevention.

The Assistant Director for Early Help, Prevention and Effectiveness responded that repeat referrals did not show the same level of improvement and that the ideal case was to reduce them. He noted that Wirral was currently comparable in performance for repeat referrals with most other similar authorities.

Members asked for detail on why the percentage of visits completed within the statutory timescale for children in need had gone down over the past few years, but the percentage of visits completed for child protection was improving. They also asked for clarity on what the difference was between children in need and child protection.

The FFC Programme Leader – Practice responded that those children with a child in need plan are not considered to be at risk of significant harm, whereas a child under a child protection plan are deemed to be at risk of immediate and significant harm.

The Assistant Director for Early Help, Prevention and Effectiveness stated that as far as the visits completed within statutory timescales he would provide further information for Members in writing.

Members discussed the crime statistics and in particular the apparent spike in first-time entrance to the criminal justice system. They queried if there was any particular reason for this.

The Assistant Director for Early Help, Prevention and Effectiveness stated that overall, Wirral's performance on first-time entrances to the criminal justice system was consistent. He noted that in the period of 2023-24 there was an increase in of arrests regarding possession of controlled substances and violent offences, but that overall, the statistics were fairly steady.

Members noted that the report showed that Wirral had a lower instance of electively home educated children and queried if there was any particular reason for this.

The Director for Education responded that while Wirral was lower, they still wanted to reduce the number of children being electively home educated and were carrying out work to support families that chose to home educate their children, but also to support them if they wished to bring those children back into mainstream education.

Resolved – That the report be noted.

82 **WIRRAL SAFEGUARDING CHILDREN PARTNERSHIP ANNUAL REPORT**

The FFC Programme Leader - Partnerships presented the report on behalf of the Director of Children, Families and Education, which set out activity undertaken by the WSCP and relevant agencies to safeguard and promote the welfare of children and young people in Wirral.

The report included what had been done in the previous 12-month period as a result of the local statutory multi-agency safeguarding arrangements, including a summary of child safeguarding activity, statutory reviews, and progress against actions from previous reviews, and an assessment of how effective the safeguarding arrangements had been

The report included evidence of the impact of the work of the safeguarding partners and relevant agencies, including training on outcomes for children and families, and an assessment of any areas requiring further improvement. The report also included case studies highlighting good practice and examples of how children, young people and families had informed the work of the safeguarding partnership and influenced service provision.

Members discussed the work that had been carried out on Breaking the Cycle, they noted that the report indicated that there was some level of impact from auditing of cases and scrutiny of key performance data. They asked what officers felt was the best evidence of improvement in the Breaking the Cycle programme.

The FFC Programme Leader – Partnerships responded that a lot of work had been done through the Safeguarding Partnership. He stated that there had been improvements in training as having a skilled workforce was the best way to increase performance. He noted that co-location of services gave better access to a wider pool of expertise. He stated that in North Birkenhead, this way of working had led to a reduction in the number of cases being referred into the integrated front door and that by focusing on a cradle to career approach, less cases are having to reach the top end of children’s social care.

Members raised the issue of neglect of children and asked how the reported priority of improving how to tackle neglect was being carried out.

The FFC Programme Leader – Partnerships responded that neglect was a much harder issue to identify than physical abuse. He felt that just putting a strategy in place would not be enough and stated that a lot of work had been done with staff to help them to identify neglect and the nuanced evidence that can lead to that identification. He noted that it would be approximately 12 months before there was direct evidence that this approach was improving outcomes.

Members asked what the best safeguarding success had been, and what was the service finding hardest to improve.

The FFC Programme Leader – Partnerships responded the most successful area around safeguarding was the early help and prevention services, he stated that they had an incredibly skilled and motivated workforce with a strong model for around early help and prevention.

He stated that the biggest challenge for the service was the very complex, high-end cases such as child sexual abuse, which increasing on a national scale. He felt that grasping the complexity of safeguarding was a real challenge.

Resolved – That the report be noted.

83 **FAMILIES FIRST FOR CHILDREN PATHFINDER PROGRAMME**

The FFC Programme Leader - Partnerships and the FFC Programme Leader – Practice presented the report on behalf of the Director of Children, Families and Education The report noted that the Families First for Children Pathfinder (FFC Pathfinder) was announced in February 2023 as part of the government’s children’s social care implementation strategy, stable homes built on love.

The strategy had responded to recommendations from a number of influential reports and reviews, including the Independent Review of Children’s Social

Care and the Child Safeguarding Practice Review report on child protection in England, and set out the government's commitments to a number of reforms.

Wirral Council successfully applied to be one of only 7 Wave 2 FFC Pathfinder areas who were chosen to test the delivery of the strategy commitments. This was a very good opportunity for Wirral to showcase some excellent local practice and influence national reform of children's services.

In April 2024, the Council received £3m to design and test approaches to deliver the reforms across four key policy areas:

1. Family Help.
2. Family Network Support Packages.
3. Multi-agency Safeguarding Arrangements and Systems.
4. Multi-agency Child Protection Teams.

The report provided the Committee with an update of local progress made in FFC Pathfinder to date, and an overview of what the Council would seek to achieve by April 2025. The report would provide a particular focus on child protection, including how the Pathfinder aimed to reduce the need for child protection plans and for repeat plans.

Members thanked the officers for their report and suggested it would be good to have an update report in approximately six months' time. They asked if there had been any news about the funding for the Pathfinder programme being extended beyond April 2025.

The FFC Programme Leader – Partnerships responded that the government had provided all Pathfinder areas with funding for an additional year. Officers were speaking to Children's Services in order to best ensure their work had the best impact. He confirmed that they would be happy to return in six months with a further report.

Members discussed the opportunities to work with the voluntary sector and other agencies that might be able to help to pick up issues.

The FFC Programme Leader – Practice agreed that this was an important opportunity and reassured Members that work was being done with the third sector already.

Members suggested that as quantitative results started to be come through, they should be communicated in the press and social media as it was a good news story for the council.

Members asked if one of the aims of the Pathfinder project was to shorten the length of time the council had child protection plans as some could be over two years old.

The FFC Programme Leader – Partnerships responded that it was definitely something the programme was seeking to do.

Resolved – That the report and the Pathfinder activity be noted.

84 EARLY YEARS FUNDING AGREEMENT

The Early Years Operations Manager presented the report on behalf of the Director of Children, Families and Education which stated that the Early Years Funding Entitlement (EYFE) agreement is an annual agreement between Wirral Council and early years providers to deliver funded place to children under 5 years. The agreement was based on a template provided by the Department for Education (DfE). The template had been tailored for Wirral and included additional sections that supported relevant strategies, for example attendance and assessment data.

The funding agreement covered the delivery of EYFE for children aged from nine months to five years, including Early Years Pupil Premium (EYPP), Disability Access Fund (DAF) and Special Educational Needs Inclusion Fund (SENIF). SENIF also had a guidance booklet. The funding agreement had been reviewed and updated for financial year 2025-2026 and early years providers would be consulted on the document between January and March 2025.

Members discussed the difficulties in recruitment for staff to cover care of children from age 9 months. They asked if Wirral was typical of other authorities in this respect.

The Early Years Operations Manager noted that both recruitment and retention across the Early Years sector was difficult, and additional pressure would be added in September 2025 with the changes in care hours offered to two and under two-year-olds coming into effect. She noted that a meeting was being held that evening with the Wirral Chamber of Commerce, the Department for Work and Pensions and Job Centre Plus to look into addressing these problems.

Members discussed the importance of holding information on those children entitled to Early Years funding and for that information to be shared with schools so that the relevant support can be given as soon as possible. They noted that this was particularly important when children transitioned from one school to another such as from primary school to secondary school.

Members asked if there were any problems regarding information being passed to new schools from parents regarding their EYFE.

The Early Years Operations Manager agreed that this can be an issue and that while 75% of providers did pass on the relevant information, the service was always trying to encourage them to do so.

Members queried whether the National Day Nursery Association (NDNA) could have input into the survey that the Council intended to send them in September 2025.

The Early Years Operations Manager noted that the previous survey had been co-written with the NDNA, as well the Child Minding Association and agreed that they would be consulted on further surveys.

Members discussed the demand for EYFE and whether limited spaces were stopping children from receiving funding.

The Early Years Operations Manager responded that she was not aware of any child that hadn't been able to access a place. Those in the SEND group didn't necessarily have limited spaces, however some early age providers needed support in helping to meet those children's needs.

Resolved – That the report be noted.

85 **OVERVIEW OF ACADEMIC YEAR 2023/24 COUNCIL LIFELONG LEARNING SERVICE ADULT EDUCATION DELIVERY**

The Head of Service – 14-19 Strategy presented the report on behalf of the Director of Children, Families and Education Services which set out the service's developments, summary of delivery and learner achievements in the 2023/24 academic year.

Grant funding received from the Liverpool City Region Combined Authority was £1,173,362.

Wirral Council's Lifelong Learning Service actively engaged and supported local residents (aged 19+) who were furthest from the labour market. The education provision provided learners with the confidence to take the next steps back into education and employment. As a grant funded Council service, the service had the capacity to support the most disadvantaged, working on difficult issues and using innovative approaches for example, to support community cohesion, Family Hubs, the resettlement programme, family learning in schools, and improving mental health and wellbeing through learning.

The 2023/24 academic year had been very challenging for the service with further growth in qualification course delivery, new test and learn projects plus continuation of the MULTIPLY maths intervention support programme. The Lifelong Learning Service was inspected by Ofsted, June 2024, and maintained as "Good". The service was also MATRIX re-accredited, July

2020, recognising its integrated high-quality delivery of careers education and support for its learners,

As a service, Lifelong Learning supports three of the key strategic Council themes, as outlined in the Wirral Plan 2023 – 2027. These themes included:

1. Early help for children and families through the delivery of high-quality education for adults and families;
2. Promoting independence and healthier lives through a curriculum focus on wellbeing and positive mental health;
3. Safe, resilient and engaged communities through targeted engagement of adults and families in the Borough's most deprived communities / ward areas; and
4. Protecting our environment through courses and provisions that include engagement with community allotments and themes including environmental sustainability.

Members discussed a previous award ceremony for people that had successfully gone through the courses related to the report and asked if a similar ceremony would be held in 2025.

The Head of Service – 14-19 Strategy responded that it would. He noted that the service had received an additional £10,000 had been received from the Liverpool City Region Combined Authority and that this had allowed the scheduling of some additional celebration events.

Members highlighted that some courses showed low achievement by Ofsted and asked whether improvements had been made.

The Head of Service – 14-19 Strategy responded that improvements were being made through continued professional development and digital skills tutoring.

Members discussed the threshold for free courses and the fact that those courses were available to anyone to attend whether they were free or not. They asked how those courses might be communicated to parents that earned more than the maximum threshold for free courses but might still want to attend a course.

The Head of Service – 14-19 said that the service had a community development manager, and a community development support officer had recently been appointed. He noted that their role was partly marketing these courses, but also to develop relationships with support services in the third sector and other council departments as well as through the Family Hubs. He stated that they were focusing on additional social media posts as well as the more traditional press releases.

Resolved – That

- 1. The report be noted; and**
- 2. The services' planned improvements and contributions to improving the lives of adults and families in Wirral's more deprived communities during 2023/24 be recognised and noted.**

86 ADMISSIONS ARRANGEMENTS FOR COMMUNITY AND VOLUNTARY CONTROLLED PRIMARY AND SECONDARY SCHOOLS AND THE CO-ORDINATED ADMISSION SCHEMES FOR 2026-27

The Assistant Director for Education presented the report on behalf of the Director of Children, Families and Education which invited the Children, Young People and Education Committee to determine the Council's admissions arrangements for community and voluntary controlled primary and secondary schools and the co-ordinated schemes for 2026-2027, and to approve the Wirral Fair Access Protocol.

The report noted that the Council, in its capacity as Local Education Authority, was required to determine admission arrangements for community and voluntary controlled primary and secondary schools. The Council was also required to have in place a co-ordinated scheme for admissions to all primary and secondary schools including Academy schools, in 2026-27. The proposed schemes were attached along with proposed admission numbers for community and controlled schools.

The Council was required to have in place a Fair Access Protocol agreed with the majority of schools which ensured that there was a fair and balanced approach to admitting unplaced children, particularly those who were most vulnerable, outside the normal admissions round. The Wirral Fair Access Protocol had been developed in partnership with local schools. All admission authority schools must participate in order to ensure that children were allocated a place quickly. The criteria list of children included was set out in the Fair Access Protocol Guidance. The Protocol was reviewed annually; the current version was reviewed in Autumn 2023 and was in force from February 2024 accordingly.

Resolved – That the Children, Young People and Education Committee approves:

- 1. The admission arrangements for community and voluntary controlled schools and the Wirral co-ordinated schemes for 2026-2027 as set out in Appendices 1 and 2 to the report.**
- 2. The Wirral Fair Access Protocol as set out in Appendix 3 of the report.**

87 SEND IMPROVEMENT

The Assistant Director SEND and Inclusion provided members with an update on the improvement programme for Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) for the Local Area in Wirral. The report covered the period from mid-November 2024.

In addition to an update on the December 2024 Local Area SEND Partnership Board progress and the report provided members with feedback from the Notice to Improve Stocktake Review meeting held on 26th November 2024 with the Department for Education (DfE) and NHS England.

The report noted that it had been agreed with DfE 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 (WSOA) was fully delivered by October 2025. The report was presented to the Committee to provide assurance of improvement and enable alignment with the business of the committee.

Members raised their concern that the report made no mention of communications with parents. They noted that the most frequent comments they received revolved around poor communication with parents who wished to be kept updated on the progress of their cases.

The Assistant Director SEND and Inclusion responded that until recently, case workers had been too busy to balance communication with parents with their casework. He hoped that with the additional staff that had recently started working in the SEND team, this would improve and as the caseloads of individual officers reduced, they would have more time to keep parents updated. He noted that in terms of expectation management, they were laying the groundwork in the communications that were being put out through the communications officer.

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

88 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.

Resolved – That the work programme be noted.

89 **BUDGET UPDATE 2025/26**

The Head of Finance (People) presented the report on behalf of the Director of Finance which provided an update on the budgets within the remit of the Committee in respect of forthcoming pressures and proposed savings that were being considered within the Medium-Term Financial Plan.

It was stated that it was also for the Committee to consider feedback and outcomes from the Budget Oversight Panels (BOPs) which had been held in recent months. The Panels enabled officer and member liaison on proposed budget options, to facilitate discussion and allow direction to be obtained on further analysis required. The Panels also provided an opportunity for alternative proposals to be considered.

The Policy and Service Committees were responsible for those services being delivered under their operational headings within their actual budget envelope. The Policy and Resources Committee, in consultation with the respective Policy and Service Committees, had been charged by Council to formulate a draft Medium Term Financial Plan (MTFP) and budget to recommend to the Council.

The Council was required to set a balanced budget each year and set a Medium-Term Financial Plan which considered the future pressures and savings options that would be taken forward to result in a balanced budget position.

It was reported that the Council faced a severe budget challenge to identify savings required to set a balanced budget for next financial year, largely due to increased demand and costs for social care services, compounded by the previous significant reductions in Government funding and uncertainty around the future financial settlements.

Unless significant, deliverable cost reductions were identified and approved, the Council would not meet its statutory obligation to set a legal and balanced budget without a significant increase in funding.

Members discussed the content of the exempt appendices.

Resolved – That

1. **The indicative pressures and proposed savings detailed in Appendices 1 and 2 be noted; and**
2. **The Budget Oversight Panel feedback and outcomes, as detailed in the exempt Appendix 3 be agreed.**

90 **EXEMPT INFORMATION - EXCLUSION OF THE PRESS AND PUBLIC**

RESOLVED – That, under section 100 (A) (4) of the Local Government Act 1972, the public be excluded from the meeting during consideration of the following items of business on the grounds that they involved the likely disclosure of exempt information as defined by paragraphs 3 and 4 of Part I of Schedule 12A (as amended) to that Act. The Public Interest test had been applied and favoured exclusion:

2025-26 Budget Report Update -

- **Appendix 1: Budget Pressures**
- **Appendix 2: Potential Savings**
- **Appendix 3: Service & Policy Committee Budget Oversight Panel feedback**

91 **SCHOOLS CAPITAL PROGRAMME UPDATE**

The Head of Facilities Management presented the report on behalf of the Director for Regeneration and Place. The report noted that the Department for Education (DfE) allocated grant funding each year to help maintain and improve the condition of school buildings and grounds. All local authorities must ensure that they had a sound Capital strategy for education services, making sure that facilities were sufficient, safe and offer the best teaching environment for pupils of all abilities.

This report gave details of the planned major Capital works projects for Maintained Schools over the next 12 months and gave details of proposed spend of two capital grants (i) School Condition Allocation (SCA) and (ii) High Needs Provision Capital Allocation (HNPCA).

Members Queried how many extra places would be provided at Foxfield and Stanley schools.

The Assistant Director for Education noted that over the next 2 years, the plan was to create an additional fifty places at Foxfield School, and an additional 20 places at Stanley School.

Members raised that the DfE had given Wirral £4 million pounds in March 2024 for special needs investment. They asked if this had gone towards the

work at Foxfield and Stanley Schools and where any remaining money might be spent.

The Assistant Director for Education responded that some of the work at Foxfield and Stanley had come from this money, it had also been spent on expanding Foxfield at their second site in the old Kingsway Academy and on the Claremount School site that has grown from 220 to 400 pupils over the past four years as well as a number of other projects across the borough.

Resolved – That that the Director of Regeneration & Place be authorised to procure and to accept the most economically advantageous tenders, for projects detailed within the report provided he was satisfied that the cost could be met within the grant allocations given to the council by the Department for Education.