



CHILDREN, YOUNG PEOPLE & EDUCATION COMMITTEE

Wednesday 5th March 2025

REPORT TITLE:	CARE PROGRAMME
REPORT OF:	DIRECTOR FOR CHILDREN, FAMILIES AND EDUCATION

REPORT SUMMARY

This report will give an overview of activity undertaken as part of the Care Programme. Over recent years, Wirral has had far higher numbers of children in care than its statistical neighbors. This reached a peak in 2018, with 834 children in care. Since then, through practice improvement, investment in early help and prevention services, and the Care Programme, the numbers of children in care have steadily reduced to 699 (January 2025), this is now in line with statutory neighbors. Whilst the number of children in care has decreased, the cost of providing care for those children has increased substantially.

The report is aligned to Wirral Council's Plan priority, *working for brighter futures for our children, young people and their families* and it is aligned with the Health and Wellbeing Strategy Priority 3 which supports *the best start in life for children and young people*.

This is not a key decision.

RECOMMENDATION/S

The Children, Young People and Education Committee is requested to scrutinize the progress to date of the Care Programme.

SUPPORTING INFORMATION

1.0 REASON/S FOR RECOMMENDATION/S

- 1.1 Proactive steps need to be taken to mitigate against the forecast overspend for Children's Care. This needs to be delivered at pace, with regular monitoring and oversight from Elected Members.

2.0 OTHER OPTIONS CONSIDERED

- 2.1 Not to act would lead to a projected overspend of almost £8 million, which would negatively impact on the Council's overall financial position and wider Children's Services provision. In striving to manage the Children's Services budget, available options have been evaluated to maintain a balance between service delivery budget control.

3.0 BACKGROUND INFORMATION

- 3.1 The Care Programme was presented to the Children, Young People and Education Committee in September 2024. This set out a clear programme of activity to tackle the numbers of children in care, and the escalating costs of residential provision. The current annual cost for children's social care services is around £5.7 billion in England. The Department of Education published *Stable Homes Built on Love* (February 2023) which is a vision to rebalance children's social care from costly crisis intervention to more meaningful and effective early support. Wirral became one of seven areas identified to test out new ways of working and supporting children to remain within their family networks (Families First for Children Pathfinder). In addition, Wirral are also in collaboration with regional Local Authorities as part of Foster4 which is to improve recruitment and retention within foster services.
- 3.2 The aim of the Care Programme is to safely reduce our 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. It will do this focusing on the following areas:
- Children live safely with their families
 - Reliant on effective and impactful child protection work
 - Increased opportunities for reunification with family
 - Children live within their family network
 - More children being cared for in Special Guardianship arrangements
 - More children being cared for by Connected Carers
 - Use of Special Guardianship Orders rather than Care Orders
 - Children live in a family environment
 - Retain and optimise the foster care resource we currently have
 - Recruit more foster carers
 - Efficient and effective use of residential placements when required
 - Effective oversight of residential care placements
 - Successful transitions from residential care to independence for older young people

4.0 Governance

- 4.1 The Care Programme has a strategic board chaired by the Assistant Director of Social Care. This is to oversee the activity in line with the identified objectives of the programme. A lead senior officer has now been identified to bring together the workstreams and provide leadership to the programme. In addition, there has been corporate project management support to coordinate the programme. Regular reports to the Council's Senior Leadership Team and to the Children, Young People and Education Committee will ensure effective monitoring and oversight.
- 4.2 The Director of Children, Families and Education now agrees all new residential placements. The Assistant Director or Head of Safeguarding will now agree any new children coming into the care of the Local Authority.

5.0 Changes since the beginning of the Care Programme

- 5.1 There has been a real shift in thinking about how we support children and families. An operational Keeping Families Together (KFT) panel has been set up. This panel is multi-disciplinary attended by Social Care, Family Matters, CAMHS, Education and SEND. (Appendix 1). There has been a gradual reduction in children looked after.
- 5.2 The Pathfinder is now fully operational and is beginning to show impact on how children are supported to remain with their families. The report on progress was presented to the January 2025 committee.
- 5.3 Foster carers play a pivotal role in the Care Programme. Wirral are part of Foster4 to support the recruitment and retention of foster carers. Whilst it has been a slow start, it is anticipated Foster4 will generate more foster care enquiries
- 5.4 The Fostering Service continue to work with carers to tailor support. They have been more children matched in house for shorter periods of time which have then returned home to family. There have been an additional 4 Q3.
- 5.5 Success measures and metrics have been included in the Care Programme which will evidence progress and impact.(Appendix 2)

6.0 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 6.1 The Council's ability to maintain a balanced budget for 2024/25 is dependent on a stable financial position. That said, the delivery of the budget is subject to ongoing variables both positive and adverse which imply a level of challenge in achieving this outcome.
- 6.2 The outturn position for the Children and Families budget in 2023-24 recorded an adverse variance of £4,531,000, an overspend of 8%. A target has been set to reduce the number of residential placements as part of the care programme. As of 1.2.25 there are 83 children in residential provision.

7.0 LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

- 7.1 The Council has a duty to provide care for children and young people in accordance with Section 20, Sections 22 and 31 of the Children Act 1989.

7.2 Statutory guidance on the purpose, principles for practice and expected outcomes for children's social care are defined in the Children's Social Care National Framework issued by the Department for Education in December 2023. The Care Programme is aligned with its expectations.

8.0 RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS: STAFFING, ICT AND ASSETS

8.1 It will be necessary to reconfigure teams from the existing resource to deliver the Care Programme. For many staff and teams this will be a temporary change whilst the Care Programme is delivered, however, this will be reviewed to understand whether there would be long-term benefit from the new arrangements.

9.0 RELEVANT RISKS

9.1 The Inspection of Local Authority Children's Services conducted by Ofsted in September 2023 identified areas of practice for children in care which require improvement to be good. The Care Programme is aligned with the ILACS Action Plan and supports the required improvements for timeliness, decision-making, effective child protection and securing good outcomes for children and young people, however, any change poses risk and this will be monitored through the Care Programme Board and Children's Services Assurance Board.

9.2 The local authority has no control over the market costs of residential care. Over recent years, the cost of residential care has increased significantly, and without intervention from the government to cap care costs, there is an ongoing risk. It has also been documented in national studies that almost two thirds of children in care in England are living in the north of the country, which impacts on availability of placements.

10.0 ENGAGEMENT/CONSULTATION

10.1 Working to co-produce a Foster Care Charter, carers have shared their views on recruitment and retention issues, contributing to the development of the Care Programme.

10.2 Regular engagement with the Children in Care and Care Leaver Councils will ensure that there are opportunities to receive direct feedback from children and young people on the Care Programme.

11.0 EQUALITY IMPLICATIONS

11.1 Wirral Council has a legal requirement to make sure its policies, and the way it carries out its work, do not discriminate against anyone.

11.2 It is recognised that care experienced young people are more likely to face disadvantage. Support and services are provided to ensure that they are provided with the help they need to narrow the gap and achieve their potential.

12.0 ENVIRONMENT, BIODIVERSITY AND CLIMATE CHANGE IMPLICATIONS

12.1 There are no environmental or climate implications arising from the remodeling of

Children's Services. It is expected that there will be no impact on the emission of greenhouse gases.

13.0 COMMUNITY WEALTH IMPLICATION

- 13.1 Many community organisations are significant stakeholders in supporting children in care and care leavers, as are local residents who are employed as foster carers. Plans to recruit and retain local foster carers, providing them with specialist training, will enhance community wealth.
- 13.2 Strong corporate parenting, which leads to care leavers making successful transitions to adulthood through their education and employment will support community wealth building.

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BACKGROUND PAPERS

[Children's social care: national framework - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk)

[Children's social care: stable homes, built on love - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk)

[Championing kinship care: national kinship care strategy - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk)

APPENDICES

Appendix 1- Care Programme 2024-25
Appendix 2 Key Performance Data
Appendix 3 Progress to date

TERMS OF REFERENCE

This report is being considered by the Children, Young People and Education Committee in accordance with section a of its Terms of Reference:

(a) exercising management, oversight and delivery of services to children and young people in relation to their care, wellbeing, education or health, with the exception of any powers reserved to full Council.

SUBJECT HISTORY (last 3 years)

Council Meeting	Date
N/A	N/A