

CHILDREN, YOUNG PEOPLE AND EDUCATION COMMITTEE

7th March 2023

Report Title:	PROGRESS ON CHILDREN LOOKED AFTER AND CARE LEAVERS STRATEGY 2022-2025
Report of:	DIRECTOR FOR CHILDREN, FAMILIES AND EDUCATION

REPORT SUMMARY

The report provides members of the Children, Young People and Education Committee with an overview of progress made to deliver the priorities as set out in the Children Looked After and Care Leavers Strategy, as agreed on 10th March 2022.

The Strategy sets out a vision to “ensure children looked after and care leavers are valued listened to and supported to be aspirational and achieve their full potential” and four key priorities to children looked after and care leavers. These priorities are:

1. **Emotional and physical health and wellbeing** – making sure you are happy and healthy all the way through your childhood and into adulthood.
2. **Independence and transition to adulthood** – Focussing on helping you learn ‘life skills’ from an early age and getting everything in place so you can be supported if you need it after you turn 18
3. **Positive Lived Experiences** – Making sure there are enough of the right people to look after you in suitable homes whether this is a short or long stay/time.
4. **Education and Employment** – Ensuring that you do well and have the right support in school and have the right opportunities to access employment.

Underpinning each priority will be the fundamental principle to listen to the ‘voice of the child and young people’.

The report highlights progress which has been made since the report was approved in March 2022 and the role of the Corporate Parenting Board in oversight and monitoring of the priorities.

The report is not a key decision.

The report supports the Wirral Plan priority ‘Brighter Futures’.

RECOMMENDATION

The Children, Young People and Education Committee is recommended to endorse the progress made to date.

SUPPORTING INFORMATION

1.0 REASON/S FOR RECOMMENDATION

- 1.1 To provide assurance to elected members that actions are taken to progress the Strategy and priorities for children looked after and care leavers (CLA).
- 1.2 To highlight challenges and issues which have been identified over the past 12 months and the action being taken to address them.

2.0 OTHER OPTIONS CONSIDERED

- 2.1 As corporate parents elected members have a vital role in championing the needs of children looked after. This Strategy provides that vehicle to drive improvements in the services and support provided to children looked after. It is important that elected members are assured actions are being delivered and are aware of the local challenges that the council and partners are experiencing.

3.0 BACKGROUND INFORMATION

- 3.1 In March 2022, the Children, Young People and Education Committee approved the Children Looked After and Care Leaver's Strategy. The Corporate Parenting Board has been responsible for reviewing progress and has themed its meeting around the priorities in the Strategy. To date, two themed meetings have taken place.
- 3.2 For the priorities within the Strategy, the following progress has been made:

Priority 1: Emotional Health and Wellbeing

- The learning and impact of the work delivered by OOMOO has been continually reviewed and evidence of outcomes reported to the Corporate Parenting Board. As the contract is due to end, a review has started to consider the future model and commissioning arrangements. Further feedback is being ascertained from children about what has worked well and what could be added.
- Work is ongoing via the Future in Mind Programme about a Single point of Access (SPA) and an Alliance of mental health support commissioning to meet the needs of all children with emotional and mental health needs in Wirral. How this will affect the current commissioning decisions for CLA in Wirral via Open Door and Polaris is subject to current debate as to date the SPA and the Alliance have not focused on this cohort of children, although they are some of the most vulnerable and with associated mental and emotional health needs in Wirral.
- Joint working with neighbouring local authorities and NHS colleagues including Cheshire Wirral Partnership has been undertaken to resolve key issues for children who are experiencing a mental health crisis. Key issues to resolve include the gatekeeping process (for admission) potentially becoming independent, a joint working protocol and how Section 2 and Section 3 of the Mental Health Act 1983 are implemented for children. Nationally admissions to Tier 4 for Under 18-year-olds have reduced by 39% in the past 24 months.
- A bid has been submitted and successful for joint training planned with NHS colleagues around services and support for children and young people across the locality with a focus on the social care workforce.

- The Mental health crisis team continue to operate and there has been a renewed push for staff to sign up to the rota.
- The development of a Tier 4 crisis/respite bed programme for young people with learning disabilities and autism has been delayed as the home identified for purchase is in probate.

Priority 2: Independence and transition to adulthood

- Further work has been developed to outline the requirements of a Care Leaver Covenant “Whole Council Strategy” and the actions needed to implement the approach. The Director for Children, Families and Education has made proposals for taking forward the recommendations. The Care Leaver Covenant self-assessment toolkit is to be completed and awareness of the Care Leaver Covenant to be raised with elected members across the council. Meetings with People and Places team have been arranged and discussions with colleagues in Procurement are to begin shortly.
- The development of care leaver accommodation under the Partnership Accommodation Programme has been a success with young people reporting positive transition and independence to adulthood. Increased occupancy in the homes has meant that more young people are benefited, and the financial savings realised.

Priority 3: Positive Lived Experiences

- Changes have been implemented to the fostering process which has increased the administration and improved efficiency of approval of foster carers. A dedicated recruitment officer has been appointed to actively promote and identify potential foster carers.
- A foster carer financial review has been completed and presented to SLT on 27/01/2023. The consensus view was that the proposals are positive and rooted in supporting foster carer recruitment and retention, as well as providing creative ways to provide additional homes for complex and specialist placements with associated support. The plans encompass preventing some children entering residential care and providing foster homes and preventing institutionalisation of young people whilst simultaneously reducing financial costs to the Council.
- The current Sufficiency Strategy is under review with the purpose of considering and understanding the profile and needs of homes for children looked after. A bid to the Department for Education for an edge of care home was unsuccessful although it is recognised that short-term therapeutic homes are required. Contextual safeguarding accommodation has also become a priority to be considered and planned for in the sufficiency strategy.

Priority 4: Education and Employment

- The Virtual School has increased its capacity and reduced caseloads of Virtual school teachers to improve educational oversight of children looked after and care leavers, as well as children with a social worker (following new Department for Education Guidance: *Revised guidance for Virtual School Heads and designated teachers*).

- The Virtual School continues to ensure that children have a Personal Education Plan (PEP) and that these are completed in a timely way. During 2021-22 academic year, 94% of children had a personal education plan. 3% (29) young people have not had a PEP as they were not applicable, either by age or length of time CLA. The 3% (34) who have not had a PEP became looked after during May to August 2022 and may now have a PEP.
- A report was taken to Children's Senior Leadership Team highlighting challenges in securing education placements for children looked after. At present, there are 39 children who are not in full-time education. The Virtual School has ensured that there is education provision in place, but further work is required to ensure a more collaborative approach with schools. A task and finish group will be set up to review the pathways for children looked after accessing education, including education, health and care plan assessments.
- Wirral continues to perform better than national for young people remaining in employment and education and training post 16. 73% in Wirral compared to 64% nationally. 23 young people are in Higher Education, 77 in Further Education and 60 young people in employment or training. Work has been undertaken to secure apprenticeship opportunities for care leavers from a range of partner organisations including construction companies and the local science museum, Eureka! A range of programmes have also been commissioned to focus on re-integrating young people back into education or employment. There is also work being undertaken internally with the council's organisational development team to explore internal recruitment and work experience opportunities through the council Employment Strategy which is in the process of being developed.

Underpinning priority: the voice of the child

- Essential to the delivery of the Strategy is understanding the voice of the child and using this to inform changes. The Participation and Engagement Team have been proactive in seeking the views of young people aligned to the priorities in the Strategy.
- Four surveys have been developed and circulated across a range of participation and engagement networks to gather the views of children looked after and care leavers. The findings of these will inform the Strategy direction and the actions which need to be taken under each priority. They will also provide an understanding of what has worked well.

4.0 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 4.1 There are no significant implications from the report. Delivering the Strategy may result in financial implications such as the foster carer financial review. This development is an invest to save model with the purpose of reducing the number of

5.0 LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

- 5.1 There are no significant legal implications arising from the report. The local authority has statutory duties as outlined in the Children and Families Act and subsequent statutory guidance in relation to our role as corporate parents of children looked after. Senior leaders across council and partner organisations are also responsible for championing the needs of children looked after and care leavers by identifying

and agreeing priorities and making decisions which support their needs and wellbeing.

6.0 RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS: STAFFING, ICT AND ASSETS

- 6.1 There are no significant resource implications arising from the report. The Corporate Parenting Board will be responsible for the oversight and monitoring of the Strategy priorities and deliverables. The Corporate Parenting Operational Group consisting of officers from the council and partners will be the vehicle for delivery. The performance indicators identified will form part of a POWER BI dashboard, development by the Children's Data and Insight Team.

7.0 RELEVANT RISKS

- 7.1 The current financial challenge across the region is resulting in difficult decisions being made and government funding changes. There are risks associated with funding programmes for care experienced young people which supports them into education, employment, and training. The impact of these funding cuts could result in a rise in young people who are NEET. This has consequences for the council.
- 7.2 Sufficiency challenges remain a risk and have been highlighted on the directorate risk register. The Partnership Accommodation programme has outlined plans to help grow and ethical market of children's home but there is a significant need to increase the number of foster carers. The financial review of foster carer payments will seek to help attract a new cohort of foster carers.
- 7.3 The Corporate Parenting Operational Group is intended to be the vehicle for delivery of the Strategy. Work is progressing under each priority but a detailed action plan is required. Failure to create effective governance and monitoring may result in delayed progress in some areas. A graduate in the Performance and Improvement Team will assist with facilitation of this work.

8.0 ENGAGEMENT/CONSULTATION

- 8.1 The Corporate Parenting Board is fully engaged in the activity being undertaken and receives thematic reports against the priorities in the plan. Engagement and participation of children and young people is imperative, with care experienced representatives' active members of the Corporate Parenting Board.
- 8.2 There are a range of ways in which young people can also share their voice around their experiences of being in care. These include focus groups, sessions at My Space, online surveys and interactive surveys.

9.0 EQUALITY IMPLICATIONS

- 9.1 There are no equality implications arising out of the report.

10.0 ENVIRONMENT AND CLIMATE IMPLICATIONS

- 10.1 As corporate parents we must treat children looked after as if they were our own. Like any parent, it is important that we play a role in teaching our young people about the climate emergency and how to proactively support the environment. One

of our objectives will be to consider how we can promote positive approaches to the environment through education and life skills for care leavers.

- 10.2 Many Wirral schools attended by our children looked after are proactive in positive education about protecting the environment and through our education priority we would hope that improved learning and education outcomes will relate to this.

11.0 COMMUNITY WEALTH IMPLICATIONS

- 11.1 Priority 4 of the Strategy focuses on employment and education. There have already been positive developments around supporting Wirral care leavers into local employment. A successful apprenticeship programme has resulted in many care leavers finding local, long-term employment including in the Council itself.
- 11.2 It is hoped that moving forward, this priority will help shape further opportunities, particularly through the Care Leaver covenant, to ensure that our care leavers continue to access employment locally, live in local homes and support the local economy.

REPORT AUTHOR: Hannah Myers
Interim Head of Improvement and Effectiveness
hannahmyers@wirral.gov.uk

APPENDICES

None.

BACKGROUND PAPERS

Corporate Parenting Strategy

Corporate Parenting Annual Report

TERMS OF REFERENCE

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

(d) leading for the Council and its partners in the discharge the Council's functions as Corporate Parent for its children in care and care leavers.

SUBJECT HISTORY (last 3 years)

Council Meeting	Date
Children, Young People and Education Committee	10th March 2022