

Children Looked After and Care Leavers Strategy Progress Update 2023

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1. Introduction

This Appendix is to provide an update on the Children Looked After and Care Leavers Strategy 2022-2025.

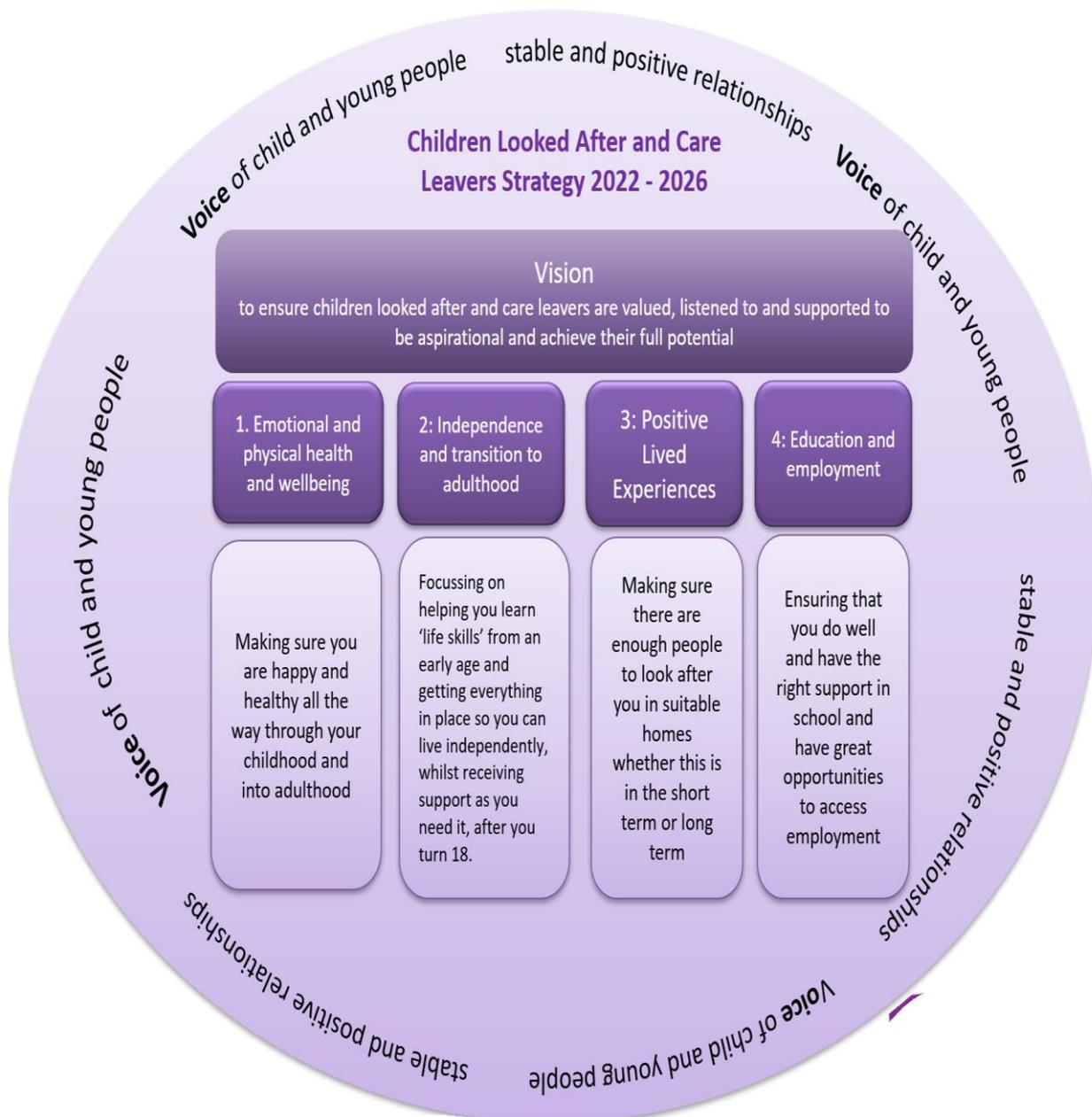
The report will focus on the four key areas of the strategy outlining plans and progress:

- Emotional and physical health and well-being
- Independence and transition to adult hood
- Personal lived experience
- Education and employment

2. Background

The Children Looked After and Care Leavers Strategy was developed in 2021 to ensure that Children Looked After and Care Leavers had a voice in designing what they wanted the corporate parenting board and its approaches to focus upon. Four key work streams already outlined in this report were identified. These four work streams are underpinned by the work of the corporate parenting operational group which comprises of key members across the partnership.

Children Looked After and Care Leavers Strategy 2022-2025



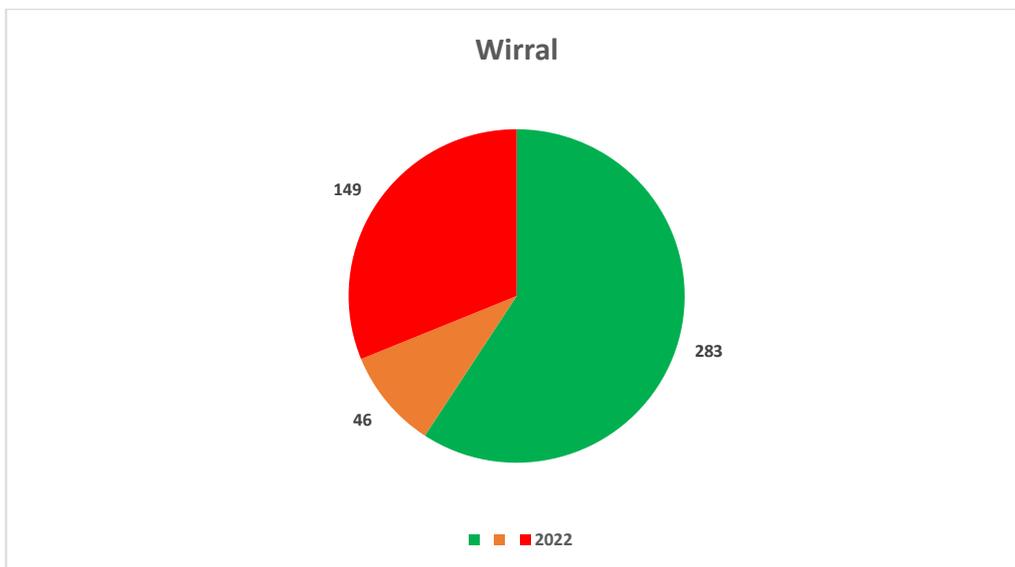
3. Emotional and physical health and well-being

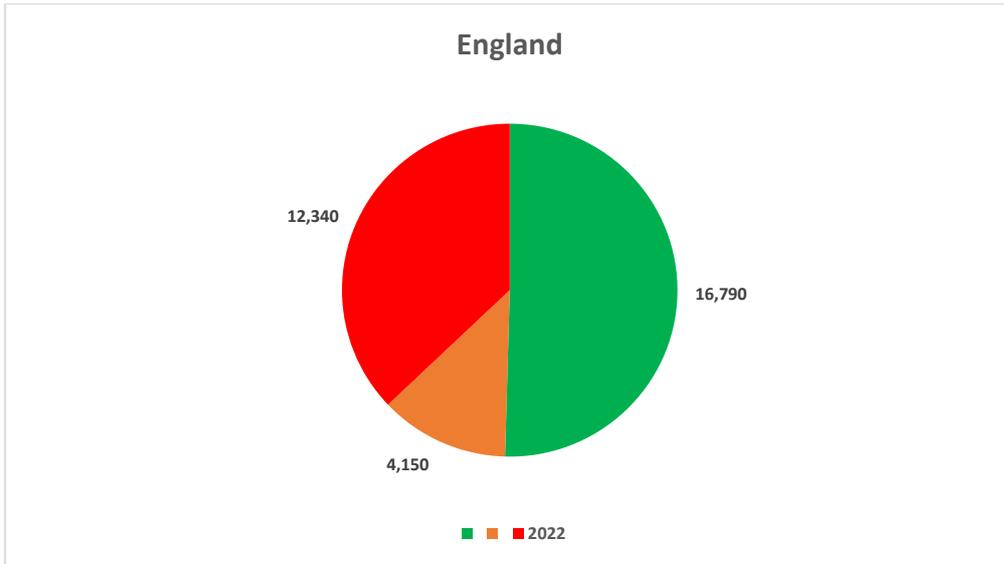
The Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) is a brief emotional and behavioural screening questionnaire for children and young people. The tool can capture the perspective of children and young people, their parents and teachers and foster carers. The pie charts below shows the comparison between Wirral and the rest of England. As can be seen, Wirral has less children in the borderline and cause for concern areas than compared to the rest of England. This is based on approximately 95% compliance rates of SDQ being completed.

Green: Normal SDQ score

Orange: Borderline score

Red: Cause for concern score





A paper is being submitted to the Senior Leadership Team to consider an options appraisal for children looked after and care leavers around specific mental health support from December 2023 onwards when the current contract with Polaris and Open Door is due to expire.

There are three options to be considered:

- Retender for the original specification
- Retender with an amended specification
- Provide services via a permanent staffing group across services

The option to continue working with current providers is catered for within the first two options described above.

Support around children’s mental health and emotional well-being has been successful. Providing bespoke services to meet a range of needs across this cohort of children has been greatly beneficial. The support has been provided across children, foster carers and other professionals as well as social workers in order that children’s needs are more fully understood and met within the community. There have been some waiting lists across the work undertaken by Polaris. This reflects an increase in the amounts of one-to-one therapeutic work originally anticipated as being required, and additionally the service has been beset by staffing issues at different points throughout the contract. There have been difficulties in retaining and recruiting

some staff members, although the current manager has been working extremely hard in support the service and has been excellent in communication and engagement with the local authority.

Polaris provides therapeutic work 1-1 with children and supports carers and professionals working with children to think psychologically about their needs and their developmental history. Open Door provides a range of CBT interventions, peer mentoring and an activity based focus ranging from crafts, and Art, to Yoga, boxing and other group/individual wellbeing activities.

Both organisations have worked alongside CAMHS in ensuring that children receive support when needed and if there is a waiting list in either CAMHS/Polaris then often Open Door can provide some interim support, with the additional benefit of the Care Navigator Team that has been developed within CAMHS in the past 12 months and has been operational for approximately 7 months.

4. Independence and transition to adult hood

In order to prevent children and young people becoming homeless at 18 years of age a guarantor scheme is being implemented by the care leavers service. Specific legal advice has been sourced in order to ensure that young people can move into tenancies prior to 18 where appropriate with support from the Local Authority.

‘Staying Close’ funding has been approved following a successful bid earlier in the year. This provides for:

The Staying Close offer from Wirral Council will support residential care move on for young people 18+ into semi-independent living with onsite support, or independent living with outreach support. The focus will be to ensure that young people at the age of 17 have an identified person who supports them in a trusting relationship when they leave residential care. To facilitate this, the existing Leaving Care Panel will integrate a ‘Staying Close,’ element to identify young people within residential homes who are moving on to semi-independent/independent living provision.

In addition to the cohort of young people described above, those eligible for staying close will be young people leaving supported accommodation and moving into alternative accommodation at 18 and with supported living accommodation being their only option between age 16-18. These young people are likely to be just as vulnerable as many of the children leaving residential care at 18 years old. It is vital that trusting relationships they have developed during this period is continued.

Furthermore, the project will focus on Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children (UASC) within Wirral to ensure continuity of relationship with a trusted person.

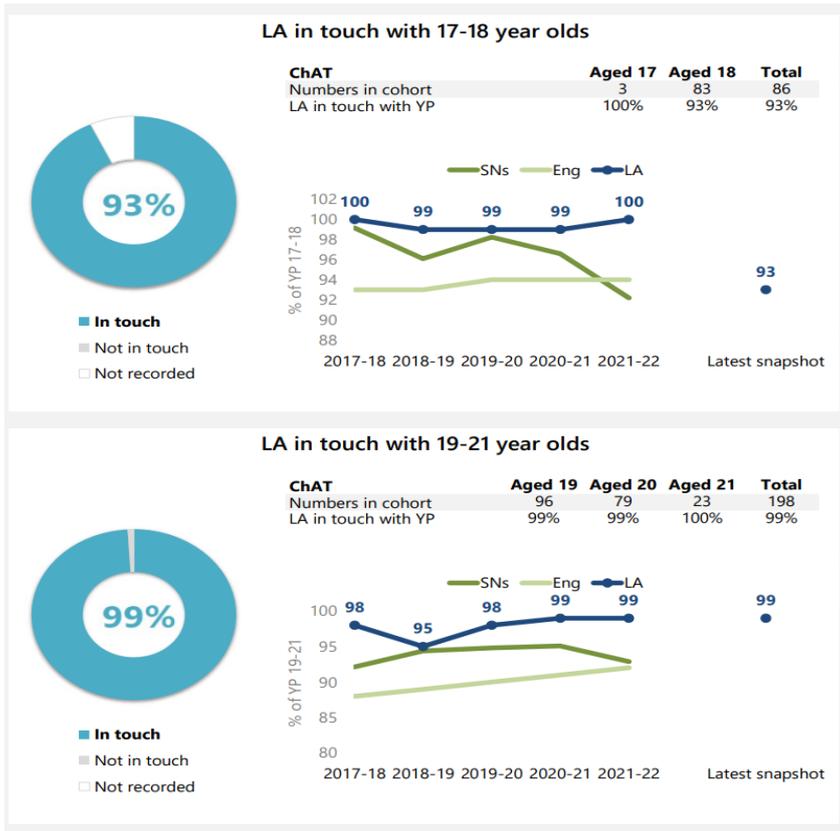
All three cohorts of children share similar characteristics in that many will have experienced multiple placement breakdowns and multiple traumas. The focus and outcomes of the project will be:

- Reducing homelessness
- Reducing the isolation that many young people experience on leaving residential care,
- Improving the mental health of children leaving residential care, and
- Improving engagement and outcomes in education, training, and work.
- The model will include the creation of a Transitions Worker post within the Care Leavers Service. The transitions worker will identify children aged 15-17 and relevant trusted persons and make referrals to the Leaving Care Panel to identify and agree a trusted person for all relevant children leaving care. The transitions workers will engage with the commissioning service, residential providers, young people, and personal advisors (PAs) in the care leavers services to ensure that packages of support are in place alongside the identified trusted person.
- Three 'Staying Close' posts will be created within the Care Leavers Service to build a trusted relationship with young people that will remain once they leave care. This offer will be provided to those young people where all avenues for existing trusted relationships have been exhausted. For example, where a private provider does not have capacity to support. Young people will be identified at 17 and the practitioner will commence early relationship building with them prior to and beyond time in residential or supported living accommodation.

- A Staying Close Framework will be embedded within Pathway Plans to ensure the plan encompasses vital elements of the framework, identifying support to be put in place, including the 'trusted relationship,' and move on accommodation. The offer will link with the guarantor scheme where young people are supported into accommodation pre-18 where the local authority is the guarantor paying the rent to ensure secure tenancies for young people and avoiding homelessness at 18. The Leaving Care Panel will coordinate move on placements in for either supported or independent living. Where possible, placements will be within walking distance of their previous home.
- As part of the model, a psychologist will be commissioned to provide intensive therapy for higher need young people, and reflective group clinical supervision to personal advisors. This specialist psychological therapeutic support will dovetail with current mental health support offered via OOMOO which will provide the young people with positive physical and creative activities, including peer mentoring and digital Cognitive Behaviour Therapy approaches. This would enable a specialist form of ongoing consultation supporting effective work, focussing on young people who are most at risk, e.g., exhibiting self-harm, suicidal ideation, difficulties in keeping safe, and in maintaining positive engagement with community/training and support.
- The psychologist will provide specialist advice and consultation to social workers, managers, and other professionals around the needs of children who are leaving care. The psychologist will provide specialist consultation to the network around the young person, ensuring that a trauma informed approach is applied work undertaken with the young person.
- The 14-19 Team will support care leavers with training, apprenticeships, and education and will encourage young people attend the SKILLZ (life skills programme for young people) at 'Our Space,' which is the dedicated care leaver hub in a central location in the borough. It would also include provision of Care Leaver Peer Mentor to support with employment, education and/ or training options utilising the existing partnership with the National Youth Advisory Service, which has been in place for the past three years. This will provide young people with a volunteer to work with them with job applications, job interviews, CVs, and training.
- In terms of sustainability, it is expected that the transitions worker will be embedded within the Care Leavers team with joint funding across the Permanence and Cared Leavers team to ensure continuity of role. Regarding the Psychologist role, this would

form part of the core offer for mental health support for CLA and Care Leavers and would be an ongoing commitment from Wirral. The aim for the 3 x 'Staying Close practitioners' will be to secure joint funding across public health, children, and potentially adult services to enable posts to become sustainable and integrated, part of the support network.

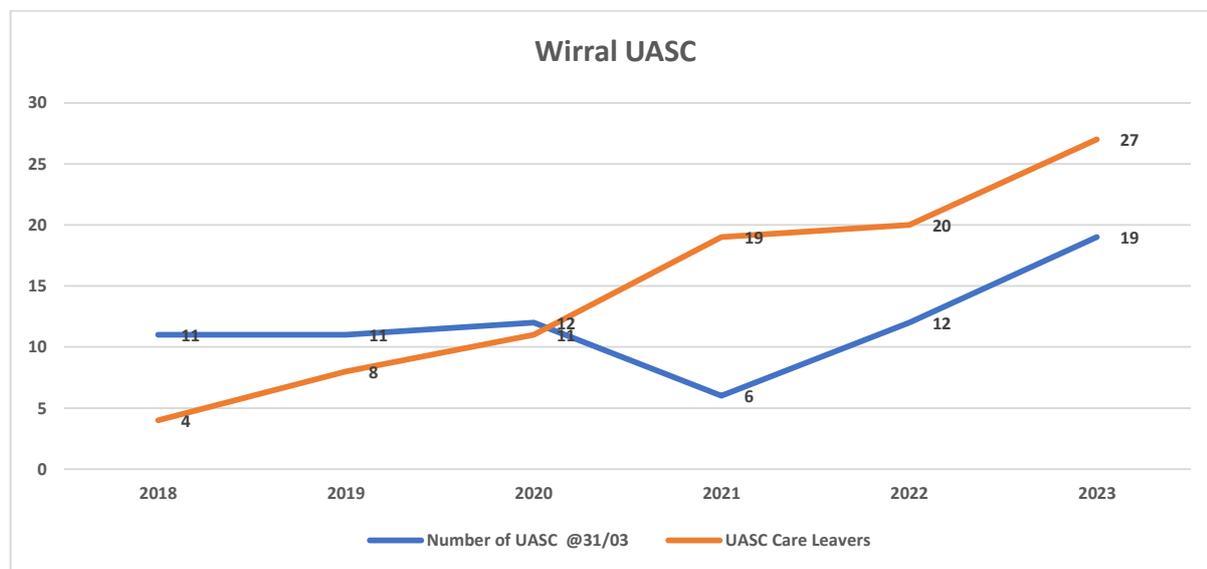
- Gareth Jones from the 14-19 Team has been meeting with the relevant Council departments and affiliated companies to ensure apprenticeships are available for our care leavers. Specific wording within and outside contracts for the Council need to include ironclad guarantees that care leavers will be offered apprenticeships with companies that are developing areas around the Wirral.
- Gareth Jones will also be looking at developing a mandatory corporate parenting video use across the council. He is working on this in conjunction with our organisational development team.
- We are moving our SKILLZ training offer for independence and life skills for children in care and care leavers into a more accessible version that can be accessed via carers and young people and undertaken within homes. The plan is that the platform will be provided to foster carers for example who will be able to go through the program and support the young person to gain the qualification in the life skills associated with it rather than the expectation that the young people come to a centre to complete the work. This should increase the numbers of young people accessing these courses and fit in with expectations around foster carer roles.
- We are supporting the Care Leavers Covenant to be applied across the Council in terms of embedding support to Care Leavers across all Council Departments and relevant public and private sector organisations and partnerships.
- In terms of contact between the Care Leavers Service and our young people this is illustrated by the information below highlighting a positive impact of engagement and support by the team:



5. Unaccompanied And Separated Children

In terms of unaccompanied and separated children who have come to the UK from abroad the numbers have increased significantly over recent years. This is primarily as a result of the national transfer scheme which Wirral is part of as are other local authorities in the UK. This means that Wirral has a quota of young people to take from holding points usually on the south coast of England.

Graph to illustrate numbers of Unaccompanied and Separated Children looked after and numbers of care leavers has increased in recent years



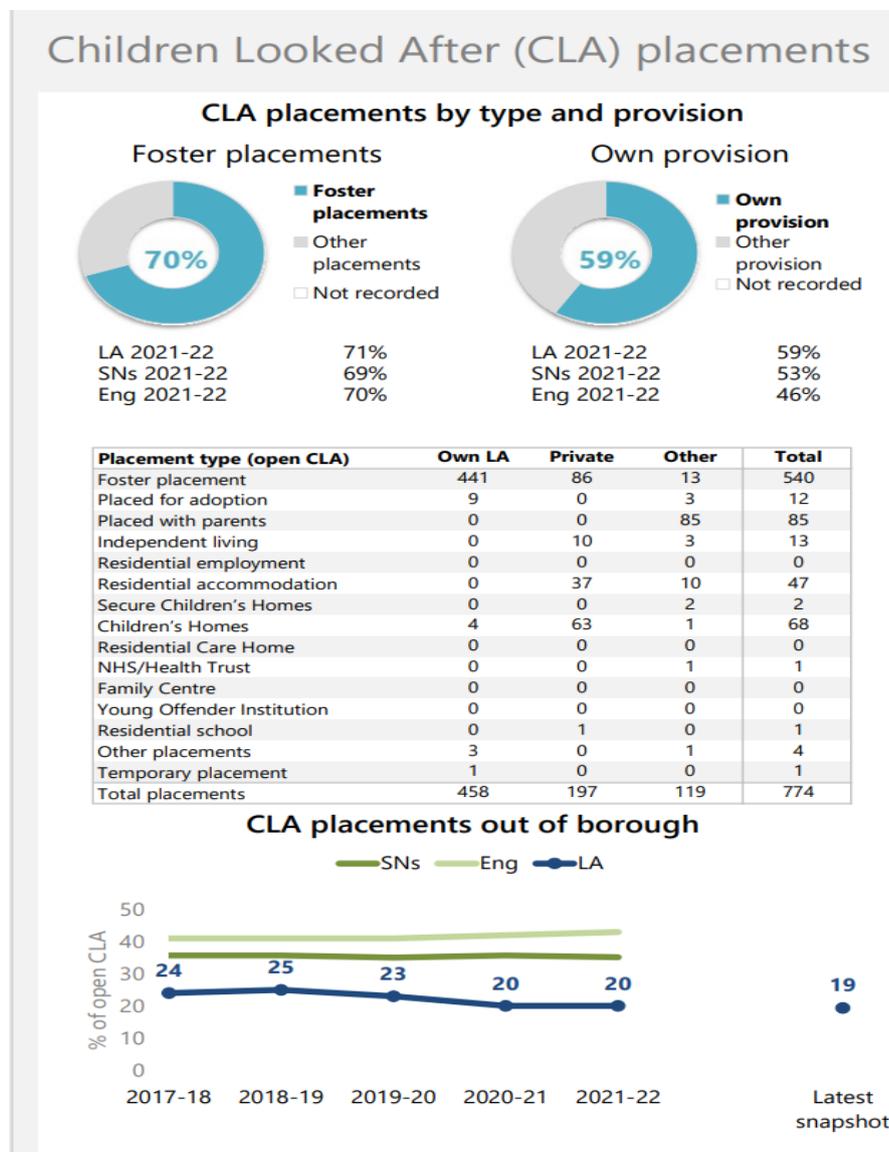
Work is ongoing alongside colleagues within commissioning and housing to support young people to be placed within Wirral rather than in Liverpool where there is more scope for accommodation on offer, but the young people may be more removed from the support locally.

In terms of our support for foster carers, a paper was submitted to senior leadership team outlining significant changes in skills banding payments to foster carers. This is to support the recruitment and retention of foster carers at a time of increasing costs for them and against the backdrop of no increases in these payments for more than 10 years. An uplift in payments across the bandings has been agreed at 11%. We have also provided two new skills banding payments for children with specialist needs (usually teenagers who have experienced significant trauma) and children with complex needs (usually children with significant disabilities and high care needs). The aim of these new skills banding payments are to support children to be placed in foster care rather than in residential care, thereby supporting a more family focussed and less institutionalised setting, whilst at the same time reducing the high costs associated with residential care.

There have been requests for increase mileage allowance from foster carers recently and proposals are being costed currently prior to presentation at the Senior Leadership Team (SLT).

6. Personal lived experience

The information below highlights how Wirral has more children placed in foster care than comparative neighbouring authorities and in England as well as the fact that a significantly higher proportion of the children placed in foster care are within the LA own provision. This means that we have more children placed with Wirral local authority employed foster carers. Additionally, Wirral has a significantly lower proportion of children placed out of borough than other areas of England.



The first residential home for Juno has opened in May 2023. This is a four bedded residential home run by a community interest company supported by Wirral and other partners. The home is a wonderful bright and airy space with plenty of room and opportunities for relaxing and engaging in positive activities within the community. The staff team is in place and receiving ongoing training and support specifically around children's emotional well-being and mental health. Two children have since moved into the home, with another two children planned to move in within 3 months and matching is ongoing currently.

The three bedroomed respite/crisis home for children learning disabilities/autism is moving forward as a result of the home progressing through probate finally. The project is moving forward and steps are being taken to plan and implement the building modifications and a view to opening the home within a few months.

A further home has been identified via NHS colleagues which is owned by Cheshire Wirral partnership. Work is ongoing with NHS colleagues to identify the best use of this building which is a six bedroomed previously respite home for young people with disabilities. Data were to examine the specific needs of children who would be supported in this home are underway with a focus on short-term care and rehabilitation and community support.

The commission with Kinship to provide additional support to our carers who look after children subject to special guardianship orders ended in April 2023. This was as a result of the contract not being utilised to its full potential (there was not enough demand for the services provided), the contract cost had increased significantly, some of the key benefits of the contract can be accessed free of charge, and Wirral is providing a small and bespoke SGO support team which is currently being developed.

7. Education and Employment

The Assistant Director for Education has been meeting with colleagues to codesign key principles in relation to expectations around our children looked after. These principles will be part of the inclusion offer for children supporting children to remain in school and not be excluded, supporting children to have people remaining supporting them rather than losing the supports and having no safe place at times within school hours to go to

Wirral Virtual School consist of 10 staff who champion the education of Looked After Children and children with a social worker. As part of their role they ensure that:

- Government Grant Funds are monitored, scrutinised and carefully accounted for and used appropriately and in accordance with all Grant requirements to support vulnerable children to achieve the best outcomes.
- All systems are utilised appropriately and accurately to enable tracking and monitoring of plans for looked after children and ensure all relevant parties are fully informed and involved.
- Accurate and reliable data is collected to inform and drive progress and continued improvement.
- Reporting systems are in place to ensure compliance and accountability.
- Children out of authority are carefully considered and championed by a specific member of staff who is in regular contact with all out of borough schools and who works with all agencies to ensure they do not fall off the radar.
- Children with a plan for adoption are supported via LACES and AIM. Meetings are attended and adoptive parents have full support and guidance of Virtual Head.
- Children in foster care are fully supported and training is planned for the Summer Term 2023.
- We work with all providers to support children in residential settings access education quickly and placements are stable.
- Children with SEND are carefully and meticulously supported and championed by a specific member of the team who liaises with all relevant parties to ensure that the most vulnerable children are accessing the right education with the right support.
- Unaccompanied Asylum-seeking Children and Young People receive funding and support

whenever necessary.

- 100% completion of Personal Education Plans and are good or better quality
- There have been no children Permanently Excluded from school
- Every School visited to develop relationships and provide support and challenge to raise aspirations and progress of looked after children
- Wirral children in care make better progress generally than other groups of children open to social care. We have plans to address this and support schools and social care to ensure all groups of children attain good outcomes
- We have worked with colleagues in data teams to produce reports showing the educational progress of all Wirral CLA in GLD, Phonics, Key Stages 1, 2 and 4 assessment data. This allows us to see at a glance, who is making progress and to share good practice across the authority. It also allows us to identify those not making progress and to provide further support and challenge to school and settings. Further work is needed to consider comparative internal school data.
- We pride ourselves on our excellent working relationships with schools, social care and all parties involved in the lives of Wirral Children's Services.

8. Financial Implications

There are financial implications for the uplift of skills banding payments to foster carers. We have agreed an 11% uplift across three skills bandings. The danger had we not uplifted is that foster carers will leave the service and we will not attract new foster carers to replace them, thus accelerating the financial commitment of the council to an increase in residential placements.

In terms of the financial implications for the Cheshire Wirral Partnership(CWP) Integrated Home, these are difficult to determine the moment as the planning is at a relatively early stage, however it is anticipated that whatever proposals are made these would result in net savings as a result of support been put in collaboratively across the partnership, and prevention of exceptionally high-cost placements and use of agencies for these young people.

9. Engagement/Consultation

Young people have been consulted around the strategy prior to its finalisation, and were involved from the outset in its design. Young people are regularly consulted with via the children in care Council and the Participation and Engagement Team to better understand feedback around each aspect of the strategy and its impact, as well as any other issues that are of renewed or new importance to young people.

Further to this range of internal partners and external organisations are involved in the design and review of the strategy.

10. Conclusion

The Children Looked After and Care Leavers strategy has assisted significant numbers of children looked after and care leavers in all areas of their emotional and physical health and well-being, their independence and transition to adult hood, their personal lived experience and in relation to education and employment. There are significant decisions that need to be made around future commissioning compared with in-house options around supporting this cohort children within Wirral and the corporate parenting Board will be advised of further recommendations in relation to the areas outlined in this report. There are various areas of expertise around psychological support to children where overlaps across services may mean that in house services closely linked with commissioned providers and CAMHS may offer a more flexible, responsive and integrated service band the positives and negatives of such approaches will be considered further by the Senior Leadership Team in advance of contracts ending in December 2023.