



Better  
education  
and care

# Joint area review

Wirral Children's Services Authority Area

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## Review of services for children and young people

Adult Learning Inspectorate  
Audit Commission  
Commission for Social Care Inspection (CSCI)  
Healthcare Commission  
HM Crown Prosecution Service Inspectorate  
HM Inspectorate of Constabulary  
HM Inspectorate of Court Administration  
HM Inspectorate of Prisons  
HM Inspectorate of Probation  
Ofsted

Audience	Published	Reference no.
All	[Date]	[00000]

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## Introduction

1. This joint area review was conducted in September and October 2005 using the arrangements required under section 20 of the Children Act 2004. It was carried out by a multidisciplinary team of 11 inspectors from the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted), the Commission for Social Care Inspection (CSCI), the Healthcare Commission (CHAI), HM Inspectorate of Constabulary (HMIC), the Adult Learning Inspectorate (ALI) and the Audit Commission. The review was undertaken according to the requirements of the *Framework for the inspection of children's services*.

2. The review was linked to the contemporaneous corporate assessment of the local council by the Audit Commission and its findings are represented in the relevant part of the corporate assessment report. It also drew on the findings of the contemporaneous inspections of the Youth Offending Service (YOS) and the youth service.

3. This review describes the outcomes achieved by children and young people growing up in the Wirral area and evaluates the way local services, taken together, contribute to their well-being. Joint area reviews focus on the extent to which children and young people are healthy, safe, enjoy and achieve, make a positive contribution, and are well prepared to secure economic well-being.

4. The review evaluates the collective contribution made to each outcome for children and young people by relevant services in the area. It also judges the contributions made by the council's services overall and, specifically, its education and children's social care services. Particular attention is given to joint action by local services on behalf of those groups of children and young people who are vulnerable to poor outcomes. Two such groups are covered in detail: children and young people who are looked after by the council; and children and young people with learning difficulties and disabilities.

5. The review took place in two stages consisting in total of three weeks over a six-week period. The first stage reviewed all existing evidence including:

- self-assessment undertaken by local public service providers
- a survey of children and young people
- performance data
- the emerging findings of the inspection of the YOS (led by HM Inspectorate of Probation)
- planning documents
- information from the inspection of local settings, such as schools and day-care provision

- briefings from staff within inspectorates, commissions and other public bodies in contact with local providers.

6. The second stage included inspection fieldwork. This included studies of how far local services have improved outcomes for a small sample of children and young people, some of whom have the most complex needs, and a study of provision in the St James' neighbourhood of Birkenhead. It also included gathering evidence on ten key judgements, selected because of their critical importance to improving outcomes for children and young people in the local area. This included discussions with local councillors and their equivalents in other public agencies, officers from these agencies, service users and community representatives.

7. A report on the Wirral youth service is being published by Ofsted at the same time as this report.

## Context

8. Wirral is a very distinct area: a peninsula between the Mersey and Dee estuaries. It has two large urban areas on the Mersey coast, Birkenhead and Wallasey, where most of the population live, but also has several smaller dormitory towns situated in the countryside or along the coastline. It is well served by the motorway network, and is connected to mainline rail routes. The birth rate is falling and the number of young people of school age is expected to decline significantly over the next few years. The proportion of residents from minority ethnic groups is very small. No political party has overall control of Wirral Metropolitan Borough Council, which delivers all the local authority services.

9. The range of socio-economic circumstances in Wirral is huge. Some of the coastal areas on Liverpool Bay and the Dee are very prosperous. However, the Birkenhead conurbation, which was once a focus for the shipbuilding industry, contains some of the most disadvantaged neighbourhoods in England. Overall, disadvantage predominates and the unemployment rate in Wirral is above the national figure. Of the population, 75% live in some of the 10% most deprived areas in the country. St James, which was a focus for attention in this review of children's services, is one such area.

10. The Children and Young People's Strategic Partnership includes the borough council, two primary care trusts, a hospital trust, the Wirral and Cheshire Partnership, the Greater Merseyside Connexions Partnership, the Merseyside Police Force, and a range of voluntary and community bodies. It is led by a management board on which the major bodies are represented. It is currently reviewing its provision in line with the government's requirements. There are already some multi-agency service groupings such as the Drug and Alcohol Team and the Youth Offending Team. The council currently provides its services through an Education and Cultural Services Department and a Social Services Department, but has appointed a designate director of children's

services and is moving towards an integrated Children's and Young People's Department. The borough council looks after about 650 children and young people.

11. There are 100 maintained primary schools, 22 maintained secondary schools, 11 maintained special schools and 1 pupil referral unit. The arrangement of secondary schools and colleges is complex. In some areas there is a system of grammar schools and high schools, in others a system of nominally or actually all-ability comprehensive schools. There are also four Roman Catholic secondary schools, two of which are grammar schools recruiting from a broad area. Half of the secondary schools are single-sex, and 17, including some high schools, have a sixth form. There is a sixth form college and a general further education college. Work-based learning is the responsibility of 17 local training providers and 3 national providers. Entry to Employment provision is managed by the Laird Foundation, a local consortium, and three other providers: Scientiam, Michael John and Wirral Metropolitan Borough College. Adult and community learning, including family learning, is provided by the borough council and the general further education college. Greater Merseyside Learning and Skills Council is a partner with the borough council, the colleges, schools and training providers in addressing 14–19 strategy.

## Summary report

### Outcomes for children and young people

12. **Outcomes for most children and young people in Wirral are positive and, from the evidence gathered, children and young people appear safe.** However, there are marked inequalities in outcomes which relate to economic and social differences across the borough. In general, young people are reasonably healthy, but life expectancy is much higher in the prosperous parts of the borough than in the disadvantaged areas. Educational standards are better overall than the national average, and improving further, and the large majority of Wirral schools are good or better. However, standards tend to be higher in the prosperous areas. Most 16 and 17 year olds are in full-time education and the proportion is increasing, but it is higher in the prosperous areas. The uptake of apprenticeships has improved and is above average overall but is still too low for 16 year olds. Sixth formers taking GCE or VCE AS or A level do consistently better than the national average. Nearly two thirds of young people achieve level 2 qualifications by age 19. Across the borough, children appear safe: appropriate action is taken to protect them when necessary. However, there are some delays in providing support to those children whose need is not immediate, and some children live in communities where they feel concerned about their own safety. Many young people contribute well to their school and local communities and most of those surveyed feel they are given some say in how things are run. Overall, outcomes for children looked after by the council or those with learning difficulties and disabilities are satisfactory, but a high number are placed outside the area.

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## Impact of local public services

### Being healthy

13. **The combined work of all local services in securing the health of children and young people is good.** There are some areas requiring further development.

14. Young children and their parents generally receive good health support, particularly in areas served by Sure Start programmes, where health services are linked well to other services. Schools undertake a lot of health education, and healthy eating and physical activity programmes are strong in primary schools. Immunisation programmes are in place; the overall uptake is in line with the national average, but there are marked differences across the borough, resulting in some high incidences of infectious diseases. Dental decay in children and young people is significantly worse than the national average and some parents experience delays in getting routine checks. There are a number of initiatives to reduce teenage pregnancies, smoking and substance misuse. These are having some positive impact. Health support for children looked after by the council is very good.

15. Much of the mental health support for children and young people is excellent and the service was awarded Beacon status in 2004. It is responsive and flexible, and emergency response is good. However, there is limited availability of mental health in-patient beds, which can result in children with acute mental health problems being cared for on the paediatric ward. Similarly, there are limited specialist facilities or staff for children within the accident and emergency department.

### Staying safe

16. **The overall contribution of services to keeping children and young people safe is adequate.**

17. Children assessed as most at risk of harm or abuse and the subject of formal plans of protection are well protected by multi-agency work and committed professionals. Arrangements for children and young people on the child protection register are secure. The numbers of children on the register are higher than in similar areas. Social work teams continue to work with a high level of vacancies and this, combined with the demands of maintaining high numbers of looked-after children and backlogs in allocating and transferring cases, reduces the capacity and consistency of support for all but the most urgent of cases. The majority of children in a sample for this review had been the subject of repeat referrals prior to social work services being allocated, indicating that thresholds for allocating resources are operating at a high level of need. The quality of assessment, care planning and auditing of case files is inconsistent. Coordination of multi-agency work needs further improvement:

implementation of the Child Concern model is still at pilot stage. The police force has had difficulty in meeting its commitments regarding child protection. The Area Child Protection Committee (ACPC) is generally well attended but there is no formal representation from the local voluntary and community sector. It also has limited capacity to meet its commitments. Comprehensive procedures for addressing bullying and improving behaviour are in place in schools. The number of children admitted to hospital following severe injury is higher than the national average; an accident prevention strategy to address this is having some success.

### **Enjoying and achieving**

**18. The overall contribution of services to helping children and young people enjoy their education and recreation and to achieve well is good.**

19. The council works effectively with its partners to ensure that children and young people enjoy their education and achieve well. Parents and carers have effective support, particularly in the most disadvantaged neighbourhoods. The council gives good support to schools and early years settings: there are no schools with serious weaknesses or in need of special measures. The large majority of schools are good or very good. The council gives effective support to the national strategies to improve standards and pupils' attainment is above the national averages. The attainment of looked-after children is slightly above that found nationally and inspection indicates that children and young people with learning difficulties and disabilities achieve well. The support for improving behaviour is effective in reducing exclusions and there is good support for improving attendance, although the attendance of looked-after children remains slightly below the national average for that group. The provision for pupils excluded from school has failed to meet statutory requirements but is now satisfactory.

### **Making a positive contribution**

**20. The overall contribution of services in helping children and young people to contribute to society is good.**

21. Services do a lot to help children and young people to develop socially and emotionally. Much is done to encourage them to develop relationships and a sense of personal responsibility. Young people have many opportunities to take part in local decision-making activities although they do not contribute much to high-level decisions. Consultation with those from minority groups is unsystematic. Good support is given to those young people who are experiencing difficulties with life, tackling issues such as teenage pregnancy, sexual health needs, homelessness, drug- and alcohol-related problems and bullying. Support is less effective for young people with learning difficulties and disabilities, particularly as they move from children's services to adult services. Where anti-social behaviour is a problem, preventive programmes have been

developed and these are well used by young people at risk of offending and already known to the Youth Offending Team. However, the number of young people re-offending has increased.

### **Achieving economic well being**

**22. The overall contribution of services to helping children and young people achieve economic well-being is adequate.** There are some good features.

23. The local partnership's regeneration work benefits children and young people in the most disadvantaged areas. Housing provision for care leavers is at least adequate. Young people do not always receive full and impartial advice and guidance on the range of education and training available post-16, but participation is improving; however, it is higher in the more prosperous parts of the borough than in Birkenhead and Wallasey. Connexions is making a good contribution to increasing the numbers of young people in education, employment and training, including care leavers, young offenders and young people with learning difficulties and disabilities. Progress in planning and coordinating 14–19 education and training across the area has been slow in some key respects, but the quality of provision is generally satisfactory or good. The take-up of apprenticeships has improved and is now above average overall, but is still too low for 16 year olds. Provision for young people with learning difficulties and disabilities varies: the sixth forms of special schools are good but there are too few other education or training courses with sufficient flexibility to meet widely differing individual needs.

### **Service management**

**24. The management of services for children and young people is adequate.**

25. Senior leadership of the education service and of the children's social care service is very good and the council provides effective leadership to the Children and Young People's Partnership Strategic Board. Relationships between local partners are good and major partners, including the voluntary sector, are actively involved in the strategic board. Partners are investing strongly in the time and resources to develop their partnership approach. The overall capacity of the partnership is adequate but there is some weakness in the council's social care staffing and financial planning. Performance management arrangements are adequate and improving, but children, young people and their families are not fully involved in assessing and improving the quality of services. The council manages its resources well and it provides good value for money. Its costs are comparable to similar councils and it measures its performance against other councils. However, the council's budgets are driven by a desire to make savings and not enough by other priorities.

26. Local partners were fully and very productively involved in the self-assessment process and they recognise most of the issues facing the partnership. The self-assessment correctly sees the education service as Wirral's greatest strength, but underestimates the work to be done in some aspects, such as the inclusion in mainstream schools of more young people with learning difficulties and disabilities, and in planning 14–19 education and training. It is considerably too generous in its evaluation of its service management, in the light of the difficulty experienced in tackling some enduring issues, such as the high number of looked-after children. Nevertheless, the capacity of the partnership to improve further is adequate.

## Grades

**Grades awarded:**

**4: outstanding; 3: good; 2: adequate; 1: inadequate**

	<b>Local services overall</b>	<b>Council services</b>	<b>Health services</b>
<b>Being healthy</b>	<b>3</b>		
<b>Staying safe</b>	<b>2</b>		
<b>Enjoying and achieving</b>	<b>3</b>		
<b>Making a positive contribution</b>	<b>3</b>		
<b>Achieving economic well-being</b>	<b>2</b>		
<b>Service management</b>	<b>2</b>		
<b>Capacity to improve</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>2</b>	
<b>Children's services</b>		<b>3</b>	
<b>The education service</b>		<b>3</b>	
<b>The social care services for children</b>		<b>2</b>	
<b>The health service for children</b>			<b>3</b>

## Recommendations

**For immediate action**

27. Ensure that targets and timescales are met in reducing the overall numbers of looked-after children and the use of external placements.

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**For action over the next six months**

28. Partners should ensure that the implementation of the Child Concern model is supported by clearly agreed thresholds for providing timely services to children in need.

29. The primary care trusts should develop and implement an action plan to improve dental health and reduce reliance on emergency services for dental care.

30. The council should ensure that staff recruitment and retention remains a priority in order to address the high level of vacancies for qualified council social workers.

31. The ACPC should review its capacity to monitor, evaluate and develop child protection services and identify a representative of the voluntary and community organisations to join the committee.

32. Ensure that firm borough-wide plans are made within this academic year for removing surplus school places.

33. Improve transition arrangements for supporting young people with learning difficulties and disabilities from children's services to adult services, including planning for improved education and training opportunities post-16.

34. Take action to embed the 14–19 strategy and the learner entitlement across the borough and ensure that young people receive impartial advice and information on the full range of learning opportunities that are available post-16.

**For action in the longer term**

35. Establish a database of health outcomes; use this to identify local variations in health and to evaluate the impact of health improvement initiatives.

36. Improve opportunities for systematic consultation and strategic engagement of children and young people, particularly those from more vulnerable groups, including Black and minority ethnic heritage groups.

37. Increase the inclusion into mainstream schools of children and young people with learning difficulties and disabilities.

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## Main report

### Outcomes for children and young people

38. **Children and young people are generally healthy, but there is considerable inequality across the borough.** There are considerable variations in life expectancy at birth: for example, 78 years for males living in Wallasey but only 66 years for those living in Tranmere. Perinatal mortality is slightly higher than the national average but infant mortality is slightly lower. The percentage of babies with low birth weight is average. Overall, childhood immunisation rates at the age of 5 years are in line with the national average, but the incidence of measles and whooping cough is higher than national average. The pregnancy rate for girls aged under-18 is comparatively high but falling. The number of pregnant women smoking is very variable across the borough but there has been an overall decrease. More children than average have decayed or missing teeth. In a survey undertaken for this review, a high percentage of children and young people reported feeling quite healthy or very healthy.

39. **On the evidence gathered, children and young people appear safe.** The majority of those responding to the recently conducted survey said that they feel safe. The proportion of children on the child protection register is higher than the national average. Rates of re-referrals generally reflect those nationally and in similar areas. Appropriate action is taken to protect children when necessary. However, there are delays in assessments and the delivery of services for less urgent cases involving children in need but who do not require immediate protection. The incidence of domestic violence is high and some children live in communities where they feel concerned about their safety. Hospital admissions of under-18s for serious injury are higher than the national average. The number of road traffic accidents is about average.

40. **Children and young people are well prepared for school and achieve well.** Most children and young people attend school regularly, enjoy their education and achieve well. There are enough early education and childcare places to meet the needs of children and parents, and children are well prepared for school. The educational standards achieved at school by most children are better than the national averages and those for similar areas and are improving further. Children and young people from the most deprived areas of Birkenhead and Wallasey generally achieve less well than those in the more affluent south and west areas of the borough, but a significant number of the most disadvantaged schools produce good value-added outcomes. Attendance at school is improving across the borough and is in line with the national average. The level of permanent exclusions from secondary schools is lower than in similar areas and nationally, but the number of exclusions from primary schools, although declining, is well above that found in similar areas. Children looked after by the authority achieve slightly higher results than is the case nationally, but their attendance remains slightly below the national average.

School inspections indicate that the achievement of the majority of pupils with special educational needs is good or very good.

**41. Children and young people have a good range of opportunities to make decisions and take personal responsibility; many make a good contribution to their communities.** Children and young people are involved in a good range of activities where they develop personal and social skills and take personal responsibility. Many make a positive contribution to their local communities, particularly through school and youth programmes such as mentoring and play leadership. Two thirds of the children and young people surveyed feel they are able to have a say in the way things are run in their local area and the majority of pupils feel able to contribute in some way to decisions about school affairs. Looked-after children and young people and those with learning difficulties and disabilities are not consistently involved in their reviews and do not always find it easy to make their views heard. A high proportion of young people who have offended are placed in appropriate education, employment or training provision. Rates of repeat offending, however, have increased. About one in seven of children and young people surveyed do not feel very safe in their local area and about half feel only quite safe. In general, these young people feel that, for example, more police on the streets, protection from bullies or gangs, and safer roads would reduce their feelings of unease.

**42. Most young people are able to achieve economic well-being and they are prepared well for working life.** Young people benefit from the extensive regeneration programmes which are improving their environment and creating jobs. Appropriate housing for young people has been in short supply but action is being taken to remedy this. Most 16 and 17 year olds are in full-time education and the proportion is increasing. The proportion of young people not in education, employment or training is reducing but is still too high. The proportion of 17-year-old students not continuing with their courses to 18 is high. Success rates in education and training are variable, depending on the area and type of provision, but are generally improving. Most young people make satisfactory progress. Sixth formers taking GCE or VCE AS or A level do consistently better than the national average. Success rates on apprenticeship and advanced apprenticeship programmes are in line with national averages.

## **Impact of local public services**

### **Being healthy**

**43. The combined work of all local services in securing the health of children and young people is good.** There are some areas for development.

44. Parents and carers, particularly those in Sure Start areas, receive well-coordinated advice and support in keeping their children healthy. Partnership working within Sure Start effectively targets provision to neighbourhoods with the greatest need and reaches some traditionally hard-to-reach groups, such as

teenage mothers and fathers. Programmes of support are well directed, and focus on crucial issues such as healthy eating, sex education and smoking cessation. Some of the work is imaginative: a male worker has recently been employed specifically to support young fathers. This multi-agency provision is not yet available across the borough, but a network of children's centres is planned which will allow its expansion.

45. The impact of advice and support to parents varies. The proportion of mothers initiating breastfeeding differs significantly across the borough. While there has been an overall increase in beginning breastfeeding, there has not been much success in maintaining it beyond a few weeks. Likewise, initiatives to reduce smoking in pregnancy have had some impact, but parts of the borough continue to have a much higher-than-average number of smokers.

46. Schools make a valuable contribution to promoting children's health. For example, the majority are involved in schemes to promote healthy living. All primary schools are involved in the national fruit and vegetable scheme and a majority provide fluoridated milk. Most children surveyed understand the significance of eating healthy food, but a large minority feel, despite schools' current efforts, that they do not have sufficient access to it. There is limited data available for assessing rates of childhood obesity, but historical data suggests that this is an increasing problem. Schools, youth and leisure services promote healthy living through a good range of activities including sporting opportunities. However, a few young people and their parents complain that provision is not always appropriate, particularly for those with disabilities, and that in some instances, individuals have been excluded because of their behavioural difficulties. The council's policy of offering free access to swimming pools during school holidays has been popular and beneficial.

47. A number of multi-agency initiatives are provided in relation to alcohol and substance misuse and sex education but the impact varies. All schools meet national guidance on substance misuse, but Wirral has a high concentration of young people presenting for drug treatment. Sex education may be contributing to the decrease in the number of teenage pregnancies. Even so, the overall figure remains above the national average and the number of teenage mothers remains high. Support for pregnant teenagers is broad-ranging: a teenage pregnancy clinic offers a one-stop approach enabling easier access and referral to other services, and a new dedicated facility for pregnant teenagers and mothers is opening soon.

48. The identification and assessment of health needs at an early stage is good, with health visitors making a significant contribution. The uptake of immunisations across Wirral by the age of five is similar to the national average. However, despite promotional work, there are considerable variations between particular areas and incidences of measles and whooping cough are higher than average. The number of decayed and missing teeth experienced by children and young people is also higher than the national average. Although the

majority of dentists provide NHS care, parents experience difficulty in accessing regular services.

49. Attendances at the accident and emergency department by children and young people are in line with the national average. Waiting times are satisfactory, but there are very limited facilities for children in the department, for example there is no separate waiting room and a limited number of registered children's nurses. The trust has good plans to improve this, but these have yet to be fully implemented.

50. Much of the mental health support for children and young people is excellent and the child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS) won Beacon status in 2004. Provision is responsive and flexible, and the emergency response is good. Services include clinical psychology and joint assessment procedures. Waiting times are short and an on-call service is available. However, children and young people with acute mental health problems requiring hospital treatment frequently have to be cared for on a general paediatric ward. In addition to treating children and young people, CAMHS offers advice and consultation to social work staff and carers. Foster carers value this support, particularly those caring for young people with complex needs through the department's fostering treatment scheme.

51. The health needs of looked-after children are monitored very well: over 90% receive timely medical and dental checks. Two dedicated nurses for looked-after children monitor their health-care plans and support young people with health problems to ensure they gain access to the treatment they need. The nurses are able to refer young people directly to CAMHS without a doctor's referral.

### **Staying safe**

**52. The overall contribution of services to keeping children and young people safe is adequate.**

53. Children and young people who are most at risk are well safeguarded. There are higher numbers of children on the child protection register than nationally or in similar areas and these children tend to be registered for longer than average, but progress is being made in reducing the number registered and the period of registration. Procedures for removing children from the register are good: relatively few are re-registered within 12 months.

54. Referrals of children at lower levels of need declined markedly in 2004 because social care services, as a consequence of their resource problems, maintained high thresholds for accepting cases. The majority of children in the sample of case studies undertaken for this review had been the subject of several contacts or referrals. This suggests that social care services are mainly working with children at high levels of need who require protection. The

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council's investment in family support services is significantly lower than similar authorities and the rate of growth is slow. The implementation of a strategy to tackle these problems has had little impact as yet.

55. There are some good examples of partnership working to support individual children, although this was poorly coordinated in a significant proportion of the cases sampled. Local partners, under the leadership of the council's social care services, are piloting the Child Concern model in order to rationalise and improve referrals, assessment and provision. Although this is aimed at clarifying agencies' roles and improving the management and coordination of services to individual children and young people, it will not be implemented fully for several months. At present, there is some good inter-agency work, but it is sometimes hampered by unclear information-sharing. Agencies tend to work in the way they are used to rather than according to an agreed system. Services do not yet deploy resources consistently to meet agreed priorities. The police force, in particular, has undergone a period of understaffing and instability with regard to its commitment to child protection, although its collaboration with the probation service regarding domestic violence is good.

56. Schools have comprehensive procedures for tackling bullying and improving behaviour and the large majority of pupils feel very or quite safe there. One quarter of those surveyed, though, would welcome more effective action to address bullying or rude behaviour. A police initiative to work with schools to combat bullying is at an early stage of development.

57. The borough benefits from having a considerable range of organisations working with children and young people. However, the local partnership does not currently ensure that advice and training, although available, is systematically structured to meet each organisation's needs. The ACPC is generally well attended, but there is no formal representation from the local voluntary and community sector. It also has limited capacity to meet its commitments: for instance, it did not meet timescales in undertaking two Serious Case Reviews.

58. The council's resource problems are affecting the delivery of social care services. Some social workers are responsible for more than 40 cases. This is partly attributable to slow closure of some cases and the limitations of the management information systems, and partly to the lack of sufficient qualified staff. Completion of assessments and care planning, although sometimes excellent, is often delayed. However, all looked-after children have care plans which are reviewed within appropriate timescales by independent reviewing officers. The majority of looked-after children are allocated to a suitably qualified social worker, although 65 children have other staff who had received appropriate training.

59. Children who are looked after by foster carers consider themselves safe and well cared for. Overall outcomes for looked-after children are satisfactory

although there are inconsistencies in the quality of care planning. The demands on the service of maintaining such a large number of cases are very high. This has an impact on the service's ability to plan effectively and to meet strategic objectives. For example, the council did not meet its target for adoptions this year.

60. Many looked-after children are placed outside the borough, reflecting the inability and lack of capacity of local resources to care for this number of looked-after children. The council's strategy to reduce the number is meeting difficulties. The local fostering service has been unable to meet increased demand although initiatives are planned to improve recruitment and retention. Thirty-six children were placed on a temporary basis with foster carers outside their category of approval, although these placements had been subject to appropriate management scrutiny and decision-making.

61. The best examples of social care case files are well ordered, accurate and up to date, but some others examined at random are not maintained as well. Some are unclear and cannot be used easily. The auditing of files does not always focus on quality or outcomes for children. The involvement of different agencies is not always clearly indicated in the files.

62. The council has adequate procedures for tracking children who are excluded from school and ensuring that they receive education. It works with other agencies to identify and provide for missing children and young runaways, but it is difficult to monitor the uptake of its services by the children of homeless families because of their mobility.

63. The number of children admitted to hospital following severe injury is higher than the national average. An accident prevention strategy to address this is having some success; for example the provision of fireguards and stair gates led to a decrease in accidents involving the under-5s. Schools and youth workers encourage young people to take action to avoid feeling unsafe and a protective behaviours programme has been particularly effective in raising safety awareness in local communities. The council has a broad range of actions in place to reduce casualties resulting from road traffic accidents.

### **Enjoying and achieving**

**64. The overall contribution of services to helping children and young people to enjoy their education and recreation and achieve well is good.**

65. There is a wide range of high-quality support for parents and carers wishing to help their children enjoy and achieve well at school. This includes particular work with those in the most deprived areas or who face the greatest difficulties. Parents and carers whose children attend nurture groups, for

example, receive good support in developing the skills to deal with difficult behaviour.

66. There is a good integrated strategy for early years provision. The quality of nursery education is good and children who are likely to underachieve are identified early and supported well. Effective links with primary schools ensure that children continue to make good progress when they transfer. Under-5s have access to a particularly good range of facilities in disadvantaged areas: for example, the Sure Start programme in the St James district of Birkenhead has many valuable initiatives to help young children's development.

67. In nearly every respect parents and carers receive clear guidance on the admission arrangements for schools. There are sufficient school places in secondary schools, but in the primary sector there are too many surplus places. Although the challenge of removing surplus places has remained inadequately addressed for too long, a clear strategy is now being implemented which is likely to involve some school closures.

68. The large majority of schools are good or very good. The council gives effective support to school self-evaluation, and its school improvement service makes good use of performance data to monitor schools well, in proportion to the needs of each school. There are good procedures for identifying and supporting schools causing concern and there are no longer any schools judged to have serious weaknesses or to be in need of special measures. The council gives effective support to the implementation of the national strategies for raising attainment.

69. Pupils' school attendance is in line with the national average. The educational welfare service makes good use of the full range of available strategies, including prosecution, to encourage good attendance. Overall, the support for behaviour is effective and there is some very good practice in the behaviour improvement programme and the nurture groups. The coordination of support for behaviour has been underdeveloped, but this is now being addressed. Few pupils are permanently excluded from secondary schools and although exclusions from primary schools are high, these are now falling.

70. The provision for pupils excluded from school is now satisfactory. It has been reorganised effectively and now meets statutory requirements. However, the provision for those excluded from primary schools is relatively new and has not yet been fully planned. Systems for monitoring exclusions and reintegration have been inadequate, but these are now in place. The hospital school provides very effective support for pupils with physical and mental health needs and for pregnant schoolgirls.

71. School inspections indicate that children and young people with learning difficulties and disabilities achieve well in special and mainstream schools. However, a small number of young people, parents and carers voice strong

concerns that some of these young people are not being adequately supported to reach their full potential. The council is committed to the inclusion of pupils with learning difficulties and disabilities in mainstream schools but, despite a clear strategy, too many pupils remain in special schools within or outside the authority. Special schools and resourced units, however, are increasingly supporting pupils with learning difficulties in mainstream settings and there is effective inclusion of children with physical disabilities. The number of young people with statements of special educational need has fallen, but remains high and statements are issued too slowly.

72. Support for the education of looked-after children is good. They do better at school than is the case nationally, and the majority of those interviewed say they enjoy school. All schools have designated teachers for looked-after children, but only 90% of these young people have a personal education plan (PEP) and some, although aware of their PEP, are not convinced of its value. The absence rate of looked-after children is consistently slightly above the national average but this is now the subject of improvement work. The looked-after children service is particularly valued by secondary schools who believe that it is effective in retaining some disenchanted pupils in mainstream education.

73. Schools generally provide a rich curriculum and give young people good opportunities for out-of-hours learning. The youth service provides a good range of activities to support the personal development of young people, including looked-after children and those with learning difficulties and disabilities. Young people greatly value that provision, but there is a need for the service to engage more with minority groups. There are many opportunities, including those provided by leisure and play services and the music service, for young people to become involved in sports, music and the arts. The provision of leisure opportunities for children and young people with learning difficulties and disabilities is extensive, but not always easily accessible to them.

### **Making a positive contribution**

**74. The overall contribution of services in helping children and young people to contribute to society is good.**

75. Local partners do much to promote children and young people's personal, social and emotional development. Early years settings and schools, in particular, provide extensive opportunities for them to develop positive relationships, take responsibility and value diversity. Good efforts have been made, particularly by the youth service and voluntary providers, to include the most vulnerable young people in citizenship programmes such as Millennium Volunteers and the Duke of Edinburgh's Award scheme.

76. In general, children and young people receive good support in managing change and in coping with difficult periods in their lives. For example, effective support is provided by Connexions personal advisers to vulnerable young people aged 14 and above, and those with a learning difficulty and disability are assisted by specialist personal advisers. However, the involvement of personal advisers in special needs annual reviews is inconsistent and of variable quality. A number of parents and carers are very critical of the review process in general, complaining that their own contributions are not valued. Only two thirds of looked-after children and young people take part in their annual reviews. Many young people with learning difficulties and disabilities have insufficient support when they approach adulthood.

77. Vulnerable young people receive good specialist support. An information, advice and counselling service is very effective in giving help on matters such as sexual health, pregnancy, homelessness, drugs and alcohol. It is regarded highly by the many children and young people who use it. In addition, CAMHS provides a comprehensive service for young people with more complex needs who require intensive support and there has been a good development of therapeutic fostering services and provision. A voluntary body gives good advocacy and support to young carers.

78. The partnership's commitment to including children and young people in decision-making processes is strong. However, their influence on strategic decisions is currently limited and their involvement does not represent the diverse range of young people living in the area. Nevertheless, a comprehensive plan is in place to take this work forward and young people have developed a charter for participation.

79. Children and young people's voices are heard better at local level. School councils are well established and often act as an important influence on policies regarding matters such as bullying, healthy lifestyles, mentoring schemes and after-school activities. Area youth forums have been effective in taking up local issues with service providers, senior officers and councillors. Young people from diverse backgrounds participate in youth service activities, but those from minority ethnic groups, while small in number, are under-represented in consultation processes and as users of services overall. Two members of the UK Youth Parliament are elected annually and represent Wirral's young people on a number of national, regional and local forums.

80. Some looked-after children and young people are making extremely positive contributions to improving services: they interview candidates for social worker vacancies and have produced a training video entitled 'My ideal social worker'. More formal mechanisms to involve them in planning their provision are, however, underdeveloped.

81. Good work has been undertaken to consult young people with learning difficulties and disabilities. A group of disabled young people has been highly effective in raising issues that concern them. Nevertheless, young people

interviewed during this review expressed their frustration at the lack of feedback from the consultations to which they have contributed.

82. Initiatives to reduce anti-social behaviour are effective. A number of voluntary and statutory youth agencies organise activities in particular localities during school holidays, at weekends and after school to engage the most vulnerable children and young people. These have led to a reduction in criminal activity during these times. There is effective collaboration on community safety between the police force and the council. Anti-social behaviour orders are used by the police only as a last resort after attempting activities with individuals or groups.

83. The council's racial incidents and harassment policy gives effective support to education staff and pupils; teaching materials are provided to raise awareness and develop young people's understanding of diversity.

84. The Youth Offending Team is developing work to prevent young people who are at risk of offending from becoming offenders and this engages these young people well. Those who have already offended are supervised appropriately by the service, although re-offending rates have increased over the last year. The service tackles substance misuse and health problems among young offenders and they have good access to mental health support. A high proportion of children and young people known to the service are in education, employment or training placements. Young people receiving detention and training orders are managed effectively, although post-release provision for education, employment and training, and accommodation, is insufficient to meet their needs.

### **Achieving economic well-being**

85. **The overall contribution of services to helping children and young people achieve economic well-being is adequate.** There are some good features.

86. Wirral has a strong regeneration programme, increasingly well focused on local communities' needs, which attracts extensive investment and provides benefits to children and young people. Local people feature prominently in the planning and implementation of these initiatives, as in the development of adult and community learning in one disadvantaged area.

87. The local partnership has a good strategy for providing a range of types of childcare. The most significant increase has been in the number of full-day places. In the St James' area of Birkenhead there are insufficient childcare facilities for over-5s to help parents take full advantage of employment opportunities but the current development of extended schools is likely to resolve this. Similarly, in that neighbourhood, parents or carers are hampered by a lack of clear information on the provision available. However, the links

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between Sure Start and Jobcentre Plus give good support to vulnerable families in providing opportunities to gain employment.

88. Young people in Wirral are well supported by Connexions in deciding what to do post-16 and good progress has been made in increasing participation in education and training. The number of 16–19 year-olds not employed or in education or training is reducing but is still too high. Schools' careers education and guidance is improving but young people do not always receive impartial advice and guidance on the full range of learning opportunities that are available.

89. Progress has been made in establishing and implementing a 14–19 strategy following the area-wide inspection in 2002, but it has been slow in some key respects. A detailed post-inspection action plan has relevant aims but a strategy and a learner entitlement are only now being launched. Four local groups of leaders and managers have only recently extended their work to include improving collaboration on 14–19 issues.

90. There is much strength in the range of education and training on offer. However, effective pathways to progression for students have yet to be established and links between academic, vocational and work-based learning programmes are insufficiently developed at all levels. There is some duplication of academic level 3 provision and there are some small sixth forms with restricted opportunities. The take-up of apprenticeships has improved and is now above average overall, but is still too low for 16 year olds.

91. The colleges and almost all the sixth forms are at least satisfactorily led and managed. Students receive good academic and pastoral support and most make satisfactory progress, although too many 17 year olds fail to continue to 18. Success rates vary, but sixth form attainment at level 3 is better than the national average. Significant improvements have been made in the quality of some training providers that were inadequate when first inspected.

92. Good progress has been made in increasing the number of care leavers in education, employment or training. Young people have appropriate pathway plans from the age of 15. In addition to the mainstream service, a drop-in centre is available which includes resources to develop independence skills. The financial support available to care leavers is adequate and the leaving-care grant is sufficient for setting up a home with basic equipment.

93. Provision for young people with learning difficulties and disabilities within the sixth forms of special schools is of good quality. However, there are too few other education or training courses with sufficient flexibility to meet widely differing individual needs post-16. Nevertheless, the personal support for these young people is effective and there are developing initiatives to support some in gaining access to higher education. The further education college and the sixth form college have extensive support strategies in place.

94. Some progress has been made in ensuring that social housing meets the set standards for decent housing. Housing for young people has been in short supply but the council and partners are now taking action to remedy this. Strong partnerships have been developed between the council's care leavers service and housing providers: a range of housing is available for this group of young people with appropriate levels of support. The average length of stay for families with children in bed and breakfast accommodation, except in emergencies, has reduced to one week in 2004–05, much better than the government target of six weeks.

### **Service management**

**95. The management of services for children and young people is adequate.**

96. Partners share clear and realistic ambitions. There is much effective service provision, particularly in education, and some effective multi-agency working. However, joint commissioning and budgeting are underdeveloped. The council gives clear leadership to the local partnership and its services provide good value for money. Nevertheless, a number of longstanding issues remain to be solved, particularly in the provision of social care.

97. The local partnership has a good approach to developing shared ambitions. As a result of needs analysis and discussion, it now has a clearly expressed and fully shared vision for providing a range of high-quality services to children and young people. This vision reflects the common objectives of partners to reduce the inequality of outcomes for children and young people across the borough. There are some links to the community strategy and to the council's wider priorities. It has, though, been relatively slow to evolve.

98. Consultation on the children and young people's plan was wide ranging, effective and characterised by a genuine desire to be fully inclusive. The overall approach to listening to children and young people is good, although they receive insufficient feedback. A multi-agency change management team has developed a programme for implementing the first stage of an integrated approach to children's services in each locality during 2006–07.

99. The local partnership has an adequate approach to setting priorities. Its draft plan builds on an effective preventive strategy and contains nine priority areas for development. These focus strongly on improving outcomes for children and young people and are based on a mapping of needs. The draft plan, not required by legislation until April 2006, is at an early stage.

100. The children and young people's strategic board has a good general knowledge of the local area and young people's needs, and has used this to develop its priorities. In general, much attention has been given to analysing data for regeneration purposes, but even so, some local providers lack a clear

understanding of provision and the council itself is not always clear on the details of what exists. There are some gaps in health data: those currently collected tend to focus on what is being provided rather than what is being achieved. Where health outcomes are measured, they are often ill-defined and so broadly calculated as to mask crucial local variations.

101. The strategic board has been a catalyst for multi-agency working. Major partners, including the voluntary sector, are actively involved in the board. Results of the collaboration include the provision of a good CAMHS service, a range of effective Sure Start initiatives, and valuable help for vulnerable groups of young people by specialist services. A local commissioning strategy has recently been put in place and development work is underway, but joint commissioning and the use of pooled budgets are generally underdeveloped. The future role of schools within the integrated approach is still being developed, although there are already many examples of their strong involvement with local agencies.

102. The track record of partners on achieving their priorities is generally good. There has been positive impact, for instance, in reducing the number of children not in education, training or employment and in increasingly involving the vigorous and effective voluntary sector in collaborating with statutory bodies. However, there are examples of less positive progress, mainly in areas of work that are the council's own responsibility. These include: slowness to take action on the high number of surplus school places; slowness to reduce the high levels of spending on out-of-borough placements for looked-after children and those with special educational needs; limited progress on improving social services' capacity; and limited engagement with young Black and minority ethnic groups.

103. The overall capacity of the local partnership's services is adequate and there is a strong commitment to undertake fundamental changes to the way in which services are delivered at local level. These include the establishment of district boards and multidisciplinary teams based on area forums, significant changes to governance structures, the development of key strategies and protocols, and potentially difficult changes to the workforce culture. These intentions have been clearly set out and consultation is in hand. The roles of director of children's services and lead councillor are being developed, but the council has made limited progress on developing delegation arrangements to cabinet members. There is much to do in a short time.

104. Local partners were fully and very productively involved in the self-assessment process and they recognise most of the issues facing the partnership. The self-assessment correctly sees the education service as Wirral's greatest strength, but underestimates the work to be done in some aspects, such as the inclusion in mainstream schools of more young people with learning difficulties and disabilities, and the planning of 14–19 education and training. It is considerably too generous in its evaluation of its service

management, in the light of the difficulty experienced in tackling some enduring issues, such as the high number of looked-after children.

105. The council's contribution to the partnership's capacity is adequate. It has made a clear commitment to services for children. Senior leadership of the education service and of the children's social care service is very good. The council meets, or is only slightly below, government spending targets for children's social care and education, despite the Wirral policy of keeping council tax at a low level. It is good at attracting external funding which is then targeted well at areas of high deprivation. Overall, the council has an adequate approach to financial management. However, overspending on out-of-borough placements for looked-after children has not been successfully resolved despite the existence of a plan to achieve this. The quality of financial planning is improving, but remains largely focused on making budget savings rather than on shifting resources systematically to meet priorities. The council is not aware of the ways in which difficulties with the 2005–06 budget are likely to impact on the ability of its services to meet obligations to children and young people.

106. Overall, council services for children and young people provide good value for money. Service costs are in line with those in similar authorities but outcomes, especially in education, the youth service and child protection, are generally good and sometimes very good. The council's approach to evaluating and improving further the value for money it provides, however, is not robust. It does, though, make some use of benchmarking data to compare costs and outcomes, particularly in education, and it reports performance information alongside financial data. Medium- and long-term financial planning take place but with limited focus: the overspending on social care has yet to be resolved, and there has not yet been a clear calculation of the costs of the intended integrated department.

107. The council's capacity to implement its plans is generally adequate. Its asset management is satisfactory, and it acted well to support schools when they experienced difficulties with a large contractor. The demands on the social care service for expenditure on the high number of looked-after children, however, make it difficult to invest in support for families. Vacancies for qualified social workers remain at a significant level, causing a backlog of cases awaiting allocation and transfer between teams. The approach to induction of new social workers, workload management and staff supervision needs more consistency. Some foster carers are concerned about the frequent change of social workers for looked-after children, although there are signs that this support is becoming more stable. Some schools have concerns about the ability of the service to meet its obligations to children and young people.

108. The partnership's arrangements for performance management are adequate overall, and practice is improving. The Local Strategic Partnership has a framework which operates well, informing members of progress against national and other targets. However, partners recognise that more work is needed to ensure a greater focus on outcomes.

109. The council is developing its own approach to performance management, based on the good practice developed in education, where regular reports to staff and managers ensure that effective action is taken to address areas of concern. This approach is less well embedded in social care. There is insufficient use of effective information technology in social care, although this is being addressed through an investment and procurement plan. The use of performance management information by select committees, lead councillors and the cabinet is weak, and challenge on areas of weakness or slowness is inconsistent. Opportunities are available for children and young people to comment on the quality of a number of services they receive, but the impact of this is variable.

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## **Annex: The children's and young people's section of the corporate assessment report**

1. The council is performing well in the provision of services for children and young people. Its services are provided at a cost comparable with similar authorities and provide good value for money. Senior leadership of the education service and of the children's social care service is very good. Young people overall achieve educational standards that are above the national average and in many respects are improving further. The council's youth service is good. Young people who are subject to child protection or looked-after children care plans are served well. In general, though, the outcomes for young people are better in the more prosperous parts of the borough than in the disadvantaged areas.

2. The council currently provides children's services through several departments, principally the Education and Cultural Services and the social services departments. It is consulting on a proposal to establish an integrated Children and Young People's Department in 2006. Its intention is to re-shape provision so that, for instance, schools take on an extended role and multidisciplinary area teams involving a range of partners give focused support to vulnerable young people. The ambition for this is clear, and it represents the approach taken by the Children and Young People's Strategic Partnership, of which the council is the leading member. However, it sets a very demanding agenda, on which there is much to do in a short time. The Children and Young People's Plan, not required by legislation until April 2006, is in an early draft because of a desire for thorough consultation. It is based on appropriate priorities which reflect national policy with clear reference to Wirral's circumstances.

3. Management of the council's services for children is adequate. Services work well with other partners. Financial management and performance management are generally adequate. The overall capacity to meet the council's objectives is secure. However, too many looked-after children or those with learning difficulties and disabilities are placed outside the borough, and plans to reduce their number are not bearing much fruit. Social services give inconsistent support to children in need but who do not require protection, partly because of the high number of vacancies for social workers. Progress in reducing surplus primary school places has been slow, but a clear strategy is now being implemented. Overall, the council's capacity to improve its services is adequate, but would benefit from more focused planning and monitoring.

4. The council collaborates well with partners in promoting children's health. Integrated services for under-5s in Sure Start areas are having a positive impact. Schools contribute strongly to health education and leisure services give opportunities for health development to many young people. The council contributes significantly to multi-agency initiatives targeting particular problems such as teenage pregnancy.

5. On the evidence gathered by the joint area review, children and young people appear safe. Children and young people who are most at risk are safeguarded well and there are some good examples of partnership working to support individual children. However, the council maintains high thresholds for accepting cases and those not requiring protection do not all get consistently good support. Overall outcomes for looked-after children are satisfactory.

6. The council contributes to a good strategy for childcare and early years education. The large majority of schools are good or very good. The council gives effective support to school improvement and to school attendance, and some of its behaviour support work has had a good impact. The council is committed to the inclusion of pupils with learning difficulties and disabilities in mainstream schools but, despite a clear strategy, too many pupils remain in special schools within or outside the authority. Special schools and resourced units, however, are increasingly supporting pupils with learning difficulties in mainstream settings and there is effective inclusion of children with physical disabilities.

7. Young people make good progress in their personal and social development as a result of effective work by schools and the youth service, and many make a positive contribution to their local communities. The council consults them well at local level, but is less effective in helping young people contribute to discussions at strategic level. It does not have good mechanisms for consulting minority groups.

8. Some progress has been made in ensuring that social housing meets the set standards for decent housing. However, housing for young people has been in short supply, but the council and partners are now taking action to remedy this. The council's regeneration work is benefiting young people in disadvantaged areas. The council has made progress in increasing the number of care leavers in education, employment or training and in liaising with housing providers to arrange suitable accommodation for care leavers. Personal support for young people with learning difficulties and disabilities post-16 is effective.