

KENT COUNTY COUNCIL

SELECT COMMITTEE - CORPORATE PARENTING

MINUTES of a meeting of the Select Committee - Corporate Parenting held in the Bewl Room, Sessions House, County Hall Maidstone on Tuesday, 24 February 2015.

PRESENT: Mrs Z Wiltshire (Chairman), Mr R E Brookbank, Ms C J Cribbon, Mr B Neaves, Mr M J Northey, Mr R J Parry, Mrs P A V Stockell and Mrs J Whittle

IN ATTENDANCE: Ms D Fitch (Democratic Services Manager (Council)), Miss T A Grayell (Democratic Services Officer), Mr G Romagnuolo (Policy Overview Research Officer) and Ms K Sanders (Business Intelligence Officer)

UNRESTRICTED ITEMS

3. Minutes of the meeting - 3 February 2015
(Item 2)

These were agreed as a correct record.

4. Interview with Ann Allen, Chairman, Corporate Parenting Panel
(Item 3)

Please introduce yourself and outline your role and responsibilities.

I am the Chairman of the County Council's Corporate Parenting Panel (CPP), and of the Children's Social Care and Health Cabinet Committee. I am also a Deputy Cabinet Member. I am responsible for seeing that the agendas of these two committees cover the issues that Members most need to look at – adoption, fostering, Virtual School Kent (VSK), CAMHS etc - anything which impacts upon the lives of children in the care of the County Council.

You have a much bigger role than that, with your fostering and adoption background.

I used to be a foster carer, so I have a personal knowledge and experience of the subject. Over the years I cared for 20 – 30 children and have foster granddaughters of 25 and 9.

What are your corporate parenting duties?

As I have said above. But every Member has corporate parenting duties and responsibilities. I have been on the County Council for a very long time, and I know that people form into silos in some areas. The majority of Members know they have a corporate parenting role, but not all are involved as much as they could be. The Corporate Parenting Panel (previously the Children's Champions Board (CCB)) raised the profile of the corporate parenting role but it is very difficult to undertake this role. I see corporate parents as being a bridge between the County Council and children and young people in care. I have ensured that young people serve on the Panel, and I see them and their involvement as an asset as they tell it like it is. Also, the foster carers on the Panel are a very valuable resource as they bring their insight and we see their view of the bureaucracy that sometimes comes into our processes.

They are advocates for young people. I have also served on fostering panels and adoption panels.

How should elected Members fulfil their corporate parenting role? What should they be doing?

They do the best they can with their ability and with their awareness, but they could do more. The question is how can they do that? They need to keep engaging with young people, they all signed the County Council's Pledge to its children in care, they saw the excellent presentation at full Council that young people did recently, to give Members an insight into the issues of being children in care, but the corporate parenting role is a hard one to identify. We need to ask ourselves 'what is a good parent?' and do the same as corporate parents as we would for our own children. Young people are in care because of what has been done to them, not because of anything they have done.

I agree that many Members are not fulfilling this role, but what should they do? How should they care for children in care?

Obviously there is a line that they can't cross; Members can't go round to a child's home and say 'I am your corporate parent'. They can celebrate and recognise children's achievements and attend VSK events and participation days, be supportive and make themselves aware of the content of the County Council's Pledge to children and young people in care. They can recognise the issues that children and young people in care face, such as the limits they face around doing things such as staying overnight at a friend's house, or the problems they encounter when going abroad for an expedition and losing out on benefits because they have missed signing on, and then get into debt trying to catch up. We could look at issues like this and talk to the partners and other local authorities who place children in Kent who could help address this sort of issue. The County Council retains its corporate parent status when young people grow older, leave care, go to college and start work. As corporate parents we could be doing the same for children and young people in care as we do for our own children, like helping them out if they are short of money. Members could look at the County Council's Pledge to children and young people in care and make sure they are doing all that is listed in it. Working with our partners is key to addressing these issues.

How can we be aware of the range of problems faced by children and young people in care, eg abuse, being unaccompanied asylum seekers (UASC), and what we can do to help with these problems? How do we solve this?

Stability and security are key. Corporate parents should ensure that systems are in place to deal with the issues that children and young people in care face. Their experiences can vary a lot, and can be affected by small things, eg having a bad day because a social worker does not turn up when arranged, or a good experience such as an inspirational social worker changing a young person's life experience. Children and young people in care don't want to feel any different from anyone else their age.

How does a child or young person become looked after? How can we identify those that need special help?

They could be in care due to poor parenting - perhaps their parents did not have good parents themselves, so don't have a good role model. Their parents may be unable to prioritise their children's needs above their own needs or relationships. There could also have been a family breakdown, domestic abuse or drug or alcohol problems, but the most frequent issue is poor parenting.

How can we scrutinise the quality of support that we give to children and young people in care? The CPP is fine for Members who are interested and have chosen to be Members of it, but it only includes a few Members. How can we relate the issue about children and young people in care to the rest of the Council, eg with an all-day full Council meeting to focus on these issues? How can we get the tools to be good corporate parents, including all Members, not just CPP?

We used to issue Member briefings sheets setting out how many children and young people in care are in any area at any one time. The minutes of the former CCB used to be referred to full Council, but the CPP minutes do not now and I am not sure why this changed; perhaps we should reinstate this arrangement. CPP minutes go to the Kent Corporate Parenting Group (KCPG) and vice versa, so will be seen by full Council as part of the KCPG annual report. To spread the message about the corporate parenting role, all Members need to see CPP minutes and information and statistics relating to children and young people in care. Briefings for new Members could include this. Members tend naturally to concentrate on their own local areas of the county and the issues in which they have most interest.

We need to keep an eye on the support which is given to children and young people in care, eg by foster carers, as the quality of care varies. How can we achieve this monitoring without appearing too heavy-handed?

Every foster carer has a regular review so we can monitor that way, via the Fostering Panels.

Are those Panels sufficiently independent?

Fostering is a professional job, so foster carers need the right skills to be able to deliver a quality service. They must also protect themselves to avoid burnout, and we must ensure that they get suitable support from the fostering team. A reminder of the corporate parenting role could be included in the induction pack for all new Members when they are elected, with regular reminders of the role and ongoing training during their period of office. There could be a mantra of 'think child' for any decision they make, eg for issues such as provision of open space, housing and infrastructure. We need to look at where children and young people in care are being placed and consider whether or not if those placements are appropriate. Corporate parenting is a very diverse subject and not an easy one to tackle.

We have to provide school places for children and young people in care and help and support them through their education, but how can we expand our support to improve their life chances?

We do get involved with schools to some extent, and ensure that children and young people in care have things such as a passport, so they can take part in school outings. Birth parents do not necessarily co-operate with such things but we do things like this for the children. We also ensure that they have a financial reward when they pass exams and have a savings account so they will have a fund of money when they leave care. Foster carers need to be very savvy about the rights and entitlements of children in their care and how to help them access what they are entitled to.

Why does the County Council press for adoptions for the under-5s?

Under-5s usually have priority for adoption as they are easier to adopt. They are more likely than other children to be in care as a result of poor parenting, and

perhaps as a result of their parents being directed to take a course to improve their parenting. Such parents often keep trying to be better parents to their children and to resist them going into care. Their children are likely to be in the process for a while before being released for adoption.

I know there is a Pledge for children and young people in care which sets out what the County Council will do for them and what they are entitled to. We get them into a local school when they come to a new placement and give them plenty of support there, but should we be pushing to get them into a better school? They need support when they start a new school or enter any new stage of their life.

Support for a child settling into a new placement and entering a new school should be provided by a social worker and the foster carer working together. Every school must now have a named Governor to look after the interests of children and young people in care in their school, and a policy that sets out how it will approach their needs, but these policies were required to be set up some time ago and may be getting a bit old now.

A child's school might be the only stable element of their life and the only place where they feel safe. A good teacher can see if something is not right with a family and can identify signs of possible neglect (eg by a child's poor appearance or if they have not been given a breakfast) and start to tackle the issue. Schools also need to be sensitive to the presence in their class of a child in care, eg when making Mother's Day or Father's Day cards.

I have great admiration for foster carers and the role they undertake. It is a difficult job to do, and many children must pass through their home, with all sorts of problems. How can we increase the number of foster carers who are trained and prepared to foster children and young people with special needs or mental health difficulties?

Yes I agree that our foster carers are brilliant people and the skills they bring to the job are amazing. Being a foster carer is a professional job, a vocation, and we need to recognise this and train and support them with therapy and respite care, which is a huge issue. We need to ensure that all the services that need to be around the child are there. The health issues of children and young people in care didn't use to appear on agendas but do now. Health professionals can help to identify issues such as potential abuse, eg by the appearance at hospital of a child with non-accidental injuries. It is important that all partners who deliver services for children are fully engaged and can work together effectively.

Do we need to access more help from professionals outside the County Council to address issues with children and young people in care, eg mental health/SEN?

We must ensure that other agencies which help with and support these issues are engaged and their work co-ordinated, and that a child's social worker links with them. Some of the issues that foster carers deal with, eg children who go missing, are over and above the issues that a parent would have to deal with for their own children, so other professionals need to be involved.

We could look at best practice and update the education briefings that we give to Members. Is Kent looking at Essex County Council at the moment, to see what they do and compare their and our practices?

We have recently had meetings with them but the outcomes of these are not yet known. Essex had their children's services rated as 'failing' but have since achieved a 'good' rating, so it would be interesting to find out how they did that.

Caseload size is a key issue in improving services. Kent is unique in the number of children and young people in care it has, plus the number of UASC and the number of children placed by other local authorities. The County Council has corporate parenting responsibility for UASC but not for children placed by other local authorities. The placing authority retains the corporate parenting role, and some of them are not good corporate parents to their children and young people in care. A good corporate parent would not place so many of their children out of their area.

I have never been asked by any parent in my area to support them with a school appeal, so I wonder if many people know who their local County Council Member is, and how to contact them. A building block in grasping Members' corporate parent role is the good relationship they have with young people on the Corporate Parenting Panel. The VSK apprentices that the Panel meets are ambassadors for other children and young people in care and give us much information about what life is like for them, what works and what doesn't.

It is rare to hear young people speaking to elected Members. Meetings with Our Children and Young People's Council do not work in a formal setting; meetings with them need to be fun.

Some young people do not have high expectations of what they will find and achieve in life and seem to think that they 'don't deserve to be happy'. Corporate parents need to help them to develop some self-esteem. Some think it is their fault that they are in care, although there they can often have a better experience in care than they would have had otherwise; they get good meals, someone to cuddle them when they are upset, and someone to watch football with.

I am still not clear about how I can access children and young people in care in my role as an elected Member. Am I permitted to meet children and young people in care at schools, or at a foster carer's home, or is there a barrier to me doing this? If I can't reach them, how can I help them?

We need to address the issue of Members meeting children and young people in care. Elected Members cannot expect to relate to every child in care in the county, but need to ensure that support is in place to help them. Visiting a child at school would single them out as being 'different', and they want to appear to be like any other child in their class.

Being spoken to by a local councillor can be intrusive; why would a young person want to talk to a stranger about being in care?

Children and young people in care do not want to be picked out as different so keep their care status private as they fear being seen by school friends as 'bad' for being in care. I was brought up by my grandparents, and I remember feeling different from school friends. Nowadays, family set-ups are much more diverse and a child who is not with their birth parents is no different from many other children at their school.

How can I help children and young people in care if I don't know who they are?

You can help by addressing the issues which affect them, eg you could ask the local social work office about the caseloads that they carry and if they have the resources to do what they need to do to support children and young people in care.

How can I help personally if I can't identify a child as being in care, to avoid them being picked out as different? I can appreciate the need to avoid picking out children and young people in care as I remember from my own school that the children who had free school meals stood out.

Members need to ask themselves if they understand their corporate parent role; not all Members do. Then there is the question of how we tackle that role; how does the County Council empower Members to take on their corporate parenting responsibilities? There is a fine line that Members can't cross, but we must ensure that our various partners are around a child to support them.

Thank you very much for giving your time today to help the Select Committee with its information gathering.

5. Interview with Tony Doran, Head teacher of Virtual School Kent
(Item 4)

Please introduce yourself and describe the roles and responsibilities that your post involves.

I am the Headteacher of the Virtual School Kent (VSK). VSK has multi-agency responsibilities, not just to do with educational attainment. They include undertaking health assessments and dental checks when a child or young person enters care. We also collect data on attendance and exclusions and pass it to the specialist children's services Management Information Unit. My primary duty is to ensure that young people in an education setting get the support they need and to drive for the best possible outcomes that we can achieve for them. VSK works with schools to put in help and support over and above what a child would receive in a normal school. We train teachers and support staff to identify and manage the issues that children in care face. Pupil Premium Plus (PPP) is paid by the Government and is for children in care only. It was previously paid to schools but it is now given to VSK, so we have control over how it is spent in schools. In April 2012, VSK took over responsibility for the Children In Care Council (which in Kent is called Our Children and Young People's Council (OCYPC)) from the Young Lives Foundation and we developed the websites for the OCYPC and Kent Cares Town. We organised focus groups which evolved into the participation days for children in care that we currently hold across the county in the school holidays. These have been a great success, with 300-400 children and young people taking part each year.

What are the key issues for children in care in education - achievement, attendance?

Children in care are the poorest performing young people in terms of school attainment, not just in Kent but nationally. However, we have seen a very positive improvement. Kent is unique in the UK due to the number of children in care it has, which includes an extremely high number from other local authorities and unaccompanied asylum seeking children (UASC), and the pressures that this places upon its schools. For example, every secondary school in Thanet has 30 – 40 children in care. In year 11, most other local authorities have 20 children in care in each of their schools, but Kent has 150, and this volume brings a challenge.

Summary of KS2 attainment stats over last 4 years

5 Yr KS2 Trend Breakdown

	2009-10*	2010-11	2011-12	2012-13	2013-14
Level 4+ Reading (New indicator from 2012-13)			54%	61%	65% *↑11%
Level 4+ Writing (New indicator from 2012-13)			44%	46%	59% *↑15%
NI99 (Level 4+ Reading and Writing)	38%	44%	50%	50%	56% *↑18%
NI 100 Level 4+ Maths	43%	44%	40%	49%	57% *↑14%
NI99 + 100 combined	36%	36%	36%	39%	44% *↑8%

Results across all three indicators had increased across the board.

It is difficult to compare KS4 data like-with-like with previous years as the Government changed the method of measuring and weighting in 2014, shifting more emphasis to exam results.

Kent is one of only three local authorities to reduce the gap in attainment across all three indicators.

The extra weight now placed upon exam results is bound to have some impact on children in care as they tend to benefit from multiple chances to progressing at each level. Courses which are more modular in nature suit them better as their study is often interrupted, eg by the disruption of changing placements, hence modular courses are easier to pick up.

Has the number of children in care placed in Thanet by London Boroughs improved?

This is still an issue, although it is a bit better than previously. Some Thanet schools still have very high numbers of children in care. VSK has to achieve a fine balance between supporting and challenging schools, and needs to maintain a good working relationship with them. PPP is a minefield as Kent has 1,100 children who qualify for it, across 500 schools. Thanet, Canterbury and Swale have a large number of children in care placed by many other local authorities, and each placing authority has its own system of administering PPP. We have developed a combined offer for Kent children in care based in Thanet rather than each school applying for each child in care in their school. VSK cannot use PPP for other local authority children; their virtual head teacher has their funding.

Schools in Canterbury and Coastal areas have formed a federation. Last year was the first in which the new model of PPP applied and Government guidance was issued after schools had prepared their budgets for the year, so to help them, VSK gave schools a pro-rata percentage of their PPP allocation as a lump sum. If we hadn't done this, schools would have underspent their PPP this year. Schools are

not automatically entitled to PPP as a flat rate; it is calculated by a formula and is based on evidence of need, which in turn will identify the funding allocation for each child; some children are eligible for more than others. Access to funding and navigation of the system have both been made easier and more flexible by close working between VSK and schools. PPP can't be used to cover admin processes.

Do you look at how schools use PPP, eg to support pupils taking the Kent test?

Contrary to popular belief, it is not illegal to coach children to help them pass the Kent Test. Good and effective parents would help their own child to prepare for the test so good corporate parents can do the same. VSK officers can coach a child and develop their potential.

Who says who takes the Kent test? Do we have an opt-in or opt-out system?

VSK can do this, although it is difficult to identify which children to target. However, VSK is best placed to identify children. The Government has changed expectations on schools re assessment which means they no longer have to use national curriculum levels.

The Education and Young People's Services Directorate has produced a grading system but schools do not have to use it. The Government has recently changed all the assessment processes. VSK can identify children who are suitable and PPP can be used to pay for a place. It is difficult to track their progress and we have to track them almost on a daily basis. It is complex but VSK will find a system.

The VSK website is excellent and gives local contacts.

This was put together by VSK and young people. The website that young people designed and put together is brilliant; it includes a radio station which they run. I can send the Select Committee a link to this. The Kent Cares Town website features buildings, which allow the user to access certain information when they click on them. For example, there's a picture of County Hall, a radio mast to access the radio station, and a coffee shop to access an 'agony aunt', who was formerly a child in care and is a senior VSK apprentice who gives advice to other children in care.

I am still not confident of how I personally could help young people . How do I identify and help young people in my local area?

There are many ways in which you can help. You could attend the VSK activity days which take place in school holidays. This would give the opportunity to meet and chat to young people informally. You could search via the VSK website and link to the young people's website. You could go and meet the team at Worrall House in Kings Hill, which is the local office in your division. The Swattenden Centre is also quite near you. VSK holds an achievement ceremony for children in care in Canterbury every September, which all County Council Members are welcome to attend. I regularly ask if any County Council Member wishes to contribute some of their personal allowance to fund additional activities. My annual budget does not cover the cost of many activities so the VSK apprentices regularly have to fund raise to cover what they want to arrange. My budget of £50,000 p.a. allows me to employ the eight VSK apprentices and does not cover all of the activity days and participation days that we want to hold.

I regularly attend Corporate Parenting Panel meetings to give an update on my work and expect County Council Members to hold me to account for what I do and how

well I do it. I also attend the officer group, the Kent Corporate Parenting Group, which has one County Council Member on it, Martin Vye. I provide data to these two groups about the number of children in care across the county, the education outcomes that we achieve for these children, etc.

I have attended participation days and there is a tremendous camaraderie among children in care.

Yes, over 90% of the feedback that we get from these events is very positive.

Do you get positive feedback about the VSK apprentice scheme?

Yes, some other local authorities have asked about the scheme, eg most recently Devon County Council. Kent's scheme has been a great success. It started with one apprentice being employed by the Young Lives Foundation, which VSK took over. VSK then had four and now has eight apprentices. We support them and get them ready for work. They have all passed their NVQ Level 2 and are very employable. Members may have seen the 'Never Stop Listening' DVD they made last year as a follow-up to 'Care To Listen' DVD a few years ago. This was presented by Sophia, who we have as a senior apprentice. Sophia is currently undertaking her NVQ level 3. We seek to progress people in this way so we are able to retain people of a good calibre. Bella also is an excellent example of the scheme, but not all our apprentices have had their level of confidence.

Is there anything else you want to tell the Select Committee?

There is one County Council Member whom I would describe as 'a beacon of good practice' – Martin Vye. His involvement is a very good example of Member engagement. He serves on the KCPG, makes regular visits to the local office in his area, has met the local team and comes to the VSK activity days.

I am employed by Members to raise the educational attainment of children in care and achieve the best possible outcomes for them, so I expect to be challenged and held to account for what I do and how well I do it.

There are massive changes going on/coming up at a national level. There is a clash between the location of foster care places and school places. There is a rising number of children in care in Canterbury and Swale and all Swale schools are currently oversubscribed.

How are these children in care placed? Who placed them there?

These figures do not include children in care placed by other local authorities – these are just Kent's own children in care. If this level of placement carries on, I fear that head teachers in Canterbury and Swale, as Thanet head teachers have in the past, may start to act illegally and refuse admission to their school to a children in care coming into a placement. When this does happen the County Council takes robust action

Can you tell the Select Committee something about missing children?

Most of the young people who go missing are UASC who move around, and these have very little impact on VSK. Those who go missing sporadically have more impact on what VSK are trying to do as they have gaps in their education. Also, when they are missing they are at more risk of harm. However, VSK scores as well or better than the national average on attendance.

What can the County Council do to help the pressure on schools caused by excessive numbers of children in care?

Addressing this issue requires a balancing act; unless better distribution of children in care can be achieved, 'hotspots' will continue and will remain a big issue. The County Council can help by building up the numbers of foster carers in other areas, to spread out the placing across wider areas and avoid the concentrations that currently exist. When placing children with foster carers, the aim is to minimise the level of disruption as far as possible by placing a child as near to their family home as possible.

Other local authorities placing children in Kent use independent fostering agencies (IFAs), which are profit-making companies. Such companies operating in London seek to recruit foster carers in Kent, and those foster carers will not then be available for the County Council to use.

What can the the County Council do to stop this happening?

Legislation to say where they can and cannot operate came into operation last year, however it does not set the same expectations on children's homes that were there before this legislation. Although there is now a restriction to setting up new IFAs, there are many already in existence. What would help the County Council to compete with and manage the risk posed by IFAs is effective care planning. The County Council needs to hold placing authorities to account, to require and insist that they place children in care only in areas where there is good educational provision and that they undertake suitable planning before making a placement. If a child is placed as an 'emergency', then we should insist that, as soon as the immediate issue is resolved, a substantive placement is made, with proper planning, in a place where the child's needs can be properly met.

Is there any evidence that Police activity increases where there is a children's home?

Not in the case of Kent's children in care as we don't run children's homes. I can't speak for any home run by any other body or used by other local authorities. Some young people do get into trouble while they are in care and trying to deal with the issues that caused them to come into care, but I can tell you examples of young people who have overcome troubled times and been very successful. Not all young people come into care due to neglect; one young man came into care because his parents were dying and struggled to cope with that fact, but is now moving towards attending Oxbridge. His push to turn himself around was that he wanted to succeed for his parents and wanted them to have been proud of him. One of my VSK officers working with 16-18 year olds was in care 30 years ago and committed minor offences but grew out of it. He now makes an excellent role model for young people and can relate well to them as he knows the pressures they face and has overcome them successfully.

Is there anything else the County Council can do, apart from improving the educational outcomes for children in care?

Local authorities are currently going through a very difficult time, but at a time of many redundancies, VSK has grown. We have taken on new work streams and are achieving good and improving outcomes. We are now properly resourced for what we need to do and are moving in the right direction. Each of my Assistant head teachers has a caseload of over 250 cases. Future changes that are coming will have greater impact on our work, eg the international GCSE will not be valid after 2015. However,

it still holds that if a young person can pass 5 GCSEs at grades A* - C, their life chances will be greatly enhanced. Supporting them to achieve this will give them as much help as we could possibly give them.

If vulnerable children are placed in a vulnerable area they will lack aspiration. Surely they are more likely to seek more chances if they are placed in a more affluent area?

Some of the schools in which our children in care are placed are over-subscribed but those schools are experienced and are good at nurturing children in care. What we should be seeking is for all schools to develop this expertise. VSK being able to utilise PPP to facilitate whole-school training to develop these skills and expertise will help in the long-term to build capacity for schools to offer children in care a good education.

Thank you very much for giving your time today to help the Select Committee with its information gathering.

6. Sinead Whelan and Sarah Jenner, Senior Practitioners, Kent County Council
(Item 5)

The Chairman welcomed Sinead and Sarah to the meeting and invited to introduce themselves before answering questions from Members.

Sinead stated that she had been a senior practitioner in the children in care team at the Poltons Family Centre in Dover. One of her key roles was to place children with Foster Carers in order to support them once an order was in place. She still had a full social worker case load and also carried out other managerial tasks.

Sarah explained that she was a team manager and managed a team of 6 social workers and 1 social work assistant, her role was to straddle the two functions of the supervision of social workers and a managerial function for her team for example drawing up the duty rota and providing training and development for social workers.

Q – There can be some confusion around the use of the term “supervision” which has a specific meaning in the context of social work. Can you explain this please?

Sinead explained that in this context supervision was carried out 3 or 4 weekly or more frequently if something happen in relation to a case. In the regularly 3 or 4 weekly supervision there was an opportunity to for the social worker to discuss cases with the manager and to speak about the social workers role and training. It was a reflective discussion. It gave the manager oversight and the opportunity to discuss ideas on specific cases.

Sarah stated that supervision meetings provided an opportunity to explore the dynamics of cases in a reflective way in order to enable a picture to be gained of the case. Social workers instincts were important in relation to cases.

Sinead stated that supervision was crucial for Kent in relation to Ofsted inspections, Ellen Monroe (?) had made a recommendation regarding reflective supervision and the importance of social workers being able to discuss their feelings about a case with their managers.

Sarah confirmed that supervision provided a formal record of discussions enabling Ofsted to look at the how and the why of a case. It made it possible to provide a clear record of why a decision was made. Looked after Children had a right to look at the decision made about them which is why it was particularly important to make sure that key decision about the child are recorded.

Sinead referred to the new records system that had been introduced and encouraged reflective supervision on a rolling basis.

Q - Sinead you are based in the Poulton Family Centre in Dover?

Sinead explained that the Poulton Family Centre was a general family centre which housed the family support team and the children in care team and managers. It was a drop in centre.

Q – Members have a corporate parenting responsibility, how far would you like Members to support and help you?

Sinead referred to visits made by Elected Members to local offices and where appropriate to sit in on a review. She stated that it would be helpful out in the local offices to know what Members were doing and their focus in relation to Looked after Children, maybe via a newsletter.

Q – Members are often not sure how much they are allowed or it is appropriate for them to get involved with Children in Care. It would be helpful to have basic details of Children in Care in our area and to know our local social worker. What are your views on this?

Sinead stated that she would be happy for her team to link with their local elected members and for them to visit the local team but of course these visits would need to be pre-planned.

Q – It would be helpful to have a countywide link for each area for local member and more local information for each member.

Sinead stated that there could be a two way link between the social working team and the local members.

Q – The key aim of the Select Committee is to make us more aware as Corporate Parents and to do the best possible for our children in care, who can we achieve this?

Sinead stated that it would be helpful to have Members come along to our meetings and to get first-hand experience and to see the system worked.

Q – Sinead as you cover Dover do you have issues with unaccompanied asylum seekers?

Sinead explained that from 1 December 2014 the responsibility for unaccompanied asylum seekers had passed to Children in Care teams. She and her colleagues had received training regarding assessment etc. prior to 1 December 2015. In Ashford the Children in Care team did a lot of work with unaccompanied asylum seekers. Sinead confirmed that these children were taken to an assessment centre and would go from there to a foster carer or would be allocated housing anywhere in Kent depending on what was appropriate in the particular case.

Sarah stated that since 1 December 2015 the second team in Gravesend had taken over responsibility for 102 unaccompanied asylum seekers the aim is that eventually these cases will be fully integrated into the children in care teams.. She personally believed that this was a positive move as asylum seeking children were also looked after children but with particular issues of communication and the need to use interpreters. There was an issues regarding the volume of unaccompanied asylum seekers and there were hot spots in Kent where this was more of an issue.

Sinead explained that children aged 16 – 18 remained the responsibility of the Children in Care team.

Q – Is one of the difficulties with unaccompanied asylum seekers assessing their age?

Sinead agreed that this was an issue, and that she had gained experience of this when at university in a placement in an asylum team. She explained that it was possible to appeal against an age assessment. The age of a child was important as there was a need to make sure that young vulnerable children were not placed in an inappropriate setting.

Sarah confirmed that unaccompanied asylum seeker children had the same rights as other Children in Care, they were allocated a social worker and would have a care reviews, the first of which would take place within 28 days

Q – Is there any specific process for unaccompanied asylum seeking children who go missing?

Sinead and Sarah confirmed that the process for dealing with this issue was the same as it would be for any other Child in Care. As a social worker they had a corporate parenting role and there was a need to consider carefully where the child might be.

Q – is there anything that Members can do as corporate parents to help you in your role?

Sinead stated although they had some amazing foster carers, one of their issues was the need to find enough good quality foster carers who would commit to children in the long term. It would be nice to have a pool of foster carers who had a high level of expertise and experience.

Sarah stated that one of the most successful things over the past two and a half to three years was the integration of children in care into a separate service, which worked for children and ensured that children had a consistent social worker. One of the issues that children in care mention regularly is how important it is for them to have not to have a number of changes in social worker. Over the past two and a half and three years Kent has been more successful in keeping social workers in post and with the same child. She would welcome anything that Members could do to encourage a stable workforce would be appreciated as this was key to making the lives of children in care better.

Sinead mentioned the important support given by social work assistants. She stated that her team did not have a social work assistant, which meant that tasks such as taking a bible out to a child had to be done by a social worker. It would be helpful to have some support to carry out the more simple tasks. Sinead explained that she was aware of social work assistants who had been in post for over 10 years and who therefore had a detailed knowledge of their area and the families within it which was extremely valuable to new social working and for building relationships.

Sarah stated that social work assistants became, via association with social workers, very skilful and were able to provide a huge level of support. In her team they supported social workers in the background documents required for adoptions such as life story books in order to help meet statutory timescales.

Q- Although you are both KCC employees the adoption service is provided by Coram have any issues arisen in working with them?

Sarah and Sinead confirmed that the relationship with KCC's children in care teams and Coram was good. Sinead stated that her team had completed 12 adoptions so far this year, in order for these to be dealt with quickly a good relationship with Coram was necessary. KCC had been working with Coram for at least 2 years so this was a relationship that had been built up over a period of time.

Q – In relation to unaccompanied asylum seeking children, there may be issues in relation to culture, language and religion therefore does this mean that you spend more time supporting these children compared to other Looked after Children?

Sinead confirmed that communication difficulties with unaccompanied asylum seeking children were normally the main issue which made it difficult to build relationships with them. The interpretation service had been unreliable with social workers having to wait for an interpretation to attend which was very time consuming and distressing for the child.

Sarah referred to the issue of integration and the need for the young person to be integrated into our society.

Sinead also explained that these children/young people ended to try to support one another and form groups and there may be a risk that within that group maybe an individual who was not a positive interest.

Q – What can KCC as a local authority to prevent child exploitation?

Sinead confirmed that there had been a lot of awareness raising over the past months. An issue that had come from Members was the importance of ensuring that there was an awareness of the issues around child sexual abuse and the importance of there being tools in place to deal with this.

Sarah stated that one of the key issues around child sexual exploitation was the importance of interagency working and this was where Members were best placed to support inter agency co-operation for example between the police and colleague in education. She emphasised that relationship building and joint working were critical. A lot of mapping was being carried out to identify where patterns were developing and to have discussions across agencies.

Sinead referred to the service provided to children in care by the CAMHS which had developed over the past 4 to 6 months, this was useful in providing support regarding sexual exploitation e.g. workshops for young people and 1 to 1 support e.g. over a six week period. It is extremely helpful for the young person to receive this type of support from someone other than their social worker.

Sinead confirmed that in relation to child exploitation there were certain areas in Kent where children were more vulnerable and she confirmed that her team were in regular contact with the police regarding the situation. She stated that the child in care out of hour's service was brilliant. It was important that foster carers were aware that if a child went missing they should be looking for signs such as coming home in different clothes and having new phones for example and made the social worker aware so that this could be explored in their follow up interview with the child.

Q – How do we ensure that accommodation that we provide for Children in care is safe?

Sinead explained that Foster Carers had a full assessment and those provided by independent agencies were assessed to see if they were suitable for Kent's C in C. There was also supported lodgings which again were all assessed. Some unaccompanied asylum seeking children were placed in group living but this accommodation was also inspected to see if it was suitable for these children.

Sarah stated that issues had been identified regarding the quality of supported lodgings accommodation. This young people are able to cope with independent living better than others and therefore this was reviewed as necessary.

Sinead stated that it would be useful to have a formal assessment process for supported accommodation across the county like a "kite mark" so that all were of an agreed standard. So that the same rigorous process that was applied to foster care accommodation could be applied to supported accommodation as a part of one service.

**7. Wrap up session to identify key points from hearing sessions
(Item 6)**

One of the key issues identified by Members from today's evidence gathering sessions was that of accommodation for children in care including accommodation

for young people leaving care. It was agreed to further consideration would be given to the key issues at the meeting of the Select Committee on 27 February 2015.