

## KENT COUNTY COUNCIL

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### CORPORATE PARENTING PANEL

MINUTES of a meeting of the Corporate Parenting Panel held in Darent Room, Sessions House, County Hall, Maidstone on Friday, 23 September 2016.

PRESENT: Mrs A D Allen, MBE (Chairman), Mrs Z Wiltshire (Vice-Chairman), Mr R H Bird (Substitute for Mr M J Vye), Mr T Doran, Ms S Dunstan, Ms M Emptage (Substitute for Ms S Dunn), Mr S Gray, Mr S Griffiths, Mrs S Howes, Ms N Khosla, Mr G Lymer, Ms D Marsh, Mr B Neaves, Mr P Segurola, Ms B Taylor, Mr B Weeks (Substitute for Mr S Collins) and Mrs J Whittle

ALSO PRESENT: Mr P J Oakford

IN ATTENDANCE: Ms G O'Grady (Participation Co-ordinator, Specialist Children's Services), Ms C Smith (Head of Fostering) and Miss T A Grayell (Democratic Services Officer)

### UNRESTRICTED ITEMS

#### **166. Membership**

*(Item A1)*

The Panel noted that County Councillor Ms Diane Marsh had joined the Panel to fill the vacancy left by Robert Brookbank, as had Andy Heather, Principal Educational Psychologist. The Chairman welcomed both of them.

#### **167. Tribute to Robert Brookbank**

The Chairman referred to the recent death of Robert Brookbank and said the Corporate Parenting Panel owed him a great debt. He had championed the provision of young people's mental health support services, which he had pursued energetically in his role as Chairman of the Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee. He was a true children's champion and would be sorely missed.

#### **168. Apologies and Substitutes**

*(Item A2)*

Apologies for absence had been received from Ms H Carpenter, Mrs T Carpenter, Mrs P Cole, Mrs S Collins, Ms S Dunn, Ms B Haskins, Mr A Heather, Ms C Moody and Mr M J Vye.

Mr R H Bird was present as a substitute for Mr M J Vye, Ms M Emptage for Ms S Dunn and Mr B Weeks for Mr S Collins.

#### **169. Minutes of the meeting of this Panel held on 20 July 2016**

*(Item A3)*

RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting of this Panel held on 20 July 2016 are correctly recorded and they be signed by the Chairman. There were no matters arising.

**170. Verbal Update from Our Children and Young People's Council (OCYPC)**  
(Item A5)

1. Ms Dunstan and Ms Taylor gave a verbal update on recent work undertaken by the participation team on behalf of the Children In Care Councils (CICC) and Young Adult Council (YAC).

**5 August – Annual celebratory event for CICC:**

- corporate parents who had attended this event were thanked for their participation.
- the main activity at this event was a group exercise, in which groups, each including CICC members, a corporate parent and member of County Council staff, were tasked with answering two questions:
  - (a) what do you think is the purpose and role of the CICCs? and
  - (b) what are the things that corporate parents need to do to help the CICCs achieve their purpose?

The responses to the first listed six things around enabling young people to network, engage and express their views, and to the second the replies included a request for corporate parents to dress informally in meetings, to be less intimidating.

The Chairman commented that county councillors dressed smartly to show respect for visitors attending their meetings.

**10 September - London Bridge Trek**

- This had been completed in just over 5 hours and had been great fun. Corporate parents who had sponsored the participants were thanked for their support.
- The aim of taking part was to raise awareness of Who Cares Trust. A passenger on the train home had overheard the group talking about the event and had immediately made a donation.

The group was congratulated on its fund-raising efforts and the Panel commented that it was particularly pleasing to see children in care raising money to support other children in care.

2. The verbal updates were noted, with thanks.

**171. Verbal Update by Cabinet Member**  
(Item A6)

Mr P J Oakford gave a verbal update on the following issues:-

**Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children (UASC)** – Although the rate of monthly arrivals was still much less than at last summer, there were currently 1,400 UASC in Kent and the number was still increasing. Mr Oakford would write to the new Immigration Minister, Robert Goodwill, to press for a mandatory programme of dispersal of UASC around the country. Although new arrivals were being dealt with as they arrived, a core of long-standing cases was not being addressed, and the longer a young person stayed in the county, the more settled they became, for example, in education, and the harder they would be to move on. Once they reached 18, Kent would be obliged to take on responsibility for them as care leavers, and the costs of this were not fully covered by Home Office funding.

**Visit to Border Force at Dover** – this had been most useful in demonstrating the tactics used to smuggle people into the country and the tools available to detect them, including a method of x-raying large vehicles to detect people concealed inside. It was also possible to visit the holding suite used by the immigration service to detain and interview people.

**Children's Centres** were currently displaying charts illustrating the sugar content of various popular drinks, as part of a pilot scheme to raise awareness among parents. Kent had been chosen by Public Health England as one of only five local authorities in the UK to pilot this scheme as part of the 'Change4Life' campaign, to test which messages worked best in addressing childhood obesity. Schools, GPs' surgeries and other County Council premises had also been approached to carry similar displays.

**Children's Centres improved utilisation review** – a working group had recently been established with officers from Property, Public Health and Early Help services to ensure that optimum use was being made of children's centres premises, both in terms of the services based there and the number of days per week on which the premises were used, to achieve best use of public money. For instance, in Tonbridge, the youth centre and children's centre previously occupied two separate buildings but had combined to share the space and make full use of the children's centre building.

**10 September Virtual School Kent Awards Day** – this had been an excellent day and it had been most enjoyable to see young people celebrating their achievements.

**Children In Care Council 'Take Over' Challenge** – for one day in November, young people from the OCYPC would take over the running of the County Council. This would include covering the issues that a Cabinet Member would deal with in a day, and questioning officers on issues relevant to children in care and care leavers.

## **172. Fostering Service Independent Review**

*(Item B1)*

1. Ms Khosla introduced the report and highlighted progress made in the six months since a review of the fostering service had been requested in April 2016, when she had taken up her post. The fostering team now had a permanent head of service, Caroline Smith.

2. The Cabinet Member, Mr Oakford, commented that the report of the independent review had been excellent. However, he expressed his disappointment at the media coverage which had ensued from its publication, which had focussed on and magnified a negative part of the review report. An industry expert who had been asked in a radio interview to comment on the review had been most complimentary about Kent's service.

3. Ms Khosla, Ms Smith and Mr Segurola responded to comments and questions from Members, as follows:

- a) in response to a question asked on behalf of a Thanet foster carer, about independent foster carers being used for placements ahead of in-house foster carers who might have capacity, Mr Segurola said he understood Thanet foster carers' frustration at having vacancies but had to bear in mind the pressure that large numbers of children in care would have on local services, for example, school places and health services. Having criticised other local authorities for placing excessive numbers of children in care in Kent, Kent must be careful that it did not replicate this trend with its own children in care. He clarified that the county council had discretion to place non-Thanet children within Thanet, as long as good quality matches could be found. He undertook to reply directly to the foster carer who had submitted the question;
- b) in response to a question about how the county council could compete with independent fostering agencies (IFAs), and the extent to which avoiding paying IFA fees would increase the funding available to support young people, Ms Smith explained that the county council was seeking both to broaden its range of foster carers and to have foster carer ambassadors to target recruitment of foster carers in shortest supply, such as mature carers and carers for disabled children, older children and siblings. It was known that many foster carers were first attracted to the service via word of mouth from friends and neighbours. The target was to recruit 200 new foster carers in the next 12 months, to support the improvement of the service. Recruitment campaigns would target areas of high footfall, such as rail stations. The content and visual impact of fostering campaign leaflets was praised;
- c) in response to a question about the quality of recording and record keeping, which Ofsted had criticised, Ms Khosla confirmed that Ofsted inspectors had been able to view all records. Ms Smith added that a dedicated officer had been engaged whose job it was to review and upload all records electronically. This project was currently halfway through and would be complete by the time of the next Ofsted review;
- d) it was suggested that the report, with the addition of suitable RAG ratings for each part of the action plan, be submitted to full Council in 3 months' time. This would raise awareness of the corporate parenting responsibility of all 84 Members and give them confidence that a robust service was in place. The best timing of this report was discussed, and whether or not the issue should first be reported back to the Children's Social Care and Health Cabinet Committees, although the need to raise awareness of the corporate parenting responsibility among other Members was agreed. Ms Khosla advised that the action plan was already RAG rated; and
- e) the issue of corporate parenting training for newly-elected Members was then discussed, and a view expressed that this be part of the core training, early in a new Member's term of office. It was pointed out that the corporate parenting role did not appear in the 'job description for a County Councillor in the county council constitution. It was also suggested that the

'key questions to ask' document, concerned with safeguarding, be re-issued. Ms O'Grady reported that she was working with young people to re-design the e.learning module on safeguarding and the corporate parenting handbook, and to raise the profile of this issue.

4. RESOLVED that:-

- a) the content of the fostering review be noted, and the fostering service action plan be endorsed; and
- b) a further report be made to the Panel in six months' time and the Chairman take advice on reporting the issue to full Council.

**173. Kent Adoption Service - Annual Report 2015/2016**

*(Item B2)*

*Mrs S Skinner, Head of the Adoption Service, was in attendance for this issue.*

1. Mrs Skinner introduced the annual report and reported latest figures, as follows:-

- 19 new adopter assessments were currently at stage 2
- 22 new adopter assessments were currently at stage 1
  
- 13 approved adopters were awaiting matching with suitable children
- 56 children had been placed for adoption, up from 31 since April 2016
- 27 adoption orders had been granted so far in 2016/17
  
- There were 18 agency decision maker (ADM) decisions in the courts system

2. Mrs Skinner, Mr Segurola and Ms Khosla responded to comments and questions from the Panel, as follows:-

- a) the number of adoption orders made so far in 2016/17 was much lower than that for the same time last year and matched the national trend. Previous years' figures had been higher as they had included a legacy of cases which had been delayed in the system, and current rates were lower, partly as adoption was not necessarily the preferred option for some children in care. There had been a sharp increase in the number of special guardianship orders being granted by courts, which had brought a corresponding rise of costs to the County Council. Such cases often resulted in a child returning to care, and in these cases the County Council would return the case to court. Children could only be placed for adoption on the direction of a court;
- b) the level of engagement with the Judiciary had improved in the last five years, with engagement with the Adoption Leadership Board, and this work had sought to emphasise to the Judiciary the need to have regard to a guardian's lifelong ability to care for a child placed with them via a special

guardianship orders. It was expected that, if the number of adoption placements were not to increase, there would be calls for changes to primary legislation; and

- c) a mentoring system for prospective adopters had previously been proposed, and Mrs Skinner undertook to advise a questioner outside the meeting about the progress which had been made on this.
3. RESOLVED that the information set out in the report and given in response to comments and questions, and the Adoption Service Performance for 2015/2016, be noted, and the plans in place to deliver an 'Outstanding' service during 2016/17 be endorsed.

#### **174. Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children update** *(Item B3)*

*Ms J Williams, UASC Strategic Manager, was in attendance for this item.*

1. Ms Williams and Mr Segurola introduced the report and responded to comments and questions from the Panel, as follows:-
  - a) the deadline for local authorities to commit to take part in the National Transfer Scheme (NTS) was 22 September 2016, so the final level of take-up could not yet been identified. However, 38 local authorities were known to have signed up to take part;
  - b) responsibility for assessing the age and health status of a new arrival would fall upon the authority taking over responsibility for them via the national transfer scheme. However, if there was any suspicion that they were older than they purported to be, the County Council would investigate this upon their arrival in Kent;
  - c) the duties which would arise when a young person turned 18, and the associated costs, may deter other local authorities from taking over responsibility for them in a dispersal scheme. Mr Segurola confirmed that this was a huge concern for many local authorities. In Kent, the 18+ accommodation funding available was adequate to cover the costs of in-house foster carer placements but not adequate for independent foster carer placements. Kent's shortfall in Home Office grant funding for this in the current year was expected to be approximately £2million. In addition, the County Council was the 'anchor' authority for the NTS and should be adequately funded for undertaking this administrative role;
  - d) Mr Segurola referred to a new but increasing trend for young arrivals *not* to claim asylum, and hence not be part of the cohort for which the County Council could claim Home Office UASC funding. Those who were accompanied but whose companions later left them also did not qualify as UASC and hence would not attract funding, although their status as children in care required the County Council to take responsibility for them. Those over 18 whose rights to remain had been exhausted had to be accommodated in the county at the County Council's expense, while Human Rights assessments were completed;

- e) the youngest UASC to arrive in Kent was 6, travelling with a sibling of 8, although the main cohort was aged between 15 to 17, with a few aged 11 or 12;
  - f) the pressures previously placed on accommodation services had eased since 2015. Young people aged over 18 would be supported via shared accommodation services, which were currently being re-commissioned;
  - g) the provision of education placements for UASC was another pressure for the County Council, and finding suitable placements was a challenge for foster carers looking after them. Secondary education for UASC was a big issue as there was a dis-incentive for colleges to offer sufficient entry-level courses for them. UASC would arrive and want to enter college throughout the year, so were often not on roll at the start of the academic year, when funding was allocated for the number of students then enrolled. In addition, provision of good English as a Second Language (ESOL) courses was inconsistent across the county. These issues were similar to those experienced by special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) students, and colleges were often reluctant to look beyond a student's basic English and maths skills. What was required for UASC students was a more bespoke programme of courses; and
  - h) some schools seemed to be reluctant to enter UASC students for GCSEs as they feared that it would harm their performance figures. Mr Doran undertook to look into this issue.
2. RESOLVED that the information set out in the report and given in response to comments and questions be noted, with thanks.

**175. Performance Scorecard for Children in Care**  
*(Item B4)*

*Mrs M Robinson, Management Information Service Manager, was in attendance for this item.*

1. Mrs Robinson introduced the report and explained that the reporting format had changed since previous reports to the Panel. The two red-rated areas of performance were around health assessments, and performance on both of these had increased greatly since the report had been prepared. One area of performance, the number of children in care experiencing three or more placement changes, was approaching a red rating but this issue, and the reasons for the pattern, had been well covered in other reports recently to the Children's Social Care and Health Cabinet Committee and to this Panel.
2. In response to a question about monitoring the number of complaints about services received from young people, there was general agreement in the Panel that this should be included in future scorecard reports.
3. RESOLVED that the information set out in the report and given in response to comments and questions be noted, with thanks.