

CORPORATE PARENTING PANEL – 16 FEBRUARY 2021

NOTES of a briefing held on Microsoft Teams.

PRESENT: Mrs A D Allen, MBE (Chairman), Ida Linfield (Vice-Chairman), Mr R Barton, Ms J Bayford, Ms D Bride, Ms C Chapman, Mr G Cooke, Mr T Doran, Ms S Dunstan, Mrs L Game, Mr S Gray, Ms S Hamilton, Mrs S Prendergast, Ms N Sayer, Mrs T C Scott and Ms C Smith

ALSO PRESENT: Mrs S Chandler, Mr R L H Long, TD, and Dr Lisa Holmes (Rees Centre, Oxford University)

IN ATTENDANCE: Mr M Dunkley CBE (Corporate Director of Children Young People and Education), Ms C Barton (Family Group Conferencing Team Manager), Ms J Carpenter (Participation and Engagement Manager, Virtual School Kent), Ms C Holden (Head of Commissioning - Children's), Mr N Patel (Head of 18+ Care Leaving Service (North & West)), Mrs M Robinson (Management Information Unit Service Manager), Mr M Walker (Interim Director for Disabled Children and Young People), Mr M Weinel (Head of 18+ Care Leaving Service (South and East)), Miss T A Grayell (Democratic Services Officer) and Mr G Romagnuolo (Research Officer - Overview and Scrutiny)

1. Membership

The Chairman welcomed Charmaine Chapman, who had joined the Panel as a new Virtual School Kent (VSK) apprentice and said how pleased she was to have another young person on the Panel.

2. Apologies and substitutes

Apologies for absence had been received from Sarah Hammond, Geoff Lymer and Sarah Vaux.

3. Chairman's Announcements

The Chairman thanked the Corporate Parenting teams who had organised the Christmas appeal and all those who had contributed to it so generously. The appeal had raised enough money to give a Christmas gift to every care leaver as well as gift hampers to disabled children and those in the youth justice system. She added that she was always proud of what the VSK team did on behalf of the children and young people in care and in representing their views and interests.

4. Notes of the briefing held on 1 December 2020

These were accepted as a fair summary. There was nothing arising.

5. Update from Children in Care Councils – written report

1. Jo Carpenter advised the Panel that Charmaine Chapman had joined the VSK team as an Apprentice, specialising in supporting young people who had been

adopted, and that three VSK Apprentices – Amy Barden, Tom Byrne and Alex Gordon – had completed their Apprenticeship Level 3 in Operational Delivery.

2. Charmaine introduced herself and advised that she had been a member of the Adoptables group and sought to help other young people, using her experience of having been adopted and the support that she had received. She had come to know the work of the VSK team and wanted to support that work.

3. Sophia Dunstan and Rob Barton then introduced the report on the work of the participation team, young people's councils, social groups and engagement. A new participation group had been established for the children of foster parents and six young people had attended the group's first session. The Young Adult Council had been planning its meeting sessions, which included Paul Manwaring from the Practice Development Team to talk about decision making and Stephen Gray of the Young Lives Foundation (YLF) to talk about information and advice packs prepared to support young people moving out of a foster placement. Charmaine set out participation events planned for half term. Jo added that the team had been reflecting on how they had worked and supported each other, and young people in care and leaving care, through 2020.

4. The team had made several films reflecting the views and concerns of children and young people in care. The latest film was about experiences of growing up in a children's home and this was shown to the Panel. The film was narrated by a young man who talked about his good experience of the staff and the relationships he formed there and set out what the skills he thought were most important for residential home staff. Many young people were happy in care homes and preferred them to a foster placement or adoption but needed to be well prepared for when they left the home. Living in a children's home still carried some stigma, however, a suggestion that young people were there because they were 'bad' or troublesome and had been placed there as a last resort when other options had failed. The film emphasised the importance of children's home staff listening to young people's concerns and preferences. The video was very well received by the Panel. The Chairman asked if Independent Visitors could have a role in supporting young people in children's homes and asked what more corporate parents could do to support them. She emphasised the ups and downs of living in any shared space, be it a family home or residential care – it would sometimes be noisy, siblings would sometimes argue and be annoying and there would always be some rules which needed to be followed. Matt Dunkley praised the quality of the films made by the team and highlighted the organisational and production skills these demonstrated.

5. Asked for more details about the comments made in the film, for example, about the stigma of living in a home, and if homes felt at all 'institutional', Sophia advised that the comment about stigma had been expressed by teenagers. Younger children in homes would be asked for their views on the subjects covered. Jo reassured the Panel that homes were very welcoming and homely places and were not at all institutional. Nancy Sayer added that the homes she had visited in her work with the Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG) had impressed her as being very homely.

6. Dr Lisa Holmes from the Rees Centre in Oxford, who was attending for the Lifelong Links item (minute 11, below) also commented on the quality of the film and said the work on residential care could contribute to her own research into strengthening the voice of the child and young person and exploring the view that residential care was seen by some as a last resort. She asked to be able to use the film to contribute to her research and the VSK team confirmed they were happy to allow this.

7. The establishment of a new participation group for children of foster carers was welcomed as it supported the idea that everyone had a part to play in giving young people an inclusive family setting.

8. The verbal updates were NOTED, with thanks and congratulations on the team's success with their completed qualifications and excellent films.

6. Challenge Card Update

1. Jo Carpenter introduced a challenge from the Super Council, that the promise in the Kent Pledge to provide young people in care with a computer be extended to include 7 to 11-year olds (Key Stage 2). Children in this age group were expected to complete schoolwork online, particularly in the current restrictions, and many did not have their own device to use so had to borrow one and were limited in the time they had to use it. Tony Doran advised that VSK had set its current budget of £80k, based on the cost of providing secondary age pupils with a device, and would need to assess the cost and feasibility of extending this to include primary age pupils, for whom an additional 70 devices would be needed. He was exploring three costed options:

- Extend the current offer to include KS2, at a cost of £28k for 70 laptops.
- Extend the current offer to include KS2, at a cost of £23k for 70 lower-spec netbooks.
- Change the spec for all devices to provide netbooks instead of laptops. This would meet 99% of needs at a cost of only an additional £5k on the current allocated budget.

2. Asked if these were indeed the most cost-effective options, as one Panel member had used his County Council Member grant to provide a local primary school with 10 tablets at a cost of £500, Tony advised that he had looked at using fire books, however, their use would depend on a school's IT policy, which would differ from school to school; any offer made to children in care would need to be universal. He undertook to check again that there were no further options for the Key Stage 2 age group, as younger children were known to manage better with the larger keyboard and screen offered by a laptop. Julianne Bayford added that the needs of carers supporting pupils would also need to be considered; some foster families might be supporting several children, each using a different IT format for their schoolwork. She suggested that more detail on equipment to meet the child's needs could be included in their e.PEP. Sue Chandler supported the need to take a flexible approach as schools' approaches could change so rapidly, especially in the current restrictions, and corporate parents needed to ensure that they were able to support children in care through their school life as effectively as possible. Some local initiatives existed which sought to supply schools with donated laptops and she

undertook to look into local schemes in her area as an example which could potentially be duplicated elsewhere.

3. The challenge was NOTED, with thanks, and the actions being taken welcomed, and the Panel agreed that all options be investigated to best meet the challenge.

7. Verbal Update by Cabinet Member for Integrated Children's Services

1. The Cabinet Member for Integrated Children's Services, Sue Chandler, gave a verbal update on the following issues:-

National Apprenticeship Week, 8–12 February 2021 - the County Council celebrated the successes of its apprentices as part of National Apprenticeship week. Youth Justice Participation Apprentices had been in post just over a year and continued to do an amazing job in capturing the voices of young people across the service, as well as offering a meet and greet service at court for all young people, to support them and walk them through the process. She took opportunity to pay tribute to everyone who had completed an apprenticeship with the County Council to date and to all those who were currently working towards one. Now, more than ever, apprentices would be invaluable to the recovery of businesses as the county headed out of the pandemic.

Try Angle Awards – the Spirit of Try Angle Awards ceremony would take place virtually on 12 March 2021. The awards were in their 26th year and celebrated young people and groups who really tried their best, whether at school, work, college, in business or in their wider community across Kent, often with little recognition and in difficult circumstances. There were eight categories this year. Sue would attend the award ceremony on behalf of the County Council.

Care Leaver Housing - on Monday 1 February 2021, the former Supported Lodgings (SLODs) Service transferred to the management of the County Council under the new name of Kent Supported Homes. The new service was a key part of the wider accommodation offer for young people, supported by both the Child in Care teams and the 18+ Care Leavers Service. The wider aim was to build on the service to provide a more integrated and flexible accommodation offer to young people aged 16 and over within the care system. Sue welcomed the former Catch22 staff who had transferred to the County Council and said she looked forward to seeing the development of the service over the coming months.

Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children (UASC) update – the County Council had announced on 7 December 2020 that it had resumed receiving new arrivals of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children into the Council's care, but had given a warning that a long-term solution needed to be implemented to avoid overwhelming Kent services again. The Council continued to work with the Home Office on short-, medium- and long-term plans towards a sustainable and equitable national system for the care of UASC, and continued to hope for a mandated National Transfer Scheme.

2. Asked to clarify the short-, medium- and long-term solutions for UASC, Sue explained that:

- in terms of short and medium-term solutions, lateral flow testing was used to avoid UASC needing to quarantine upon arrival, unless they tested positive, and extra Home Office resources would be allocated to help resolve age disputes and status issues more quickly so UASC could move on to take up employment and support themselves.
- a longer-term solution would be offered by making the National Transfer Scheme mandatory and by securing more funding for UASC care leavers. The Local Government Association was working with the Home Office on this and the Leader of the County Council, Roger Gough, was involved in negotiations.

3. Matt Dunkley responded to concerns about the length of time taken to establish UASC status, and the danger of young people going missing during this time. He advised that the process could take several years, during which the County Council would be responsible for their care. The average age of arrivals was 16–17 so they would be 23-24 by the time their status was determined. Since 2015, 95% of UASC care leavers had been granted indefinite leave to remain. If this process could be made quicker, young people could start to work and support themselves earlier, reducing their dependence on the County Council, and the Department for Education supported this view. Most who went missing went very soon after arrival and had to be recorded as missing, even if the County Council knew where they were.

4. The verbal updates were NOTED, with thanks.

8. Performance Scorecard for Children in Care

1. Maureen Robinson introduced the scorecard and advised that there had been little change since last reporting. The number of initial health assessments being completed on time had increased month on month but the number of dental checks completed had decreased, largely due to the impact of the covid-19 pandemic. This impact had also caused a delay in court hearings for special guardianship orders and adoptions. Some foster carers had experienced problems accessing dental appointments for children but had been more successful when reminding the surgery of the child's care status. Caroline Smith confirmed that all foster carers had been made aware of the need to do this. There was some backlog of cases due to lockdown but improvement was expected soon.

2. The performance data in the Corporate Parenting Scorecard was NOTED, with thanks for the work which goes into collating and updating the information, to keep corporate parents informed.

9. Missing Looked After Young People - Annual Report

1. Dan Bride introduced the report and highlighted the main patterns identified from data. She emphasised that missing incidents had reduced during the time of the

pandemic restrictions and lockdown, that most children in care did not go missing at all and that those who did were isolated incidents only. The few young people who had been missing for an extended period (between 2-4 weeks and one year) were all UASC and were mostly male. If a young person had been missing for more than 48 hours, multi-agency work would start and be escalated to a national scale if necessary. Kent was an active user of the National Referral Mechanism and its practice was more robust than that of many other local authorities. The cases of young people missing for a long period would be monitored closely for the first six months and then three-monthly from then onwards.

2. The process for conducting return interviews was to be reviewed, to help the Council to understand fully the reasons for missing episodes. Young people would be asked whom they wanted to speak to, for example, if they did not want to speak to a social worker they could have their interview with someone from the YLF. The language used would also be changed, with 'conversation' replacing 'interview'.

3. A new model, the Complex Adolescent Harm Framework (CAHF), sought to help the Council better understand reasons for and patterns of missing episodes and work would continue to develop this to the point at which it could start to produce useable data.

4. The information set out in the report was NOTED, with thanks, and the work being done to develop understanding of missing episodes was welcomed.

10. Care Leavers 18+ Service progress report

1. Caroline Smith introduced the report and advised that, although the number of responses to the survey had been small, most responses had been positive and had rated the service favourably. The County Council was working on its accommodation offer to care leavers, and the service previously supplied by Catch22 had been brought back in-house on 1 February 2021. Part of the Council's response to the survey would be to manage young people's expectations of the support the Council could provide, particularly in terms of accommodation. 2020 had been a very difficult year and there had been four unexpected deaths among care leavers. The Panel was assured that the young people most affected by these deaths had been offered bereavement support.

2. Caroline, Nimesh Patel and Mark Weinel responded to comments and questions from the Panel, including the following:-

- a) the pilots of the rent guarantor scheme and Council Tax rebate scheme had both cost less than expected. The rent guarantor scheme in particular had been very timely and had worked well to support young people who had fallen behind with their rent as a result of the economic impact of the pandemic. Both schemes would become part of the ongoing local offer to care leavers;
- b) the unexpected deaths had occurred early on in the pandemic restrictions in 2020. Risk assessments had been carried out and support offered to the people most affected by the deaths, for example, flatmates and friends, as

well as carers or former carers. Some had taken this up and some had not yet but had been asked to keep in touch. These conversations had been face-to-face rather than virtual and had used appropriate personal protection equipment. Staff had received training in supporting young people most at risk of struggling with their mental health, and multi-disciplinary meetings with CAMHS and the Kent and Medway NHS and Social Care Partnership Trust were seeking to improve links between professionals to best support young people facing crisis. It was hoped that this joint working could be rolled out across the whole county, and a specialist bereavement service would be procured.

3. The information set out in the report was NOTED, with thanks.

11. Lifelong Links Evaluation - Rees Centre, Oxford

1. Clare Barton introduced the report and thanked Rob and Brad from VSK for their help in making a film to promote Lifelong Links, which launched on 28 January. Although additional funding for 6 months had been given by the Family Rights Group, the current funding would still end in 2021. Dr Lisa Holmes from the Rees Centre thanked all those who had contributed to the evaluation of the pilot project and summarised the key points of the findings, including that 91% of young people reported good outcomes from meeting family members, also that anxiety that a young person meeting their birth family may lead to instability of their placement had been largely unfounded. A template would be prepared for all local authorities to use. Clare added that she was on the working group which would put the findings into place.

2. Julianne Bayford advised that experienced foster carers tended to support Lifelong Links more readily than newer carers and she supported it being made available to as many young people as possible. Lisa commented that in many other local authorities, it tended to be newer foster carers who were more open to it. The concept of Lifelong Links tended to be easier to accept when it was introduced early in a placement. Lifelong Links would be built into all foster carers' training, and it was hoped that any carers who were sceptical could be encouraged by those who had embraced it more readily. Matt Dunkley added that a young person's contact with their birth family could be difficult to manage but, if managed well, could be very successful. To work well, Lifelong Links would need to have a structure and establish practice principles, including an evaluation mechanism. Clare advised that Kent was the first local authority to have an accredited Lifelong Links service. Sue Chandler added that the positive stories of young people who had benefitted from Lifelong Links would be helpful in promoting it, and the enthusiasm for the scheme shown by the Minister for Children, Vicky Ford, would also be a great help. The Chairman said how proud she was that Kent was a trailblazer in Lifelong Links.

3. The information set out in the report and the continuation of the Lifelong Links project in Kent were NOTED, with thanks.