

CORPORATE PARENTING PANEL – 15 SEPTEMBER 2021

NOTES of a briefing held using Microsoft Teams.

PRESENT: Ann Allen (Chairman), Trudy Dean (Vice-Chairman), Rob Barton, Julianne Bayford, Dan Bride, Tom Byrne, Charmaine Chapman, Gary Cooke, Tony Doran, Sophia Dunstan, Stephen Gray, Kelly Grehan, Sarah Hamilton, Margot McArthur, Dirk Ross, Nancy Sayer, Tracy Scott and Caroline Smith.

ALSO PRESENT: Sue Chandler, Cabinet Member for Integrated Children's Services.

IN ATTENDANCE: Jo Carpenter (Participation and Engagement Manager, Virtual School Kent), Christy Holden (Head of Strategic Commissioning, Children and Young People's Services), Maureen Robinson (Management Information Unit Service Manager), Sarah Skinner (Head of the Regional Adoption Agency), Theresa Grayell (Democratic Services Officer, Clerk) and Gaetano Romagnuolo (Research Officer, Support Clerk)

1. Membership

The Panel noted that Alison Farmer, Head of the Education Psychology Service, had joined the Panel in place of Dr Dan Jones, who had previously filled the post on an interim basis.

2. Apologies and substitutes

Apologies for absence had been received from Alison Farmer, Lesley Game, Shellina Prendergast and Sharon Williams. The Corporate Director, Matt Dunkley, was also unable to attend. There were no substitutes.

3. Chairman's Announcements

1. The Chairman advised that she had recently attended a number of events:

- a fun day with foster carers and their children,
- a 'Challenger' day, which was also very enjoyable. She expressed her hope that Simon Dean, who ran the Challenger project, could be invited to a future meeting of the Panel, and
- a visit to Rochester Cathedral organised by the Young Lives Foundation.

She had also recently met some UASC care leavers and had been pleased to hear they were settling well and enjoying their new life in Kent.

2. She repeated what she had said on many previous occasions, that she was always so pleased to meet Kent's young people and was so proud of the resilience, spirit and energy they showed in the way they approached life and supported each other.

4. Notes of the Panel briefing held on 20 July 2021

These were accepted as a sensible summary of the proceedings. There was nothing arising from them.

5. Performance Scorecard for Children in Care

1. Maureen Robinson introduced the report and highlighted key areas of performance. Sarah Hammond added that, to address the shortfall in completed initial health assessments (IHAs) for UASC, a protocol had been agreed with the Home Office that newly arrived UASC would have a summary health assessment within 14 days of their arrival. This would not cover all areas covered in an IHA but would identify any urgent health needs.
2. The Chairman highlighted the excellent performance of Kent's Children's Services, despite the continued challenges of the pandemic and pressures of UASC numbers. She asked that the Panel's thanks and appreciation be passed on to the staff concerned.
3. Referring to the Panel's previous request for a comparison of Kent's data with the national picture, Maureen explained that the most recent national figures available were for 2019/20, with figures for 2020/21 due to become available in March 2022. Of the 28 measures for which Kent data was collected, 15 were local and 13 were national. Where national data was available, this had been included in the dashboard. There would inevitably be some local variation due to the varying numbers of UASC in different parts of the country.
4. Asked about the shortage of information provided on Education and Health Care Plan (EHCP) assessments, Maureen explained that data on EHCP assessments was collected using the Synergy system, whereas data for children in care services was collected using Liberi, so collation of data was not automatic. However, as there were known to be very few children in care with an EHCP, it was possible to collate the data manually and identify individual cases to assess against data.
5. It was RESOLVED that the performance data set out in the Corporate Parenting Scorecard be noted, with many thanks to Children's Services teams for continued good work through very challenging times.

6. Participation Team Update

1. Jo Carpenter reported that the team had had a very busy summer. Two of the apprentices, Bradley Aves and Alex Gordon, had passed their Level 3 NVQ in Public Sector Service Delivery and two new apprentices were due to join the team shortly. The team had organised a very successful Team Challenger Day, at which all the various Children In Care Councils and groups had come together, and the Panel were shown photographs of young people, their families and staff enjoying the event. Jo thanked Sarah Hammond for her help with the logistics for the event.
2. Tom Byrne and Rob Barton advised that the team had returned to normal communal activities over the summer holidays, that events had been held in a covid-safe way and had all been able to take place outside as the weather had been good.

Groups always found interaction in person so much better as it offered so much more opportunity to interact constructively, which was just not possible in a virtual format. Face to face events also offered a good opportunity for the team to promote their role in supporting children and young people in care. The team had had to add an extra activity day as they had proved so popular. In all, 23 activities had taken place, attended by over 190 young people.

3. Sophia Dunstan advised that, in the October half-term, groups would continue to meet in person and that events planned included a celebration of Black History Month and the work of the County Council's Green Guardians.

4. Charmaine added that she co-chaired the Rainbow staff group, a role which gave her the opportunity to learn about leadership. She was currently working on including LGBTQ information on the Kent Cares Town website. Jo added that it was good to have young people represented on Council staff groups such as Aspire and Rainbow.

5. Asked how young people and their foster carers were able to access information about the team's activities and the opportunity to attend events, Sophia advised that all Kent foster carers were sent fliers for upcoming events, and event information was also shared between the Social Work, Independent Reviewing Officer and CIS teams. Social media was not used to share such information due to concerns about being able to maintain privacy and security.

6. The update was NOTED, with thanks

7. Verbal Update by the Cabinet Member

1. Sue Chandler said she had attended the 'Challenger' day as a spectator and agreed with the Chairman that it had been an excellent event. She then gave verbal updates on the following issues:

Reconnect – this service had organised an excellent programme of summer events, which had received much good feedback from participants. Travel to events had been provided free of charge. Sue thanked the clubs and volunteer groups whose work in hosting events had made the programme possible, including a community interest company which had provided lunches for participants, and also David Adams and his team for putting in place the transport arrangements within a tight timescale. The next round of Reconnect activities would be in the October half-term holiday.

SEND – this was a key area of focus since the publication of Ofsted's written statement. The Children's, Young People and Education Cabinet Committee had received a monitoring report at its meeting on 14 September and much positive work was going on. Kent 'PACT' (Parents and Carers Together) was much involved in work with the SEND agenda.

UASC – Kent was once again accepting newly-arrived UASC after the recent period in which it had had to refuse acceptance as it could not accommodate any more. A Member briefing on the updated situation would take place on 17 September.

2. The verbal updates were NOTED, with thanks.

8. Adoption Partnership South East Performance Update - November 2020 - May 2021, Adoption Partnership South East Business Plan 2021 - 2022 and Adoption Partnership South East Adoption Panel Chairs Report November 2020 - April 2021

1. Caroline Smith introduced the report and advised the Panel that the Regional Adoption Agency (RAA) had gone live in 2020 with Sarah Skinner as its Head and Amy Coombs as Service Manager.

2. Sarah Skinner set out the structure of the RAA and the challenges of taking it live during the pandemic. It had been audited early in 2021 and had been given a 'Good' rating for its governance structure. The RAA had had a busy year with 90 children being placed so far, including 3 inter-agency placements. Interest shown by prospective adopters had remained good, and information events attracted some who chose to become adopters immediately and others who had taken away information to consider the role for the future. Adoption panels were held weekly to avoid delays to the process and the RAA was committed to early-permanence placements (EPPs). Post-adoption support services were very active and had recently been given an increase in resources. Adopted children were included in invitations to participation and engagements events as a matter of course and it was hoped that more would take part in future events.

3. Sarah responded to comments and questions from the Panel, including the following;

- a) the annual report was received well as an excellent picture of the work and progress of the RAA;
- b) asked if, to avoid delays in adoption hearings, courts in the partner authorities of Bexley and Medway would be used as well as Kent courts, Sarah advised that an adoption order would be raised in the area in which the child usually lived, so Bexley children would have their hearings at Bexley courts, Medway children at Medway courts, etc, regardless of where they were proposed to be placed. Courts all across the UK shared the challenge of having a backlog of adoption cases waiting to be heard;
- c) the quality of post-adoption support was welcomed as a way of helping an adoptive family and their new child to feel 'normalised' and to settle down like any other family welcoming a new child;
- d) asked about the support given to birth parents by Barnardo's, Sarah advised that this independent counselling service was well established across all three partner areas of the RAA and offered support to help birth parents to understand and comply with the adoption process and reasons, for example, if their child had been adopted without their consent, and to negotiate and comply with contact arrangements. It gave them space to talk about their feelings away from the courts service and social workers,

IROs, etc. Barnardo's offered individual counselling as well as support groups for birth parents, which they could access during and/or after court proceedings, whenever they felt ready. Some birth parents chose not to maintain contact with their child, allowing them to settle into their new family faster; and

e) asked about the Special Guardianship Order (SGO) process, what issues tended to arise from SGOs and how they were dealt with, Sarah advised that the first phase of research conducted by Oxford Brookes University had looked at the Kent/Medway/Bexley RAA's innovative multi-disciplinary arrangements. It was hoped that a second phase of research could be undertaken if funding could be secured.

4. It was RESOLVED that the information set out in the report and given in response to comments and questions be noted, with thanks.

9. Housing Options for Young Adults who are Care Leavers

1. Caroline Smith introduced the report, which set out work to identify the challenges young people faced when leaving care and the aim to achieve a consistent approach and county-wide housing offer to address them. Kent's young people in care were currently unevenly placed across the county, and as care leavers would normally then be housed where they had last been in care, the burden of providing accommodation for them fell more heavily on some districts than others. If a consistent housing offer were to be available across the county, care leavers could more easily choose where they wanted to live. Christy Holden added that the Kent Housing Group, comprising Housing Officers from all 12 district councils, worked very closely to address these issues but it was hoped that work could be shared beyond this group. Caroline and Christy responded to comments and questions from the Panel, including the following:-

a) County Council Members who were 'twin hatters', ie were Members of both the county and a district council, could take up the cause in their local area and would need to have guidance on what practical help they could give to help local care leavers. The Cabinet Member, Sue Chandler, added that the many 'twin hatters' on the County Council would offer a valuable resource to widen the discussion of the issue across the county. She said the issue needed political commitment as well as the work of the Kent Housing Group officers. Sarah Hammond and Caroline undertook to look at how best 'twin hatter' Members could help to address the issue locally;

b) the clarity and breadth of the report were welcomed;

c) concern was expressed that it should be possible to identify good and bad practice among district councils across the county and hold to account those which were doing less than they could, as some more affluent areas did not necessarily perform well. Sarah advised that various factors affected the scope of engagement with housing for care leavers, including

the political leadership and culture of a council. Some were simply more committed and alive to the issue than others;

- d) reference was made to the work of the Affordable Housing Select Committee, which had reported in July 2020 and included a recommendation to improve co-ordination between the county and district councils. It would be useful to know what work had come out of that in terms of housing for care leavers. Sarah clarified that it was not expected that care leavers would be able to be accommodated in affordable or social housing as this was simply not a realistic option;
 - e) property identified by the 'No Use Empty' initiative could be assessed in respect of its possible use to accommodate care leavers;
 - f) regarding the establishment of a consistent approach across the county, concern was expressed that different districts faced different local challenges and arrangements, for example, only some had housing associations, and that 'one size did not fit all'. It was suggested that a small working group of officers and a 'twin hatter' Member from each district be established to address the issue facing care leavers; and
 - g) Sarah welcomed the interest and commitment shown by Members and reminded them that the County Council had a duty to ensure that its care leavers were housed in safe, suitable accommodation but did not have any duty or ability to actually provide that housing, as a housing authority would. Instead, it sought to encourage and influence the provision of suitable housing.
2. It was RESOLVED that the information set out in the report and given in response to comments and questions be noted, with thanks, and that the move to have a Care Leavers Housing Offer available and visible throughout each of the partner organisations with a duty as a Corporate Parent be supported.