

CORPORATE PARENTING PANEL – 26 October 2022

MINUTES of a meeting held in the Council Chamber, Sessions House, County Hall, Maidstone.

PRESENT: Dirk Ross (Chairman), David Beaney, Dan Bride, Tom Byrne, Tony Doran, Lesley Game, Sarah Hamilton, Sarah Hammond, Margot McArthur, Nancy Sayer and Caroline Smith.

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

IN ATTENDANCE: Joanne Carpenter, Participation and Engagement Manager, Virtual School Kent, Maureen Robinson, Management Information Unit Service Manager, Steve Tanner, Assistant Director, SEND, Sarah Skinner, Head of Adoption Partnership South-East, Florah Shiringo, Assistant Director Area lead South, CYPE, Theresa Grayell, Democratic Services Officer, and Georgina Little, Principal Democratic Services Officer.

1. Apologies and substitutes

1. Apologies for absence had been received from Rob Barton, Julianne Bayford, Gary Cooke, Sophia Dunstan, Alison Farmer, Stephen Gray, Shellina Prendergast, Tracy Scott and Sharon Williams.

2. Joining the meeting remotely were Dan Bride, Lesley Game, Sarah Hamilton, Margot McArthur and Nancy Sayer.

3. Florah Shiringo was in attendance in place of Kevin Kasaven, Interim Director of Integrated Children's Services, East Division, but the Panel was advised that Kevin would be a regular future attender at Panel meetings.

2. Chairman's Announcements

1. The Chairman advised that he intended to shape the important role of the Vice-Chairman as a supporter to the Chairman's role.

2. He advised that he would be attending a participation event at Detling Showground on 27 October and an Adoption conference on 2 November.

3. Minutes of the meeting held on 27 July 2022

It was RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting held on 27 July 2022 are correctly recorded and they be signed by the Chairman. There were no matters arising.

4. Participation Team update

1. Jo Carpenter advised that a new Youth Engagement Support Officer had been appointed to work with young people aged 16+ and care leavers. Two new apprentices had also been appointed and would start work shortly.

2. Jo and Tom Byrne summarised the meetings of the care councils and the many participation activities which had been attended and enjoyed since last reporting to the Panel, along with those planned for the winter programme. Some of these events would be virtual as some young people were nervous of being out late on dark evenings. All County Council Members would be sent details of events so they could attend.

3. Tony Doran advised that, at a recent conference of 200 schools across Kent, a national speaker had paid a warm tribute to the work of Jo and the Participation team, described them as 'one of the best - if not *the* best - Participation team in the country'. The Panel was delighted to hear this news and congratulated the team.

4. Tom showed a photo reel of young people enjoying two recent award ceremonies for those aged 16+ and 18+, presented by Sue Chandler and Caroline Smith, which included adventurous outdoor activities at which Shellina Prendergast excelled. Jo added that the award ceremony had been held at an Ashford residential centre, which had worked well as a venue as it offered good indoor and outdoor space. Timed sessions of awards had been interspersed with sessions of outdoor activities and young people and their families had been able to move freely between the two. Sue Chandler commented that the day had been fantastic and had generated a great buzz. Caroline Smith added that she had had plenty of very appreciative and positive feedback from families and carers, saying their young people had felt very special to attend such an event and had taken away very proud memories. Parents also appreciated the timed slots for the awards as this broke up the day and gave young people time to be active in between. Tony Doran added that he also had had many compliments, including from a carer of two children on the autistic spectrum who usually did not show joy but who had shown excitement and pleasure at being at such an event. One had won a cuddly toy fox as a prize, which was much treasured.

5. The update was noted, with thanks, and the news of the success of recent events and the feedback and tributes were welcomed.

5. Performance Scorecard for Children in Care

1. Maureen Robinson introduced the scorecard and highlighted three challenges currently facing the service:-

- a) the National Transfer Scheme had some impact on Kent's statistics as young people leaving the county as part of the scheme were become excluded from Kent's figures, although they would already have been included in those figures for their initial health assessment when first coming into care in Kent. They were not separated out from citizen children at the initial health assessment stage but to be able to make this separation in the future would help a lot when monitoring figures. Because Kent had so many more UASC than any other local authority, it was always difficult to compare Kent's performance statistics with other local authorities;

- b) young people arriving in the county from overseas but not claiming asylum were did not become looked after in the same way as UASC and hence did not show up in the statistics in the same way; and
- c) social worker staffing had improved in the early part of the autumn and average caseloads were now 15.6 cases per social worker, so were gradually approaching the target of maximum of 15 cases.

2. In response to a question about the number of children awaiting Adoption Orders, Caroline Smith advised that Kent had no shortage of people waiting to be approved as adopters and that timescales for the adoption process in Kent were generally good. Sarah Hammond added that Kent's performance at placing a child, once a final Adoption Order had been granted, was good; the delay in the adoption system was in the courts process to get an Order granted. The Department for Education had very recently contacted Kent to take part in a review of the material and financial impacts of court delays, and this opportunity to comment was welcomed.

3. It was RESOLVED that the performance data in the scorecard be noted, with thanks.

6. Verbal Update by the Cabinet Member

1. Sue Chandler gave an update on the following issues:-

UASC and the National Transfer Scheme (NTS) – the NTS had first been introduced in 2015 to help ease the pressure at the height of Kent's UASC crisis. The aim at that time had been that UASC would make up no more than 0.07% of the total population in any one authority and that all councils across the country would take a share of UASC. The scheme had first been voluntary, and participation had been limited, later becoming mandatory. However, in 2022, not all authorities were yet taking their share of UASC and the target percentage of population had had to be increased from 0.07% to 0.1% per authority to accommodate increasing UASC numbers. The NTS usually took about 15 days to complete a transfer and the aim was to reduce this time as well as the need to use hotels to accommodate young people awaiting transfer.

2. Kent's UASC population was again very high. So far in 2022, 1,146 UASC had arrived in Kent, which exceeded the number arising at the height of the 2015 crisis. Most of this increase had come from Albania, and some were not claiming asylum so did not show up in UASC statistics listed in the dashboard. There were safeguarding concerns around young people waiting for transfer, and the Council was working with the police to minimise the risk of exploitation. As a result of these various developments, the picture of non-Kent children in care in Kent was now more complex than ever before.

3. In response to questions, Sue advised that the revised target for the UASC percentage of population would be applied immediately. Sarah Hammond added that, by the end of 2022, Kent expected to reach its 0.1% of population, which would be 346 UASC, but to this needed to be added approximately 120 young people accommodated temporarily while awaiting transfer.

4. Asked how many Ukrainian children were in care in Kent, Sarah advised that they were not part of Kent's UASC population so the Council had no corporate parenting responsibility for them, although it did have a duty to provide early help services and school places. Most Ukrainian children in Kent had arrived with a parent and a few were living with hosts in private fostering arrangements.

16+ Care Leavers – Sue said how delighted she had been to attend the 16+ awards ceremony described in the Participation Team's update. Its success was a great testament to the care, work and commitment of the staff who supported young people and were making such a difference to their lives. On 27 October, she would attend an Aspirations event for care leavers. Such an event would be a good opportunity to focus on the Council's corporate parenting role in supporting young adults.

5. It was RESOLVED that the verbal update be noted, with thanks.

7. Kent Children in Care in the statutory school years with an Education Health and Care Plan (EHCP) - Access to Education

1. Tony Doran and Steve Tanner introduced the report and highlighted that Kent's percentage of young people with an EHCP was 2% above the nation average of 30%. The main reason for a young person to have an EHCP was that they had come into care later in their teens. However, an EHCP was not necessarily always the right pathway and VSK and the SEND team were working closely together to address this. Tony reassured the Panel that no child in Kent was or would be left without any educational provision.

2. Steve added that the report included information previously requested by the Panel, including the number of EHC plans and EHC needs assessments currently in the system (20,000), and work to change the operating model and seek dedicated staff to manage the process. The process would be phased to cover the transitions from early help to primary, primary to secondary and secondary to 16+. The team also sought to align the SEND and children in care annual review processes to make an holistic approach.

3. Tony and Steve responded to questions from the Panel, including the following:-

- a) asked about the criteria and eligibility for an EHCP assessment, Steve advised that a parent would need to be able to demonstrate evidence that their child was significantly (ie two or more years) behind his or her peers. The Covid pandemic had exacerbated the situation for many children. Work was going on to reaffirm the criteria used and apply them consistently. There was no scope for parental appeal, unless through a

tribunal, and they could not re-apply for 6 months unless they could demonstrate exceptional circumstances;

- b) Sarah Hammond advised that, although Kent's percentage of children in care with an EHCP was slightly higher than the national average, it was very much lower than the number of children not in care with an EHCP. This demonstrated the effectiveness of the VSK team;
- c) asked if social prescribing was used, for example, to engage with a child via non-academic interests such as music, art or an interest in animals or nature, Tony advised that other forms of engagement were indeed used. He gave an example of a young man who was not academic but wanted to work with horses and was encouraged to develop this interest and train in this field. He had eventually become a jockey. The process needed to have the flexibility to be able to offer routes like this. Sue Chandler added that all children could benefit from alternative forms of engagement;
- d) Tony added that the recent Ofsted inspection had included visits to schools and had considered the issue of children in care being taken out of class to take part in regular care reviews and meetings about PEPs and EHCPs. Although many young people said they no longer felt as much stigma about their care status at school and did not mind having to leave class to attend such sessions, Tony and Caroline Smith were part of a working group looking into addressing this issue.

- 4. It was RESOLVED that the work of VSK and Kent SEN in supporting young people be noted, with thanks.

8. Adoption Partnership South-East, Regional Adoption Agency (RAA)

1. Sarah Skinner introduced the report, highlighted key points and set out the content of the Adoption conference on 2 November. The conference would focus on adoptive parents and would feature key speakers such the lead of a therapeutic parenting organisation, a paediatrician, the strategic lead from the RAA and representatives from adoption partnership groups, including virtual schools. She responded to comments and questions from the Panel, including the following:-

- a) the inclusivity of the adoption service in terms of race, gender and sexuality was welcomed. Sarah advised that there were very few criteria that prospective adopters needed to satisfy, legally – they should be aged over 21, resident in the UK and have no criminal record relating to children – and diversity in the service was actively promoted;
- b) asked about the timescale of the legal elements of the adoption process, Sarah advised that the key target for the RAA was the time between achieving a placement order and matching a child with adoptive parents, which was a minimum of 121 days; this may be shorter if the child was already living with the adoptive family and

longer if the child had complex emotional or physical needs. This time was made up of two stages; the first stage was led by the adopters and covered statutory checks and training, while the second was the formal assessment process; and

- c) adoptive parents were not paid in the same way as foster carers but could receive an adoption allowance. This allowance was framed by eligibility criteria and dictated by the needs of the child rather than the adoptive family.

2. Sue Chandler commented that the Adoptables group established by the Participation Team was unique to Kent and was invaluable in helping to support adopted children and their families. Jo Carpenter added that the team was pleased with the work it had done so far but had much work still to do, including work with Bexley and Medway councils, Kent's partners in the RAA.

3. Jo added that adoptive parents tended to have a different approach from foster carers to their children attending participation events and were generally more hesitant about leaving their children at such an event. At times, it could be harder for a child to join in and take part, and more challenging for the team to relate to a child, while their parents were present. The participation team worked hard to reassure adoptive parents and gain their trust that their child would be OK and able to enjoy an event with their peers and make friends. Asked how adoptive parents could network with others, to support this process, Sarah advised that a virtual monthly coffee morning took place, which focussed on education issues, and there were two yearly family events for adoptive family, eg a family picnic and Christmas party, and a monthly newsletter. A charitable organisation 'We are Family' was commissioned to facilitate adopter-led support groups. Asked how the Council could check if monthly newsletters were being read, Sarah advised that, under General Data Protection Regulations, adopters now had to opt in to receive the newsletter so were making a conscious choice to receive it and engage.

4. It was RESOLVED that the Regional Adoption Agency annual report be noted, with thanks.