

## **CORPORATE PARENTING PANEL – 17 February 2026**

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

PRESENT: Pamela Williams (Chair), Adrian Kibble (Vice-Chair), Oliver Bradshaw, Martin Brice, Dan Bride, Dean Burns, Paul Chamberlain, Spencer Dixon, Tony Doran, Christine McInnes, Stephen Gray, Stuart Heaven, Garry Sturley, Terry Mole, Kayleigh Leonard, Claudine Russell, Roxanne Hills, Tracy Scott, Martin Brice and Caroline Smith

IN ATTENDANCE: Christine Palmer (Cabinet Member for Integrated Children's Services), Joanne Carpenter (Participation and Engagement Manager), Ingrid Crisan (Director for Operational Integrated Children's Services), Sarah Newman (Senior Participation Support Officer), Alice Gleave (Assistant Director SEN Statutory Services), Louise Fisher (Assistant Director Safeguarding Professional Standards & QA) and Georgia Humphreys (Democratic Services Officer)

#### Apologies and Substitutes

Apologies had been received from Mr Mayall for whom Mr Mole was present as substitute and Ms Sayer for whom Ms Hills was present as substitute.

Ms McInnes, Ms Crisan, Ms Bride and Ms Fisher were present virtually.

#### Chair's Announcements

1. The Chair shared that earlier in the day she had attended a gift-making workshop with Kent's children in care. She described it as a wonderful visit, explaining how uplifting it was to see young children gaining confidence and enjoying time together. The experience was a powerful reminder of why the role of Corporate Parent is so important. The Chair expressed her thanks to Ms Carpenter and her team for organising such a lovely morning.

#### Minutes

RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting held on 9<sup>th</sup> December 2025 were a correct record.

#### Participation Team update

1. Ms Carpenter, Participation and Engagement Manager, and her team updated the Panel sharing that:
  - a. The Participation Team delivered a range of February half term activities, including Young People's Councils, creative workshops and sports. Work had continued to strengthen the Participation Framework,

with four guiding questions developed, it was highlighted that Children in Care were involved throughout. Staff had been introduced to the new approach in December, and a stronger feedback loop was in place to return outcomes to children and families.

- b. Progress was reported on the Young Reviewers Programme and collaboration with South East authorities.
- c. The Care Leavers' Christmas activities had a strong impact, with positive feedback received on the cards designed by young people. Work to recruit those with lived experience into decision making roles continued, alongside joint projects with Kent Police.
- d. The participation offer for kinship care had expanded, helping carers and young people feel more connected, and the team was exploring a Young Persons' Council. The Social Connections Service had supported children in need and those on protection plans. UASC coffee mornings had received positive feedback.
- e. Creative engagement sessions were held in children's homes, and participation training for all CYPE staff had continued, including sessions with Kent universities and designated staff in colleges, with EKC (East Kent Colleges) training delivered in January. It was highlighted that feedback on the contribution of designated staff had been very positive.

RESOLVED that the update was noted.

### Challenge Cards Update

1. Ms Carpenter presented an update on the work taking place with young people on two challenge cards. The second challenge focused on ensuring that children and young people understood their right to share their views, their legal right to be involved in decisions about their lives, and the importance of self advocacy. It was reported that managers had recognised that some staff had been avoiding meetings, and all workers had been reminded that young people were entitled to access advocacy through Young Lives Foundation (YLF), Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs) and the Participation Team. The Participation Team had also started visiting children before their first review when they entered care and intended to introduce the Kent Pledge as part of early contacts.
2. Young people attended to speak about the Kent Pledge, explaining that the Kent Pledge consisted of six promises made by KCC to children in care. Ms Newman, Senior Participation Support Officer, reported that the group had explored how well the Pledge was known among young people and had found that awareness was lower than expected. Some young people were unsure what the Pledge contained, and many did not have a physical copy. The young people explained that:

- a. They had received some information in the past but had only really learned about the Pledge after joining the Children in Care Council.
  - b. One young person's foster parents had given them a copy of the Pledge, but it had not been discussed by her social worker.
  - c. A young person had received a copy of the Pledge from the Super Council but staff had not talked through it with them.
3. The young people agreed that the Kent Pledge remained important, explaining that it helped children understand their entitlements, including support for education, such as access to a laptop. Furthermore, it provided reassurance and a sense of security and it supported young people to feel safe and understood by professionals.
4. The group felt that additional promises for children in care were necessary, such as:
  - a. That many children felt uncertain when entering care and that the Pledge helped counter stereotypes about children in foster care.
  - b. The Pledge offered continuity when moving between placements and reduced stigma, particularly for those preparing for adulthood and concerned about stability after turning eighteen.
  - c. Given the number of changes children in care often experienced, the Pledge helped to provide a sense of consistency.
5. The young people offered suggestions on what could be done to improve awareness, namely:
  - a. The Kent Pledge should be embedded into regular meetings and training rather than mentioned only once, and that social workers needed to fully understand it themselves.
  - b. The Kent Pledge should be included in training for social workers and foster carers, and that IROs should ensure young people's views were taken seriously.
  - c. The importance of avoiding jargon, checking in regularly, following through on commitments, and advocating for young people when they were unable to advocate for themselves.
6. The young people also made suggestions for the Panel, namely:
  - a. Corporate parents should meet young people to build meaningful connections and noted the importance of having consistent social workers.
  - b. Reinforcing the Kent Pledge within social worker training.
  - c. The Pledge should be discussed openly and in accessible language, and that positive examples of the Pledge being met should be celebrated.
7. It was reported that the Kent Pledge cards had been refreshed with updated language and that new resources were available to help explain the Pledge.

There was a need for training for workers and broader awareness for young people so they could be empowered to advocate for themselves. A video about the Kent Pledge was shown, and Members were invited to sign a pledge card to confirm their commitment.

8. In response to comments and questions it was said:
  - a. When asked how awareness of the Pledge would be maintained. Ms Carpenter and Ms Smith explained that the first review was a crucial point for introducing the Pledge. It was suggested that it could be included in IRO annual reviews, incorporated into social worker reminders, and added to the Corporate Parenting Handbook. Additionally, the possibility of young people speaking to officers at 'Workshop Wednesday' sessions was suggested.
  - b. A Member queried whether elements of the Pledge could be incorporated into the Scorecard to enable corporate parents to monitor progress more effectively. A young person added that the Children in Care Council could also play a valuable role in holding corporate parents to account.
  - c. When asked how young people used the Pledge when they encountered difficulties. Ms Smith explained that trusted adults, including IROs, should know the Pledge thoroughly and help young people navigate issues. She explained that some commitments, such as providing laptops, were more straightforward than others like securing a stable home. A young person described their positive experience of meeting their trusted adult informally before reviews.

RESOLVED the Panel noted the challenge card progress to date and supported the actions being taken to meet the challenges.

#### Verbal Update by Cabinet Member

1. Mrs Palmer, Cabinet Member for Integrated Children's Services, gave a verbal update on the following:
  - a. The Committee was informed that within the recent Ofsted report, strong practice across teams was highlighted, including in those services not rated as outstanding.
  - b. A new social media fostering campaign had supported recruitment, with 28 families in assessment and over 30 foster carers approved since April 2025. It was confirmed that no cuts were being made to fostering services; the reported £1.2m saving was clarified to be due to the increased use of digital technology.
  - c. Mrs Palmer reported progress on in-house properties for children with complex needs, with two out of four sites purchased and granted planning permission. This was a part of the 'Invest to- -Save' programme, which aimed to expand provision and reduce reliance on

external placements. A related project was underway to bring some out of county placements back into Kent, which offered significant financial and service quality- benefits.

- d. The launch of the 'Best Start in Life' service was anticipated, and thanks were given to Ms Crisan for her work. Mrs Palmer expressed her thanks to the young people in attendance at the meeting for their confidence and speaking skills.

2. In response to comments and questions it was said:

- a. It was confirmed that a report detailing feedback from Ofsted and actions for improvement was scheduled to be presented to the Children, Young People and Education Cabinet Committee on 12th May 2026.

RESOLVED that the Panel noted the verbal update.

#### Kent Children in Care in the statutory school years with an Education Health and Care Plan

1. Mr Doran, Headteacher Virtual School Kent (VSK), introduced the bi-annual report, he highlighted stable overall numbers but a steady rise in children in care with EHCP's, with far more in KS4 than KS3. VSK's tracker held about 55 young people, including those without a recorded school place, those not yet in full-time education, and those whose circumstances had changed due to care planning. Mr Doran highlighted a 20% improvement over the past year in issuing EHCPs within two months.
2. Ms Gleave, Assistant Director SEN Statutory Services, added that VSK addressed situations individually, as many cases involved mental health factors and young people not being ready for school. VSK worked to create tailored support packages, sometimes including specialist provisions such as Curley's Farm, to help young people re-engage and secure appropriate school places.
3. In response to comments and questions it was said:
  - a. A Member asked whether the 34 young people with no recorded school included the 30 in Years 10 and 11, noting that this was a crucial GCSE stage. It was confirmed that the October 2025 data showed 34 young people on the tracker with no registered school, with differences in systems and data quality affecting reporting. It was explained that teams were working together on individual cases and within SEN there had been an increase in tuition packages due to system capacity and availability.
  - b. A Member queried the graph showing the number of days from issue, which stood at around 80 days. Ms Gleave explained that the SEN service had experienced challenges linked to the Designated Person

Service, which reflected wider pressures, including a shortage of Educational Psychologists (EP), a rapid plan had been put in place to address this.

- c. A question was raised about whether timescales could be expected to drop back to around 50 days by January 2026. Ms Gleave reported that performance was now returning to the 20-week timeframe and that she was confident the EP capacity issue had been resolved and figures would return to previous averages. She added that January performance could be confirmed, although seasonal pressures due to Christmas would need to be considered.

RESOLVED that the Panel noted the work of the Virtual School and Kent SEN in supporting its young people.

#### VSK report

1. Mr Doran introduced the report highlighting that the data status had not yet been validated and that confirmed national and regional comparisons would be available in the statistical first release in April. He reported that GCSE year outcomes for young people with EHCPs remained very vulnerable, with attainment between 23–25%. He highlighted that last year primary outcomes for this group were double the national average.
2. Mr Doran stated that outcomes this year for children with additional special educational needs but without an EHCP were strong, with Kent's children in care achieving 70% compared to the 54% national average in reading, writing and maths at the end of primary. Mr Doran provided a comprehensive overview of the data included in the report.
3. Mr Doran highlighted achievements linked to the Kent Pledge and Personal Education Plans (PEPs), with an average completion rate of 99.3% across the three annual PEPs. He reported that there had been zero permanent exclusions for eleven consecutive years. Participation levels remained above the national average, and one of the young people present, was recognised as one of 50 who had progressed through the programme.
4. It was highlighted that 156 young people attended the Children in Care Councils, Mr Doran recognised Ms Carpenter's key role in increasing engagement over time. There had been 70 activity days delivered in the past year, reaching just over 900 young people, in addition to local activities.
5. In response to comments and questions it was said:
  - a. A question was asked about yearly 'Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET) numbers and what interventions or opportunities were available. Mr Doran explained that there had been an important change

in Central Government direction. For the first time last year, the Government attempted to replicate the additional support provided pre16 into the post16 phase. He reported that the post16 pupil premium was now available in pilot form, though it was at around one tenth of the pre16 funding amount. Mr Doran explained that the 16 –18 budget amounted to roughly £4,000 per young person, which enabled the creation of bespoke NEET support packages. This funding supported initial engagement work designed to help young people re-enter education, employment, or training.

RESOLVED that the update was noted.

Signed: .....