

CORPORATE PARENTING PANEL – 30 June 2026

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

PRESENT: Pamela Williams (Chair), Adrian Kibble (Vice-Chair), Dominica Basini, Oliver Bradshaw, Dan Bride, Tom Byrne, Connor Cruickshank, Spencer Dixon, Tony Doran, Brian Horton, Juliet MacFarlane, Thomas Mallon, Robert Mayall, Terry Mole, Connie Nolan, Peter Osborne, Sharon Roots, Claudine Russell, Tracy Scott, Colin Sefton and Caroline Smith

IN ATTENDANCE: Paul Webb (Cabinet Member for Integrated Children's Services), Kevin Kasaven (Director of Children's Countywide Services), Hayley Bodiam (Service Manager), Gayle Levy (Quality Assurance Manager), Mark Vening (Fostering Service Manager), Sarah Newman (Senior Participation Support Officer) and Georgia Humphreys (Democratic Services Officer)

Apologies and substitutes

Apologies had been received from Mr Brice, Ms McInnes, Ms Sayer for whom Ms Basini was present as substitute.

Ms Bride was present virtually.

Chair's announcements

1. The Chair advised that a recent engagement event with care experienced young people included arts and crafts activities, opportunities for discussion, and a feedback board. Young people provided honest and insightful comments about their experiences and how services could better support them.
2. The Key themes raised by young people included:
 - a. The importance of considering how corporate parenting actions impact children and young people, particularly in relation to education. Young people felt that meetings should not take place during school hours.
 - b. How social workers could provide better support by taking time to understand young people's individual experiences and needs. Young people emphasised that simple actions and good communication can make a significant difference.

- c. How the Police and Youth Justice Services could better support young people by being more patient, understanding and mindful of their personal circumstances and experiences.
 - d. Messages for Corporate Parents and senior officers included the need to work more quickly, avoid unnecessary delays and ensure that children's voices are heard and acted upon.
3. The Chair reported that young people had suggested that Corporate Parents should produce a video to explain who they are, the role they play, and the departments they work within. In response, arrangements were being made with MRX to develop a video, involving children in care in its production and sharing further information with Members.

Participation Team update

1. The Participation Team provided the Panel with a comprehensive update. Key points of the update included:
 - a. That two apprentices had passed their level 2 apprenticeships in Customer Service.
 - b. The Team thanked members of the Panel for attending the event on 26th May with 20 members of the Children in Care Councils.
 - c. An Update was provided on the work of the Children in Care Councils as well as the Young Adult Council and the Young Parents Group.
 - d. The Team explained about a Speak Up referral for a young person who was finding it difficult to engage with professionals and share his interests or views. The Team explained that through Speak up Sessions the young person began to engage more openly and ultimately the work had a positive impact.
 - e. During the Easter and May Holidays there were 13 activity days facilitated for children in care, older care experienced young people, adopted children, children in kinship care and children with SEND who come under the Strengthening Independence Service.

RESOLVED that the update was noted.

Challenge Cards update

1. Ms Newman, Senior Participation Support Officer, outlined the challenge set for Corporate Parents by the Young Adult Council. This was 'Our Young Adult Council would like to challenge their Corporate Parents to improve and streamline the process of accessing case files, to help make the process smoother and more accessible.' Ms Newman explained the importance of Young Adults being able to access their records without barriers.
2. Mrs Russell proposed, and Ms Nolan seconded the amendment to the recommendation that:

'Members of the Corporate Parenting accept the challenges given by the Young Adult Council and ask officers to progress these and to update the Challenge Cards in line with this.'

3. The Chair put this to the vote and it was unanimously agreed.
4. In response to comments and questions it was said:
 - a. Mr Kasaven, Director of Children's Countywide Services, confirmed that the support for care leavers ends at 25 years of age.
 - b. When asked about Life Story work for care experienced young people, Ms Smith, Assistant Director Corporate Parenting, explained that younger children are supported through life story books, which can be added to over time by their adoptive families or carers. For older children, social workers undertake life story work directly with them, tailored to their age and understanding. Members were advised that some children have both life story books and memory boxes, which help record important events, experiences and relationships throughout their lives. Life story work is updated to reflect significant decisions and developments in a child's journey, enabling them to understand what has happened and why decisions have been made. It was further explained that all children receive a letter explaining key decisions made about their care. For older children, more detailed information is provided to help them understand their experiences, support their identity, and make sense of their time in care.

RESOLVED that Members of the Corporate Parenting Panel accept the challenges given by the Young Adult Council and ask officers to progress these and to update the Challenge Cards in line with this.

Verbal Update by Cabinet Member

1. Mr Webb, the Cabinet Member for Integrated Services advised that, since being appointed on 30 March 2026, he had commenced his induction into the

role, including meetings with officers and visits to a range of services across the county.

2. Visits had included Oak Manor Reception Centre, Acacia Court, Olea Grove, and attendance at the County Youth Justice Board Away Day. The Cabinet Member had also recently visited Windchimes, Fairlawn and Lodge Short Breaks Units, where he had met staff and observed the high standard of care being provided to children and families. He highlighted the dedication and compassion demonstrated by staff across the services.
3. On 26 June 2026, the Cabinet Member visited HMP Standford Hill to attend the Gypsy, Romany and Traveller Reverse Peer Mentoring Day. The visit had provided an opportunity to hear directly from participants and gain a greater understanding of the challenges and barriers experienced by Gypsy, Romany and Traveller communities.
4. The Cabinet Member reported that he had visited a number of Family Hubs, including those in North Ashford and Maidstone, and had attended the Temple Hill Family Hub Open Day. He had also visited the Athena Project home in Ashford, which was undergoing renovation, and a completed home in Sittingbourne, noting that the latter would provide high-quality accommodation and support for children.
5. The Cabinet Member informed the Committee that the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Act 2026 had received Royal Assent on 29 April 2026. He advised that the Act introduced significant reforms to strengthen child protection and safeguarding arrangements, including requirements for Family Group Decision Making, enhanced information-sharing duties, a strengthened role for education in safeguarding, and the establishment of multi-agency child protection teams.
6. The Panel was further advised that the Act included measures to support children in care and improve the children's social care system, including a statutory framework for the authorisation of deprivation of liberty arrangements, additional powers for Ofsted to address breaches of the Care Standards Act 2000, measures relating to unregistered children's homes, and restrictions on the use of agency social workers.
7. The Cabinet Member explained that the Act also included provisions intended to improve the children's care market, including the establishment of Regional Care Co-operatives to support the planning and commissioning of children's placements, and powers to cap the profits of certain independent providers where necessary. It was explained that the reforms were intended to improve outcomes for children and young people and strengthen support and protection for vulnerable children.

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

- a. Mr Webb clarified that his update on Gypsy, Romany and Traveller Reverse Peer Mentoring Day was given as a wider update on his portfolio rather than specifically on Corporate Parenting.

RESOLVED that the verbal update was noted.

Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) Service Annual Report

1. Ms Bodiam, Service Manager and Ms Levy, Quality Assurance Manager, introduced the report and provided the Panel with an overview of the work of the IROs, the findings of the Key Performance Indicators and Quality Assurance (QA) recording and reporting.
2. In response to comments and questions it was said:
 - a. It was explained that there were cases where children were unhappy with their care plans. In these cases, IRO's would support children to understand the decision-making process, recognising that it was not always safe for children to be placed where they wished to be. The IRO helped children to process and understand their feelings, advocated on their behalf, and provided appropriate challenge to the Local Authority where required.
 - b. When asked why the target dates for some of the 2024–25 recommendations had passed, Ms Bodiam explained that, in a number of cases, work had commenced and was progressing but had not yet been fully completed. As a result, the team did not consider it appropriate to mark these actions as complete prematurely.
 - c. When asked about parental involvement, Ms Levy explained that the service offered a wide range of opportunities for parents to engage. As part of the IRO review process and subsequent recommendations, discussions took place between the IRO and social workers to determine whether parental involvement was appropriate and in the child's best interests.
 - d. A Member asked what the priorities were to improve children's experiences. Ms Bodiam explained that life story work and planning for transitions into adulthood remained key areas of focus. Work was being undertaken across services to explore how agencies could work collectively to strengthen transition planning and begin this process at an earlier stage. Members recognised the importance of ensuring that appropriate pathways were in place and that there was a clear

understanding of the care-experienced journey, including the role of parents and carers throughout the process. It was further explained that reunification should remain an aspiration where appropriate. Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs) had an important role in supporting understanding of reunification, ensuring that the possibility was regularly revisited, and facilitating conversations between children, families and professionals to explore the most suitable outcomes for the child. Mr Webb added that actively listening to children and young people and getting feedback was a priority.

RESOLVED that the Panel note the IRO Annual Report and its findings.

Kent Fostering Service Annual Report

1. Ms Smith and Mr Vening, Fostering Service Manager, introduced the report and provided the Panel with an overview of the content.
2. In response to comments and questions it was said:
 - a. A Member asked what actions were being taken to prevent foster carers from de-registering. Ms Smith explained that many carers left fostering for positive reasons, including young people remaining with foster families through Staying Put arrangements, children achieving permanence through Special Guardianship Orders or adoption, and carers retiring. She advised that exit interviews were undertaken to understand carers' reasons for leaving and identify opportunities for service improvement. Feedback from these interviews had informed enhancements to Kent County Council's therapeutic support offer for foster carers and children. It was explained that recruitment and retention remained challenging due to factors such as competition from independent fostering agencies and pressures within the local market. Ms Smith emphasised that supporting existing carers was a key priority, as positive word-of-mouth remained one of the most effective recruitment tools. Mr Webb added that changes in family circumstances, including the impact of the cost-of-living crisis and young people remaining at home for longer, had reduced the availability of fostering placements. He explained that the service was therefore also developing its Kinship Service to help address these challenges.
 - b. When asked how many children were in kinship care and foster care, Ms Smith explained that there were 629 children in mainstream foster care and 99 in kinship care.

RESOLVED that the Panel noted the information contained within the Kent Fostering Annual Report and Kinship Service Annual Report and Business Plan 2026/2027.

Children in Care with Education Health and Care Plans (EHCPs)

1. Mr Doran, Headteacher, Virtual School Kent (VSK), introduced the report and gave an overview of the content.
2. In response to comments and questions it was said:
 - a. A Member asked how the service was assuring children with pupil premium were being prioritised. Mr Doran explained that the funding was robustly monitored by Virtual School Kent (VSK), with care taken to avoid duplication where children had Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs) and received high-needs funding. Children in Care received three Personal Education Plan (PEP) reviews each year, with 99.3% completed as required. These reviews considered the child's needs, the support already in place, and whether additional funding was required. Where provision should have been delivered through existing funding streams, this was challenged with the education provider. Members were advised that enrichment activities were also provided during school holidays. It was explained that 57 young people were currently on the attendance tracker; however, those not attending school full-time were still receiving education through alternative provision or tuition and were encouraged to participate in enrichment activities. Work was also underway to support young people on reduced timetables into more flexible and sustainable education programmes.

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