

KENT COUNTY COUNCIL

CORPORATE PARENTING PANEL

MINUTES of a meeting of the Corporate Parenting Panel held in Council Chamber, Sessions House, County Hall, Maidstone on Monday, 5 December 2011.

PRESENT: Mrs A D Allen (Chairman), Mr R E Brookbank, Mrs T Carpenter, Mrs P T Cole, Mr G Cooke, Mr A Duncan, Mrs E Green, Mr S Griffiths, Mr P W A Lake, Mr K H Pugh, Mr G Razey, Mr L B Ridings, MBE, Mr M J Vye, Mrs C J Waters and Mrs J Whittle

ALSO PRESENT: Mr A D Crowther, Mrs T Dean, Ms A Hohler, Mr J A Kite, Mr M J Northey, Mr C P Smith, Mr R Tolputt and Mr M A Wickham

IN ATTENDANCE: Mr A Ireland (Corporate Director, Families and Social Care), Mrs J Imray (Interim Director, Specialist Children's Services), Mrs L Totman (Head of Corporate Parenting), Ms S Skinner (Interim Head of Adoption Services), Mr P Brightwell (Policy & Standards Manager) and Miss T A Grayell (Democratic Services Officer)

UNRESTRICTED ITEMS

32. Minutes of the meeting held on 7 October 2011 (Item A2)

RESOLVED that the Minutes of the meeting held on 7 October are correctly recorded and they be signed by the Chairman.

Matters arising

Minute 29, paragraph 2 e): Panel Members had been sent a copy of the age breakdown of LAC with the papers for today's meeting.

Minute 29, paragraphs 2 g) and h): information requested in these paragraphs will be reported to the Panel's February meeting.

33. Cabinet Member's oral updates (Item A3)

1. Mrs Whittle gave an oral update on the following issues:-

LAC placed by other local authorities – progress is still ongoing, with the Children's Minister Tim Laughton giving support by admonishing local authorities who place children further than 20 miles from home, particularly in Thanet.

Thanet Task Force – recent meetings have discussed the issue of recruiting more local Foster Carers.

Assisted Boarding Scheme – a recent meeting has taken place with the Head Teachers of Sutton Valence and the Duke of York Military Schools.

2. Mrs Whittle and Mr Brightwell responded to comments and questions from Members, and the following points were highlighted:-

- a) PCTs have pledged to recoup the health costs incurred by host authorities, particularly in relation to mental health issues. *A report on this issue will be made to a future meeting of the Children's Services Improvement Panel;*
- b) Kent could try replicating the successful 'Who Cares Trust' campaign and work done a year ago by the Association of Metropolitan Boroughs on placement; and
- c) the Pan London group has established a strategy and agreed three key actions:- to make reciprocal use of neighbouring Boroughs' residential provision, to improve and make optimum use of available data, and to agree joint targets. The onus is on London Boroughs to ensure that they have sufficient facilities for their own LAC and that the facilities available are fit for purpose.

3. RESOLVED that the information given in the update and in response to Members' comments and questions be noted, with thanks.

34. Adoption Services *(Item B1)*

All County Council Members had been invited to attend for this item, and Mr A D Crowther, Mrs T Dean, Ms A Hohler, Mr J A Kite, Mr M J Northey, Mr C P Smith, Mr R Tolputt and Mr M A Wickham were present.

Mr M Narey, Ministerial Advisor on Adoption, was in attendance for this item at the request of the Panel.

1. Mrs Whittle introduced Mr Narey and explained that she had commissioned him to undertake an independent review of Kent's adoption services in response to a rise in the national profile of adoption and critical media coverage of the low number of looked after children being adopted, across the UK and in Kent. The Secretary of State's key target for Kent is to raise its adoption rate to 11% this year and 13% next year.

2. Mr Narey said he had been pleased to be asked to undertake a review for the County Council. He set out some background to his review and some of its key findings, including:-

- the national reduction in the annual number of adoptions since the 1970s, from 22,000 in 1974 to 10,000 at the end of the 1980s. The reasons for this reduction include changing attitudes of social workers and courts towards parental rights and the primacy of the child's interests and an enduring culture among local authorities that they should avoid taking a child into care at all costs;
- more recent changes include research which shows local authority care to be beneficial for many children, and the heightened importance of adoption nationally since it was championed by the Prime Minister;

- the number of successful adoptions in Kent has fallen in the last two years from 78 to 57, a decrease of 27%, while expenditure on adoption has risen by 32%;
- a major issue is the mismatch between the number of children cleared for adoption (90 in July 2011) and the number of adoptive families ready to take them (28 in July 2011). The recruitment of more Adopters is crucial;
- Kent should be willing to make more use of Voluntary Adoption Agencies to address the shortfall in its own Adopters. The cost to the KCC is the same; and
- there are very few services in which one can radically improve services to needy sectors of society and save money – adoption is one of them.

3. Mrs Whittle, Mr Narey and the officer team responded to comments and questions from Members on the adoption review and its findings, and the following points were highlighted:-

- a) Members welcomed the report and thanked Mr Narey for his work. The clarity and content of the review are very useful in providing an insight into adoption issues and increasing Members' understanding;
- b) Members also welcomed the report of verbal feedback from the Ofsted inspectors, and look forward to receiving the written report;
- c) a view was expressed that it was a pity that Kent's adoption services had been allowed to reach crisis point before improvement had been sought. The quality of services had become poor due in part to 'drift' and in part to a culture which has not favoured adoption;
- d) the status of 'Permanently Looked After Child' (PLAC) offers an alternative to adoption, which may be preferable for some families. When a child is adopted, and hence becomes part of a family, social work support ends. Maintaining a LAC status means that social worker support to the child and their foster family continues;
- e) the Concurrency model had been popular with Courts (as it reduced adoption waiting times), adoption and social work staff and elected Members, and many would welcome its reinstatement. Concurrency does not necessarily lend itself to permanent placements, and Foster Carers entering such an arrangement have to be prepared for the likelihood of a child returning to its birth parents;
- f) the successful 'Staying Together' initiative is used for certain groups of children, with the aim of achieving permanence. This is currently being discussed by the Children's Services management team with a view to making it part of the mainstream services;
- g) when seeking savings in the harsh economic climate, the needs of children are paramount and the need to create permanence and stability for them must not be overlooked;

- h) Members spoke about their largely positive and rewarding experiences of serving on Adoption Panels. Although the commitment needed, in terms of both time and emotional input, is substantial, and should not be taken lightly, most felt it important that elected Members have the opportunity to serve on these. Paperwork submitted to Panels could be streamlined and simplified, which would make the workload less onerous. Mr Narey advised that a new assessment tool is shortly to be introduced which will make paperwork more manageable;
- i) a view was expressed that, although Kent's adoption services had been criticised, it is not the worst authority in the UK. Kent has a good record of being responsive and proactive in addressing its shortcomings, once highlighted;
- j) views were expressed that prospective Adopters are sometimes dismissed too quickly, and others do not have a positive or encouraging experience of the recruitment process. To attract and secure more Adopters, this experience will need to improve. Members could play a greater role in recruitment, and the model used by Harrogate City Council could be investigated as a possible way forward;
- k) Kent needs to make a big improvement quickly, and not lose the impact of this review;
- l) a campaign involving publishing the profiles of children waiting for adoptive parents could re-energise the adoption service and attract potential Adopters. These profiles could be included on the KCC website;
- m) some early improvements have been identified:
- 43 Adoption Orders were made between April and November 2011, with a further 47 predicted to be made before the end of March 2012. This is just short of the target 11% increase set by the Secretary of State.
 - 37 Adopters were approved between April and October 2011, with a further 48 predicted to be approved before the end of March 2012.
 - the rate of placement breakdown in Kent is very low.
- n) Mr Narey stated that the social work staff he met during his review had impressed him, with Kent's services being 'overwhelmingly very impressive', although some better joined-up working is required;
- o) Members asked if an Adopter could be invited to serve on the Panel, so the Panel has the opportunity of benefitting from the input which the two Foster Carer Panel members have been able to offer; and
- p) Mr Narey was asked how he thought the poor economic climate might impact on family cohesion and the number of children coming into care,

and he expressed the view that the number of LAC might rise. It is important to recognise that, for some children, coming into care is the best option and it is in their interest to move them onwards to adoption as soon as possible. Kent needs to deliver an increase in its adoption rate and then maintain that increased rate.

4. Mr Ireland thanked Mr Narey and Members for the very useful and instructional debate and the frankness of the views expressed. He summed up the key issues arising as follows:-

- a) the issues facing Kent's adoption service affect its whole operating system and culture;
- b) papers submitted to Adoption Panels, and cases submitted to courts, need to be sharper and more focussed;
- c) the clarity around the two key indicators which illustrate progress – the number of Adoption Orders granted and the number of Adopters approved - is very useful, and the figures quoted for recent months are good;
- d) Members' dynamic and robust interest in the adoption service, and their willingness to be involved, is encouraging; and
- e) legislation, social work guidance and social culture have all changed since the 1970s, but it is important to start addressing change by looking at the system as it is and the experiences of current service users. The service's current and future customers are more important than the past.

5. RESOLVED that:-

- a) the oral feedback from the Ofsted Inspectors be welcomed, and the final written report be awaited with interest;
- b) Mr Narey be thanked sincerely for his review and its findings be welcomed; and
- c) the draft action plan be welcomed, a final version be requested and regular updates on progress be submitted to every meeting of this Panel.