

KENT COUNTY COUNCIL

CORPORATE PARENTING PANEL

MINUTES of a meeting of the Corporate Parenting Panel held in Darent Room, Sessions House, County Hall, Maidstone on Thursday, 23 February 2012.

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

IN ATTENDANCE: 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 (Performance and Quality Assurance Manager, LAC), Mr T Doran (Head Teacher of Looked After Children - VSK), Mr A Speller (CEO, The Young Lives Foundation) and Miss T A Grayell (Democratic Services Officer)

UNRESTRICTED ITEMS

35. Minutes of the meeting held on 5 December 2011 (Item A2)

RESOLVED that the Minutes of the meeting held on 5 December 2011 are correctly recorded and they be signed by the Chairman.

36. Chairman's Announcements

The Chairman welcomed to the meeting Ms Yashi Shah from the Coram charity, which is working with the County Council on developing its Adoption service. Ms Shah was attending the meeting as an observer.

Before the start of business, the Chairman secured the Panel's agreement to consider items B1, B2, B3, B5 and B6 as urgent business, as the papers had not been placed on public deposit with the required five clear days' notice.

37. Cabinet Member's Oral Update (Item A3)

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

The cost of supporting other local authorities' LAC placed in Kent – it is now high time to act on this, and the Children's Minister is taking action to minimize distant placements. There is a moral imperative that councils place children as near as possible to their home to minimize negative impact on them. The Margate Taskforce met again recently to address the issue of out-of-area LACs being placed in Thanet. London Boroughs trying to recruit Foster Carers in Kent is still a problem and there is evidence that some are recruiting Kent residents directly, as well as going through independent fostering agencies to foster their children.

The report of the recent Ofsted inspection of Kent's Adoption service, published on 21 February – Despite an overall rating of 'inadequate', Ofsted's report is complimentary about the support Kent gives to its adopters, its low disruption and breakdown rates (which are better than the national average) and the passion and commitment of its staff. The Coram charity, which has an outstanding track record (eg in partnership with Harrow Council, where all children awaiting adoption are now placed within 6 months), is now working with the County Council to develop its adoption service. Mrs Whittle highlighted the value of having commissioned the Narey report to highlight the issues early so they could start to be addressed. The recent increase in adopter recruitment will soon begin to show a significant impact.

2. Mrs Whittle responded to comments and questions from Members, as follows:-
 - a) she believes that more adopters are always available – the supply has not been exhausted – but some prospective adopters were possibly put off by questions asked by adoption panels, by the slowness of the process or by media coverage.
 - b) there are different methods of decreasing LAC numbers – use of Special Guardianship Orders as an alternative mechanism, resurrection of the Concurrency Service and recruitment of more adopters to increase the number of children matched with adopters.
3. RESOLVED that the information given in the update and in response to Members' comments and questions be noted, with thanks.

38. Other Local Authority Looked After Children *(Item B1)*

1. Mr Brightwell introduced the report and highlighted two difficulties related to the issue:-
 - a) it is difficult to identify accurate figures for the number of OLA LAC placed in Kent at any one time. The figure Kent has on record is 1,340, but OLAs have challenged this. Discrepancies can arise if OLAs fail to inform Kent when a LAC arrives or leaves the county, but an accurate, reliable record of the LAC population is obviously vital so Members can make informed decisions about service needs; and
 - b) similarly, it is difficult to identify accurate costs incurred by those who deliver services to these LAC, as some agencies' costs are clearer and easier than others to identify. For example, schools have not identified any significant costs attached to OLA LAC.
2. Mr Brightwell, Mrs Imray, Mr Doran, Mrs Totman and Mrs Whittle responded to comments and questions from Members. The following points were highlighted:-
 - a) Members expressed concern about the availability of reliable, accurate data, the lack of which might lead to decisions on service provision being based on misleading information. Amongst the various information sources about a child, eg from school and social work

records, it should be possible to know more about them, and it should be possible to trace every child;

- b) The responsibility for notifying a host authority lies with the placing authority, and Kent cannot always rely on having that notice. Kent should be proactive in trying to increase its knowledge of children placed in Kent. Statutory reviews of a LAC's care are also not overseen by Kent but by the placing authority, so there needs to be a robust checking and information matching mechanism;
- c) the various agencies involved with a child in Kent, eg the Health service, know their local LAC population, but as the statutory responsibility to notify KCC does not lie with them, they do not do it. Improving links will take dedicated officer resources;
- d) Members expressed disappointment that police and the Youth Offending Service know more about a LAC than the school service. Kent should adopt a preventative rather than a reactive approach;
- e) It is important to understand the issues around missing children and look at what can be done to address and minimise incidents. The definition of 'missing' is complex. A child who is not where they should be but whose whereabouts are known could still count as 'missing'. Some children, eg those who are seen as particularly vulnerable, cause concern if they are not where they should be for only a short period of time, while others who have a habit of staying out past a curfew, or who are less reliable about keeping track of time will cause their Foster Carers less anxiety, and will be given more leeway. Foster Carers have to report any absence which is out of character for their Foster Child. One absence which simply turns out to be lateness would be recorded as a missing incident;
- f) more information and explanation is needed to set out the context of 'missing children' incidents and explain how statistics are produced, to help Members and the public understand the issue;
- g) KCC regularly monitors the number of alerts of missing children, and the key aim is to locate them and find out what caused the incident so that issues can be addressed and avoided in future – eg it would be useful to identify any correlation between a LAC's age group or education status and the number of missing incidents reported, also the Asylum Seeker status of missing children. KSCB has a subgroup to tackle missing UASC, and meetings are going on with MPs to address the issue;
- h) LAC placed a long way from their home cause a particular risk, and many incidents of missing children are LAC who have left Kent Foster homes to make their way back to their London homes. Reducing long-distance placements will reduce this problem. Also, some LAC are placed without first having education placements, and this may add to the likelihood of them going missing;

- i) surprise was expressed at Mr Brightwell's statement that schools have not reported much impact of OLA LAC. More work is needed to identify true picture. Mr Brightwell and Mr Razey undertook to work together to identify a fuller picture of costs for Kent schools and colleges. Data available varies greatly between districts. Recent DoE data showed that 48% of LAC in Kent at Years 10 and 11 are from OLA. The Waltham Forest judgement of 2008 would have helped KCC to reclaim (some of?) the costs of education OLA LAC, had it not been overturned by the government. Also, it is known that some 50% of LAC will need CAMHS services at some time during their stay in care, and this adds another pressure for Kent's services.
- j) Members expressed concern that the limited number of Foster Carers available in Kent – 1,340 – should be looking after Kent's own children rather than those placed by OLA;
- k) Kent has already reduced the distance at which it will place its own children within the county, and the government should now enforce the 20 mile limit. London Boroughs need to work more closely together to accommodate London LAC within London, by using neighbouring boroughs' facilities;
- l) the information given in report and in response to questions is very helpful in filling in background and helping Members to understand the issue. Having a Select Committee to look at it in more detail would give a fuller picture of impact on Kent; and
- m) Mrs Whittle expressed a view that, although a Select Committee would give a fuller picture and might lead to longer term solutions, the immediate issues needed a quicker response. Regular FOI requests to London Boroughs would allow Kent to monitor problem, but is important that Kent is not seen to demonize any child placed in Kent if this placement is right for them.

3. RESOLVED that:-

- a) the information set out in the report and given in response to comments and questions be noted;
- b) the Corporate Parenting Panel be given more information on the costs of supporting LAC placed by OLAs, and a more in-depth report of how data is used;
- c) the work to be undertaken by Mr Brightwell and Mr Razey, to identify the costs to Kent's schools and colleges of educating LAC placed by OLAs, be welcomed; and
- d) the Cabinet Member, Mrs Whittle, be asked to take forward and address the issues raised by members during discussion and outlined in paragraph 2 above.

39. Views from Looked After Young People

(Item B2)

1. Mr Speller introduced the report and explained that information had been gathered using different methods and that all the young people had chosen to share their views. He responded to comments and questions from Members and the following points were highlighted:-

- a) the information offered is valuable but Members would need to be able to see how broad the sample had been and the extent to which the findings would be supported by a broader survey of young people; and
- b) In response to a question, Mr Speller undertook to look further at the data from the online survey to identify any correlation between the number of placements and the young people's time in care.

2. Members were invited to the next regular meeting of the Children In Care Council, which would take place on Saturday 25 February at County Hal.

3. Mrs Imray assured members that the KCC's placement strategy had been revised to prioritise the closeness of placements rather than placement with KCC in house Foster Carers (as to place them with in house carers might mean looking further afield for an avail FC). The development of dedicated LAC social workers will also address the issues identified by young people about relationships with social workers. It is expected that these changes in policy will start to show up in future feedback. Mr Speller updated Members on the progress towards resolution of the four example case studies which had been included in the report

4. RESOLVED that:-

- a) the information given in the interim report and in response to comments and questions be welcomed, and a further report with refined figures is anticipated; and
- b) the revised placement strategy be welcomed.

40. The Looked After Children Strategy - Operational Action Plans

(Item B3)

A copy of the LAC Strategy was tabled.

1. Mr Brightwell introduced the report and the Strategy and explained that all agencies involved had been required to formulate a detailed operational action plan to implement the Strategy. This work is currently ongoing, and draft action plans will be considered by the Kent Corporate Parenting Group at its March meeting. Mr Brightwell, Mrs Imray, Mr Doran, Mrs Totman and Mrs Whittle responded to comments and questions from Members, and the following points were highlighted:-

- a) all KCC Members had previously undertaken training appropriate to their Level 1 responsibility as Corporate Parents, but CPP Members had greater responsibility (Level 2) and would need further training to

understand and perform this role properly. CPP could also look at how it could become more involved in the implementation of the Strategy. An informal half-day 'brainstorming' session for CPP Members was suggested, at which these issues could be discussed;

- b) Mrs Imray added that, to help Members to fully understand and make the most of their Level 2 responsibility, training should be delivered by an impartial professional person who could help Members identify the difficult questions they should ask to scrutinise and test the KCC services to LAC. To have LAC involved in Members' training would also be useful. Members welcomed these suggestions;
- c) to help Members to understand the role they could play locally in supporting local LACs and their Foster families, Members would need to know to what extent they could identify and engage with local families and what information they were entitled to have. Mrs Imray explained that the more interest Members take in local families the more supported they will feel. In smaller authorities, Members might regularly meet with Foster families, but this is simply not possible in a county the size of Kent;
- d) Members of the Panel with fostering experience explained that Foster Carers have good information networks and are very proactive in find out about local events and services they could access. VSK and Foster Carer liaison officers also help with information sharing; and
- e) It was suggested that KCC members attend meetings their local Foster Carer Advisory Boards and other Groups across the county, and Mrs Totman undertook to write to all KCC Members with details of meetings.

2. RESOLVED that:-

- a) The LAC strategy be noted and welcomed; and
- b) a half-day session be arranged at which Members can discuss what input they wish to have in the implementation of the Strategy, what training they need and would like to cover their Level 2 Corporate Parenting responsibility, and how this could be delivered, taking on board the suggestions offered above.

41. Young Care Leavers in Post-16 Education (Item B4)

1. Mr Razey presented a series of slides which set out the work of the Young Care Leavers in Post-16 Education (YCLPE) group in addressing issues facing education for 16+ care leavers, including NEETs. The Group, of which he is the Chair, has worked since 2008 with a broad Membership and good involvement of education professionals across the county. Its aims are to identify and improve, and train staff to respond to, issues relating to 16+ care leavers. He tabled a copy of a new document from the Who Cares Trust, *'Finding Your Way'*. Mr Razey said YCLPE would welcome any support CPP could give to its work. Additional points highlighted during the presentation included:-

- a) although the issue of 16+ education and NEETs is a national one, Kent has a particular challenge to address as its NEET LAC population is two times the national average;
- b) YCLPE works with 19 other local authorities to address the issues facing their LAC placed in Kent, so links with an issue which is receiving much attention at the moment, as highlighted in Item B1 of this agenda; and
- c) good communications and relationships with partners such as VSK, HE/FE Colleges, Connexions, etc, are vitally important.

2. Mr Razey, Mr Doran and Mrs Imray responded to comments and questions from Members and the following points were highlighted:-

- a) Mr Doran pointed out that, although much of VSK's work so far had been focussed on under 16s, as NI targets which it needs to meet are concentrated there, extending that work to the over 16s was part of VSK's long-term plans, starting in September 2012;
- b) Members expressed concern that Connexions funding, once it is paid direct to (and hence controlled by) schools, might not be spent effectively, and asked how the KCC or the CPP could influence its allocation. Mrs Imray assured Members that LAC teams offer support up to age 18 and do not enforce any point of transition, structuring its service delivery to suit the needs of individual young people;
- c) the '*Finding Your Way*' document included three options for 16+, but it could usefully include something which the Student Journey Select Committee had come across in its evidence gathering; the '4th option' – start your own business; and
- d) The Chairman suggested, and it was generally agreed, that Mr Razey be asked to make his presentation to a meeting of the Cabinet.

3. RESOLVED that:-

- a) the information set out in the presentation and given in response to comments and questions be noted and welcomed; and
- b) the presentation be made to a meeting of the Cabinet.

42. Update on the work of Kent's Adoption and Permanency Panels in the context of New Regulations and New National Standards for Adoption
(Item B5)

1. Ms Skinner introduced the report and explained that she is now seconded to the Coram charity. Coram are working with the KCC Adoption service to find the most effective way for adoption panels to work, increase the number of cases which come to them and shorten the time these cases take to process. Ms Skinner responded to comments and questions from Members, and the following points were highlighted:-

- a) the statistical picture of the numbers of children and prospective adopters going through the assessment and matching process is complex and changes daily, but figures for the end of January 2012 are as follows:-
 - 65 ongoing assessments of households
 - a total of 81 households approved as prospective adopters
 - 93 children (these could include groups of siblings) ready for adoption and awaiting placement;
 - b) of the 58 households approved and ready to adopt, only two had waited more than two years to have a child placed with them, and the reasons for this delay will be investigated;
 - c) there are three cohorts of children for whom statistics are collected:-
 - those placed with prospective adopters, awaiting an adoption hearing
 - those ready to be placed (93, listed above)
 - those coming through the process for future assessment and placement; and
 - d) Members asked for more information on the number of children awaiting hearings, and some details of this cohort - age profiling, sibling groups, etc
2. RESOLVED that the information set out in the report and given in response to comments and questions be noted, with thanks, and an update report be submitted to every meeting of the Panel.

43. The Adoption Service (Item B6)

1. Mrs Totman introduced the report and explained that, since last reporting to the Panel, the adoption service had received the written report of its recent Ofsted inspection, with the grading of 'inadequate, under management'. This grading had been revised since the initial oral feedback. Since the inspection and the initial oral feedback, Kent had continued with its programme of improvement, and the draft action plan which had arisen from Martin Narey's report had now been finalised. Mrs Totman assured Members that the Ofsted report was taken very seriously. Members commented that the action plan made no mention of the role of Members or Cabinet Members in the programme of improvement.

2. Mrs Whittle added that the key to improving the service is to build a sufficient pool of adopters, and much work had gone into increasing the pool and addressing the speed of placement. The key statistics on which Members needed to be frequently updated is:-

- how many children are awaiting adoption?
- how many adopters are available and ready to take them?
- how long does it take to match the two?

She emphasised that Kent had proved itself to be proactive and forward looking in commissioning Martin Narey's report to give a frank and full picture of the service so that improvements could start being made as soon as possible. Much work had

already gone on and was still going on, the effects of which will soon be seen in the improvements being made.

3. RESOLVED that:-

- a) Ofsted's written feedback be welcomed and the action plan be taken forward; and
- b) Future adoption update reports include the three key statistics set out in paragraph 2 above the information listed in paragraph 1 d) of item B5, above.