

## KENT COUNTY COUNCIL

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### CORPORATE PARENTING PANEL

MINUTES of a meeting of the Corporate Parenting Panel held in Darent Room, Sessions House, County Hall, Maidstone on Friday, 26 October 2012.

PRESENT: Mrs A D Allen (Chairman), Mr M J Vye (Vice-Chairman), Mr R E Brookbank, Mrs T Carpenter, Mrs P T Cole, Mr G Cooke, Mrs E Green, Mr P W A Lake, Mr L B Ridings, MBE and Mrs J Whittle

IN ATTENDANCE: Ms M MacNeil (Director, Specialist Children's Services), Mr N Baker (Head of Integrated Youth Services), Mr T Doran (Head Teacher of Looked After Children - VSK) and Miss T A Grayell (Democratic Services Officer)

### UNRESTRICTED ITEMS

#### 12. Minutes of the meeting held on 20 September 2012

*(Item A2)*

RESOLVED that the Minutes of the meeting held on 20 September 2012 are correctly recorded and they be signed by the Chairman. There were no matters arising.

#### 13. Cabinet Member's Oral Update

*(Item A4)*

1. Mrs Whittle gave an oral update on the following:-
  - **Peer Review:** there had been a good debate on this at full Council on 25 October. Much work has been done by Virtual School Kent, and a good vision is coming together to set out the way forward, for which a suggested title is 'Every Day Matters'.
  - **A new Children's Minister, Edward Timpson**, was appointed on 4 September. He has similar personal experience of adoption and fostering to the previous Minister, Tim Laughton, so his appointment instils confidence.
  - **The National Adults' and Children's Conference** is taking place in Eastbourne this week, 22 – 26 October.
  - **Ofsted's written report of its review of Virtual Schools** is now available and was also considered by full Council on 25 October. Virtual School Kent was much praised for its e.PEP (computer-based Personal Education Plan) initiative, in which young people have the opportunity to set their own targets and challenge themselves. There have been mixed reactions to the Ofsted report, for example, the review team did not seem to recognise the scale of Kent's challenge, and still suggests that officers give Members only good news. Mrs Whittle and Mr Ireland plan to write and challenge some of the findings, but in discussion the point was made that the report should be viewed as a whole and its conclusions perhaps seen as an indication of a need to better evidence what Kent does.

2. Mrs Whittle and Ms MacNeil responded to questions and comments from Members and the following points were highlighted:-

- Is the KSCB robust enough now? *Since the peer review, issues at KSCB are being discussed at a higher level than previously, and scrutiny and challenge are more robust. Partners on the Board are working well together.*
- Who chose the venues to be visited by the review team? *Kent sent the review team to see a range of facilities, not just the best, so reviewers would see and report back on a realistic picture. This will avoid a repeat of the shock of getting the previous bad Ofsted report.*
- There was a discussion of the possible role for Locality Boards in challenging on local issues. It would be wise to consider to how many different Boards and groups the same information is reported, as there is potential for much duplication. If Members want information to be reported to Locality Boards this could be done, but not all areas yet have one. Locality Boards could help spread and raise all Members' awareness of their role as Corporate Parents. There would need to be a protocol for contact between local Members and local Managers. Developing roles and a protocol would also help shape the information to be given to newly-elected Members on their Corporate Parenting role. This is a challenging task but one which must be tackled.

3. The oral updates were noted, with thanks.

**14. Update regarding the work of the Head Teacher of Virtual School Kent (VSK)**  
*(Item B1)*

1. Mr Doran introduced the report and updated Members on key progress since his oral report to the Panel's September 2012 meeting:-

- the academic results reported in September have subsequently been validated
- the written thematic inspection report is now available and will be sent to all Panel Members
- the 'Virtual Voice' website is at the testing stage and it is hoped that this will be launched in November 2012
- excellent feedback about the Olympic-themed rewards ceremony in September has been received from young people and carers who took part
- a very good response to the Assisted Boarding Scheme has been received from Head Teachers and two placements have so far been made, with two more young people currently being assessed for possible placement.

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

- a) the Assisted Boarding Scheme is still in its early stages and progress has been necessarily cautious as it is important to be absolutely sure that placements are suitable for the young people concerned and will meet their pastoral care needs. It is vital that the matching process is thorough and that young people are not being overstretched;
- b) the success of the Assisted Boarding Scheme will be an increased stability for some young people in care, which could be measured by a decrease in the number who move repeatedly from one foster

placement to another. The Scheme needs to be seen as a vital part of the Family Group Conferencing process;

- c) the target age group of the Scheme is 10 to 12, which equates to school years 6 to 8. There is a smaller cohort of looked after children in these years, so the target group is limited. Evidence from similar schemes shows that there is much benefit to be gained, but to optimise the use of it, the decision making processes need to be developed;
- d) the aim of the scheme is to give stability and pastoral care to those young people whose family lives are chaotic and who are of average or above average academic ability. It is not a 'special education' scheme for those with stated special education needs;
- e) although the results show good performance, the academic attainment of looked after children is, sadly, unlikely to match the performance of those not in care, as looked after children have the burden of having to contend with more emotional and behavioural problems than those not growing up in care; and
- f) much support in the Virtual School Kent team is directed towards supporting young people in care to improve their academic performance, but one area of work currently identified as needing more attention is transition. Whereas other young people go through transition at predictable points in their academic careers (for example, when moving on from primary to secondary to upper school), young people in care can experience a broader range of transitions in a less predictable way.

3. RESOLVED that:-

- a) the information set out in the report and given in response to comments and questions be noted, with thanks; and
- b) all Panel Members be sent a copy of the thematic written report of the recent inspection of Virtual School Kent.

## **15. Staying Together Scheme**

*(Item B2)*

*Ms M Lowe, Performance and Quality Assurance Officer, Children in Care, was in attendance for this item.*

1. Ms Lowe introduced the report and highlighted that very few of the carers who initially enquired about the scheme had chosen to proceed with it. This may be because they were disappointed by the financial arrangements available. Plenty of fresh enquiries have been received recently, however, and Independent Reviewing Officers advocate the scheme to carers for whom they feel it would be suitable.

2. A Panel Member with much experience as a Foster Carer told the Panel that she had looked into Staying Together and explained why she had chosen not to take it up. She had consulted a solicitor who advised her that the main financial benefit

would be for the KCC and not the child in care, as the latter would lose the entitlement to reduced university fees, for which they would have qualified as a looked after child. This loss of entitlement would mean, effectively, that the young man concerned would not have been able to afford to take up a University place. Due to this negative financial impact, the speaker was clear that she had made the right decision for him and would not take up Staying Together or Special Guardianship in the future for any other child in her care.

3. Ms Lowe said how saddened she was to hear this account and said the scheme was apparently not being properly described to carers. The protocols have recently been changed to state that young people will be considered on a case-by-case basis for support from secondary school onwards. Ms MacNeil added that the confusion and misunderstanding around the rules of the scheme is regrettable and needs to be clarified. She emphasised that the key aim of the scheme is to provide stability for young people; the financial arrangement is not its main focus. It was suggested and agreed that a report to a future meeting of this Panel set out and clarify the purpose and rules of the Staying Together scheme and Special Guardianship, and Ms MacNeil undertook to clarify the message to social workers to ensure that the right people get the right support at the right time.

4. Ms MacNeil responded to a question and explained that funding of the scheme is provided via the 'Access To Resources' Panel, to ensure parity of access, but Members expressed concern about the limitations and sustainability of this funding.

5. RESOLVED that:-

- a) the information set out in the report and given in response to comments and questions be noted, with thanks; and
- b) a report be prepared for a future meeting of this Panel to set out and clarify the purpose and rules of the Staying Together scheme.

## **16. Specialist Children's Services - Presentation** *(Item B3)*

*Ms Y Shah, Coram/KCC Project Manager, was in attendance for this item.*

1. Ms MacNeil presented a series of slides which updated Members on progress on the restructure of Specialist Children's Services, the Early Intervention and Prevention Strategy and progress on the review of the Adoption service. The adoption figures had been updated since the meeting papers had been prepared and new figures were tabled *and subsequently published on the website in place of the original paper.*

2. Ms MacNeil and Ms Shah responded to comments and questions from Members and the following points were highlighted:-

- a) the recruitment of team managers is a challenge in a number of areas of the county, with both the quantity and quality of applicants being an issue. Although the national shortage of qualified social workers has been well documented, the shortage of good team managers is of

similar concern. Figures for specific areas of the county will be supplied to Members upon request;

- b) the aim is that, to allow them to manage effectively, each team manager will lead no more than five or six social workers, each of whom should have a workload of no more than about fifteen cases at any one time;
- c) Members found the structure charts very helpful and asked that all names and contact details be included on them, once these are known, and circulated to Members;
- d) Ms Shah undertook to advise Members of the number of private inter-country adoptions and step-parent adoptions;
- e) unaccompanied asylum seeking children (UASC) are usually older teens and hence not as suitable as younger children for adoption. However, having 'looked after' status, they would qualify for the same benefits upon leaving care as any other care leaver;
- f) a recent review of the role of Adoption Panels has made changes to their function to lessen bureaucracy and help move young people in care towards permanent placements as quickly as possible;
- g) in the common assessment framework, all agencies are expected to be able to identify, and hence share the responsibility to highlight, issues that they see in their work with a family. As families select whom they feel able to talk to about a problem, any agency working with them could be first to be told and then need to share information with professional partners; and
- h) there is a difference in process for Foster Carers who later choose to adopt a child and those who go through the Concurrency procedure, and every family's circumstances are different. Both processes have challenges. The role of those moving from fostering to adoption will change, and good matching is vital to minimise disruption. A few Foster Carers can feel pressured to keep a child longer than they had intended to, and moving towards adoption may require them to re-think their life plan. Those who always intend to adopt, and use the Concurrency process to foster first, face different challenges. A child will be placed with them to foster but there is always the chance that court proceedings will mean the child has to be returned to its birth parents.

RESOLVED that:-

- a) the information set out in the report and given in response to comments and questions be noted, with thanks; and
- b) a report on the review of the Adoption Panels be submitted to the December meeting of this Panel.

Chairman .....

14 December 2012