

KENT COUNTY COUNCIL

CORPORATE PARENTING PANEL

MINUTES of a meeting of the Corporate Parenting Panel held in Waterton Lee, Invicta House, County Hall, Maidstone on Thursday, 11 April 2013.

PRESENT: Mrs A D Allen (Chairman), Mr R E Brookbank, Mrs T Carpenter, Mrs E Green, Mr P W A Lake and Mrs J Whittle

IN ATTENDANCE: Ms S King (Assistant Director East Kent, Children in Care), Mrs S Skinner (Service Business Manager, Virtual School for Kent) and Miss T A Grayell (Democratic Services Officer)

UNRESTRICTED ITEMS

33. Minutes of the meeting held on 28 February 2013

(Item A2)

RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting held on 28 February 2013 are correctly recorded and they be signed by the Chairman. There were no matters arising.

34. Cabinet Member's Oral Update

(Item A4)

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

- **Adoption:** Kent's Adoption service was inspected by Ofsted three weeks ago, and the draft letter setting out the assessment rating will be released after the election.
- **UASC:** There was a £3m gap in funding last year in the cost of supporting young people who have exhausted all rights to remain in the UK (ARE cases), and an ongoing conflict between the view of the Home Office and the content of the Children Act about the role of local authorities in supporting these young people. Kent is seeking a court statement to clarify its responsibility, and Mrs Whittle said she is confident that this statement will support the KCC's view of what its responsibilities should be. It is also seeking to limit the cost to the KCC of accommodating ARE cases to £99 per week.

2. In response to a question, she explained that, while it is true that Kent and a few other local authorities take in a disproportionate number of UASC – Kent currently has 200 under 18s and 700 care leavers – these authorities do receive some grant funding. There is, however, a shortfall between the level of grant and the actual cost of supporting them.

3. Panel members commented that it is a challenge for young people to live on £99 per week and reiterated concerns expressed at previous meetings that UASC awaiting repatriation are vulnerable and the KCC should be able to offer them a safety net.

3. The oral update was noted, with thanks.

35. Recruitment and Retention of Qualified Social Workers in Specialist Children's Services (Item B1)

Ms Karen Ray, Human Resources Business Partner, Families and Social Care, was in attendance for this item.

1. Ms Ray introduced the report and set out key points as follows:-
 - the proportion of experienced and inexperienced social workers is currently 66% and 30%, respectively. This compares well to the proportion in other local authorities.
 - since preparing the report and stating the vacancy rate as 14.8%, it has now risen to 18%.
 - many agency staff have served Kent for a long time and have contributed much expertise to Kent during their employment.
 - East Kent and Tunbridge Wells are currently 'hot spots' for recruitment are.
 - the recent Ofsted inspection had highlighted not only the need to recruit experienced social workers but social work managers. East Kent in particular has a shortage of team managers.

2. Ms Ray and Ms King responded to comments and questions from Panel members and the following points were highlighted:-
 - a) one Panel member who is a Foster Carer explained that she serves on an employment panel for fostering social workers and recognised the issues relating to social. These social workers need experience in children and families work, and some are identified via Compass events. They could gain some of this experience by working in the voluntary sector, but many find this experience difficult to access. Recruitment advertisements specify the need for experience but do not specify any length of experience, and it is important to exercise judgement about the value of experience gained and how much weight this should be given in the selection process;
 - b) there is a two-year intensive recruitment programme in East Kent which is looking at initiative and incentives. Key themes identified by this are housing and travel. Work to profile recruitment issues across Kent is being lead by Mark Gurrey, the Interim Assistant Director for Safeguarding. Outcomes from work going on will take a while to become apparent;
 - c) although new staff can claim relocation expenses of up to £8,000, many rent property for a while when they first move into an area;
 - d) social workers choosing to work in Kent rather than anywhere else are looking for something over and above what they are offered elsewhere;
 - e) Kent's recruitment strategy could look at addressing issues around securing school places for the children of prospective employees. In other work sectors, staff posted abroad have an 'ex-pat' support service

which co-ordinates all issues around their relocation, eg housing and school places, and Kent could look at the possibility of establishing something similar;

- f) inexperienced staff need support while they gain experience. Social workers leaving the KCC are given an exit interview, and information arising from these interviews is analysed, although it is limited to what people choose to share. Issues cited most often are workload and work-life balance;
 - g) Kent compares its social work employment packages to those offered by neighbouring shire authorities, although some details of other local authorities' packages are harder to find out about. London Boroughs present the most challenging competition for recruitment;
 - h) there has been low take-up of a scheme which offers a contribution toward car insurance, although it had been expected that this would attract young people starting out in a career;
 - i) it is important also to retain existing professional staff, and a 'toolkit' is being developed to address this. Some people choose to reduce their working hours or move to an agency instead of leaving the profession altogether. Overall, Kent does well at retaining its staff;
 - j) Panel members reported that issues they had found when shadowing social workers included practical arrangements such as 'hot-desking' and access to car parking which does not involve needing to move a car frequently through the day;
 - k) all agency staff are engaged via Kent Top Temps and many have stayed a long time and contributed much valuable experience, with some moving to substantive posts. Low turn-over of staff generally helps to minimise disruption to children in care. KCC has a good relationship with the agency and is able to select good staff on competitive rates of pay; and
 - l) as with asking departing staff why they are leaving, it could be useful to ask new staff what attracted them to take up a job in Kent.
3. RESOLVED that the information set out in the report and given in response to Panel members' comments and questions be noted, with thanks, and a further update report be made to a future meeting of the Panel.

36. Briefing on the Views of Children in the Care of Kent County Council (Item B2)

1. Mrs Skinner introduced the report and highlighted the following:-
 - preparing the report in response to the Panel's request had presented a good opportunity to look at what sources of information are available.
 - activity events now held by VSK in each school holiday have provided much of the feedback included in the report, which is evaluated and used to shape future events. These events have allowed broader

scope to engage with young people and seek their views. An extensive survey was also undertaken last year, and work is ongoing with Eileen McKibbin, Research and Evaluation Manager.

- much information has become available via use of the e.Pep, which is a good tool for monitoring, valued by schools and VSK. Questionnaires issued from various sources can be combined to avoid duplication, and the questions asked can be geared to collect information which is useful to the broadest audience possible.
- Panel members are being invited to say what information they would like VSK to collect on their behalf, and with what frequency.

2. Panel members made the following comments:-

- a) feedback received can be used to evidence how well the Panel is engaging with young people;
- b) activity days are a good source of feedback from young people and have had a good outcome. However, some dates clash with other events for young people and Foster Carers, so it is not always possible for everyone who wishes to attend to do so. *Mrs Skinner explained that the aim is to arrange events in every school holiday and to have four weeks of activity – in North, South, East and West Kent – in the long summer holidays;*
- c) the feedback on the work of Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs) does not seem to fully encapsulate what they do. Future feedback reports could include examples of IROs' work in the form of anonymised case studies. Panel members gave examples of their good experiences of the IRO service and considered how best to reflect the range and depth of IROs' work;
- d) information gleaned from complaints made by children and young people had highlighted the number of disputed decisions about placements. *Mrs Skinner explained that there is not a procedure around the 'staying put' initiative to address these disputes but one will be established in the near future. KCC also needs to consider how it can best support young people who wish to remain in foster placements;*
- e) Foster Carers do not receive payment for housing young people who have returned home to them during the holidays from higher education, but it should be possible for them to access Supported Accommodation payments. If the purpose and rules of the Supported Accommodation scheme were made clearer, more young people and their Foster Carers could access and benefit from it. *Ms King suggested a workshop for carers and young people and this was welcomed.* There is no option for young people in care to stay anywhere else during holiday periods as University accommodation is not available; and
- f) it is always useful to have feedback and views from as many young people as possible, and Panel members should seek to have as much contact with young people as possible. *Mrs Skinner added that any*

Panel member is welcome to attend any activity day as an observer, and undertook to supply the dates of activity days to the Democratic Services Officer to share with Panel members. Miss Grayell explained that Panel meetings do not usually take place in school holidays so the dates should not clash.

3. RESOLVED that:-

- a) the information set out in the report and comments made by Panel members be noted, with thanks; and
- b) similar reports be made to the Panel every six months, including anonymised case study examples of IROs' work and plenty of good news stories.

37. Update on Adoption Service *(Item B3)*

Ms R Murdock, Interim Manager, Adoption and Special Guardianship Support Team, was in attendance for this item.

1. Ms Murdock introduced the report and responded to comments and questions from Panel members. The following points were highlighted:-

- a) adoption is a life-long commitment, and it is helpful to try to anticipate issues as far as possible. Challenges which arise during adoption placements and possibly cause the placement to break down are largely those which would arise in the course of any child's upbringing; they do not necessarily arise as a result of the child having been adopted;
- b) research has shown that the experiences children have in their very early years, and even before birth (eg of a parent who abuses drugs or alcohol) continue to affect them for a long time. The experience of being separated from a birth parent and going into care can stay with a young person for a very long time and needs to be managed. There are support services geared to helping young people manage this but there is room for improvement;
- c) for some young people it is not appropriate for them to stay in an adoption placement, and if social workers and IROs decide that the placement has broken down irretrievably it is right to end the placement; and
- d) KCC spends more than other local authorities on post-adoption support and will need to consider how sustainable this is. There are some post-adoption support projects in London but more local ones are needed. A Family Futures package could be used to help address either of the above.

2. RESOLVED that the information set out in the report and given in response to Panel members' comments and questions be noted, with thanks, and a further update report be made to the Panel's June meeting.

38. Update on the Assisted Boarding School Scheme
(Item B4)

1. Mrs Whittle commented that the scheme had not been well described in paragraph 2.2 of the report and said it was about children who do not have particular behavioural issues but need support to avoid going into care.

2. Mrs Skinner introduced the report and responded to comments and questions from Panel members. The following points were highlighted:-

- a) some schools have a strong pastoral care culture, which could be of great benefit to young people, but they are not willing to share their facilities with children whom they perceive to be 'unruly' or 'disruptive'. Schools' understanding of the aims of the scheme needs to be improved;
- b) the scheme could help to minimise Adoption breakdowns;
- c) what is most important about the scheme is that the placement is right for the young person concerned. Some young people struggle in a family environment yet much prefer to be in that environment; and
- d) the scheme could be suitable for young people who need support to stay in a family placement, and they could perhaps attend as a day pupil.

3. RESOLVED that the information set out in the report and given in response to Panel members' comments and questions be noted, with thanks, and a further update report be made to a future meeting of the Panel.