

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 Friday, 13 December 2013.

PRESENT: Mrs A D Allen (Chairman), Mr M J Angell (Substitute for Mr G Lymer), Mr R E Brookbank, Mrs P T Cole, Mr B Neaves, Mr R Truelove, Mr M J Vye and Mrs Z Wiltshire

ALSO PRESENT: Ms S Dunstan and Mrs J Whittle

IN ATTENDANCE: Ms M MacNeil (Director, Specialist Children's Services), Mr P Brightwell (Head of Quality Assurance, Children's Safeguarding Team) and Miss T A Grayell (Democratic Services Officer)

UNRESTRICTED ITEMS

65. Minutes of the meeting held on 25 October 2013

(Item A2)

RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting held on 25 October 2013 are correctly recorded and they be signed by the Chairman. There were no matters arising.

66. Chairman's Announcements

(Item A3)

The Chairman reiterated her view that the Panel's membership would benefit from a strengthened presence of foster carers and should also include a young person who can represent at first-hand the views and experiences of young people in care and leaving care. To this end, she proposed, and Mr B Neaves seconded, that Ms Sophia Dunstan and Mrs Carolyn Moody be formally co-opted as Panel members. This met with general support and was

Agreed without a vote

67. Cabinet Member's Oral Update

(Item A4)

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

Adoption summit. This had given a good snapshot of the progress made in improving the adoption service and had been attended by a range of stakeholders, including Coram, past adopters and colleagues working in the mental health field.

Announcement by Edward Timpson, Parliamentary Under Secretary Of State for Children and Families about 'staying put', to enable care leavers to stay with their foster carers, if they wish, up the age of 21. Many local authorities already have informal arrangements but this now puts it on a formal footing and empowers young people. Further information on funding is awaited, and some change in responsibility will inevitably come when a care leaver reaches the age of 18, eg a change in eligibility for benefits and to whom those benefits will be paid.

The lifting of the Improvement Notice on 12 December 2013 is obviously to be welcomed but is not an excuse for complacency as there is still much work to do, eg completing the recruitment of a full complement of qualified, permanent social workers and maintaining the improvements made to the adoption service.

2. Mrs Whittle and Ms MacNeil responded to comments and questions, as follows:-

- a) in response to a question about the possibility of maintaining a pool of experienced (perhaps retired or part-time) social workers who could be called upon to fill vacancies, instead of using agency staff, Ms MacNeil explained that such a scheme would not be workable due to the nature of the social work market. The County Council has a small number of retired social workers to whom it could resort informally if needed, but it is paramount that all concerned should be able to be confident that such an arrangement would work properly, and to run this sort of scheme on a formal basis would not solve the challenge of recruiting well-qualified, permanent social workers;
- b) asked if past social workers could play a useful role as volunteer mentors to new or inexperienced social workers, Ms MacNeil said this sort of arrangement might work for social work support staff but not for social workers. There is currently no problem with support staff recruitment;
- c) there are many good social workers in Kent but there needs to be more. Some other local authorities are experiencing now the 'churn' of social workers that Kent used to have. Kent's management structure and quality of social work practice have both improved, and this improvement is demonstrated by the lifting of the improvement notice;
- d) consistency and continuity of social work are important to young people in care, and when a change of social worker is unavoidable, good transition and handover can help a young person to better manage the change;
- e) one challenge in recruitment is the poor media coverage that the role often attracts, as social workers are usually blamed if something goes wrong. Social work is a very complex area of work and sensationalist headlines will always sell more papers than news of the good-quality casework which goes on every day. A close working relationship between social workers and the judiciary would help, and perhaps a scheme in which judges could shadow social workers would help to increase the judiciary's understanding of social workers' role. A series of job profiles on radio was run one year ago, and this could helpfully be repeated to raise public understanding of social workers' role. Publicising and promoting the extensive good social work practice which exists would also help;
- f) a competition amongst young people in care had asked them to name two or three things which the County Council could do to improve its service to them, and offered £150 in book tokens as a prize. This sort of

engagement could also be used to identify and promote good experiences of being in care. Ms Dunstan added that the first issue of a newsletter prepared by Our Children and Young People's Council (OCYPC) would be published on 16 December and would include such good news stories as well as interviews with elected Members. *A presentation on this work could be made the Panel's next meeting; and*

- g) Mr Vye made a brief oral report of issues which had arisen at a recent conference 'Corporate Parenting and Children in Care Councils; Taking it to the Next Level', several of which echoed the points raised during discussion, above. *He undertook to circulate a written report of these issues to all Panel members.*

3. The oral updates were noted, with thanks.

68. The Dartford 'Crash pad'

(Item B1)

Mr P Segurola, Assistant Director, North Kent, Ms S Whittaker, Children and Young People Service Manager, and Ms M Nichols, Housing Manager, YMCA Thames Gateway, were in attendance for this item.

1. Ms Nichols, Ms Whittaker and Mr Segurola introduced the report and outlined the service provided by the crash pad and the benefits it brought to the area. The YMCA had had a long involvement with the scheme, sharing the common aim of ensuring that 16 and 17 year olds are in safe accommodation and protected from homelessness. She set out the referral process and the scheme's success at encouraging young people to return to their families. Specialist Children's Services and Dartford Borough Council's housing department work together to provide wraparound services. They aim to meet with young people and their parents or carers to provide immediate mediation to help them resolve whatever problem has arisen in the family. From this meeting, an action plan is drawn up and agreed with all parties, with the main aim being to help the young person stay at home. Sometimes there are safeguarding issues, and young people might stay safely at the crash pad while the team works at resolving the issue and either returning a young person safely home, if this is appropriate, or moving them on to suitable long-term accommodation. Kent Integrated Adolescent Support Services (KIASS) are a key partner in this part of the process, with the aim of keeping a young person from needing statutory intervention. Generally, earlier and lower-level interventions are favoured. Use of bed and breakfast accommodation is avoided at all costs. Ms Nichols, Ms Whittaker, Mr Segurola and Ms MacNeil responded to comments and questions from Members and the following points were highlighted:-

- a) the scheme run with the YMCA in Dartford is currently the only crash pad scheme in the county, but the team is keen to spread it further, and its successes send a good message to other districts about what can be achieved with similar partnership working. The 'crash pad' model could work in any area, using YMCA, supported lodgings or one of the 'Foyer', 'Porch Light' or similar schemes which exist around the county. To be successful, however, any scheme must have a host organisation;

- b) providers can be imaginative in applying available funding sources such as the Government's Homeless Prevention Grant. The crash pad scheme is not expensive to run and is very cost-effective; and
- c) KIASS is a useful tool for linking resources and there is a common understanding of need. A good relationship and shared aims between partners are vital to make the crash pad model work.

2. The Chairman said how impressed she was by the successes of the crash pad scheme and had first-hand experience of the way in which it benefitted families in the Dartford area. She urged all elected Members to spread the message and promote the benefits of the model to their local councils.

3. RESOLVED that the work and successes of the crash pad scheme be noted.

69. Action Plan responding to the Ofsted July 2013 Children in Care/Care Leavers inspection

(Item B2)

1. Mr Brightwell introduced the report, which had been prepared in response to a request from the Panel for regular updates, containing specific detail requested. Although action plans for all aspects of the Ofsted inspection have been established and will be regularly updated, such plans can only be an indication of the issues raised by Ofsted; there are other issues in the work of Specialist Children's Services which need attention and improvement, such as supervision, participation, child-focussed practice and good quality care plans. Mr Brightwell responded to comments and questions from Members and the following points were highlighted:-

- a) instead of being content with Ofsted's rating of 'satisfactory', Kent should be looking to run 'good' services, and this aim should be the indicator against which performance is measured;
- b) every case audit by a team manager is now routinely peer reviewed by someone of similar seniority in another authority; and
- c) more attention should be focussed on good case work and positive outcomes, to balance out the poor media attention that children's social work often attracts. *Ways in which this positive promotion can be achieved will be discussed at a future meeting of the Panel.*

2. The Cabinet Member, Mrs Whittle, referred to two performance indicators about which the Panel had previously asked – the length of time a child spends in care and the number of re-referrals - and asked that these be included in future scorecards. Mr Brightwell confirmed that they would be. He added that he would seek to have data in future scorecards presented by age, as the correlation between the age at which a child first comes into care, and the length of time they spend in care, was identified by research undertaken by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation in the 1980s.

3. RESOLVED that:-

- a) the content of the action plan and the progress achieved be noted;

- b) the activities being put in place by each agency which will contribute to addressing the recommendations made by Ofsted, and the sharing of good practice, be supported;
- c) the children in care strategy be updated to reflect Ofsted's findings and recommendations, as well as any Government announcements which are made in the future;
- d) ways in which good practice in case management and positive outcomes can be promoted be discussed at a future meeting of the Panel; and
- e) the length of time a child spends in care and the number of re-referrals be included in the data recorded in future scorecards.

70. Kent's Corporate Parenting Governance and Framework
(Item B3)

1. Mr Brightwell introduced the report and emphasised the complex network of relationships which existed around corporate parenting. New Ofsted inspection guidance had said that roles around corporate parenting responsibilities should be clear. Kent's two corporate parenting groups – one officer group and one Member group - give it an added strength and allow it to focus on issues from more than one point of view, but the existence of two groups and the relationship between them also brings some complications. The key issue is to look at how the two groups relate to and communicate with each other. The Corporate Parenting Panel, as the Member group, should have an oversight of and scrutinise the officer-led Kent Corporate Parenting Group (KCPG).

2. Panel members made the following comments and suggestions of ways in which the two groups could link and work together:-

- a) the presence of the two groups was welcomed as a strength, but they need to have good links between them;
- b) the minutes of the KCPG should come to the Corporate Parenting Panel, to give the latter an overview of the work of the former. Ms MacNeil said that, as the Chairman of the KCPG, she welcomed an exchange of minutes between the Group and the Panel;
- c) the Cabinet Member could attend meetings of the KCPG, perhaps with one other Panel member;
- d) the idea was raised of young people in care, or care leavers, attending the KCPG's meetings. Their presence and input is always welcomed but it is important not to impose upon them any requirement to attend, or expectation that they will take part beyond what they are comfortable with. It was suggested that young people in care or care leavers could perhaps attend the KCPG once a year; and

- e) the Kent Children in Care Councils (OCYPC) could use the 'challenge card' to draw attention to issues of concern, and this could be another way of linking them and their views into this Panel. Members were reassured that issues raised this way would be anonymised so that no individual's affairs could be identified.

3. RESOLVED that:-

- a) the content of the report be noted; and
- b) the ideas put forward to the Panel – that the minutes of the Kent Corporate Parenting Group be reported to the Corporate Parenting Panel, that the Cabinet Member attend meetings of the Kent Corporate Parenting Group, perhaps with one other Panel member, and that the challenge card be used to draw attention to issues of concern to young people in care – be taken forward as ways of establishing closer links between the two corporate parenting bodies and between the Corporate Parenting Panel and the Children in Care Councils.

71. Performance Scorecard for Children in Care

(Item B4)

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

- a) more detail was requested on the future of the young people who are the subject of fixed-term exclusions. *Mr Brightwell undertook to ask the Virtual School Kent team to provide information outside the meeting on how many of these become involved with pupil referral units (PRUs) and what performance they achieve at KS2 and beyond;*
- b) it is hoped that the average caseloads of Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs) can be further reduced, but achieving this will be a challenge as it is difficult simply to appoint more IROs. IROs' main focus is on achieving best practice and reducing the numbers of children in care. It may be possible to use some experienced and retired former IROs to supplement the workforce as this would be preferable to employing agency workers;
- c) an assessment of IROs' daily workloads will identify how much time they spend on administrative tasks and travelling between review meetings, with the aim of minimising these aspects and maximising the time they have available to spend with young people. Reducing the frequency of review meetings from six-monthly to yearly will free up more time for them to spend with children and young people;
- d) in response to a question about the amount of travel IROs are required to undertake, Mr Brightwell explained that they may have to travel away from Kent to attend review meetings for young people who are placed at a distance from their Kent home. Young people are able to choose where they wish their review meetings to take place, so IROs are sometimes required to travel some distance. Mr Brightwell said he had

explored the possibility of establishing a reciprocal arrangement with other local authorities, whereby they carry out reviews for each other's placed children, with the aim of reducing the need for each to travel, but explained that this sort of arrangement is generally not a good idea in terms of best practice;

- e) Members asked that, where a cohort of children does not achieve the prescribed performance level, some mention be included in the scorecard of the level they had achieved so this achievement can be acknowledged. Mrs Whittle pointed out that this would mean treating children in care differently from the way in which other children are treated. The requirement to complete KS4 is universal as this basic standard of literacy and numeracy is required by employers, and children in care will need to be able to compete with all others for employment when they leave school; and
- f) statistics are available by which corporate parenting activity in Kent can be compared to that of other local authorities, but Mr Brightwell offered the view that Kent should compare itself to the best rather than to the average and aspire to match that best standard.

2. RESOLVED that:-

- a) the performance data set out on the children in care scorecard be noted, and
- b) two new pieces of information – the length of time a child spends in care and the number of re-referrals - be included in the data recorded on future scorecards.

Chairman

14 February 2014