

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, 14 February 2014.

PRESENT: Mrs A D Allen (Chairman), Mr R E Brookbank, Mrs T Carpenter, Mrs P T Cole, Mrs T Dean (Substitute for Mr M J Vye), Ms S Dunstan, Mr G Lymer, Mrs C Moody, Mr B Neaves and Mrs Z Wiltshire

ALSO PRESENT: Mrs J Whittle

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

UNRESTRICTED ITEMS

1. Minutes of the meeting held on 13 December 2013

(Item A2)

1. RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting held on 13 December 2013 are correctly recorded and they be signed by the Chairman.
2. It had been agreed at the last meeting (minute 70) that the Panel would receive the minutes of meetings of the Kent Corporate Parenting Group, to give the Panel an overview of the work of the Group. This arrangement would commence following the next meeting of the Group.
3. There were no other matters arising.

2. Chairman's Announcements

(Item A3)

1. The Chairman announced the Kent Foster Care Association's sports day event on 27 May 2014, for which an updated flyer had been tabled. Panel members were invited and asked to contact Carolyn Moody if they wished to attend.
2. She then welcomed to the meeting Mrs Patricia Denney, who had recently taken over the post of Assistant Director of Safeguarding and Quality Assurance.

3. Oral update from Our Children and Young People's Council

(Item A4)

1. Ms Dunstan tabled a list of events for children and young people in care organised by the Council for the half-term week of 17 – 21 February and initial activities planned for the Easter school holidays, and an agenda for the Council's next meeting on 18 February. She also circulated copies of an early draft of an Easter newsletter produced for members of the Junior Children in Care Council, to

illustrate to the Panel the sort of colourful and engaging material that VSK apprentices produced for younger children.

2. The update and written material were noted, with thanks.

4. Cabinet Member's Oral Update

(Item A5)

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

A number of recent announcements had been made and developments arisen which affect children's services and children in care:

- the Minister for Children and Families, Edward Timpson, had recently announced a formal limit on the maximum distance allowed for placements of children in care. Some two-thirds of the 1,200 children in care currently placed in Kent had come from London, and this recent announcement should help to reduce this number;
- London Boroughs campaigning to recruit foster carers in Kent, (for example, in Dartford) should be working as part of the London Consortium to recruit foster carers from within London. Mrs Whittle said she would be writing to the Minister to seek clarification of responsibilities around this issue and emphasising that sanctions needed to be put in place to address it;
- work would be needed to strengthen Inspection Panels for children's homes. Approximately one-third of the total *national*? Budget of £3billion was spent on children's homes, yet only 9% of the children in care population was accommodated in them;
- the Government's allocation of funding for the Staying Put initiative was yet to be advised, and the changes in benefits eligibility and payment still to be clarified. The financial implications of both would need to be carefully considered;
- all Virtual Schools were now required to have a Head Teacher, but Kent was ahead by already having one;
- a Parliamentary debate would shortly take place about extending the same right to young people housed in children's homes as young people in foster care already had, ie to stay with their foster carers until the age of 21;
- a review of social work training by Sir Martin Narey, Advisor to the Education Secretary, had made 18 recommendations, some of which focussed on the calibre of new entrants to the profession and the relevance of degree courses in preparing graduates sufficiently for the reality of the social worker role. Only one third of entrants to degree courses had one or more A-levels – a low level of academic achievement which raised concern. These issues would need wider discussion;
- an increasing reliance on agency social workers was also a concern. It was necessary to have some agency workers, but fees charged by agencies made those social workers more expensive to employ than directly-employed social workers. The implications of this on the County Council recruitment strategy would need to be explored; and
- feedback from the 50 new, qualified social workers recruited by the County Council in September 2013 had so far been good, and Mrs Whittle said she was confident that social work practice was more robust than it had been previously.

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

- a) it was not possible, without checking, to report the number of applications received for the 50 posts filled in September 2013, but Ms MacNeil assured the Panel that applicants would have been very carefully screened. The calibre of applicants, however, had varied;
- b) the ratio of male to female social workers currently employed by the County Council was 30:70. The Council would still seek to increase the number of male social workers, although concern was expressed that imposing ratios around gender or part-time to full-time posts would be limiting and unwise in a changing social work market. Some people did not want to work full time, and part-time workers could still make a valuable contribution;
- c) in response to a question about appointing an independent person to interview a child or young person who had absconded from care, as some other local authorities had done, Ms MacNeil explained that Kent had always considered it best practice that such interviews be undertaken by a social worker known to the child, and had followed that practice. Mrs Whittle added that the training of a dedicated member of staff to undertake this role was a Government requirement, and that the Children's Society was lobbying for independent advocates for children or young people who abscond;
- d) a view was expressed that those interviewing young people who had absconded from care should be sufficiently firm to be able to deal with testing behaviour, but Ms MacNeil assured members that social workers taking on this role would be trained in interview skills and able to tackle difficult issues. Mrs Denney agreed that social workers, rather than any external professional, were at times better placed to understand the issues faced by young people absconding from care, and also sometimes better able to link the information gathered to identify the bigger picture;
- e) information gleaned from interviews may need to be passed to other agencies, such as the police, so an understanding of the whole picture and the importance of good partnership working was vital. Ms MacNeil offered to discuss the speaker's concerns in more detail outside the meeting;
- f) in response to a question about the necessity of completing a university degree course before becoming a social worker, and the possibilities of pursuing different routes, such as apprenticeships, Ms MacNeil accepted that there might be some different routes which could be used, but cautioned that school leavers of 16 and 17 could not be expected to be sufficiently resilient and ready to train as social workers. However, any opportunity to promote the social work profession positively to potential future recruits was to be welcomed; and

- g) the Chairman referred to foster care recruitment campaigns run by London Boroughs in her local area of Dartford and asked other Panel members to let her know of similar campaign literature of which they were aware in their areas, so an overall picture could be gained.

3. The oral updates were noted, with thanks.

5. Update on the Adoption Service

(Item B1)

Ms Y Shah, Interim Head of Adoption Service and Improvement, Coram/KCC, was in attendance for this item.

1. Ms Shah introduced the report and outlined the key areas of progress in the adopters' and child's journeys. Key points were as follows:-

- Coram had tried to provide accurate data from manual management information reports as it was currently not receiving any reports from the new 'Liberi' system;
- timescales for all areas of adoption activity were improving. The DfE had further reduced the target timescales for placing children, to apply from April 2014; from placement order to placement had been reduced from six to four months, and from entering care to being placed had been reduced from 16 to 14 months;
- so far in the 2013/14 year, 141 adopters had been approved and this number was expected to rise to 160 by the end of March;
- so far in the 2013/14 year, 144 children had been placed and this number was projected to rise to 170 by the end of March. A major challenge which could delay a successful placement was opposition to it from the child's birth parents. Another challenge was the time taken by courts to hear adoption applications. Such delays could be distressing for the child and the adopters;
- the success of the adoption service was always reliant on the availability of adopters. Approximately 150 – 160 approved adopters were needed at any one time, although the number of adopters available was only part of the picture; adopters needed to be suitable for the needs and age range of the children awaiting placement;
- a new process for approving adopters had sought to speed up the process; a first stage of approval would take two months and a second stage four months. The approval process relied on receiving prompt replies from referees and professionals supplying medical records. The health of adopters had recently shown up the issue of obesity, and some had been advised to lose weight before they could be approved;
- recent adoption events had been attended by prospective adopters from Brighton and London;
- to save time, and hence speed up the approval process, the adoption team was considering starting to ask prospective adopters to attend the office rather than visit each at their home;
- savings in expenditure on printing and postage could be made by sending adoption panel papers to Panel members by email; and
- Ms MacNeil added that the interview process for a Head of the Adoption Service would continue.

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

- a) concern was expressed that prospective adopters' obesity was raised as an issue at the approval stage. However, obesity could be viewed as an indicator of poor dietary knowledge which could be passed on to any adopted children. Ms Shah explained that concerns about adopters' health could delay their application as those approving them would need to be sure that they could accept advice about health improvement and make a sustainable change to their lifestyle;
- b) in response to a question, Mr Brightwell explained that children's care plans would be reviewed constantly to assess changing needs as they grew up. A plan which was not regularly reviewed in this way would quickly become obsolete. Ofsted had suggested in the past that local authorities should not attempt to place children who were above a certain age. Ms Shah added that the number of changes to care plans had been lower than expected. Some children became harder to place the longer they spent in care, and those with uncertain future health needs could be particularly difficult to place. If such children were to be placed early, adoptive parents would have more time to come to terms with a child's healthcare needs and start to address these. In some cases this could avoid issues escalating;
- c) in response to a question, Mrs Whittle described a protracted case in which she had been personally involved and which concerned a child trying to be adopted by former Kent adopters who had emigrated to the USA. This case illustrated the complexity and length of some cases but also the commitment of the adoption team, the adopters, the Independent Reporting Officers (IROs) and the legal team which pursued the case to a successful outcome. Such cases were simply not able to be concluded within the normal target timescales; and
- d) in response to a question about the matching process, Ms Shah explained that it was difficult to identify what exactly what would make a match as every case was different. The support needs of the child and the strengths of the prospective adopters would be identified, and the finding team would then talk to the adopters and show them a DVD of the child. Prospective adopters could attend coffee mornings, at which they would be able to see profiles of children awaiting adoption. Such matching events would include prospective adopters from neighbouring authorities. In the matching process, the religion and ethnicity of the adopters and child would be considered but neither factor would be a top priority in identifying a match.

3. RESOLVED that the information set out in the report be noted, with thanks.

6. Update regarding the work of the Head Teacher of the Virtual School Kent (Item B2)

Mr T Doran, Head Teacher for Virtual School Kent, was in attendance for this item.

1. Mr Doran introduced the report, highlighted performance against key targets and added the following:-

- one area of concern was the steady rate of permanent exclusions. Work was continuing to reduce this rate, and although it was feasible to work at reducing the general trend, it was simply not possible to plan for or avoid major incidents which arose from time to time;
- the rate of fixed-term exclusions had doubled, and such cases needed to be handled very carefully to avoid them becoming permanent exclusions;
- VSK had been recognised nationally for its work on developing a national standard for schools to work effectively with children in care and was hoping that this work could be rolled out to other local authorities;
- it had also been shortlisted for the Mental Health First Aid (MHFA) Champions award and would know on 26 February if it had been successful;
- the pupil premium per child per year would be rising from £900 to £1,100 in April 2014. This money could be used for any purpose which would benefit a child's education; and
- VSK would shortly be meeting the DfE about the resources needed for, and the implications of, the Children and Families Bill.

2. Mr Doran responded to comments and questions from Panel members and the following points were highlighted:-

- a) it was suggested that the report be referred to the Education Cabinet Committee to highlight and refer onwards the issues which could be addressed by that Committee, and Mrs Whittle undertook to speak to the Directors of Families and Social Care and Education, Learning and Skills to make this connection;
- b) Mr Doran explained that the number of fixed-term exclusions had risen from 38 in Terms 1 and 2 (September to December) of 2012 to 75 in the same period of 2013, but that the average number of days for which a fixed-term exclusion would apply had reduced and was now between three and six days;
- c) a foster carer on the Panel referred to a case, of which she had personal experience, of a nine-year-old boy who had been permanently excluded and who had waited for six months to have his special educational needs discussed, with a view to achieving an SEN statement. Mr Doran explained that a child with no SEN statement and for whom an exclusion was their first would normally be allowed to have two fixed-term exclusions before being permanently excluded, and that VSK would be able to support a foster carer to address the issues which this raised;
- d) in response to a question about persistent absence from school, and the role that mental health issues may play in this, Mr Doran said that mental health issues were a recognised contributor to persistent absence. He confirmed that a school's regime would be examined for possible causes of behavioural difficulties and that school staff were supported to cope with and address such issues. He offered to discuss outside the meeting a specific case highlighted by the speaker;

- e) a foster carer on the Panel reported that school staff sometimes did not seem to understand the issues relating to, and the potential additional needs of, children in care in their school, and did not know the children in their school who had this status. Another member, however, pointed out that some children in care did not wish to be identified as such. Mr Doran agreed that there was a training need for staff in understanding the issues and status of children in care. He explained that VSK was delivering regular training, with the help of care leavers, to teachers designated to address such issues; and
- f) concern was expressed about any delay in conducting health assessments for children entering care, and a view expressed that this should be a first priority. Mr Doran assured the speaker that assessments of health, education and social care needs, which were introduced by the Children and Families Bill, would be undertaken when a child entered care and would be reviewed by VSK during their time in care.

3. RESOLVED that:-

- a) the progress made by the Virtual School Kent be noted, with thanks, and the VSK team be congratulated on the progress made; and
- b) the report be referred to the Education Cabinet Committee to highlight and refer onwards the issues which could be addressed by that Committee.

7. Ofsted Inspection Action Plans - Update

(Item B3)

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

- a) in response to a question about the use of bed and breakfast accommodation, Mr Brightwell explained that the County Council was committed to cease using such accommodation for teenagers leaving care as it felt that it was unsuitable for young people living alone. There were only two young people currently in such accommodation and they had requested to stay there as they found that it suited them. There was one bed and breakfast establishment which catered solely for young people leaving care;
- b) in response to a question about 'deep dive studies', Mr Brightwell explained that such exercises were undertaken quarterly in each area. A half-day scrutiny session was robust and involved senior managers and staff, and the results reported to the Children's Services Improvement Panel, at which the outcomes were questioned robustly;
- c) Mr Brightwell assured Members that actions in the plans were ongoing and that no complacency would be allowed around ongoing improvement. Having moved from an 'inadequate' to an 'adequate'

rating, the County Council would then work at moving from 'adequate' to 'good'; and

- d) in response to a question about IRO workloads, Mr Brightwell said the average workload had reduced to 84 cases. The 'ideal' caseload size, cited in the official IRO handbook, was 50 – 70, while the national average was 82 – 83. However, the aim was not for Kent to be average in this regard but to be good.

- 2. RESOLVED that the progress made on the Ofsted action plans be noted, with thanks.

8. The Journey to Independence for Kent Care Leavers

(Item B4)

Mrs S Skinner, Service Business Manager, Virtual School Kent, Ms S Mullin, Commissioning Manager, Strategic Commissioning Unit, and Ms R Tinsley, Business Intelligence Manager, were in attendance for this item.

1. Mrs Skinner introduced the report and tabled a leaflet, 'Our Promises to You', which summarised the promises in Kent's Charter for Care Leavers and reinforced the Council's commitment to them which had previously been set out in the Kent Pledge. The Pledge would be incorporated into the Charter. She explained that there were many questions still to resolve in the development of the Care Leavers' Charter. Mrs Skinner, Ms Mullin, Ms Tinsley, Mr Brightwell and Ms MacNeil responded to comments and questions from Panel members and the following points were highlighted:-

- a) the 'Promises' leaflet was praised as excellent and officers were asked to clarify its intended circulation. Mrs Skinner explained that the Charter document had not yet been finally signed off but would be considered at a later date by the Kent Corporate Parenting Group. Once completed, its circulation was intended to be broad and include publication online. The Charter and the Pledge would complement each other and the latter would be refreshed and re-launched in early March 2014. It was suggested that a presentation on the Charter be made to a meeting of the full Council, with all County Council Members then being sent a copy of it;
- b) some social workers working with foster carers did not seem to be very aware of the Pledge and it could be a struggle to access it. Mr Brightwell explained that all IROs were required to review the content of the Pledge as part of their yearly review. He added that the majority (some 92.4%) of children in care were satisfied with the way in which Pledge commitments were being delivered to them;
- c) the leaflet was praised as being child-friendly and something which young people would believe and rely on, so it was vital that the promises in it were delivered;
- d) it was suggested that the reciprocal nature of the relationship between a local authority and the young people in its care should be highlighted

by a leaflet to set out what commitment the Council expected in turn from young people – for example, that they would study hard at school and work hard at finding and retaining employment;

- e) the language of the leaflet could be changed to ‘we’, to emphasise a partnership role; ‘together’. The text could emphasise that young people would be listened to;
- f) it was noted that none of the young people pictured on the leaflet appeared to have any disability, and this could alienate disabled young people;

Mrs Skinner thanked Panel members for their feedback on the content and style of the leaflet and added that it would be taken to the Our Children and Young People’s Council events in half-term week to seek feedback from young people, and the idea of the companion leaflet setting out the County Council’s expectations of young people would be raised with them.

- g) in response to a question about a planned market review and future options for outsourcing an integrated care leavers’ service, and whether or not members would be able to see the review, Ms Mullin explained the process and rationale for the review. The review would not be possible until the Catch 22 contract had ended and the service brought back in-house, and the financial implications of Staying Put and changes in asylum seeker funding were fully understood;
- h) members also asked to be able to see the independent survey undertaken by the Young Lives Foundation. Mrs Skinner explained that the content and format of the survey would be developed, and the way in which it was publicised would be discussed with young people. For instance, the County Council’s main website was considered too corporate and formal a vehicle to attract views from young people. The survey would also be available for social workers and foster carers to access and use. Ms Tinsley explained the process for analyzing data for the survey and added that County Council and Panel Members would be able to see the outcomes;
- i) members commented on the sad position of some children and young people having no-one in whom to confide while in care. Mr Brightwell emphasised that each child would have their own individual wishes and needs and their own views about to whom they felt able to, or wished to, talk to about their experiences. Most would talk a carer in person, but it could be difficult to identify to whom they could turn if they needed to talk about a problem between them and their carer. Ms Dunstan added there was a page on the OCYPC website called ‘Ask Me..’, via which young people could raise, confidentially, any concern they felt unable to voice elsewhere, and receive a reply from someone who was currently or had been in care and could understand their concern. This anonymous approach offered a valuable way of dealing with an issue without embarrassment or the anxiety that what was said would be relayed back to a carer. Mr Brightwell added that IROs were encouraged to see young people between scheduled review meetings,

and hence could be another independent person in whom a young person could confide;

- j) in response to a question about some apparent basic gaps in information, such as a child not having a copy of their care plan, or not knowing the name of their social worker, Ms MacNeil explained that the population of children in care at any one time was very fluid and it was likely that there would always be a few children who had newly come into care, for whom a care plan had not yet been completed or a social worker not yet allocated, and who would be likely to give a negative view of their experience, if asked at that time. Ms Dunstan added that some young people in care might know the names but not necessarily understand the roles of the people around them. Mr Brightwell added that all IROs would supply a child with a card showing their name and contact details;
- k) independent mentors could be useful at encouraging young people to talk about and deal with problems. Foster carers referred to their experience of IROs asking young people if they had someone with whom they could air problems, and themselves encouraged their foster children to speak to someone at school, such as a teaching assistant. Other people whom a child comes across in their life could perhaps benefit from some training in mentoring young people and encouraging them to talk through problems;
- l) in response to a question about the Staying Put arrangements, Mr Brightwell explained the changes which had been made. The new regulations had yet to have the final details added to them, and the funding criteria were not yet clear, but what was clear so far was that the new arrangements would not apply retrospectively and would affect only young people reaching the age of 18 after April 2014. As best practice, Kent already ran a similar arrangement to the one being formalised by the Staying Put policy, but the latest changes would strengthen this. The nature of the financial relationship between the young person and their foster carer would change into one similar to supported lodgings, to which a young person would have to contribute financially and the local authority would top up. The change in arrangement would need to be agreed by both parties;
- m) Members commented that the introduction of new Government policy without supporting financial information was very frustrating; and
- n) foster carers on the Panel referred to the scale of change that Staying Put would bring to them. The support for young people to stay beyond 21, and support for foster carers to let them stay, was welcome, but young people with high needs would be expensive to keep on for a longer period. Foster carers would be comforted by the fact that these things were being looked into. Kent's existing system of 18+ support meant that the changes were not as radical as they would have otherwise been. Previously, the status change which came at 18 deterred foster carers from committing to housing them for longer. Help

and guidance with understanding the tax implications for foster carers would be a great help.

2. RESOLVED that:-

- a) the content of the report, and in particular the draft Staying Put policy, and Members' comments on the activity and future direction of work, be noted;
- b) a presentation on the Charter be made to a meeting of the full Council, with all County Council Members then being sent a copy of it; and
- c) future reporting include the implications to the County Council of the Staying Put policy and points raised during debate, and the guidance to be given to foster carers on the implications of the above for them.

9. Position Statement: Fostering
(Item B5)

It was RESOLVED that this item be considered at the Panel's next meeting.