

KENT COUNTY COUNCIL

CORPORATE PARENTING PANEL

MINUTES of a meeting of the Corporate Parenting Panel held in Council Chamber, Sessions House, County Hall, Maidstone on Thursday, 4 September 2014.

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

ALSO PRESENT: Mr P J Oakford

IN ATTENDANCE: Mr P Segurola (Interim Director of Specialist Children's Services), Mr P Brightwell (Head of Quality Assurance, Children's Safeguarding Team), Mr T Doran (Head Teacher of Looked After Children - VSK) and Miss T A Grayell (Democratic Services Officer)

UNRESTRICTED ITEMS

29. Substitutes
(Item A1)

The Democratic Services Officer reported that Dan Daley was present as a substitute for Martin Vye and that apologies had been received from Teresa Carpenter, Carolyn Moody and Jenny Whittle.

30. The Openness of Local Government Bodies Regulations 2014

1. The Democratic Services Officer advised the Panel that new Regulations had come into effect in August which allowed members of the press and public to record or film the proceedings of any local authority meeting open to the public. Guidance on the new Regulations for Committee Members would be issued shortly by the Head of Democratic Services.

2. Panel Members asked how the new Regulations might impact on minors and other vulnerable service users participating at meetings. The Democratic Services Officer reassured speakers that this and other practical issues arising from the new Regulations had been raised and were being addressed.

31. Minutes of the meeting held on 19 June 2014
(Item A2)

RESOLVED that these be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

32. Chairman's Announcements
(Item A3)

1. The Chairman welcomed Philip Segurola to his first Panel meeting in his new role as Interim Director of Specialist Children's Services.

2. She then congratulated Sophia Dunstan on the excellent presentation that she and her OCYPC colleagues had given about the updated 'Care to Listen' DVD and the Pledge to the County Council on 15 July.

3. She also encouraged all Panel members to attend the forthcoming VSK awards day which was to be held on 14 September at Canterbury cricket ground.

33. Verbal Update from Our Children and Young People's Council (OCYPC)
(Item A4)

1. Sophia Dunstan gave an update on the following issues:-

Participation days – six participation days had been organised through the summer holidays, which had been attended by a total of 128 young people, 35% more than had attended similar events last summer. The days had included a range of activities, including T-shirt printing, canoeing and horse-riding. Feedback from participants had been good and many young people had said they appreciated the participation days as a chance to meet up with their friends and siblings.

OCYPC – the OCYPC had also held participation days and was planning a taster day in October so young people could see how it worked and what it did, the aim being to attract new participants. The Council had taken part in focus groups about the LILAC assessment and had been asked to give feedback on this and other issues via questionnaires. Young people were tired of responding to surveys and were not keen to respond to them repeatedly. They would much prefer to submit comments via an App or by using Twitter. Mr Brightwell added that IROs explored methods of engagement as part of their role and said that he was looking into using different technologies. Such facilities would cost the KCC approximately £4,000 as part of a package of technical services for the Council's whole children in care population. Mr Doran added that the 'Kent Cares' App offered young people a way of giving feedback online, but a wider range of methods was needed. He gave the view that a limit of one survey in a year was enough to expect young people to respond to. *A report on methods of engagement would be submitted to a future meeting of the Panel.*

2. The updates were noted, with thanks.

34. Verbal update by the Head Teacher of VSK

Mr Doran gave an impromptu update on issues relating to the VSK.

1. He reported that Sophia had completed a level 2 NVQ qualification and was about to embark on a level 3. Sophia received the Panel's congratulations.

2. He reported the latest performance achieved by children in care against national indicators NI99 and NI101:-

- Key Stage 2 results were the best ever achieved in Kent.
- improvements had been seen across both maths and literacy.

- Key Stage 4 results had shown an overall improvement on previous years.
- he had written to all Head Teachers to outline his expectation that GCSE results for 2014 would vary greatly due to the changes made this year to the marking of course work.

3. In response to a concern about the potential impact of these changes on vulnerable children, and how the achievements of those who had scored below the target level could be suitably celebrated, Mr Doran explained that a press release would be prepared when the results were known. However, as the results would take a long time to be verified, they would not be released until October. This would mean that they could not share the media coverage and celebration of GCSE and A-level results in the summer. Celebrating the achievements of VSK students would provide an opportunity to validate the resources put into VSK. The Chairman reminded the Panel that the annual awards ceremony gave corporate parents the opportunity to celebrate the achievements of Kent's children in care.

4. The updates were noted, with thanks.

35. **Cabinet Member's Verbal Update** (Item A5)

1. Mr P Oakford gave a verbal update on the following issues:-

Social Worker recruitment – recruitment was currently being targeted at management and supervisor levels in an effort to establish stability at those levels first, as it was known that that good leadership and supervision support was vital to retain staff. Research had shown that a time of particular vulnerability in a social worker's career was around the three year mark, so particular efforts would be put in place to seek to support and retain staff into years four and five. Vehicle insurance costs and the feasibility of helping young social work graduates to afford these had been a challenge historically. It was hoped that, as part of its recruitment package, the County Council could help with such costs. This issue was shared by many local authorities nationwide. A report would be submitted to Cabinet on 8 September setting out current work to boost recruitment.

Fostering awareness at the Mela event in Calverley Grounds Tunbridge Wells – he had attended the Mela to help raise awareness of fostering

VSK Awards Day (September 14, Canterbury Cricket Ground) – he echoed the previous references to the awards day and urged Panel members to attend it.

Adoption Activity Day (September 28, Oakwood) – this was the latest in a series of events arranged to give an opportunity for approved adopters to meet children seeking adoption, as part of the matching process.

2. The updates were noted, with thanks.

36. **Looked After Children placement breakdowns** (Item B1)

1. Mr Brightwell introduced the report and explained that it had been prepared in response to a request from the Panel. The report sought to raise the profile of foster carers and highlight the vital nature of the role they played in supporting young people in care and in helping the County Council to deliver good quality care to its children in care population. It set out the key issues on which attention should be focussed to improve placement stability. Mr Brightwell and Mr Segurola responded to comments and questions from Panel members and the following points were highlighted:-

- a) the implications of the most recent Ofsted report were that local authorities placing a child in a neighbouring authority's area had a duty to tell the hosting authority of any risks to the child, of which they were aware;
- b) Kent's children were not at any additional risk than those of any other authority in the UK, in terms of trafficking. KCC was always open and honest in the way in which it reported and dealt with any trafficking issues when they did arise;
- c) reference was made to recent media coverage of safeguarding issues and the lessons which could be learnt from this to ensure that such problems were not repeated at other authorities. Such cases were a timely reminder for other authorities to check their own practices;
- d) foster carers considering fostering a child would need to be given as much information as possible about the child by social workers before committing to the placement, but this preparatory briefing had not always happened in the past;
- e) some children seemed to benefit from contact with their birth family after fostering and others did not, and working out what would be right for any individual child must be very difficult. Mr Segurola agreed that such a judgement was difficult to make and assured the Panel that all relevant information would be considered. The belief among social workers had been previously that contact between a fostered child and their birth family could only be beneficial but this had sometimes been shown not to be correct;
- f) in response to a question about how breakdown of placements might be predicted, Mr Brightwell explained that there were some predictors which could be used to help identify children for whom a breakdown was most likely. These were similar to the reasons which had brought a child into care in the first place and included being out of school, being one of siblings placed together (which was a challenge, especially if a foster carer had their own children) and having unaddressed health needs (particularly mental health and emotional issues);
- g) concern was expressed about the problems which had caused the break-up of a birth family being passed on to the child's foster family. Mr Brightwell explained that national research had shown that a child who returned home from care was vulnerable to returning to care in the future, so it was important that support for the birth family was extended some time beyond a child returning home, to lessen the risk of them needing to

go back into care. National guidance aimed to promote permanence for children and a key role of the IRO service was to help support this, by using unification plans. Mr Segurola confirmed that edge-of-care services were currently being reviewed and reassured the Panel that taking a child into care would not necessarily transfer the problem to the foster family. It was often shown that a child's problems and behaviour improved once they were taken away from a dysfunctional birth family;

- h) another Panel member emphasised that it was important to remember that it was not only a child's behavioural problems which may have caused them to be taken into care but often the treatment they had received which had contributed to their situation;
- i) in response to question about reducing changes of social worker, Mr Brightwell explained that, although it was important to understand the potential impact of this, and it had been cited by the OCYPC as being a problem for some young people, the OCYPC and young people in care understood that change was sometimes inevitable as social workers changed jobs or retired and that a good handover practice could help minimise the negative effects of any change; and
- j) in response to a question about the possible negative effect on a foster carer's own children of the placement in their household of potentially troubled children, Mr Brightwell explained that support was available, with a focus on foster siblings. Good matching of a foster child and foster family was important, and it was helpful to avoid placing a child in a foster family which already had a child of the same age. However, sometimes it was simply not possible to avoid doing this (eg if the placement were in response to an emergency). If the likely challenges in a placement were identified as early as possible, suitable support for the foster family could be put in place.

2. Mr Brightwell reassured the Panel that a paper on this subject had been considered by the Kent Corporate Parenting Group on 4 September and that further work arising from this would be reported to a future meeting of the Panel.

3. RESOLVED that the information contained in the report be noted and the comments made by the Panel be taken into account in future work to address the issue of placement breakdowns.

37. Independent Visiting and Advocacy Services - update *(Item B2)*

1. Mr Brightwell introduced the report and reminded the Panel that both services were shortly to be re-tendered. He responded to comments and questions from Panel members. The following points were highlighted:-

- a) part of the role of IROs was to quality-assure Kent's Pledge to its children in care and care leavers, and this would involve auditing feedback from young people to social workers and managers. The key question to be answered was whether or not the relevant parts of the Pledge were being met for the child in question. For 95% of children in care in Kent, the

answer to this was 'yes'. Although past surveys had shown that many children in care said they were unaware of the Pledge, they were aware of, and understood, the parts of it which most interested or related to them. Indeed, some young people were not so interested in the fact that the Pledge existed as they were in the fact that it said they should have their own computer, for example;

- b) some social workers were also apparently unaware of the content of the Pledge, but Mr Brightwell reassured the Panel that all IROs were very aware of its content and were required to refresh their knowledge of it every six months as part of their role; and
- c) a view was expressed that the 'pledge' title was unlikely to mean much to young people; 'pledge' was a word used by politicians! The Chairman asked Panel members for suggestions of an alternative title and 'promise' was suggested. It was important to think creatively and use terminology to which young people could relate.

2. RESOLVED that the content of the update report be noted, with thanks.