

KENT COUNTY COUNCIL

CORPORATE PARENTING PANEL

MINUTES of a meeting of the Corporate Parenting Panel held in Swale 1, Sessions House, County Hall, Maidstone on Thursday, 9 April 2015.

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

ALSO PRESENT: Mr C Dowle, Ms A Kury and Mr M Roberts

IN ATTENDANCE: Ms S Hammond (Assistant Director of Specialist Children's Services, West Kent), Mrs S Skinner (Service Business Manager, Virtual School Kent) and Miss T A Grayell (Democratic Services Officer)

EXEMPT ITEMS

(Open access to minutes)

MOTION TO EXCLUDE THE PRESS AND PUBLIC FOR EXEMPT ITEM

The Panel RESOLVED that, under Section 100A of the Local Government Act 1972, the press and public be excluded from the meeting for the following business on the grounds that it involves the likely disclosure of exempt information as defined in paragraph 1 of Part 1 of Schedule 12A of the Act.

68. The Views of Young People in Care - discussion
(Item 1)

The Chairman introduced the purpose of the discussion session, ie to seek to identify how corporate parents can make a difference for children and young people in care. The Clerk explained that the session had been closed to the press and public so that personal information could be discussed.

The session was attended by a number of young people representing Our Children and Young People's Council (OCYPC), being currently or previously in care, accompanied by Virtual School Kent (VSK) Apprentices Amelia, Bella, Chris and Matt, Sarah Skinner (Service Business Manager, VSK) and Sarah Hammond (Assistant Director of Specialist Children's Services, West Kent).

Those around the table introduced themselves. The Clerk informed those present that their comments about their experiences of being in care would be recorded but assured them their names would not be.

The Chairman opened the discussion by setting out a number of issues that the Panel had heard about, for instance young people's relationships with their social workers, the rate of change of social worker, and issues around leaving care.

In this record of the discussion, questions and comments from the Panel are shown in italics and comments from young people are shown as bullet points. Information given by officers and VSK Apprentices is attributed to them by name.

When a social worker changes, you have to get to know a new one and tell them about all sorts of personal issues. Do you feel that they respect the personal things that you tell them?

How can we address the issue of frequent change and the need to establish a new relationship?

- When there has to be a change, perhaps we could be given a social worker that we have dealt with before. They will know us and be familiar with the problems that we have.
- It seems that, to a social worker, I am just a number. My social worker was awful; they forgot important information. I do my own budgeting at my supported lodgings but the social worker forgot to give me the money I was supposed to have. The lady I lodge with lent me some money to buy my groceries. When I had to deal with the police, when my bike was stolen, my social worker was late coming to the police station to support me.

What is the arrangement in the event of an emergency? Is there a hotline you can ring for advice?

Once you are allocated a social worker, could that person keep in touch for the whole time you are in care, so that you stay connected; for example, they would attend your annual reviews?

- Which social worker would be this long-term contact? Would this be the first one we were allocated, or would we be allowed to choose which one we wanted to stay connected to, ie one that we felt most comfortable with?
- Yes, I think that sort of arrangement would help. But my new social worker was very good, really 'on the ball', and I trust her to listen to me and to do what she says she will do.

How long have you had your current social worker?

- I can't remember. I am nearly 18 now so I will shortly be getting a new social worker anyway.

Sarah Hammond – I am pleased to hear that young people seek continuity of social work contact. This was the reason for the restructure of the children's social work service in late 2014, to avoid the need for young people to have to change social worker when they reach 16. Social workers will always want to move on through their career, but the idea is that someone from the same social work team will stay with you through to adulthood, to give continuity of care. When you leave care at 18 you will have a personal adviser instead of a social worker. This change is a separate issue to that of social workers not doing what they are supposed to do to support you.

How do you complain when something is wrong? Who do you tell?

- No-one, as far as I know. No-one offered; 'if you want to complain, contact me'. So when I am asked to fill in anything which asks 'do you know who to contact...?' I put 'no!'

You could contact your local County Council Member. You could find them on the website.

The issue of social workers suddenly changing was raised at the Kent Corporate Parenting Group (KCPG). There is no guarantee that you'll have the same social worker all the time that you are in care but some sort of handover should be organised. Does this happen?

- Once, two social workers turned up together; one said 'Hello' and the other said 'Goodbye'. They did not sit down with me and talk.
- I have had a mixed experience; one sat down and spoke to me properly and one other just turned up at the door and started asking me personal questions!

If you don't like your social worker, do you have any choice?

- No, there is no choice.

Sometimes, a system that the County Council thinks will work, young people know will not work. What sort of system of handover do young people want to see? Do you know why social workers change so much?

Sarah Hammond – some social workers leave out of choice, and there are still some agency social workers in teams, but even then there should be a month's notice if one of them is leaving.

- I know that one social worker left from stress.

Bella – what if social workers could have a 'buddy' system? If the usual social worker is not available, they could send the buddy instead?

This would be like seeing another doctor at the same surgery; you would know them a bit.

At foster carer performance reviews we advocate for children in care to ensure that their voice is heard. Foster carers speak to social workers and Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs), and I know that IROs will sort a problem, so tell your IRO about any problems!

- What if your complaint is about your foster carer? My IRO keeps changing, so I don't know them well enough to feel able to talk to them!

IROs can make a big difference as they are possibly the person who knows you the best. Some keep in touch years after you leave care. My 24-year-old had lots of social workers during his time in care and had to keep re-telling his story every time his social worker changed, but I put a stop to that.

A good foster carer can make a big difference to a young person's experience of being in care.

- If there's an issue with your foster carer you could tell your IRO but you have to live with your foster carer afterwards.

All teenagers have troubled times and difficult relationships with adults; those years are always a difficult time.

I like the idea of having a social work buddy. A young person could have a main social worker and someone else to step in if the main social worker is not available. A young person could be supported by one person or a team of people.

Amelia - we tell young people about the independent advocacy service. This is accessible via the website.

- In my children's home the phone was in the office so it was difficult to make a private call. You would be asked who you were calling and if you said 'the advocacy service' they would be very off with you. The system seems to turn on young people.

This need for privacy could be helped if the advocacy service could be on speed-dial, or if some sort of code were used, eg 'press 1 for x, press 2 for y', etc

- They would still be able to see what you were pressing!
- When you come into care, information about the advocacy service, and contact numbers and names for IROs, etc, could all be together in a pack that you are given.

Are the VSK Apprentices involved in producing things for children in care that is in a language they understand?

Sarah Skinner – this is being done. Leaflets are available on the website and there is a group working with the County Council's Communications team. Child & young person friendly leaflets are being designed and young people have been involved in the design.

- Please could this information include a copy of the rights of children in care?

Sarah Skinner – there is a new contract for the independent advocacy service, and the new manager will be attending the OCYPC on 13 April. The next VSK newsletter will have a big feature on how to complain.

- When people first come into care, they react differently to being given lots of information. Some people are preoccupied with issues and are taking one day at a time. They cannot take in or retain lots of information at that time.
- Since I was 10, I have spoken to my IRO privately before any meeting that I needed to attend. They are someone that I have always trusted.

- I found that if I told my IRO about any issue that was bothering me she would sort it out for me. When she retired she came to see me personally to say goodbye.

It seems that, if things are right, your experience of being in care will be good, but if they are wrong, you will have a bad experience.

I use the advocacy service to address issues for the children I foster. Foster carers can tell young people that there is now a new organisation running the service and it will hopefully be better now.

Sarah Hammond – the advocacy service should also be proactive about telling people they are there.

Young people could have a card listing contact details so they all know who to call.

I sympathise with the trauma which is caused when communications break down. If you are new in care you don't want to have to cope with any more information than is necessary. Your first priority must be to settle in and become comfortable, then tackle information, eg about how to complain. Issues could be treated either as complaints or problems; these two things are not necessarily the same.

How did you feel the police dealt with you? Did you tell them you were in care?

- When I had to deal with the police, when my bike was stolen, I didn't tell them I was in care as I thought it might affect how they treated me.

The police need to know something like that so they can protect your rights, so you should tell them about being in care. They have a duty to ensure that you are not unfairly treated because of it.

- I was treated OK. I told my foster care and they approached the police on my behalf.

Bella – the police are more understanding than before, so don't be afraid to tell them about being in care.

- I don't seek to tell my personal business to strangers; it's private.

You could view the police as being friends; there to help you.

- I still have reservations about telling them all my personal information.
- Children in care are treated differently. They seek to better themselves by going to college and university, but find it hard to get qualifications as their GCSE studies are often interrupted by moves to new placements.

How can this missed opportunity be addressed? Would it help to be able to take more time to pass the courses you need?

- Yes. Colleges and universities do give you more leeway if you have been in care.

The young man I fostered wanted to go to Cambridge but didn't have enough points to get onto the course he wanted. I rang the university on his behalf and they agreed to accept him with fewer points. Children in care are always playing catch-up, but universities are keen to take children in care, so you must keep asking them. All universities have LAC officers whose role it is to support you through your course.

Sarah Skinner – VSK has extended its support up to 18 year olds, including going to university. VSK has good relationships with Kent universities.

- I took an extra year in college to get the right qualifications so I was one year behind my peers all through my university course. Careers advisors need to be told about the issues that children in care face.

VSK can help with information and support.

Children in care should plug into the benefits available, so you should go and ask.

Sarah Hammond – no-one can access a degree course with fewer than 5 GCSE passes, and the same rule is applied to children in care as to everyone else. Presently there is no room for negotiation. VSK do support young people as much as possible to help them to get the points needed to get on to the course they want to do.

Bella – if you are going to university, you need consistent and coherent support from social workers and foster carers, and that doesn't seem to be there.

Sarah Skinner – there is an ePEP in place for all children in care, and established liaison between young people, the school, social workers, etc. It is possible to do one more year to gain the grades you need, and VSK could support you through this. We would not risk someone going to university and not managing; we would not set someone up to fail. We know that you would need good support.

- Falling short on my GCSEs and being one year behind my peers built up barriers to me building friendships with them.

We have heard the same from other young people. The Select Committee on Corporate Parenting will be taking forward in its report the issues that it heard about, and these will be reported to the full County Council. The recommendations that the Select Committee makes will then be actioned.

- Will I be treated differently at university as a former child in care?

You should not be.

Bella – you don't have to tell them that you were in care.

- I avoid saying to people that I am in care as I fear being treated differently.

One young man whom I started fostering when he was 13 thought he was too late to change his academic record and do well, but he is now 28 and the deputy manager

of a group of care homes. He did a BTEC qualification, worked hard and made up the ground. So it is always possible to overcome a difficult start and turn your life around.

The Chairman closed the session by saying she hoped those present had found the discussion useful. She added that it would be useful to have similar sessions regularly, perhaps twice a year.

The OCYPC representatives said they had found the session useful.

UNRESTRICTED ITEMS

69. Membership - increasing the number of Virtual School Kent (VSK) apprentices/Our Children and Young People's Council (OCYPC) representatives co-opted on to the Panel

(Item A1)

1. The Chairman proposed that three seats on the Panel be offered to co-opted representatives of young people in care, in place of the current single seat.
2. RESOLVED that the number of seats on the Panel offered to co-opted representatives of young people in care be increased from one to three.

70. Minutes of the meeting of this Panel held on 13 February 2015

(Item A3)

RESOLVED that the minutes of the Panel meeting held on 13 February 2015 are correctly recorded and they be signed by the Chairman. There were no matters arising.

71. Minutes of the meeting of the Kent Corporate Parenting Group (KCPG) held on 16 March 2015, and verbal update

(Item A4)

1. Mr M J Vye gave a brief verbal update on four issues arising from the minutes, as follows:-
 - **Challenge cards** – liaison was ongoing with Surrey County Council about the use of challenge cards, and the outcome of this would be reported back to the Panel.
 - **Leading Improvements for Looked After Children (LILAC)** – a working group had been set up to aim at getting a 'good' rating next time. Social media would be used to reach young people.
 - **Social worker change** – a new target had been set for the percentage of children who had been in care for more than 18 months to have the same social worker for at least 12 months, and this was 50%. The current score against this target was 39%. The Corporate Parenting Panel should scrutinise this issue.
 - **Links between the KCPG and the Corporate Parenting Panel** – it had been agreed that the KCPG would now receive the minutes of the Corporate Parenting Panel meeting, and vice versa.

2. Mr Vye and Ms Hammond responded to comments and questions from Members, as follows:-

a) the social work service had experienced difficulties in recent years, but Kent could strive to make its service as good as it could be, and, by benchmarking against other authorities, better than those of its peers. Although the number of social work vacancies was an area of concern, realistically there would always be some level of turnover and vacancy. The changes made to the 16+ service should help to minimise changes and meet the 50% target.

3. RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting of the Kent Corporate Parenting Group held on 16 March 2015, and the verbal updates and discussion points arising from them, be noted, with thanks.

72. Chairman's Announcements *(Item A5)*

1. The Chairman said that she hoped the discussion between the Panel and young people in care, which had taken place in the first part of the Panel's meeting, had been useful and would help those who had attended. If today's attenders spread the word that the session had been useful, hopefully others would be willing to attend future sessions.

2. The Chairman suggested that, as the Panel's meetings had necessarily to be business-like, it might be easier for young people to engage via a 'Shadow Panel', made up just of young people in care. The Shadow Panel would be sent the main Panel's agenda and papers, perhaps in an 'easy-read' version, and would be able to feed comments into the main Panel meeting. The Shadow Panel could also suggest items of business for the main Panel to consider. Mrs Skinner agreed that such an arrangement was worth trying, and undertook to talk about it with the VSK apprentices and the OCYPC. This suggestion met with interest, and a comment made that it was easier to learn more about young people's views in their own environment.

3. The Chairman said that she was still not sure that all elected Members fully grasped their role as corporate parents to all children in the care of the County Council, including unaccompanied asylum seeking children (UASC), up to the age of 18.

4. The Chairman reminded the Panel that the report of the Select Committee on Corporate Parenting would be considered at the meeting of the full Council on 16 July and suggested that a seminar on the corporate parenting role be arranged for all elected Members on that day.

5. Finally, she referred to the new practice of holding two OCYPC meetings in different venues in East and West Kent, which would hopefully increase the number of young people who could attend. She added that all Panel members were invited to attend any OCYPC meeting.

73. Verbal Update from Our Children and Young People's Council (OCYPC)
(Item A6)

1. Ms Taylor gave a verbal update on the following issues:-

OCYPC – some new members had been attracted via a taster day in Margate; there were now two venues for meetings, in East and West Kent, and a South Kent branch would soon be added.

Activities – ideas were being sought for events which would attract a wider age range, as well as targeting young people who had not previously taken part. As the last residential course had been so successful it was planned to arrange another as soon as possible.

Current involvement – the 'in care in school' project sought to raise awareness among school children of the issues faced by their classmates in care; work was ongoing with the Princes Trust, the disability team and the 16+ Children in Care Council.

Future Plans – new ways of working together were being explored, to share the increased workload. Eight apprentices were able to cover the whole county better than before. OCYPC representatives sat on interview panels for foster carers and many had undertaken paediatric training.

2. Mrs Skinner added that awareness across County Council directorates of the issues facing children and young people in care had increased, partly due to a presentation made by Philip Segurolo on the role of corporate parents to a challenger group of senior officers. From this session, some 27 officers had signed up to learn more about this role.

3. RESOLVED that the verbal updates be noted, with thanks.

74. Verbal Update by Cabinet Member
(Item A7)

1. In the absence of the Cabinet Member, Mr Oakford, Mrs J Whittle gave a verbal update on the following issues:-

New arrangements for Disabled Children's Services - Disabled Children's Services, Adults Learning Disability and Adult Mental Health Services had come together in a new division from 1 April 2015. Penny Southern would be the Director responsible for the division, called 'Disabled Children, Adults with a Learning Disability and Mental Health'. This closer alignment would further improve the support for disabled young people becoming adults.

Select Committee on Corporate Parenting – the Select Committee had finished its evidence gathering and was expected to make some hard-hitting recommendations in its final report, which would be presented to the County Council in July 2015. This was expected to attract local media attention, and would be an opportunity to remind all elected Members of their shared corporate parenting responsibility.

Future government support – whatever the make-up of the next Government, it was vital that the interests of children and young people be maintained at the top of

the political agenda as an issue with cross-party support. The Chairman added that the new Minister could be invited to meet representatives of the County Council.

2. RESOLVED that the verbal update be noted, with thanks.

75. Participation and Engagement of Children and Young People in Care
(Item B1)

1. Mrs Skinner introduced the report and highlighted the key points of it, including the recent appointment of an Interim Assistant Director for Corporate Parenting, Geoff Gurney, and two participation workers in VSK, for a period of 12 months. She responded to comments and questions from Panel members, including the following:-

- a) the involvement of social workers at meetings of the OCYPC had been considered, and there was scope to invite a social work representative to a meeting if there were issues which the OCYPC wished to share with them, but it was important that there were not more social workers present than young people;
- b) concern was expressed that younger children in care may find it harder to relate their views and talk about their experiences, particularly to adults, although they did have a range of ways in which to put forward their views, eg in ePEP review sessions, and via their IRO or social worker, and some events arranged by VSK were open to children and young people of a wide age range;
- c) regarding target setting for the level of engagement with young people, it was important to be realistic about what was achievable, and the target to be set would need some careful thought. Mrs Skinner added that the IRO service was to hold a focus day in May 2015 to look at participation and engagement; and
- d) good foster carers would always encourage a young person to participate and engage, so ensuring that foster carers had information about the options available was a good way of spreading the message to young people. The Chairman added that she had requested that attendance at participation days and involvement in activities be part of a foster carer's annual review.

2. RESOLVED that the information set out in the report and given in response to comments and questions be noted, with thanks, and a further report be made to the Panel in six months' time.

76. Head Teacher of Virtual School Kent (VSK) update report
(Item B2)

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

77. Children in Care and Care Leavers Strategy 2015-16
(Item B3)

1. Panel members commented that, although the membership of the Panel listed on page 49 of the Strategy document was complete and correct at the time of preparation, it could usefully have indicated that membership included foster carers and VSK representatives.
2. RESOLVED that the information set out in the report be noted, with thanks.

78. Post-Adoption Support update
(Item B4)

Ms Y Shah, Interim Head of Adoption Service, and Ms A Coombs, Family Finding Team Manager, were in attendance for this item.

1. Ms Shah introduced the report and told the Panel that, in the 2014/15 financial year, 143 children had been placed for adoption (out of 149, six cases having been delayed by challenges from birth parents), 181 children had been adopted and 138 new adopters approved. A three month moratorium had been placed on further adopter recruitment, and this may be extended further, as only five children were currently awaiting adoption. Kent's adoption service was now growing very successfully as an excellent multi-disciplinary team. Ms Shah responded to comments and questions from Panel members, as follows:-

- a) the move to reduce adopter recruitment was supported, as this would avoid parents reaching the end of the approval process and being disappointed when there were no children available to be adopted;
- b) Kent had a good track record of former foster carers moving to become adopters; and
- c) part of the post-adoption support service was geared to supporting adopters and children to access the CAMH services, and it was recognised that more work on this was needed.

2. RESOLVED that the information set out in the report and given in response to comments and questions be noted, with thanks.

79. Emotional Health and Wellbeing Strategy
(Item B5)

Ms C Infanti, Commissioning Officer, was in attendance for this item.

1. Ms Infanti introduced the report and explained that the Strategy was being reported to the Panel in response to a request for an opportunity to see and comment on it before sign-off. It was later to be considered by the Children's Social Care and Health Cabinet Committee. She set out the process for its preparation and the consultation which had been undertaken, and responded to comments and questions, as follows:-

- a) the focus of GPs on the lowest tier of the service was welcomed, as many emotional problems in the teenage years were due to normal adolescent development and needed no more specialised attention, although GPs

were able to refer cases, if necessary, to emotional health and wellbeing providers;

- b) asked about changing patterns of mental health problems in children and young people in recent decades, and to what extent these could be linked to mothers' use of drugs and/or alcohol during pregnancy, Ms Infanti undertook to look into any links and advise the Panel; and
- c) Ms Hammond pointed out that very few young people experienced mental ill health requiring treatment; much was distress rather than ill health. It was important to raise awareness of levels of emotional distress which could be experienced and make carers and professionals more aware of the issues.

2. RESOLVED that the information set out in the report and given in response to comments and questions be noted, with thanks.