

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 Thursday, 18 June 2015.

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

ALSO PRESENT: Mr P J Oakford

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

UNRESTRICTED ITEMS

80. Membership
(Item A1)

The Panel noted that:-

- Ms C J Cribbon had joined the Panel in place of Mr R Truelove; and
- The two extra seats which the Panel had agreed on 9 April to offer to representatives of young people in care had been taken up by two of the Virtual School Kent apprentices, Mr C Dowle and Ms S Dunstan.

81. Substitutes and Apologies

Apologies had been received from Mr S Griffiths. There were no substitutes.

82. Election of Vice-Chairman
(Item A2)

The Chairman proposed and Mrs P Cole seconded that Mrs Z Wiltshire be elected Vice-Chairman of the Panel.

Agreed without a vote.

83. Minutes of the meeting of this Panel held on 9 April 2015
(Item A4)

RESOLVED that the minutes of the Panel meeting held on 9 April 2015 are correctly recorded and they be signed by the Chairman. There were no matters arising.

84. Minutes of the meeting of the Kent Corporate Parenting Group held on 29 May 2015, and brief verbal update
(Item A5)

1. Mr M J Vye gave a brief verbal update on issues arising from the minutes, as follows:-

- **CAMHS** – communications between the County Council and the NHS were not as they should be, and although work was being progressed on commissioning and spending, there was incomplete information available about which young people were in receipt of services. Mr Segurola supported members about being robust in registering their ongoing concerns about the delivery of CAMH services and added that a young person's engagement with the service would in future be recorded on the Liberi database.
- **Challenge cards** – good examples of the use of these had been reported to the Group and it was hoped that the links between the OCYPC and the Corporate Parenting Panel would continue to be strengthened by using these.
- **GCSE scores** – the percentage of children achieving five or more A* to C grades was disappointing. Mr Doran explained that some inaccuracies had been identified in the reported figures and that the actual rate was higher than had been reported. He read out the correct figures and, in response to a request, undertook to supply a written copy of them to Panel members. Mr Segurola added that rates of GCSE passes would be included on future scorecards.

2. RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting of the Kent Corporate Parenting Group held on 29 May 2015, and the verbal updates and discussion points arising from them, be noted, with thanks.

85. **Chairman's Announcement** (Item A6)

The Chairman announced that in the Queen's Birthday Honours list, Yashi Shah, Interim Head of Adoption Service, had been awarded an MBE for services to children. The Panel recorded its congratulations to Ms Shah on the award and asked that Mr P Oakford write to Yashi on the Panel's behalf to send her its congratulations.

86. **Verbal Update from Our Children and Young People's Council (OCYPC)** (Item A7)

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

OCYPC – OCYPC members had taken part in interviews for foster carers and social workers and had enjoyed being part of the recruitment process. The self-confidence of the young people taking part had increased visibly during the course of the interviews.

Kent's Pledge to Children in Care – this was currently being re-designed, and new wording had been agreed.

Challenge cards – the feedback from the trial of these had been good. The current challenges were:-

- Helping young people in care to maintain contact with siblings still living with their birth parents,
- Involving children in care in the design of business cards which would list a social worker's full contact details, making them easier to contact directly when necessary, and

- The County Council setting up a bank account and either paying into and/or match-funding young people's contributions, which would be accessible at 18, to help reduce anxiety about their future financial worries.

Activity days – plans were currently being made for a series of events, including arts and crafts and water sports.

Work with disability team – the issues arising from this work had been more complex than expected, and the amount of information needed much higher. It was clear that disabled children in care needed dedicated support staff. Disabled children should be supported to enable them to attend VSK activity days. Newly-qualified social workers should be targeted for this participation as it would raise their awareness of the VSK apprentices' work in supporting children in care. This work was welcomed as the range of services needed for a disabled child in care was extensive, and arranging activities for disabled children was made more complicated by the range of needs of different age groups.

Newsletter – this would shortly be available and would be sent to Panel members via the Democratic Services Officer.

Youth Adult Council – this new council had held its first meeting on 13 April, which had gone well. Those taking part had felt well supported.

Future plans:-

- an OCYPC meeting venue in Folkestone had previously been trialled but had attracted very low attendance. It was hoped that, with a recruitment drive over the summer, better engagement could be achieved when this was tried again later in the year
- VSK apprentices were now based in areas across the whole county and were establishing themselves as role models and mentors, eg in Thanet, a 'myth buster' project would seek to dispel the unrealistic expectations that some young people may have about leaving care, and emphasise their rights and responsibilities as young adults.
- Social workers were being actively encouraged to attend future activity days.
- Following the success of the residential course at the Kent mountain centre, arrangements were being made for a similar week-long course at the Hadelot Centre in Northern France, at which young people preparing to leave care could experience managing away from home for a week and learn how to manage money, prepare meals, etc. The expected cost per person, for a party of six young people, was £500, and fundraising would be needed to cover this. The Panel was asked for ideas of how funds could be raised.

2. Some County Council Members said they would like to support young people to attend the Hadelot trip and it was suggested that the rules governing the use of elected Members' personal grants be researched to see if such support was possible. Members also advised that, as the Hadelot Education Centre was a County Council property, it might be possible to negotiate a discount on the use of the centre, allowing funds raised to go further in terms of activities.

3. Mr Doran praised Ms Taylor and Mr Dowle for their work in involving young people in the social worker recruitment process, for their drive in fund raising for VSK activities and for promoting their role to the wider VSK team. Panel members added that they were excellent role models for young care leavers.

4. Mr Segurola added that his overriding aim was to achieve a level playing field in which all children and young people in care could access events which support

their participation and engagement, and undertook to take forward the issue of increasing access for disabled children and young people.

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

87. Verbal Update by Cabinet Member
(Item A8)

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

Visits to Children's Centres in Tunbridge Wells, Swale and Thanet – One of the staff at a centre had described her time there as 'some of the best days I have at work'. An example of the sort of case which centres come across was that of a 19-year-old woman whom he had met at a centre, who had been put on a train in London with her year-old baby and sent to Margate to find accommodation, with no other support offered by the placing authority. He recommended that all members visit their local children's centres to see the excellent support offered there, and offered to take other members with him on his regular visits.

Visit to Specialist Children's Services office in Gravesend – Here he had met some UASC care leavers and realised the trauma that many of them had experienced before leaving their home countries. What had become clear, however, was the inflated expectations some of them had been given of life in the UK.

Attended the Early Help Service Design Workshop

Attended a briefing session about Children's Centres – this had shown how the Early Help team undertook assessments of how well services delivered via Children's Centres were meeting the needs of local families.

Kent Integrated Children's Services Board (KICSB) special meeting focused on child sexual exploitation

Open Day at Demelza House Hospice on 19 June – all elected Members had been invited to attend this.

Housing for Care Leavers – this was being championed by the Leader of the County Council, Paul Carter, who was leading multi-agency work to look at the feasibility of the County Council building and running homes for use by care leavers.

Corporate Parenting Select Committee – this committee was currently seeking an extension to its timetable to October 2015 to allow more research and the preparation of a more challenging report.

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

88. What Foster Care is Like! - presentation
(Item B1)

1. Ms Taylor and Mr Dowle presented a series of slides which had been prepared by a child currently in care to record her experiences of the care system and her thoughts about her foster carer. The presentation emphasised the positive

side to being taken into care and that this in no way meant that a child had done anything wrong or that their parents were unfit to look after them. These were both common misconceptions, expressed by other children and parents, eg at school, and the effect of such views being expressed could be very damaging to a child's confidence and self-image. The positive and supportive personal relationship built up between a child and their foster carer was also emphasised, as well as the great difference that a good carer could make to a child's formative years. However, the extent of support which foster carers needed was also extensive. Careful and un-rushed matching of a child and foster carer was important, as was a handover period between carers. The difficulties of affording to live independently as a care leaver were highlighted, with some young people having to return to parents with whom they had a strained relationship as they simply could not manage financially otherwise. A young person's bond with a good foster carer, on the other hand, could continue long after leaving care.

2. Questions and discussion then followed about the issues arising from the presentation, and comments made were as follows:-

- a) the presentation could usefully be shown to groups of foster carers, eg at Foster Carers' Association meetings;
- b) some young people leaving care could struggle to afford supported lodgings for any length of time, and may have to move back to live with their families, even if the relationship between them was not good;
- c) the planned tightening of 18 – 21 year olds' eligibility for housing benefit, announced in the Queen's speech, would not help this situation. Detail of the changes had yet to be made clear. Ms Taylor added that, on forms for claiming housing benefit, there had previously been a box to tick so a young person could identify themselves as a care leaver, but this option was no longer included;
- d) some carers had had to convert a family room in their home to use as supported accommodation for a young person. It was not good that some had felt forced to do this to manage financially;
- e) the resources put into foster care reduced sharply when a young person reached 18. Supported accommodation needed to be better resourced;
- f) some young people were given very short notice of when they would need to move out of their care placement, and were poorly prepared for the move;
- g) the positive messages in the presentation, about a child and foster carer being lucky to be with each other, and a child's self-esteem being increased by being in care, were welcomed. Although the reasons for taking a child from their birth family into care were positive, the process of going into care and trying to settle could be traumatic;
- h) Ms Taylor and Mr Dowle were praised as being good advocates for other young people coping with the issues of leaving care, and their work

supported the issues addressed in the County Council's Sufficiency Strategy. The Staying Put policy was currently still embedding; and

- i) Mrs Carpenter, Ms Moody and Mr Griffiths were praised for the work they undertook as foster carers, whom the County Council was privileged to have, and of whom it should be proud. They should be a model for other foster carers.
3. RESOLVED that the points set out in the presentation and raised in the following discussion be noted, with thanks, especially the Panel's acknowledgement of the excellent role played by the VSK apprentices and foster carers in supporting children in care and young people leaving care.

89. Performance Scorecard for Children in Care

(Item B2)

1. The Chairman advised the Panel that, since the publication of the meeting papers, an updated version of the scorecard had been prepared. This was tabled and *would replace the published version on line.*

2. Mr Segurola introduced the report and summarised the key elements of performance and the aim of the new-style scorecard which would shortly replace it and on which the Panel's views were being sought. He and Mr Doran responded to comments and questions from the Panel, as follows:-

- a) the new format was welcomed as a great improvement on the old, and it provided a good reference document for Members;
- b) Mr Segurola was asked for an explanation of some of the recording in the new-style scorecard, and it was agreed that a briefing session be arranged to introduce Members to the new methods of recording and displaying information. He suggested that this be held when the first full quarter's information became available, so that a complete set of data could be studied;
- c) Mr Doran explained the work which had gone into identifying what were the right indicators to include in the new-style scorecard. The national indicator for attainment would shortly change from the number of children achieving A* - C grades in five GCSE subjects to those achieving the same grades in eight subjects. He reminded the Panel that children in care were disadvantaged by having only one chance to score the required grades, due to the disruption cause by changes in placements and schools, often close to exam time, as many children tended to enter care at around year 10. They tended to perform better when they had more than one opportunity to attempt and achieve pass grades;
- d) a view was expressed that to have good GCSE grades would make all the difference to a young person's CV, and to allow children in care a year longer to achieve these would be a great help to them. However, it was important also to bear in mind that, upon entering the employment market, they would need to compete with other young people at interview, at which they would have only one chance to make an impression. Achieving a

balance between allowing them an extra chance and applying the same rules as to other young people was difficult; and

- e) Mr Doran reminded the Panel that Kent had many more children in care than other authorities, yet was measured against the same standards with regard to their attainment.

3. RESOLVED that:-

- a) the performance data set out on the children in care scorecard, and the information given in response to comments and questions, be noted; and
- b) the Panel's initial views on the new-style scorecard be noted, and a briefing session be arranged to familiarise Panel members with new styles of reporting. This could best be placed when the first full quarter's information was available to study.

90. Sufficiency, Placements and Commissioning Strategy 2015 - 2018

(Item B3)

Mr T Wilson, Head of Children's Strategic Commissioning, was in attendance for this item.

1. Mr Wilson introduced the report and responded to comments and questions from the Panel, as follows:-

- a) the Strategy provided a good tool by which the County Council could be held to account on its corporate parenting role;
- b) one of the actions in the Strategy was a commitment to report to the Corporate Parenting Panel on a six-monthly basis. A view was expressed that the first such report should be made in three months' time, with six-monthly reporting thereafter;
- c) the Strategy aimed to reduce the use of independent fostering agencies (IFAs), but the County Council had made use of these agencies' ability to meet specialist needs when it was not able to meet these needs among in-house foster carers. Asked whether, although use of such agencies had a cost, it may be more cost-effective to use IFAs than to try to replicate their services in-house, Mr Segurola confirmed that it cost approximately half as much to deliver fostering services in-house. It could be more effective to support in-house foster carers, which were aligned with the children in care teams, than it would be to support external carers, although he pointed out that there would continue to be a role for external organisations;
- d) the foster carers serving on the Panel were asked what issues they had identified which impacted on the service they were able to provide. The issues identified were:
 - i. the training budget had been cut dramatically in recent years. Kent's foster carers used to be among the highest skilled in the UK, but it was difficult now to access training, eg degree courses. Mr Segurola acknowledged that the reduced access to training did not

support the increasing expectations that the County Council had of its foster carers; and

- II. the valuable work undertaken by the Corporate Parenting Panel in raising the profile of the County Council's corporate parenting role and addressing the issues of children in care was unknown to many foster carers and could usefully be reported to them, eg via the Foster Carers' Association. Foster carers often said that they were not sent information from the County Council.

- e) the County Council had previously organised an annual foster carers award ceremony to recognise and celebrate the work they did, but this practise had lapsed. Mr Segurola confirmed that he was keen to re-start this and other Foster Carers' Association events which used to take place; and
- f) a Panel member who had attended the 28 May sports day said he had been told there by foster carers that they were not seen as or treated as professionals. If this view were widespread amongst foster carers it would indicate an obvious place to start in addressing the role and status of Kent's foster carers.

2. RESOLVED that:-

- a) the content of the Sufficiency, Placements and Commissioning Strategy 2015-2018, and the information given in response to comments and questions, be noted; and
- b) regular monitoring reports be made to the Panel, with an initial follow-up report after three months and a programme of six-monthly reports thereafter.

91. The County Council's Corporate Parenting responsibilities towards unaccompanied asylum seeking children and care leavers (UASC), and issues around their accommodation in the community
(Item B4)

Ms S Hammond, Assistant Director - West Kent, was in attendance for this item.

1. Ms Hammond introduced the report, which had been prepared at the request of the Panel, and responded to comments and questions from Panel members, as follows:-

- a) in some areas of the county, UASC were grouped together in disadvantaged areas and were not integrated into the wider community. This did not support young people in learning English. To encourage integration and expand their horizons, UASC should be placed more carefully. Ms Hammond acknowledged that, where this pattern had been identified in an area, the placement of any additional UASC in that area would be avoided. However, some UASC asked specifically to be placed in an area where they knew there was an established community sharing their culture and speaking their language;

- b) accessing English as a Second Language (ESL) courses was also difficult in some areas as local provision had been discontinued, forcing young people to travel a distance to the nearest college which offered such courses;
- c) the range of problems experienced by UASC would vary with their legal status and what stage they had reached with their asylum application (eg leave to remain (LTR), all rights exhausted (ARE), etc);
- d) although the majority of UASC arriving in Kent were aged over 15, some were aged 12 to 13. These had been much helped by being placed with foster carers, particularly in learning English, as younger children tended to pick up languages more easily. Efforts were being made to increase the number of foster carers able to speak the same languages as UASC and most practised in supporting them to learn English. Ms Hammond clarified that the only legislation which applied to children under the age of 18 was the Child Care Act, not immigration law, and the Child Care Act was the legislation which directed the County Council's duty of care to any UASC under 18, defining their status as children in care;
- e) some children aged 13 – 15 were accustomed in their home countries to working, and came seeking employment and accommodation rather than education and care. Ms Hammond advised that, regardless of their intention in travelling to the UK, if they were under 18, the County Council's duty of care towards them was unchanged;
- f) Mr Oakford reported that, at one of his recent visits to area offices, he had been advised that the interpreter service used by the County Council received requests to interpret for anything up to 40 different languages;
- g) Mr Segurola advised the Panel that the County Council currently had 400 UASC in its care – the highest number it had ever had. Summer was traditionally the busiest time for UASC arriving, as long distance travel in the summer months was generally easier, although the rate of arrivals had been consistently high in recent months, with the 2014/15 winter not showing the usual dip in numbers. Home Office funding, however, was finite, and the adequacy of funds allocated for 2015 was a cause for grave concern;
- h) Ofsted had highlighted health issues facing UASC, and mental health issues in particular. Taking a health history from a newly-arrived UASC speaking little or no English would be difficult enough, but tackling delicate questions about their mental health would be doubly difficult. Ms Hammond explained that the County Council would take a health history for the period since the young person had arrived in the UK. Mr Segurola added that screening upon arrival would seek to identify pre-existing conditions;
- i) the age of a UASC with no papers could be difficult to identify, and local authorities in France had established the practice of scanning UASC to identify their age. However, the Royal College of Paediatricians had advised that this practise should not be followed in the UK; and

- j) the importance of the County Council being seen to deal only with proven facts about UASC, rather than engage with unsubstantiated media coverage and popular myths about immigration, was emphasised.

2. After discussion, it was agreed that the wording of the recommendation, 'that the Panel bring to the attention of all Members the Council's Corporate Parenting responsibilities...', should make particular reference to executive Members, and that care be taken to ensure that the approach taken should be consistent.

3. RESOLVED that:-

- a) Members of the Corporate Parenting Panel bring to the attention of all Members, in particular executive Members, the Council's Corporate Parenting Responsibilities towards UASC in care and care leavers;
- b) all Members use their influence with District, Borough and City Councils to ensure that fair access to social housing is available to UASC, alongside other Kent care leavers; and
- c) a further report on the issues covered in this report and in the ensuing discussion be made to the Panel in six months' time.