

## KENT COUNTY COUNCIL

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### CORPORATE PARENTING PANEL

MINUTES of a meeting of the Corporate Parenting Panel held in Darent Room - Sessions House on Wednesday, 19 September 2018.

PRESENT: Mrs A D Allen, MBE (Chairman), Ms J Bayford, Mr D L Brazier (Substitute for Mr G Cooke), Mr T Doran, Mr J Dumigan, Ms S Dunstan, Mr D Farrell, Ms L Fisher, Mr S Gray, Ms S Hamilton, Mrs S Hammond, Mr M J Northey, Mrs S Prendergast, Ms N Sayer and Ms C Smith

ALSO PRESENT: Mr R W Gough

IN ATTENDANCE: Mr M Dunkley CBE (Corporate Director for Children Young People and Education), Ms J Carpenter (School Bursar and Project Officer, Virtual School Kent) and Miss T A Grayell (Democratic Services Officer)

#### UNRESTRICTED ITEMS

##### **96. Membership**

*(Item 1)*

The Panel noted a number of changes to its membership since the last meeting:

- Ida Linfield had replaced Trudy Dean
- Sue Dunn had retired from the County Council so had left the Panel
- Teresa Carpenter was no longer a Kent Foster Carer so had left the Panel
- Julianne Bayford and Justin Dumigan, Foster Carers, had joined as new Panel members

##### **97. Apologies and substitutes**

*(Item 2)*

1. Apologies for absence were received from Gary Cooke, Sue Gent, Reece Graves, Stuart Griffiths, Ida Linfield and Chloe-Elizabeth Mutton.
2. David Brazier was present as a substitute for Gary Cooke.

##### **98. Election of Vice-Chairman**

*(Item 3)*

1. The Chairman proposed that, due to the number of recent membership changes and the absence of a number of Panel members from the meeting, the Election of a new Vice-Chairman be deferred until the November meeting.
2. This was generally agreed.

## **99. Minutes of the meeting of the Panel held on 19 July 2018**

*(Item 4)*

It was RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting held on 19 July 2018 are correctly recorded and they be signed by the Chairman. There were no matters arising.

## **100. Chairman's Announcements**

*(Item 5)*

1. The Chairman announced that Caitlin Deveraux from the Department for Education was attending the meeting as an observer, and welcomed Ms Deveraux to the meeting.

2. The Chairman also welcomed Julianne Bayford and Justin Dumigan to their first meeting as new members of the Panel.

## **101. Verbal Update from Our Children and Young People's Council (OCYPC)**

*(Item 6)*

1. Sophia Dunstan, Participation Support Assistant, Virtual School Kent (VSK), and Jo Carpenter, School Bursar and Project Officer, Virtual School Kent, gave a verbal update on the work of the OCYPC, the Super Council and the Young Adult Council and forthcoming participation events. They circulated some pictures of recent activity days and the recent VSK awards ceremony and thanked those who had attended the ceremony. *The text of these updates will be appended to these minutes.* With Mr Doran, Head Teacher of the VSK, they then responded to comments and questions from the Panel, including the following:

- a) the establishment of a boys' pilot support group was welcomed, to mirror the girls' groups. It was good that these groups were available to support young people in whatever way they wanted to express themselves;
- b) the success of the several children in care recently going to university was welcomed. It was important that young people be supported to take up a university place if they wished to, and also to support others to realise that this was a possibility for them. Many young people historically had been told that this was not an option for someone in care. Young people securing a place but worried about affording accommodation would be supported by the County Council's new rent guarantor scheme. Mr Doran added that VSK had a social mobility plan to support children in care to attend grammar schools and were doing much work to extend this to university attendance;
- c) it would be good to start encouraging children from primary school onwards to aspire to further and higher education, starting with an expectation that they would sit the Kent Test. Encouraging children in this way was part of the role of a good foster carer; and
- d) foster children who had attended VSK activity days had been much inspired by the care leavers they met there, which showed what a great value the VSK Participation Team had as role models who encouraged children in care to network and gain confidence. Mr Doran added that one

former child in care, aged 19, had written and illustrated a book, which had recently been published, with the aim of encouraging other young people in care;

2. Ms Carpenter advised the Panel that work was in hand to expand the membership of the Recruit Crew, which attended and participated at interview panels for social workers, foster carers and adopters. To help young people to play a larger part in these panels, meetings would be scheduled to avoid school and college times. The Chairman added that meetings of the Corporate Parenting Panel would also be scheduled in school holidays wherever possible.

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

## **102. Verbal Update by Cabinet Member**

*(Item 7)*

1. The Cabinet Member for Children, Young People and Education, Roger Gough, gave a verbal update on the following issues:-

***Change for Kent Children*** – as part of a national programme, this would include a series of projects around the county to address key challenges for children in care, such as closer integration of social care and early help services, integration work with schools, placement stability, better risk management, recruitment and retention of foster carers and academic attainment of children in care. The aim was to establish new models for these work areas by April 2019, as part of an improvement of services for young people. Mr Gough undertook to update the Panel on this work as it progressed.

***Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children (UASC) update*** – so far in 2018 there had been only 108 new arrivals, with a slight rise over the warmer summer months, as was usually expected. Most had come from Eritrea, Ethiopia and Sudan. Kent currently had 244 UASC under 18 and 887 care leavers of 18+. As expected, more would attain care leaver status in January, as 1 January each year was given as a date of birth for UASC arriving who did not know, or would not give, their date of birth.

***Virtual School Kent (VSK) Awards Day*** – Mr Gough said how much he had enjoyed the awards day, and how much he knew young people had also enjoyed it. He thanked Sophia Dunstan, Jo Carpenter and the VSK team for their work in organising the event. This year saw the first young people to have completed 100 hours with the Young People's University.

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

## **103. Performance Scorecard for Children in Care**

*(Item 8)*

1. Caroline Smith, Interim Assistant Director, Corporate Parenting, introduced the report and highlighted that most performance was rated green and was moving in the right direction. She thanked Nancy Sayer, Designated Nurse for Looked After Children, for the joint working which had improved the recording of health data.

2. In response to a question about the number of children excluded from school who had additional needs, Mr Doran explained that this data was recorded and undertook to supply this information to the Panel at its next meeting.

3. It was RESOLVED that the performance data in the children in care scorecard be noted, with thanks.

#### **104. Report on children and young people in Cookham Wood Young Offenders Institute (YOI) and Medway Secure Training Centre (STC)**

*(Item 9)*

1. Louise Fisher, Head of Kent Youth Justice Service and Head of Service for Early Help (South Kent), introduced the report and highlighted key points, as follows:-

- i. all young people in the youth custody system last year were boys;
- ii. Cookham Wood and Medway STC had both recently been inspected and had improved since past inspections. The regime at Medway STC had been commended for improvements to make it more like a school environment, such as all boys eating together and having recreation time on a grassed area;
- iii. all young people in custody would have an allocated youth worker, and some also had social workers;
- iv. education and health care provision had improved, with boys being able to get help when their education had been interrupted; and
- v. plans for a young person's resettlement were started as soon as they were sentenced, so the plan was clear from the outset.

2. Ms Fisher responded to comments and questions from the Panel, including the following:-

- a) the number of young people in custody in Kent had decreased dramatically in the last ten years, from 125 to 24. The Youth Justice Board had given local authorities resources for diversionary work to protect young people at risk of being taken into custody. Although there were now fewer, those in custody had more complex needs and required more time and one-to-one work to achieve successful rehabilitation;
- b) the effectiveness of the work of the Youth Justice system in improving the lives and prospects of young people was praised;
- c) the frequency of reports on this subject to the Panel was discussed and an annual pattern was favoured;
- d) a concern was raised about the potential role Corporate Parents could play in supporting young people in custody;
- e) asked about ongoing contact with a young person's family, once they had been taken into custody, Ms Fisher explained that many young people who had families would return to them once their sentence and their child in care status had ended. Family members were also actively involved in meetings; and
- f) the recruitment of a Youth Justice Apprentice was welcomed and it was hoped that this apprentice could attend a future Panel meeting.

3. It was RESOLVED that the support and safeguarding of children and young people in custody be welcomed, with interest, and the new Youth Justice Apprentice, when appointed, be invited to attend a future meeting of the Panel.

### **105. Annual Report 2017 to 2018 - Adoption Services**

*(Item 10)*

1. Sarah Skinner, Head of Adoption Service, introduced the report and responded to comments and questions from the Panel, including:

- a) asked about the comparison between Kent's adoption figures and the national picture, Mrs Skinner explained that the number of adoption placements made nationally had reduced, while Kent had increased its number of approved adopters. Adopters could be single, married, in a civil partnership or divorced. During 2017-18, Kent exceeded Government targets for children who have been adopted, including the four-month target for the time between an Adoption Plan being agreed and a suitable adopter being identified;
- b) asked about the Foster to Adopt scheme, Mrs Skinner explained that Foster to Adopt was a scheme whereby prospective adopters could be assessed and approved as adopters but also foster carers. If a baby or very young child's care plan were one of adoption, and all family members had been assessed and felt not suitable to adopt the child, a Foster to Adopt placement can be sought, so the child should not return to his or her birth parents. This would reduce the need for the child to move in the future. The risk was that, having made such a placement, the Court may not agree with the local authority's plan of adoption and the child may be removed from the placement. Such cases were rare, however, and out of 40 placements in the last year, only two children had returned to their birth families. Foster carers wishing to adopt would be trained for that purpose;
- c) foster carers on the Panel spoke of their varied experiences with children going on to be adopted, and of the difficulties of adjusting to a child with whom they and their family had bonded moving on. Some adopters may not identify the impact that an adoption had on foster carers who might have been caring for a child for some time. Mrs Skinner acknowledged the difficulty of the transition for those involved and told the Panel about a peer mentoring scheme being developed in conjunction with the fostering service, whereby foster carers who had been through the process could support those experiencing a similar situation, and the plan to mirror the adopters' training programme with foster carers. This initiative was welcomed;
- d) Mr Dunkley highlighted the need for such support work to include the children of foster carers, as they had also bonded with their foster siblings and also experienced the difficulty of being separated from them;
- e) asked about the support available for post-adoption breakdown, Mrs Skinner explained that post-placement breakdown was rare; there had been 107 adoption placements in the last year and only two of these had

broken down. Both of these had involved sibling groups. She emphasised that, although Government targets guided the time taken to make a placement, it was important to take sufficient time over the matching process to make a good placement and avoid disruption;

- f) pre-adoption events included peer support, and experienced adopters helped those who were preparing to adopt for the first time;
- g) it was sometimes difficult for the County Council to keep contact with adopters after an Adoption Order had been made as the Council no longer had a formal role, and some families moved away and lost touch;
- h) discussion returned to the question of elected Council Members serving on Adoption Panels, a subject which arose periodically when discussing the adoption process. Mrs Skinner advised that this had been investigated previously and had been judged not to be a good use of Members' time, as well as involving onerous amounts of reading and preparation;
- i) asked about special guardianship orders (SGOs), Mrs Skinner explained that an SGO would end a child's local authority care status. Some SGOs, however, did not involve local authority children in care. Mr Doran added that new regulations for the Virtual School Kent meant that it would be part of the pathway for the SGO process, if a child had been in care prior to the SGO being granted;
- j) asked why fewer people were coming forward for approval as adopters, and if this could be due in part to the length of the process or the rigorous questioning of applicants, which some may find over-intrusive or off-putting, Mrs Skinner said she was confident of the process and that questioning was as thorough as it needed to be to identify suitable candidates. Adoption panels were chaired by people experienced in interviewing thoroughly but sensitively. The County Council had been criticised by Ofsted in the past for taking too long over its adoption process, and since 2012 had sought to reduce delay. Sometimes adopters asked to slow down the process, for example, if they were experiencing disturbance to family life due to bereavement or redundancy. The reduction in the number of prospective adopters coming forward could in part be due to changes in fertility treatment, which made it easier for some couples to have their own family. Mrs Skinner reassured the Panel that Kent was not currently struggling to attract adopters, although other local authorities were; and
- k) Mrs Skinner advised the Panel that National Adoption Week 2018 would take place on 15 to 21 October 2018.

2. Ms Smith advised the Panel that the County Council's Adoption Team had won a national award for excellence in post-adoption support. The Panel congratulated Mrs Skinner and her team on this achievement.

3. It was RESOLVED that:-

- a) the information contained within the report, and the Panel's comments on the range of services provided, and their suitability to meet the needs of adoptees and their families, be noted; and
- b) the Panel's congratulations be passed to the Adoption team for their success in winning a national award for excellence in post-adoption support.

## **106. Review of the 18 Plus Care Leavers Service**

*(Item 11)*

1. Paul Startup, Head of the Care Leavers' Service, introduced the report and set out the changes being made to the service as a result of new guidance in the Children and Social Work Act 2017:-

- i. most care leavers of 21+ opted to continue receiving services from the team;
- ii. the service was currently dealing with a substantial increase in the number of care leavers year on year, as many of the high number of unaccompanied Asylum-seeking children arriving in the county in 2015 were now reaching the age of 18 and attaining care leaver status;
- iii. to cope with the above, and give greater stability and consistency, the service had gained a permanent management team and more personal advisors;
- iv. two new service managers had been recruited, to work with UASC and young people transitioning from children in care to care leaver status, and personal advisors would be allocated earlier, to help young people to transition;
- v. care leavers in custody would be given a care plan to assist their transition upon release;
- vi. the rent guarantor scheme had had a good take-up, and landlords were gradually grasping the concept of the County Council standing as guarantor; and
- vii. the new local offer was on target to launch in December 2018.

2. Mr Startup and Ms Hammond, Director of Integrated Children's Services East (Social Work Lead) then responded to comments and questions from the Panel, including the following:-

- a) asked about the availability of suitable accommodation for care leavers, Mr Startup explained that it was sometimes difficult to find the right place and that, in some areas, suitable accommodation was harder to find and afford. Young people could not always be found a place in the area where they most wanted to live, but the service would always avoid placing a young person where they felt they would be vulnerable;
- b) asked if a young person who had 'opted out' of the service could change their mind and opt back in, Mr Startup confirmed that this could be done as soon as a request to do so was received;
- c) Ms Hammond explained that, although there was no duty upon Borough and District Councils to provide accommodation for care leavers as part of

its housing stock, the County Council as Corporate Parent had a duty to ensure that all care leavers had secure and safe accommodation; and

- d) Mr Startup advised that all care leavers would be sent a letter setting out the changes arising from the new legislation and would be sent an online survey in October 2018 to seek their views on the service. The outcomes of that survey would be reported to a future meeting of the Corporate Parenting Panel.

3. It was RESOLVED that:-

- a) the proposed structure of the 18plus Care Leaving Service, to meet the increasing demand of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children transitioning into the service, and the progress to date, be noted; and
- b) the outcome of the care leavers' survey be reported to a future meeting of the Corporate Parenting Panel.