

CORPORATE PARENTING PANEL – 13 APRIL 2022

NOTES of a meeting held using Microsoft Teams.

PRESENT: Dirk Ross (Chairman), Rob Barton, Julianne Bayford, David Beaney, Dan Bride, Charmaine Chapman, Gary Cooke, Tony Doran, Alison Farmer, Stephen Gray, Margot McArthur, Nancy Sayer, Tracy Scott, Caroline Smith and Sharon Williams.

ALSO PRESENT: Sue Chandler, Cabinet Member for Integrated Children's Services.

IN ATTENDANCE: Matt Dunkley (Corporate Director of Children Young People and Education), Jo Carpenter (Participation and Engagement Manager, Virtual School Kent), Sharon Howard (Assistant Director, Disabled Children and Young People's Service), Chris Nunn (Senior Management Information Officer), Christy Holden (Head of Strategic Commissioning, Children and Young People's Services), Joel Cook (Democratic Services Manager) and Theresa Grayell (Democratic Services Officer, Clerk).

1 Apologies and substitutes

Apologies for absence had been received from Lesley Game, Kelly Grehan, Sarah Hamilton and Sarah Hammond. There were no substitutes.

2 Chairman's Announcements

1. The Chairman added to his comments made at the previous meeting about strengthening the role of the Panel and working more closely with the 12 districts in Kent, perhaps by linking via Members who served on both District and County Councils, to support activity between Panel meetings.

3. Performance Scorecard for Children in Care

1. Chris Nunn introduced the report and, with Matt Dunkley and Caroline Smith, responded to comments and questions from the Panel, including the following:-

- a) asked if any areas of performance were still affected by covid, and if there was anything the County Council could do to address these, Matt advised that the areas in which performance caused most concern were, as previously, health assessment for children in care and adoption proceedings. Both of these areas continued to experience delays unrelated to covid issues. Caroline advised that most delayed adoption proceedings were already in progress but had been delayed by the need to request more information. As they were already in progress, there was no option to move them to any other court in the county which might have a shorter backlog; and
- b) asked to what extent the longstanding challenges with the Judiciary continued to affect the backlog of adoption cases, Caroline advised that the rate of cases heard, pre-covid, had been good, so the issues with the Judiciary had been largely overcome. In the last year, almost 100 adoption

cases had been heard. Asked for a comparison of the number of adoption plans and actual completed adoptions, Caroline advised that this data was recorded and could be supplied to the Panel at its next meeting. Matt advised that there were three areas of possible delays for adoption hearings – the Judiciary, problems securing legal representation and logistical problems around arranging virtual or in-person meetings. Work was ongoing with Invicta Law to improve the first two, and a possible next step to address backlogs would be to lobby the President of the Family Division, Lord Justice McFarlane.

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

4 Disabled Children and Young People's Service Briefing about Children in Care

1. The Assistant Director of Disabled Children and Young People's Service, Sharon Howard, introduced the report and emphasised that children with disabilities made up only a small percentage of Kent's children in care but had complex care needs. The report set out the facilities available for them, for example, short breaks and specialist foster carers for disabled children. Sharon presented two case studies of children and described the services they had accessed to meet their needs. Sharon and Caroline Smith then responded to comments and questions from the Panel, including the following:-

- a) asked about the challenges in attracting specialist foster carers and adopters for disabled children, Sharon advised that the team campaigned by visiting special schools and regular open days, by using Facebook, and was reviewing the premium paid to foster carers to cover additional costs of looking after disabled children. Support services for such foster carers were bespoke, wrap-around and available 24 hours a day. Apart from the right caring skills, potential foster carers needed to have sufficient space in their homes to accommodate a disabled child's physical needs, and suitable adaptations could be costly and take time to make. Christy Holden and Sharon Williams added that the team was working with the Kent Housing Group to help foster carers and adopters to adapt their properties; and
- b) asked about the NEST respite programme and the cost-effectiveness of using an external service rather than trying to provide it in-house, Sharon advised that the 6-bed NEST unit in Hextable was run by Clinical Commissioning Group colleagues.

2. The Chairman stated his intention to visit teams in all areas of the county to meet staff and see their work at first hand.

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

5 Participation Team update

1. Jo Carpenter introduced the update report and told the Panel of the busy programme of Easter events currently going on. Three apprentices would shortly be moving on from the team after completing Level 3 NVQ in Public Service Delivery. Cheyenne Ali would be moving on to work as a Youth Development Officer at a charity and Charmaine Chapman and Alex Gordon would be staying with the County Council to work in business support and as a support worker at Millbank, respectively.

2. Rob Barton and Charmaine Chapman updated the Panel on recent activities and engagement events and showed films of young people enjoying February half-term events. In one activity, young people had been asked what made them happy or sad, and what would help them feel better when they were feeling down. The Chairman thanked Rob and Charmaine for another excellent film and congratulated the team on their work.

3. Matt announced that he was also moving on as he would retire from the County Council at the end of May. He thanked those departing apprentices for their work and the support and encouragement they gave to other young people in care and leaving care and wished them good luck for the future. He asked Charmaine to say what was the most important thing she had learnt as an apprentice and what was the most important thing a corporate parent could do to support young people in their care. Charmaine said she had learnt that adults really care about young people and asked them just to carry on showing this care. Jo added that the two apprentices staying with the County Council would be able to use the skills they had learnt to benefit the Council and could continue to spread the message about the value of the corporate parenting role to other young people in the care system.

4. The Chairman asked how new apprentices would be identified when vacancies arose in the team, if there was a waiting list and if young people were 'talent-spotted' for the role. Jo advised that to get young people into apprentice roles in the County Council, there would need to be sufficient suitable entry-level jobs for them to enter, but it seemed reasonable to give young people leaving care the first pick of apprenticeships. Matt added that the Council did all it could to help young people leaving its care to find suitable employment but would review its pathways to ensure that the experience was as good as it could be and that everything that could be done was being done.

5. It was RESOLVED that the update be noted, with thanks.

6 Verbal Update by the Cabinet Member

1. The Cabinet Member for Integrated Children's Services, Sue Chandler, congratulated the apprentices who were moving on from the Participation team and said she was pleased that some at least would be staying with the County Council. She also praised the quality of the film shown of participation events. She then gave an update on the following issues:-

Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) Green Paper – this had been launched on 5 April, identified three main challenges and sought greater inclusion of

mainstream schools in SEND provision as well as greater investment in SEND services. There was much consultation to be undertaken and it would take time for new work to come to fruition, but the Green Paper was a step in the right direction.

Reconnect – the County Council’s Reconnect programme had been listed as a finalist for both the Local Government Chronical and the Municipal Journal awards, which recognised the hard work and dedication of the Reconnect team. She recorded her thanks to all staff involved in this great achievement.

Spirit of Triangle Awards – these would be held in person this year, and it was always a great pleasure to meet the winners, their families and foster carers and hear their thoughts and hopes for the future.

Education, Training and Employment event – this would take place on 28 April and would give Members an opportunity to look at real life case studies and talk about opportunities available to young people.

Visit to Sandwich Junior School – this visit, with the Panel Chairman and County Council Chairman, had included the planting of a ‘green canopy’ of trees to mark Her Majesty the Queen’s Platinum Jubilee. The aim was to plant 1,800 trees across the county during the Jubilee year, one for every child in care in Kent. Young people would care for and nurture the trees to ensure they reached maturity.

2. Sue advised the Panel that this was Matt’s last meeting of the Panel before his retirement at the end of May. She thanked him on behalf of the children and young people of Kent for his huge contribution to making their experience of the care system as good as it could be. He would be greatly missed. Matt responded to say that Kent’s children and young people in care were in good hands and would thrive.

3. Sue was asked how the success of the Reconnect programme and the skills and lessons learn from it could be used elsewhere in the Council’s work. Kent had been lucky to have had one-off funding at the time to launch the project, and it would need to continue now with less funding. Sue advised that much partnership work had been involved in it and this had been very valuable. It was hoped that work could continue, with an assessment of how it could be delivered with reduced funding. Reports on progress and performance could be reported to the Children’s, Young People and Education Cabinet Committee and the Scrutiny Committee.

4. Asked about the effect of the covid pandemic upon the mental health and wellbeing of young people and how and when the full impact of this might be able to be measured, so that needs could be assessed and met, Sue agreed that this was an issue of most concern. Mental health issues and progress on support initiatives would be monitored by Clinical Commissioning Group partners as part of the integrated health system and reported to the Health Reform and Public Health Cabinet Committee.

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