

KENT COUNTY COUNCIL

CORPORATE PARENTING PANEL

MINUTES of a meeting of the Corporate Parenting Panel held in Seminar Lecture Theatre, Sessions House, County Hall Maidstone on Thursday, 20 June 2013.

PRESENT: Mrs A D Allen, Mr R E Brookbank, Mrs T Carpenter, Mrs P T Cole, Mr J Elenor (Substitute for Mr B Neaves), Mr P J Oakford, Mr R Truelove, Mr M J Vye and Mrs Z Wiltshire

ALSO PRESENT: Mrs J Whittle

IN ATTENDANCE: Ms M MacNeil (Director, Specialist Children's Services), Mr P Brightwell (Performance and Quality Assurance Manager, Children in Care), Mr T Doran (Head Teacher of Looked After Children - VSK), Ms T Gallagher (County Manager, UASC), Ms Y Shah (Coram/KCC Project Officer) and Miss T A Grayell (Democratic Services Officer)

UNRESTRICTED ITEMS

39. Membership

(Item A1)

The Democratic Services Officer reported that Mrs Z Wiltshire had joined the Panel in place of Mrs M Elenor.

40. Election of Chairman

(Item A3)

1. Mr R E Brookbank proposed and Mr M J Vye seconded that Mrs A D Allen be elected Chairman of the Panel.

Agreed without a vote

2. There being no other nominations, Mrs A D Allen was thereupon elected Chairman of the Panel and took the chair.

41. Minutes of the meeting held on 11 April 2013

(Item A5)

RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting held on 11 April 2013 are correctly recorded and they be signed by the Chairman. There were no matters arising.

42. Chairman's Announcements

(Item A6)

The Chairman welcomed new Members to their first meeting of the Panel since the May County Council elections. She advised that she would like to delay the election of a Vice-Chairman to consider the idea of this position being filled by a co-opted Panel member. This suggestion met with the agreement of other Panel members.

43. Cabinet Member's Oral Update

(Item A7)

1. Mrs Whittle gave an oral update on the following issues:-
 - **Reasons for taking on the Specialist Children's portfolio** – Mrs Whittle had taken on the portfolio in 2010/11 due to her personal experience of her own mother having grown up in care in Kent, and her personal interest in improving services following the County Council receiving an 'inadequate' rating and an Improvement Notice in 2011.
 - **Children's Services Improvement Panel** – Mrs Whittle is eager to resurrect this following the May elections, and will write to Members shortly, seeking Membership and offering a first meeting date, probably in late July. The Improvement Panel has four key areas of focus – young people who are the subject of a Child Protection Plan for 2 years or more, reasons why arrangements break down for young people aged 16+, the number of children in care placed in Thanet by other local authorities and children missing from care. Suggestions of agenda items from Members are welcomed. It is important to tackle what isn't working but also to hear about what is working.
 - **Corporate Parenting training** – newly-elected Members were recommended to go on the 'shadow a social worker' scheme.
 - **Publication of Ofsted report following March inspection** – the final formal report has now been received; Kent's adoption service has been rated 'adequate'.
 - **Partnership working with Coram** over the last 18 months to improve the County's adoption service has been very productive. Coram's work has both boosted the recruitment of adopters and the support which is made available to them.

44. Update regarding the work of the Head Teacher of Virtual School Kent

(Item B1)

1. Mr Doran introduced the report and set out the background of Virtual School Kent (VSK) as an introduction to new members of the Panel. He highlighted the following:-
 - as Kent is a very large county, VSK is delivered from 6 locations across the county. Panel members were invited to visit any of these locations;
 - VSK works with six apprentice participation workers, which is proving to be a successful innovation;
 - results across all performance indicators – attendance, exclusion, attainment and participation – have improved much since they were last reported to the Panel;
 - two activity events are arranged in every school holiday - one in West Kent and one in East, alternating at various locations – and attendance at these is increasing each time;
 - a high proportion of the children VSK works with are unaccompanied asylum seeking children (UASC). Two of the VSK apprentice participation workers were themselves UASC;
 - work is ongoing with pupils who attend school only on a part-time basis to re-integrate them into full-time school as soon as possible. To benefit a child, any part-time schooling arrangement needs to be for a minimum of 50% of the regular school hours;

- VSK's performance reporting will benefit from the same new 'Protocol' information management system as will be used for the general Specialist Children's Services performance scorecard. 'Protocol' is expected to come on line in September;
- the second annual VSK achievement awards ceremony will take place on 22 September at St Lawrence Cricket Ground in Canterbury and will have a science and nature theme. Panel members were invited to attend if they wish and Mr Doran undertook to send them details.

2. Mr Doran and Ms MacNeil responded to comments and questions and the following points were highlighted:-

- a) all children in care will continue beyond compulsory school age to enter further or higher education or training. Mr Doran is a member of Young Care Leavers in Post-Compulsory Education (YCLPE), which is chaired by a former Panel member, Graham Razey. A County Council select committee on transition was convened a few years ago and its report would be useful to review now to see what has changed for children in care;
- b) participation and engagement events are vital for young people in care as they prevent them from becoming isolated;
- c) it is difficult to say what involvement VSK has in helping young people to access Special Educational Needs (SEN) services. Children in Care Nurses have good links to mental health services, but access to SEN services is sometimes difficult, and is not immediate. Mr Doran undertook to look into figures and advise the questioner on the length of time it takes to access SEN services. One of the Assistant Head Teachers for VSK is an SEN co-ordinator;
- d) the age range of UASC varies over time; the youngest is currently aged eight but most UASC are in their late teens. For many, age is difficult to identify clearly as they arrive with no personal papers. Their countries of origin also vary and will depend on where in the world there is currently political or civil unrest;
- e) a useful introduction and background to Kent's population of children in care could be gained from the data updates that were once regularly supplied to County Council members via the former Children's Champions Board. It would be useful to resurrect these updates for the benefit of the Panel and all County Council Members so they can each be aware of the number of children in care in their area; and
- f) the large number of children in care placed in Thanet is a long-standing problem, but Panel members were assured that Kent does not place any of its own children in care in Thanet who do not originate from Thanet. Many are placed there by other local authorities, mainly London Boroughs. Mr Doran emphasised that VSK exists primarily for the benefit of Kent's own children in care, and any Kent child in care is automatically covered by VSK.

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

45. Performance Scorecard for Children in Care

(Item B2)

1. Mr Brightwell introduced the report and explained that the systems from which the scorecard is prepared are still evolving. It had previously been hoped that the new data management system 'Protocol', which will replace the Integrated Children's System (ICS), would be available in June, but this is now expected to come online in September. He responded to comments and questions from Panel members, as follows:-

- a) some of the County Council's targets are very ambitious, and, in this regard, compare very well to those of other local authorities; and
- b) there are some variations in performance between East and West Kent, and a series of deep dive studies will look into the reasons behind this.

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

46. Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) Management Report 2012/13

(Item B3)

1. Mr Brightwell introduced the report and explained that it was a statutory requirement that he, as manager of the Independent Reviewing Officer service, produce an annual report on the service's activity and performance and present it to the County Council's elected Members for their scrutiny. He outlined key aspects of the service, as follows:-

- Kent's IRO service is one of the biggest in the UK, with 22 full-time IROs. Between them, they attend 5,396 reviews in a year;
- work is underway to aim to increase the amount of time each IRO spends with children and young people in care, for example by reducing the time spent travelling and condensing some administrative tasks like writing minutes of reviews;
- IRO managers monitor the quality of each IRO's work by auditing one case per IRO per year;
- the number of children and young people chairing their own care reviews is increasing, up from 9 to 21% in the last year;
- feedback from children and young people, their families and carers about the IRO service is much valued, and Mr Brightwell offered to send Panel members a more detailed report of the outcome of feedback surveys, once this is ready to share;
- interviews are undertaken with children and young people when they leave care, and summaries of these will also be shared with the Panel;
- a review of the number of initial health assessments for children and young people in care which are completed within the required timeframe of within 20 days of entering care is soon to be completed, but initial findings suggest that some 67% of assessments are completed on time. The monitoring of these assessments has recently passed from the IRO service to the children in care nurses working within Virtual School Kent.

2. RESOLVED that:-

- a) the Independent Reviewing Officer management report be approved, with thanks; and
- b) a more detailed report of the outcome of feedback surveys with young people be sent to Panel members, once this is ready to share.

47. Trafficking issues in Kent County Council

(Item B4)

1. Ms Gallagher introduced the report and set out key issues arising from the unaccompanied asylum seeking children (UASC) team's work, such as young people's fearfulness around their immigration status making them difficult to engage with and help, and the ongoing issue of the high number of young people in care who go missing. She responded to comments and questions from Panel members, as follows:-

- a) trafficking of young people is an international crime, and the County Council on its own is limited in how much it can do to make any impact upon this. Trafficking needs to be addressed at a national or international level. Ms Gallagher cited one case in which she had liaised with the Moroccan consulate with some success, and this suggests that involving consulates would be a good way to move forward on addressing this; and
- b) verifying the identity of family members named by unaccompanied asylum seeking children upon arrival is a challenge as many young people arrive with incomplete papers, and although DNA tests can be done to identify kin, these are extremely costly. While efforts to investigate and verify family links are undertaken, the young people remain the responsibility of the County Council.

2. RESOLVED that:-

- a) the information set out in the report and given in response to comments and questions be noted, with thanks, and the work of the UASC team be commended; and
- b) further update reports be made to future meetings of the Panel.

48. Update on Adoption Service

(Item B5)

1. Ms Shah introduced the report and highlighted key points, including:-
- approximately 70 children at any one time are waiting for adoptive families. Many of these children have complex needs;
 - a Family Finding team is making a big difference to the speed at which families are identified for children who need them. To help this, placements are now sought earlier than they are legally required to be;

- recent example case studies were shared with Panel members to illustrate how quickly adoption placements are now achieved;
- medical assessments for children awaiting adoption need to be completed more quickly, but this is complicated by them being undertaken by four different health trusts;
- the County Council will host its first ever adoption activity day on 7 July, at which prospective adopters have the opportunity to meet children waiting for adoptive families. It is the first large local authority to pilot such a scheme.

2. Ms Shah and Ms MacNeil responded to comments and questions from Members and the following points were highlighted:-

- a) Members thanked Ms Shah and the Coram team for their work in the last 18 months on improving the County Council's adoption service and congratulated them on the progress which has been made. Mrs Whittle referred to the need to sustain the progress that has been made and said that Coram's involvement in overhauling the County Council's practices has been excellent, and that she wished to continue Coram's involvement beyond 2014, the current planned end date;
- b) Ms Macneil explained that the number of children who are adopted in Kent is below the national average, but children being adopted are younger on average than previously as they pass through the care system faster than before. The number of children in care in Kent has not reduced as far as had previously been hoped, but Panel members were assured that those in care are those who need to be there. However, children also leave care faster than before as they are either placed for fostering or adoption or return home;
- c) many children being adopted have complex needs, so their adoptive families need support to cope with those needs. The professional team supporting adopters needs a different mix of skills than previously and needs to be able to offer more flexible support, eg at evenings and weekends;
- d) members expressed concern that the time taken to approve adopters and match them to a child is too long, and this long wait may deter prospective adopters. Ms Shah explained that work has been going on to reduce the length of time taken to approve new adopters. This includes giving a faster response to initial enquiries, more frequent regular monthly information sessions at which prospective adopters can find out what is involved, and follow-up calls to those who attend these sessions;
- e) Ms MacNeil outlined the constructive liaison work going on to reduce the time for cases to go through the courts process to a maximum of 26 weeks. Courts have been booking blocks of extra sessions to clear backlogs of cases. She explained that a few historical cases have been particularly complicated, and that it is sometimes necessary to take longer over a case to ensure that adopters are properly prepared when taking on a child who has very complex needs;

- f) the County Council has tried to appoint a permanent head officer for the adoption service on several occasions but each time the candidates coming forward have not had the range of skills required. The size of Kent as an adoption authority – Kent and Birmingham are the two largest in the UK – makes recruitment to this post a particular challenge. To move ahead with an innovative new adoption service will need fresh thinking and new ideas; and
- g) Panel members were asked to comment on the helpfulness of the information presented, and commented that statistics needed to be in a more concise and easier-to-read format.

3. RESOLVED that:-

- a) the information set out in the report and given in response to comments and questions be noted, with thanks;
- b) a report on post-adoption support given to adopters be included in the update report to the next meeting of this Panel; and
- c) member comments on the style and content of reports, set out above, be taken into account when preparing future reports.