

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 Friday, 25 October 2013.

PRESENT: Mrs A D Allen (Chairman), Mr R E Brookbank, Mrs T Carpenter, Mrs P T Cole, Mr S Griffiths, Mr G Lymer, Mr B Neaves, Mr P J Oakford, Mr R Truelove, Mr M J Vye and Mrs Z Wiltshire

ALSO PRESENT: Ms S Dunstan, Mr J Jackson, Ms T Jackson, Mrs C Moody, Mr D Tadese, Mrs J Whittle and Mrs M Norley

IN ATTENDANCE: Mr M Wheeler (Interim Assistant Director of Safeguarding and Quality Assurance), Mr P Brightwell (Head of Quality Assurance, Children's Safeguarding Team), Mrs S Skinner (Service Business Manager, Virtual School Kent) and Miss T A Grayell (Democratic Services Officer)

UNRESTRICTED ITEMS

56. Minutes of the meeting held on 25 September 2013

(Item A2)

RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting held on 25 September 2013 are correctly recorded and they be signed by the Chairman. There were no matters arising.

57. Meeting Dates in 2014

(Item A3)

RESOLVED that following dates reserved for the Panel's meetings in 2014 be noted:-

Friday 14 February, 10.00 am
Thursday 10 April, 2.00 pm
Thursday 19 June, 2.00 pm
Thursday 4 September, 2.00 pm
Friday 24 October, 10.00 am
Tuesday 9 December, 2.00 pm

58. Chairman's Announcements and Introductions

(Item A4)

The Chairman welcomed those who were attending the meeting at the invitation of the Panel:-

- the four Virtual School Kent apprentices – Sophia Dunstan, James Jackson, Theresa Jackson and David Tadese – were present to take part in the discussion and to give the Panel first-hand feedback as champions of children in care and care leavers,

- Carolyn Moody, a Foster Carer interested in being co-opted onto the Panel, and
- Mark Wheeler, Interim Assistant Director, Safeguarding and Quality Assurance, who was in attendance in place of Mairead MacNeil.

Panel Members and visitors then introduced themselves around the table.

59. Cabinet Member's Oral Update

(Item A5)

1. Mrs Whittle gave an oral update on the following issues:-

Improving the quality of support for young people - much work since the Panel's last meeting has been concentrated on this, and a report on the action plan is included on this agenda. Much work is aimed at extending support for young people beyond 18, particularly allowing them to stay with their Foster Carers, if they wish, up to the age of 21. The key approach should be geared to 'stage, not age', ie where they are currently in their development rather than their age.

Care Leavers Charter – Mrs Whittle will be interviewed by the BBC later today about the Care Leavers Charter. This will include clarification of the entitlements for young people.

2. The oral updates were noted.

60. Six-monthly update on the views of Young People in Care

(Item B1)

Ms M Norley of the Young Lives Foundation was in attendance for this item.

1. Mr Brightwell and Mrs Skinner introduced the report and explained that the information presented had been gathered from surveys completed by young people, so was necessarily limited just to the young people who were willing to give their views and to the information they were willing to give. A new questionnaire to be used in future had been independently commissioned in partnership with the Young Lives Foundation and focussed on the questions that young people wanted it to include. It would be trialled in the Ashford area later in October.

2. When developing the new questionnaire, Ms Norley had attended forums at which young people had expressed very clear views on its content and had welcomed the fact that it would be anonymous. They were very pleased to be asked for their views and were willing to be frank and honest. Young people had previously felt unable to give honest feedback as they felt their comments would be reported back to their Foster Carers.

3. Panel members made the following comments, to which the officers and the VSK apprentices responded, from their own experience and as champions of other children and young people in care:-

- a) the way in which questions are phrased and the level at which they are pitched is important, so questioning appears informal. *Ms Norley explained that questions are worded differently for different age groups;*
- b) the summary of outcomes presented in the report sets out some powerful messages and inspires empathy for the young people concerned. This is the start of some good engagement and gives a good position from which engagement can be taken forward;
- c) one thing that young people had said they were unhappy about is the number of people who sometimes attend their review meetings. *Ms Jackson responded that the 'right' number of people to have at a review depends on the young person concerned; some like to have a wider audience for the views they want to express, while others prefer to have just the few people closest and most important to them. VSK apprentices and IROs engage young people individually to seek their views on whom they want to attend their review meetings;*
- d) although the majority of young people say they are happy with the conduct of their reviews, there is still a sizeable percentage of them who are not happy. This number needs to be monitored and reduced;
- e) the quality of social work assessments and the frequency with which a young person's allocated social worker can change are both longstanding challenges. The Panel has also previously heard from young people that a lack of continuity around medical checks and the transfer of medical records to accompany a move to a new placement is also a problem. *Ms Jackson responded that VSK apprentices always impress upon young people that, although change will be minimised as far as possible, a change in social worker sometimes cannot be avoided. Ms Dunstan added that, although most young people accept this, some complain that the handover between the former and new social workers could be improved. Ms Jackson said that some young people struggle to cope with changes and the lack of continuity that this brings;*

Mr Brightwell added that young people's views should be sought before their social worker is changed, and IROs will always speak up for young people and seek to minimise disruption. The Panel had asked previously that the frequency of change of social worker be added to the scorecard as a new measure, and this will happen as soon as the new data system is available. He added that ensuring that a good quality care plan is in place for every young person would help the transition process if a social worker has to change. The IRO service is working on raising the quality of care plans. He set out the robust process used in Kent to monitor and maintain the standard of IROs' performance, including regular reviews and case audits. Very few other local authorities apply this level of monitoring;
- f) asked if social workers are expected to be able to identify the young people on their caseloads who need the most support, *Ms Jackson explained that it is often difficult to judge those who need more support*

as some young people put on 'a front' as a way of coping with the challenges they face. The best way for a social worker to identify a young person's needs is to ask them! Another Panel member commented that a good social worker should be able to see beyond a 'front'. Ms Jackson replied that some young people in care get very good at hiding their feelings and can put on a very convincing appearance of being OK;

- g) asked how young people feel about the onus to seek more help being put on them, *Ms Dunstan replied that she needed to feel that she was in control, eg of when she met with a social worker. She reassured Members that, as a social worker gets to know a young person, they will learn to identify their needs; and*
- h) in response to a question about how young people feel about the title of 'social worker', *Ms Dunstan replied that she had only ever known them as that; there is no 'softer' title for them. Some young people see social workers as being on their own level, and relate to them accordingly, while others see social workers as a daunting adult presence in their lives. This view will depend on the relationship between the young person and the social worker and how well they get on.*

5. RESOLVED that the information set out in the report be noted, with thanks, and Panel members' views, set out above, be taken into account when planning future surveys.

61. Discussion item - Engagement with Young People in Care *(Item B2)*

1. The Chairman introduced the item and explained that it would develop further the engagement themes which had started to appear in the discussion of the previous item. There then followed a general discussion around various aspects of leaving care.

2. Ms Dunstan referred to the pack of information which had been tabled by the VSK apprentices, which included some information on an OCYPC engagement event to take place on 1 November. She confirmed that CPP Members were always very welcome to attend activities arranged for children in care and care leavers, as they had on previous occasions, and that young people found this a comfortable way in which to mingle with them. The Chairman secured the VSK apprentices' support to help organise events to engage with young people.

3. Ms Dunstan added that the VSK apprentices hoped that more activity days could be arranged, so more funding for this was being sought. She said she had written to KCC Members asking for funds and had had some success. This financial support helped avoid turning away any young person who wanted to participate. Mrs Skinner added that any extra funding which could be made available for such activities would also be welcomed.

4. Mrs Skinner explained that different activity days are arranged for different age groups – eg Easter egg hunts for 6 – 8 year-olds, paintballing for 11 – 16 year-olds and theatre trips for over-16s. VSK has very good connections with under-16s but still

struggles to achieve the same sort of connections with over -16s. Ms Jackson added that foster carers often attend events with the young people they look after and enjoy the events as a family.

5. The Chairman referred to events which are sometimes arranged for the birth children of foster carers under the banner 'Kids who Foster'. These acknowledge the contribution they make as part of a foster family and the impact that fostering has on them.

6. Mrs Moody asked what arrangements there were for young people with disabilities to access and join in at participation days. Ms Dunstan explained that disabled children had attended some days with their foster carers and had felt sufficiently comfortable and integrated after a short while to stay on without their foster carers.

7. Mr Griffiths said he had been to most of the activity days with his foster children and had always found them very welcoming and well organised. He said VSK apprentices were doing an excellent job and said he hoped that such activities would be able to continue.

8. The Chairman asked the VSK apprentices to comment on the awards ceremony that took place in the summer and if the tone and conduct of it had been right. Mr Vye asked if events attracted a cross-section of young people or if they tended to attract only the most outgoing. Ms Jackson replied that some young people had proved difficult when attending activity days but other participants had handled it well. Ms Jackson said VSK apprentices had not tried to exclude any young person who was being difficult but had asked them nicely to calm down and enjoy the day rather than spoil it for others. It is important to remain friendly and avoid appearing authoritarian.

9. Mr Tadese added that the benefit of the participation days is not just to enjoy the activity but to take the opportunity to make new friends and understand other young people who share the experience of being in care. Ms Dunstan agreed and added that there is no pressure on people to participate at an activity day. However, some young people who hadn't previously enjoyed such events enjoy them now. The important thing is to make a connection and let troubled young people know that they are understood and their experiences have been shared by others. Mrs Skinner added that activity days have a high VSK/staff-to-visitor ratio to support young people attending, to make the day as positive as possible.

10. Mr Vye asked if the job specification for the VSK apprentices is right. Mrs Skinner replied that, when the specification was first written, it had not been possible to predict fully how the role would pan out, as Kent is the first and only local authority to appoint VSK apprentices. One year on from their appointment, it is now easier to identify and appreciate the contribution that they have made in their role. If the job specification were being drafted now it would look quite different, and the existing one has been changed and improved for future apprentices. Ms Dunstan added that the current apprentices had developed the role and made it their own so that future apprentices would know what to do.

11. Mrs Wiltshire asked if one outcome of the participation days might be to help young people to gain some understanding of parenting skills for the future. Mrs

Skinner replied that participation days and e.Peps (personal education plans) could contribute to developing some parenting and nurturing skills. Ms Jackson added that the VSK apprentices perhaps had a slightly more adult perspective than some young people of the benefits of attending a participation day but could still relate to younger children and help them get what they wanted out of it.

62. Ofsted Children in Care Inspection Action Plan

(Item B3)

1. Mr Wheeler introduced the report and emphasised the importance of making sure work practice keeps up with the changing needs of children in care so the best quality care and support can be provided at all times. The situation is never static. He explained that the action plan would be considered by the multi-agency Kent Corporate Parenting Group (KCPG) on 14 November. Improvements he would like to make to the Plan are to increase the emphasis on multi-agency working and the make the Plan more live and active.

2. Panel members were advised that the KCPG is an officer-led group and not a forum that Corporate Parenting Panel members would be able to attend, although the latter could receive reports from the Group so it could scrutinise its work. The link between the two bodies is currently unclear and needs to be formalised and clarified. A report on corporate governance issues will be presented to the Panel's next meeting.

3. Officers responded to comments and questions from Panel members, as follows:-

- a) officers were asked what role district workshops could have in measuring changes in performance, and how this could be achieved. *Mr Brightwell replied that exploration of this role is part of an overall project to assess how improvements can be made to social work practice. There is a close link between practice improvement and quality assurance, but improvement must be measurable. Mr Wheeler added that workshops are a stand-alone process but that every available method of measuring and addressing performance should be used;*
- b) Panel members have been told that all young people are given a copy of Kent's pledge to children in care but expressed concern that some may not necessarily read it and understand it;
- c) some parts of the Plan lists actions as 'completed' when in fact the meeting at which the final version will be signed off had yet to take place. The outcomes recorded should be an honest and reliable record of progress. *Mrs Whittle asked, and other Panel members agreed, that a report on progress on the action plan be made to every meeting of the Panel. Mr Wheeler undertook to do this and added that the next version of the Plan would include more detail. Mr Brightwell suggested that it may be useful to add a column to say 'how well are we doing?' He assured the Panel that the performance of the IRO team in delivering Kent's Pledge to children in care was constantly monitored;*

- d) although Ofsted had said that 74% of care plans were 'adequate' or better, this left 26% plans which were presumably less than adequate. *Mr Brightwell added that the County Council wanted all of its care plans to be good and that those considered less than adequate simply needed a little more work in pulling various elements together. He explained that another performance target in every IRO's personal action plan is to reduce drift. Reducing drift will ultimately reduce the number of children in care;*
- e) the review of the 16+ service was to be completed by 31 March 2014 and Panel members asked that they be able to see the completed review at that time;
- f) in response to a question about the number of children in care housed in bed and breakfast accommodation, *Mr Brightwell confirmed that the figure quoted in priority area 8.3 did not include UASC. The County Council takes a very firm stance that bed and breakfast accommodation is not suitable for any young person under 18;*
- g) a view was expressed that the Corporate Parenting Panel provided a robust scrutiny function and was now coming into its own and performing this role well. It now needed to consider how best to manage this scrutiny function. There are key things in this action plan on which the Panel should have a report to every meeting – eg progress on reducing CAMHS waiting times; and
- h) another Panel member added that, as a corporate parent, she felt a personal responsibility for the actions that the County Council should be taking. To execute this responsibility properly she would need to have more knowledge of the challenges facing the council and a realistic picture of progress, good or bad.

4. RESOLVED that:-

- a) the information set out in the report be noted, but that it also be noted that several planned actions are not yet complete;
- b) a report on corporate governance issues be considered at the Panel's next meeting; and
- c) an update report on progress on the action plan be made to every meeting of the Panel.

63. Kent Care Leavers Charter - oral update

(Item B4)

Ms S Mullin, Commissioning Manager, was in attendance for this item.

1. Mrs Skinner and Ms Mullin gave an oral update on the development of the Charter and outlined key aspects of it. It is important to see the Charter as part of the whole work stream which includes work with UASC and the Catch 22 service, rather than something which would stand alone. It should also link to the service delivery

model and the Kent Pledge. Kent's version of the Government's national charter is its own localised statement of what it will deliver to young people leaving care, and would have the input and co-operation of young people so it represented their views of what they wanted. A meeting of the Young People's Forum on 26 October would look at the wider themes of the Government's charter (eg lifelong champions) and give a view on what is realistic and desirable to include in Kent's Charter.

2. Ms Mullin added that the current Catch 22 contract would end in September 2014 and the County Council is considering a future model of service provision and delivery, to avoid the present 'cliff face' effect when many services end at the age of 16. Multi-agency work is continuing on the sufficiency of accommodation used for young people aged between 16 and 24, so they are supported on their journey towards independence. Some of this work responds to national drivers such as '21 and Beyond', but until a clear picture is available of what young people want it is not possible to progress decisively.

3. There then followed a general discussion around various aspects of leaving care.

- a) Ms Dunstan explained that young people leaving care retained a link to Catch 22 until the age of 21 but do not receive any IRO service beyond the age of 18, although she would like to have had this support through a challenging time. She had known her IRO for a long time by then and would have appreciated the chance to continue the relationship;
- b) Mrs Carpenter referred to the 'staying put' policy and said that her foster son had simply not been ready to leave when he reached the usual age of leaving care. He still returns from university in holidays to continue his link with her family. Although Foster Carers may wish to continue to support an older child, it is difficult for them to make space available indefinitely without payment, as fostering provides their income and they need to be available to accommodate new children for whom they will receive fostering payments. Mrs Whittle said she supported the 'staying put' policy and would lobby the Government to introduce an arrangement which will help Foster Carers to continue to support older children, perhaps by addressing their tax status and eligibility for benefits;
- c) Mrs Whittle went on to say that, in her view, use of bed and breakfast accommodation for care leavers is not appropriate. To address the issue of sufficiency and the use of inappropriate accommodation, it is necessary to have an open and honest appraisal of what currently happens. *She asked that a report on the number of young people housed in such accommodation, and the way in which this is risk-assessed, be made to every meeting of this Panel.* Although the County Council has corporate parenting responsibility for young people in care, it does not have responsibility for housing. This issue is shared by the County and District Councils and other partners such as housing associations, and this should be made clear, eg in media coverage. Mr Wheeler added that the problem is not a static one and is more of a challenge because of this. Ms Dunstan added that it is not just bed and breakfast accommodation which is a problem for care leavers; being in

any sort of shared housing effectively challenges them to fend for themselves at 16;

- d) asked if the County Council was good at helping young people access, understand and manage benefits, Ms Dunstan replied that it was not. She had received no help with sorting out Council Tax and had had to declare herself homeless before she could access the necessary support and benefits. Some young people would not have been able to cope with being in this situation and would not have known what to do. Advance planning would avoid other young people being put in this situation;
- e) Mr Wheeler added that the next step in the County Council's improvements is to focus on the quality of pathway plans as this is vital to improve the overall experience of moving from care to adult independent living. He undertook to liaise with the VSK apprentices on this issue outside the meeting;
- f) Ms Mullin said that no young person should be left 'in the cold' at 18. Kent's model of service for young people of 16+ has historically not supported a culture of early independence. There is no room for compromise in services for care leavers, and Kent's record in this area simply has to change and improve. 16 is too young for young people to move to from children's to adults' services – 18 is a better age;
- g) Mrs Carpenter emphasised the importance of good support being available to young people leaving care so they are not suddenly left to fend for themselves. They need to be taught skills such as budgeting and housekeeping. These skills take time to develop so forward planning and prep is vital. Young people over 18 need to have the same security and quality of service as those under 18;
- h) in response to a question about the robustness of services such as Catch 22 and those delivered by District Councils in supporting care leavers to access housing and support services, and whether or not care leavers could be given preferential treatment, Ms Mullin explained that the sufficiency requirement applied to young people aged 16 to 24. The way forward would be to do a full audit of current provision and resources across the county and then set some minimum standards and align housing services with other support for young people aged 16+. Members commented that the County Council should be seeking excellence and the best quality service possible, rather than minimum provision;
- i) asked if the Ofsted report had made any comment on the adequacy of Kent's accommodation for care leavers, as this is the first priority for the latter, Mr Wheeler replied that Ofsted would have said if it had found provision to be inadequate. The report gives steers, including not using bed and breakfast accommodation. Examining the circumstances and identifying the needs of individual young people is the key to achieving the best and most responsive service. Accommodation and support needs to be a co-ordinated package. Mr Brightwell added that much of

Kent's current practice has been graded as 'adequate' or better. The key message of the Kent Charter is that Kent will never give up trying to help any care leaver and will strive constantly to improve its services to them; and

- j) Ms Mullin explained that a report which would seek to bring back in-house the services for care leavers which had previously been outsourced would be considered by the Corporate Board on 28 October. This will also bring together teams working with children in care and unaccompanied asylum seeking children to work together on the sufficiency strategy. This was welcomed as the continuity of care, although a challenge to achieve, is vital.

4. Mrs Whittle summed up by saying that a care leavers' Charter was a vital tool to bring together and formalise the County Council's existing commitment to care leavers and the entitlements of care leavers, to create a contract between the two.

5. RESOLVED that the information given in the oral update and in response to questions be noted, with thanks.

64. Virtual School Kent Apprentices

1. The Chairman thanked the VSK apprentices for attending the meeting. Ms Dunstan, Ms Jackson, Mr Jackson and Mr Tadese confirmed that being able to participate in the discussion, hear at first hand and be able to discuss the Panel's views and concerns on engagement with young people had been very useful. Ms Jackson advised the Panel that she would shortly be preparing the first children in care newsletter and would include in this an interview with a County Council Member and a piece about the role of Corporate Parents.

2. It was agreed that in future the VSK apprentices would receive agendas and papers for all Panel meetings. The Chairman expressed a wish that one of the VSK apprentices be co-opted on to the Panel.