

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, 19 June 2014.

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

ALSO PRESENT: Mr P J Oakford

IN ATTENDANCE: Ms M MacNeil (Director, Specialist Children's Services), Mr P Brightwell (Head of Quality Assurance, Children's Safeguarding Team), Mr T Doran (Head Teacher of Looked After Children - VSK), Ms Y Shah (Interim Head of Adoption Service) and Miss T A Grayell (Democratic Services Officer)

UNRESTRICTED ITEMS

19. Membership
(Item A1)

The Chairman reported that Jenny Whittle had replaced Peter Oakford as a Member of the Panel, as Mr Oakford had taken over as Cabinet Member for Specialist Children's Services to cover Mrs Whittle's imminent maternity leave.

20. Substitutes and Apologies

The Democratic Services Officer reported that no notice of any substitutes had been given, but apologies had been received from Teresa Carpenter, Sophia Dunstan, Stuart Griffiths and Carolyn Moody.

21. Minutes of the meeting held on 10 April 2014
(Item A3)

1. RESOLVED that these be approved as a correct record and be signed by the Chairman.
2. In response to a question from Mr Vye about a report on the reasons for placement breakdowns, which was to have been reported to this meeting, Ms MacNeil apologised for the absence of the item on the agenda. She explained that the necessary information had not been complete in time to draft a report in June but such an item could be included for the Panel's early-September meeting. The Democratic Services Officer suggested that the report be sent out to Panel members as soon as it became available, between meetings, and that an item be added to the September agenda to respond to whatever issues Panel members may wish to raise after reading the report.

3. In response to a question from Mrs Wiltshire about placements of children in care beyond 20 miles from their family home, Ms MacNeil explained that the County Council had more control over the placement of its own children in care but no direct control over the placement of children by other local authorities. There were as yet no figures available to show the effect of recent new regulations restricting placements beyond 20 miles. Mrs Whittle added that the report of a recent Parliamentary Education Select Committee had recommended that placements beyond 20 miles should not be made. However, the Department of Education had yet to issue its response to the Select Committee report, and she advised that the County Council should wait for this response to be made before making its own formal comment.

22. Minutes of the meeting of the Kent Corporate Parenting Group held on 22 May 2014

(Item A4)

1. RESOLVED that the minutes be noted.
2. Mr Vye highlighted key issues which had arisen at the meeting, which he had attended as a representative of KCC elected Members:-
 - it had been suggested that KCC elected Members be issued with a lanyard printed with 'Corporate Parent', to identify the role which they all shared;
 - it was becoming clear that the Staying Put initiative would rely heavily on sufficient funding being made available;
 - a recent presentation on Junior ISAs by the Share Foundation had been inspiring as a possible way of supporting Kent's children in care to save tax-free for their future, and he suggested that elected Members could possibly use part of their individual Member grants to contribute to such accounts. He said he was currently seeking advice on this issue. *It was subsequently agreed that an item be added to a future Panel agenda in which the Share Foundation could make a presentation on Junior ISAs.*

23. Chairman's Announcements

(Item A5)

1. The Chairman announced that a recent meeting had taken place between herself, Mr Oakford, Ms MacNeil and young people in care. The purpose of the meeting had been to preview the new 'Care to Listen' DVD and ask young people for their ideas and suggestions on how they wished to engage with the Corporate Parenting Panel. The young people were preparing a report to present to the County Council meeting on 15 July, with the DVD.
2. She added that she was currently in discussion with the Leader about establishing a KCC apprentice scheme for care leavers.
3. She read out a card received from Carolyn Moody of the Thanet Foster Carers Association thanking the members of the Panel for their support and participation at the recent sports day in Thanet on Bank Holiday Monday.
4. Panel members took the opportunity to congratulate the Chairman on her recent award of an MBE in the Queen's Birthday Honours list.

24. Verbal Update from Our Children and Young People's Council
(Item A6)

In the absence of Ms Dunstan, Mr Doran briefly outlined the activities being arranged by the VSK apprentices for the summer holidays. *The details of these events, once finalised, would be sent to the Democratic Services Officer for email distribution to Panel members.*

25. Cabinet Member's Verbal Update
(Item A7)

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

Fostering Fortnight – this had recently taken place and been very successful.

Children's Social Worker Recruitment and Retention – he had asked the Council's human resources team to research the potential total benefits packages which could be offered to social workers in local authorities and to compare them to those available to social workers in independent agencies, so the County Council could set its packages to compete. The cost of recruiting social workers was currently £3million and his aim was to halve this amount.

Foster Children and Carers Sports Day in Thanet - this had been well attended, despite very poor weather, and had been an outstanding day. The local sports centre had permitted its indoor facilities to be used free of charge so that planned outdoor activities could move indoors to escape the weather. He thanked those Panel members who had attended and urged Panel members to support similar future events.

LLP – Supporting Care Leavers in Education and Training – the annual conference had been addressed by the Secretary of State for Children and Families, Edward Timpson, who had himself been in foster care as a child.

The Caldecott Foundation – this charitable trust provided residential and day care for children with disabilities and special educational needs (SEN) and had recently opened a new vocational training centre. The Foundation was seeking to liaise with the County Council to reduce the costs of placing young people at the Foundation's centres and to make their services more affordable to the Council.

26. Update on Adoption Service
(Item B1)

1. Ms Shah introduced the report and highlighted that improvements had been made at every stage of the adoption process. She presented a selection of anonymised case studies to illustrate the challenges which the Adoption service had to overcome, especially in finding adopters for hard-to-place children. She responded to comments and questions from Panel members and the following points were highlighted:-

- a) it would not yet be possible to identify any effect of a recent television series about the adoption service in one London Borough, eg on the number of prospective adopters coming forward, as the information currently available covered only the period before the series had been broadcast;
- b) adopters looking at possibly taking on hard-to-place children would be advised at the outset of the support packages which would be available to them after placement;
- c) the next planned Adoption Activity Day would take place on 28 September, and Panel members were encouraged to attend the Adoption Summit on 3 July;
- d) it had proven difficult in the past to recruit adopters from BME communities in Kent, but also there had historically been a very low number of children in Kent from BME communities seeking adoption. The number of children with dual heritage had increased recently, and the number of families from BME communities migrating to Kent had also increased, gradually changing the ethnic profile of the county. This may mean that more adopters from such communities may need to be recruited in the future. There were very few Asian children in care, and Asian parents seeking to adopt tended to travel to India to adopt there;
- e) Kent had exceeded the performance of the two other local authorities of a similar size – Essex and Birmingham – in terms of the number of children successfully adopted. *Ms Shah undertook to research comparative figures for other local authorities and advise the Panel of these;*
- f) Panel members acknowledged and celebrated the great improvement made to the adoption service since the appointment of Coram; and
- g) the annual report of the adoption service had not been ready to present to this meeting but would be presented instead to the Panel's September meeting. The independent Chairman of the Improvement Panel, Jonathan Pearce, would need to see the report when he visited the Kent Panel in early July, and *Ms Shah undertook to finalise the report and send it to Panel members via the Democratic Services Officer before sharing it with Mr Pearce.*

2. RESOLVED that the update report be noted, with thanks, and the adoption service annual report be sent to Panel members after the meeting.

27. Update regarding the work of the Head Teacher of Virtual School Kent (VSK)
(Item B2)

1. Mr Doran introduced the report and highlighted key areas in which VSK had performed well against the national, South East and London averages, although it aspired to perform above these averages. New data sets had been introduced at the LLP annual conference. Panel members were reminded that Kent had three times the national average of unaccompanied asylum seeking children, many of whom arrived in the UK during years 10 and 11 of their education and therefore had limited

time to settle and perform well at GCSE level. Kent also had an increasing number of children in care with SEN and, with the new reforms of the SEN assessment process, a great increase had been seen in the number of children who were just below the level at which they would be awarded a statement of SEN. Mr Doran responded to questions and comments from Panel members and the following points were highlighted:-

- a) VSK had shown improvement against wider data which measured attainment beyond 5 GCSEs. Mr Doran read out the latest statistics, *which are appended to these minutes*;
- b) Kent always sought to celebrate the achievements of its young people, and a press release could be prepared setting out this good news story;
- c) concern was expressed about how good performance would appear if English and Maths scores were to be recorded separately. These two subjects were measured and recorded together as they were both valued by employers and a young person's employment chances would be much better if they had good scores in both these key subjects;
- d) concern was also expressed about how realistic it was to expect young people to perform well academically when they had experienced trauma and disruption in their lives. Formal qualifications were only part of the story; it was important for young people in care to be able to build their self-esteem, and emphasising qualifications in which only the top 15% were expected to perform well might be damaging to the self-esteem of others. Mr Doran reassured members that VSK's focus extended beyond the top 15% of pupils;
- e) the Chairman asked about the extent of awareness among foster carers of the County Council's pledge to its children in care and care leavers, and Mr Brightwell advised that independent reviewing officers (IROs) checked levels of awareness as part of their role, as a way of quality-assuring the effectiveness of the County Council's efforts to publicise the document. Although some may not recognise the title of the document, most were familiar with the content of it. As part of its ongoing liaison with children in care and care leavers, the Panel could ask them what support they required to understand the Pledge and its contents;
- f) VSK's responsibility currently ended at the end of the GCSE years. The new Children and Families Act and the Raising the Participation Age legislation, which had made Mr Doran's role statutory, had been expected to extend this responsibility but no change had been made. Ideally, VSK would like to support young people from 0 to 25 but it was important to be realistic about what was currently possible with available resources. However, VSK would always seek to support a young person through their transition to further or higher education, linking to the September Guarantee. VSK had a good relationship with further and higher education colleges and would liaise with them about what support they would need to have to be able to help young people through transition;

- g) currently, a high number of children in care dropped out of education at age 16 or in year 13, and the number going on to university was very low. 48% of children in care and care leavers were not in education, employment or training (NEET), although the NEET figure only ever offered a snapshot of the situation at any one moment;
- h) Mr Doran was asked about what budgetary support might be required for this work and the Cabinet Member, Mr Oakford, said he would meet with the Cabinet Member for Education and Health Reform, Mr Gough, to discuss and take this forward. Mr Doran added that the recent transfer of control of the pupil premium grant from schools to VSK gave VSK scope in deciding how to use it. He tabled a chart listing possible uses of the grant, following the Sutton model;
- i) Mr Doran's new statutory role brought with it a budget of £2.3million but this could only be used for children from Reception year to age 16, and some in year 11, to support transition;
- j) schools had a statutory responsibility to improve the educational attainment of children in care, which is why funding had traditionally been channelled via schools, and they were required to establish a formal support plan for each child, which VSK had a responsibility to monitor. The Leuven 5-point scale of wellbeing in learning measured indicators such as interaction, concentration and behaviour and behaviour, and if existing support was not effective, schools needed to have a plan to improve it, with VSK support;
- k) in response to a question about the relationship between foster carers and VSK, Mr Doran explained that one of VSK had fostering/education liaison officers who would work with foster carers, and good links would be made between a child's school, foster home, social worker and VSK; and
- l) Mr Doran was asked by one Panel member to attend a meeting of the governing body of a local school to guide them in starting to use the Sutton model. Mr Doran said he was happy to do this but to attend every school in Kent which was considering using this model would be a huge undertaking. He pointed out that his budget of £2.3million could not be used for administration tasks.
2. RESOLVED that the update be noted, with thanks, and that VSK staff be congratulated on the levels of attainment the VSK has helped young people to achieve.

28. Independent reviewing Officer (IRO) Service - quarterly update
(Item B3)

1. Mr Brightwell introduced the report and highlighted key points, as follows:-
- the number of children in care in Kent had fallen since the last quarterly report to the Panel;
 - monitoring the number of changes of social worker a child in care experiences was now included in IROs' work;
 - a recommendation arising from Ofsted's most recent inspection was that the number of IROs should be doubled;

- the key role of IROs was to promote and support good practice;
- most children in care were now chairing their own review meetings; and
- the aim of Kent's IRO service was not to settle for any rating that was less than 'good'.

2. He responded to comments and questions from Panel members and the following points were raised:-

- a) young people who were happy with their experience of being in care were more likely to fill in surveys or take part in exit interviews, but it was important also to engage with those who were perhaps not so happy and may be reticent about sharing their feelings. Mr Brightwell commented that, as IROs were able to spend more time building relationships with young people, the latter would hopefully then be more willing to participate in feedback surveys and interviews. It was important to adopt a gentle and careful approach when seeking young people's views;
 - b) 60% of young people leaving care had said that their IRO had been helpful to them;
 - c) the Cabinet Member, Mr Oakford, commented that, when meeting with young people recently to seek their views on engagement, he had been told that they felt surveys to be 'boring' and that a mobile phone app would be preferred as it was easier to respond to. Mr Brightwell said that apps had been considered but social workers tended to prefer traditional ways of communicating and may take a while to embrace the use of new technology in this way. *He undertook to look into the feasibility of introducing this new idea;* and
 - d) 30% of social worker review reports had been rated as 'inadequate', so there was still some work to do to address the quality of reporting. Ms MacNeil responded that the County Council was thorough and strict about its self-assessment targets, and an 'inadequate' rating could arise from one error such as a mis-spelling of the child's name. The importance of getting such basic details correct was emphasised. The questioner said it would be helpful to have an indication in future reporting to the Panel of the reason for any 'inadequate' rating. Mr Brightwell added that standards of recording had risen since the 2010 Ofsted inspection, so that a basic error would now be highlighted whereas it may previously not have been. While 1 in 10 children might have some error in their care plan, it was important to acknowledge that 9 in 10, or 90%, of children, had a correct and complete plan. The County Council's aim was that all children should have a care plan which was 100% correct.
3. RESOLVED that the update be noted, with thanks, and that IROs be thanked for the difficult and valuable work they do to support children and young people in care.