

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 Tuesday, 15 March 2016.

PRESENT: Mrs A D Allen, MBE (Chairman), Mrs Z Wiltshire (Vice-Chairman), Mr M J Angell (Substitute for Mrs J Whittle), Mr R H Bird (Substitute for Mr M J Vye), Mrs P T Cole, Ms S Dunstan, Mr T A Maddison (Substitute for Ms C J Cribbon), Mr B Neaves, Mr M J Northey (Substitute for Mr G Lymer) and Ms B Taylor

ALSO PRESENT: Mr P J Oakford

IN ATTENDANCE: Mr P Segurola (Director of Specialist Children's Services), Mrs S Skinner (Service Business Manager, Virtual School Kent), Ms C Smith (Acting Head of Fostering) and Miss T A Grayell (Democratic Services Officer)

UNRESTRICTED ITEMS

134. Exclusion of the Press and Public

RESOLVED that, under Section 100A of the Local Government Act 1972, the press and public be excluded from the meeting for the following item of business on the grounds that it involves the likely disclosure of exempt information, as defined in paragraphs 1 and 2 of Part 1 of Schedule 12A of the Act.

(OPEN ACCESS TO MINUTES)

135. The views of Young People in Care

(Item 1)

A group of five young people attended to tell the Panel about their experiences of being in care and leaving care. They were supported by Julie, a social worker from the 18-plus team.

Everyone around the table introduced themselves.

Welcome to this meeting of the Corporate Parenting Panel. Can you tell us about your experiences of coping at school and of leaving care? Have you found any barriers or problems?

CC: I struggled to fit in, which gave me many problems, but I was well supported. I feel I now have the help and support that I need now I have left care.

What caused these problems? Did you move about a lot to new placements?

CC: No, I stayed in one place during that time.

JF: School was OK for me but I struggled to fit in. Over time it got better and I feel OK. Teachers and social workers were supportive. I found I had plenty of options at 16-plus - sixth form, university, apprenticeships, etc.

Did anyone tell you that your options were limited, because you were in care?

JF: I was at school at level 1 when I entered care and my social worker and carer worked together to get me into grammar school, as that's where I wanted to go. I settled well after a few months.

Was your education OK for you? Did you get help and support with English as a second language?

MA: Yes I got help. I would like to say Thank you very much for the help I was given by the County Council, which helped me a lot. This year I am studying bricklaying and next year I hope to do football coaching.

M: The County Council helped me with English and maths at level 1 and with English as a second language. In 2013 to 2014, at level 1, I studied well and had help with GCSE maths.

How do these experiences compare to those of the VSK apprentices?

VSK apprentices: This is much the same as our experience.

What have you learned from your experiences that has been helpful to you, or will be helpful to you, to help you manage as you leave care?

CC: My school did all it could to help me. I would still have learnt life skills even if I had not got any GCSEs.

Did other pupils at school know about your care status, and did you have any problem with bullying because of it?

CC: Yes they did know I was in care and I was bullied.

What did the school do to deal with this?

CC: Other people helped me to cope with this but this was because it was their job to do it; it was not their choice to help me.

But you knew where to go to get help?

CC: Yes, finding help was OK.

As you leave care and have to find a home, earn money and buy yourself food and clothes, do you find that the problems of being in care are still there? Is life still difficult for you?

J: Yes, it's stressful living on £250 per week; things build up. Costs go up all the time and this adds to the pressure, as costs are high compared to the benefits I get. I hate being on benefits; I really want to work, but I have no school qualifications in maths or English, or any experience, so it's very difficult to get a job, and everything is paper-based, which disadvantages me with English. I keep trying to get off benefits and into work.

What sort of work do you want to do?

J: Anything. I want to work – I'm 19.

VSK apprentice, to J: we could possibly help you to find work, perhaps via the VSK apprenticeships scheme. The VSK job is excellent as you can study for an NVQ as part of it, and they could help you achieve level 1 in maths and English.

J: I have sent out hundreds of CVs, looking for work.

VSK apprentice: At VSK, your status as a care leaver is more important than your CV. We can help you to look into it – we'll talk outside the meeting.

What is your current situation in terms of accommodation?

MA: I am in a Council house now, as I am over 18, after spending two years in County Council accommodation. I moved to my Council house 3-4 months ago. I have many bills to pay and I am on benefits. As I am in full-time education I cannot take up employment. At 16-plus I had £57.00 per week but when I worked for a while they stopped my benefits, so I had a while without money and had trouble paying for things like travel to college. I am now 21 and have a bus pass, but I have to pay to travel to study.

It is difficult to struggle to work and make money while you also need to study, but you are lucky in having a Council house. Did you have any help to furnish your home?

MA: I had a £2,000 grant to set up.

M: I was at Millbank to learn about life in the UK, and there I learnt about food shopping and cooking. They provided accommodation for me but I could not stay there longer as it was too far away from where I wanted to study. I was alone when I moved but I had help with accommodation and furnishing. Where I am is quite good for me and I have no problems.

CC: I have independent living support. It was hard to start with but I got help to buy furniture. I find it hard to pay bills. I am also studying at the moment.

All young people have problems setting up their own home. Did your foster carers help with teaching you life skills?

CC: I was in supported lodgings before and they helped me prepare for independent living by teaching me the skills I would need before I left.

JF: I am in supported lodgings. As I am over 18 I can claim housing benefit and I pay rent to my carers. To help pay for my food I have taken a weekend job, as working during the week would take time away from my studies. I have to pay for my own food and travel costs, and I am quite lucky that I still have someone to support me. When I move on to university or an apprenticeship, I will move to independent living, and I expect I will learn the skills I need for that then. It is a challenge to keep debts under control.

What do you have to pay – Council Tax? TV licence? Do you get any help with these?

JF: I don't earn enough to pay Council Tax. Housing benefit covers my rent, and I pay for food. When I leave education I know I will have to manage on my own.

J: I am in supported lodgings and am lucky that my support is good. I moved away from my mother at 12 and have stayed in some places which have not been good. Once I turned 16 there was much help available to me, and people have taught me so much. I hope to go on to get some more education.

Before you turned 18, were you told much about what would happen after 18?

JF: I did not have much help before 18, and the help I had was limited to how to claim the benefits I am entitled to. It took months to get me an 18-plus worker. My carer got some information from Catch 22, but it was like being thrown in at the deep end on my 18th birthday, with forms to fill in, etc.

Was there any handover of social worker at 18-plus?

J: I have both my old and new social workers at the moment. There was some handover when I moved from Children's to Adults' Services.

So did you have to build a new relationship and new trust?

J: Yes.

Would you agree that some young people are mature enough to handle the transition at 18 well, while some are not?

JF: My carers were good and helped with the transition, and with finding out about benefits, etc. They were very understanding and were patient about waiting until I had money to pay them rent. In that way, they were more than landlords to me. However, there is always some period of uncertainty as you move from one phase to another.

As a parent, I tried to teach my children skills like cooking before they moved out, and as a parent I am still there for them to come back to if they need help. I know that the situation is different for young people leaving care, if they have no family to fall back on, but it is good if you have a good relationship with your carers which could continue once you have left.

Do Catch 22 help young people to find accommodation?

CC: Yes, I think so.

Do foster carers have some role in this?

JF: I don't think they do. The 18-plus team looked after this for me, and helped and supported me, and Catch 22 set up my tenancy.

How did you find out about these arrangements, and who you needed to speak to? Did your social worker advise you?

J: They didn't tell me in advance; I felt that I was thrown into it. Once you leave your carer's home you don't know where you are going next.

Would it help if someone a bit older were to act as a mentor to you, to share their experiences of going through the same process? And would you in turn be willing to act as a mentor for someone else?

J, CC and JF: Yes, a mentor would help, and we would all be willing to do that for other people.

VSK apprentices: We would be happy to help if someone asked us. We have both had to learn how to budget for bills and food, and we could pass on this knowledge. We could establish a 'buddy' system.

CC: The VSK apprentices have attended our local Young Adults Council (YAC) to teach young people how to budget and shop carefully.

We could have more of that sort of session; we will look into setting this up.

Thank you all so much for giving your time to attend and talk to the Panel today. What you have told us is very useful. It would be good to catch up again in the future to see how you are getting on.

The meeting then returned to open session for the regular business of the Panel

136. Apologies and Substitutes

1. Apologies had been received from Mr R Brookbank, Mrs T Carpenter, Mr S Griffiths and Ms C Moody.
2. Mr M J Angell was present as a substitute for Mrs J Whittle, Mr R Bird for Mr M J Vye, Mr T Maddison for Ms C J Cribbon and Mr M J Northey for Mr G Lymer.

137. Minutes of the meeting of this Panel held on 28 January 2016

(Item A2)

RESOLVED that the minutes of the Panel meeting held on 28 January 2016 are correctly recorded and they be signed by the Chairman. There were no matters arising.

138. Chairman's Announcements

(Item A3)

1. The Chairman announced that young people in Thanet had been nominated for a National Crimebeater Award. The Vice-Chairman added that, with the encouragement of the local Youth Advisory Group, young people had made a DVD of issues they faced while in care in Thanet, which had received a good response from the High Sheriff of Kent. They had been shortlisted for a National Crimebeater Award, for which the winners would be announced on 16 March.

139. Verbal Update from Our Children and Young People's Council (OCYPC)

(Item A4)

1. Ms Dunstan gave a verbal update on the following:

OCYPC Update – OCYPC Members had taken part in a Jigsaw activity, to discuss what would make a good social worker. Mr Segurola added that the Young Lives Foundation had recently undertaken a similar exercise to identify 'the top 10 points for a good social worker', which could feed into social worker training, possibly at Canterbury Christ Church University, and into recruitment activity.

Challenge Card issues:

- a. A reply to the submission of designs for business cards for social workers was still awaited. Mr Segurola agreed that this delay had gone on too long and undertook to ensure that a reply was sent.
- b. A request that the County Council set up bank accounts for young people in care, into which the Council and a young person's foster carers could pay money for them to access when they reached 18.
- c. Young people in care should be able to see their younger siblings still living at home with parents. Mr Segurola undertook to send a response to the young people who had raised this issue.
- d. Varied experiences with social workers, and the fact that some social workers were more proactive than others. Mr Segurola asked how young people thought social worker training and practice could be improved.

Young Adults Council (YAC) Developments – attendance at meetings had improved, and useful sessions such as budgeting and shopping had been run at recent meetings. YAC Members would shortly take part in the Who Cares Trust London Bridge trek of 25km to raise funds.

Apprentice Staffing update – three new VSK apprentices had been recruited and would start work after Easter. Two more vacancies remained and it was hoped that an unaccompanied asylum seeking young person could be recruited to one of the posts.

Activity Days 2016 – County Council Members who had contributed funds from their Member grants were thanked for their support.

Forthcoming dates were as follows:

- **Tuesday 29 March** – Trampolining in Maidstone
- **Wednesday 30 March** – East and South Kent Activity Day at Kingswood: 48 spaces.
- **Thursday 31 March** – West and North Kent Activity Day at Bewl Water: 36 spaces.
- **Wednesday 6 April** - West and North Kent Activity Day for children aged 5 – 9 at the Hop Farm: 20 spaces.
- **Thursday 7 April** - East and South Kent Activity Day for children aged 5 – 9: 20 spaces

National Celebratory event, 17 February: ‘Taking it to the next level’ – This event, which had involved Children In Care Councils from other areas, had addressed engagement between Children In Care Councils and Corporate Parenting Panels. Issues arising at this event would feed into the current work to amalgamate the Corporate Parenting Panel and the Kent Corporate Parenting Group.

Regional Participation and Children in Care Council Group – for professionals - this had also shared best practice and addressed new ways of working.

2. The verbal updates were noted, with thanks.

140. Verbal Update by Cabinet Member

(Item A5)

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

Local Children’s Partnership Groups had been formed in districts, and Members were becoming involved in their local groups.

Grant submissions for Local Children’s Partnership Groups had been made, and most had been approved.

Duke of Edinburgh Award presentation evening and **Sea Cadets Awards evening** – these had both shown excellent examples of young people overcoming challenges.

Visits to Children’s Centres in Canterbury, Thanet and Maidstone, meeting staff and parents.

Visit to YMCA – met staff team and heard about challenges faced.

Visit to Sunrise Centre – this provided respite care for children with disabilities.

Attended Corporate Parenting Select Committee (with Philip Segurola) to present the action plan which would follow on from the Select Committee’s recommendations.

Attended South East Regional Group meeting for Directors of Children’s Services and Local Members (with Philip Segurola) – this gave the opportunity to make a presentation on UASC to other local authorities and highlight and start a

conversation about the challenges Kent faced around placing them. Brighton Council had taken ten UASC from Kent but support from other authorities had been lacking.

Forthcoming meeting of Local Government Association Asylum and Refugee Task Force, 24 March – this would be a national meeting of a taskforce set up to tackle issues of asylum and migration.

2. The verbal updates were noted, with thanks.

141. Head Teacher of Virtual School Kent (VSK) update report (Item B1)

1. In the absence of Mr Doran, Mrs Skinner introduced the report and highlighted key areas of progress in what had been a period of much activity and challenge:

- although KS4 scores would not be validated until later in March, the forecast was that both attainment and attendance would show an increase.
- due to the recent changes made to the measuring of performance at KS1 and KS2, it would be difficult to compare like with like when looking back at past years' performance.
- new VSK apprentices, including one graduate, had been recruited to fill the posts vacated when former apprentices moved on to permanent employment.

2. Mrs Skinner responded to comments and questions from the Panel, as follows:

- a) it was still proving difficult to place unaccompanied asylum seeking children (UASC) in schools at year 11, and this difficulty was exacerbated by the fact that examinations were imminent at that stage, when they had limited time to learn English. Mrs Skinner assured the Panel that UASC would be given all possible support to overcome these difficulties;
- b) a view was expressed that the information reported was difficult to follow in part as area references did not seem to match those used by other services, and information did not cover some of the issues that the public most wanted to know about, eg the availability of school places. Mr Segurola explained that some areas experienced more difficulty than others in accommodating the numbers of children in care, particularly those placed in Kent by other local authorities, currently approximately 1,300. In addition, the high number of UASC that Kent had to accommodate, currently approximately 900, added to the challenge of finding sufficient school places near their placements. He reminded Members that, under the Department of Education's School Admissions Code, children looked after by a local authority took precedence for local school places. The Cabinet Member, Mr Oakford, added that, in some areas of Kent, there were more children in care placed by other local authorities than there were Kent's own children; and
- c) Members had learned from two recent Select Committees, Apprenticeships and the Student Journey, that students found it difficult to access good quality information, advice and guidance, and that the skills most valued by employers when recruiting young people were English, maths and 'soft' skills such as time keeping, self-discipline and interpersonal skills. It was important that good quality information, advice and guidance be available

to children earlier in their school career, before year 11, so they could build confidence in these areas before entering the employment market. Young people needed motivation as well as examination passes. Mr Segurola said he shared Members' concern about the number of care leavers who were not in education, employment or training (NEET). Ms Dunstan added that the Young Adults Council and Our Children and Young People's Council could help young people and care leavers to build their confidence and to access information about careers and training.

3. RESOLVED that the progress made by the Virtual School Kent be noted and welcomed.

142. Update on the Fostering Improvement Plan

(Item B2)

1. Ms Smith introduced the report and highlighted the main challenges currently facing the Fostering service.

- a new audit tool would become live in April 2016 and would apply to new foster carers, from six months after they had been approved.
- a planned Fostering activity day had unfortunately had to be postponed and would now take place on 22 May. However, this would now engage and benefit children from a wider age range than had previously been planned.
- feedback from a survey of foster carers was currently being considered by the Kent Foster Carers Association and would be reported to the Panel at a future meeting.

2. Ms Smith responded to comments and questions from the Panel, as follows:-

- a) feedback from young people about their experiences of being in care would be used in foster carers' annual review meetings, as well as feedback from the carers' own foster children. The VSK apprentices could help to support this process, and the logistics of doing this would be investigated; and
- b) a standard procedure was in place for dealing with complaints and allegations made about and against foster carers. When such an issue arose, the foster carer would be party to what was recorded about the incident on their file, including the outcome, ie if the complaint or allegation were substantiated or found to be groundless. Panel members were reassured that nothing would be recorded on a carer's file without their knowledge.

3. RESOLVED that the updated fostering improvement plan be noted and welcomed.

143. Combining the Corporate Parenting Panel and the Kent Corporate Parenting Group, including a review of Terms of Reference

(Item B3)

1. The Chairman advised the Panel that, as part of its report, the Select Committee on Corporate Parenting had made a recommendation that the Corporate Parenting Panel and the Kent Corporate Parenting Group (KCPG) should merge. This seemed a good idea but gave rise to concerns that the combined group would

be too large to achieve good, constructive discussion and could be intimidating to young people attending its meetings.

2. Mr Segurola added that Kent was unique in having two separate corporate parenting bodies. The Select Committee had taken a view that the Panel was constrained by not having access to the operational knowledge that was present in the KCPG. He added that officers were comfortable with the recommendation, although he understood concerns expressed about the size of the combined group. He undertook to review the proposed membership set out in the report, with a view to trimming it.

3. In debate, Panel members made the following comments:

- a) the proposed merger was welcomed, with some reservations about the size of the combined group, and Mr Segurola's offer to reduce the membership was welcomed;
- b) it was vital that the new combined membership include colleagues from the Health Service;
- c) a review of the operation of the new group could take place in three or six months' time;
- d) it was suggested that Mr Segurola meet informally with Group Spokesmen in the coming weeks to iron out the details of membership and Mr Segurola confirmed that he was happy to do this; and
- e) the Panel was in agreement that, as a County Council Committee, its Chairman and Vice-Chairman should be County Council Members. It was suggested that this be written into the Panel's terms of reference.

4. RESOLVED that:-

- a) the proposal to combine the Corporate Parenting Panel and the Kent Corporate Parenting Group by April 2016 be agreed;
- b) the proposed new merged Terms of Reference be endorsed, with an addition being made that the Chairman and Vice-Chairman of the Panel be Kent County Council Members;
- c) the range of partner representatives to be included in the membership of the new Panel be agreed, with the proviso that their overall number be reduced;
- d) the Chairman and Vice-Chairman of the Panel be confirmed as at present; and
- e) the operation of the new combined Panel be reviewed in six months' time.