

Parents' Aid Southern Essex: Annual Report 2021.

Who we are:

Parents' Aid is a voluntary organisation and registered charity (no. 1018739), founded in November 1989, which exists to support families who are at risk of social exclusion.

A steering committee formed of a balance of professionals and former service-users manages our affairs. We have an executive team consisting of the Organising Secretary - a full-time volunteer – an independent bookkeeper and a technical advisor. Our chairperson is senior safeguarding and quality assurance manager and we are able to draw on the experience of a former Chief Inspector with the Metropolitan Police, who assists us in an advisory capacity. Our services are delivered by trained volunteers, who are selected for their common sense and commitment and who have sympathies with our client group, or indeed may once have been members of it.



Aims, Services and Area of Operations:

Parents' Aid seeks to help families overcome difficulties that may lead to the separation of children from their parents. Our services of

- Information,
- Advocacy,
- Befriending,
- Family Mediation,
- one-to-one Parenting Support
- Anger Management and
- Careers guidance

provide opportunities for concerned individuals to assist parents who are vulnerable or who are struggling to cope. These services are provided at local venues offering the facility for service provision in a neutral environment or, where appropriate, direct to the home by appointment with the client.

- Parents' Aid also offers families a 24/7 telephone information line, number **01268-763631**.
- The formation of small local self-help groups has always been one of our aims and when the opportunity presents we have convened public meetings in different areas according

to demand, giving parents the opportunity to share experiences, pool strengths and exchange encouragement. *This service is currently on hold due to the pandemic.*

- All client families are encouraged to consult our recently updated information booklet; this is now available on our website for download free of charge. Hard copies can be provided for those without access to the internet.
- The blog on our website displays regular posts, keeping interested parties informed of Parents' Aid's activities and also about projects and events run by partner agencies which may benefit our user group. This information is also available on our Facebook page, www.facebook.com/parentsaid.org
- Parents' Aid offers its user families a confidential and qualified counselling service from professionals who are either already accredited, or members of and working towards accreditation with a professional body.
- Selected volunteers who are trained in-house deliver our representation, information, befriending and ancillary services.
- Parents' Aid is currently delivering all training and services remotely which means there is no geographical limit to our area of operations. However, our team obviously have access to greater information about support available in the Essex area than elsewhere in the country. Any individual is welcome to visit our website or to use our information line and we regularly receive enquiries from all over the country.
- Parents Aid is committed to anti-discriminatory practice and will ensure, whenever possible, that the demographic of our volunteers will match the areas in which we work. We also undertake to be sensitive to any learning needs and disabilities of our service users and to align and calibrate in our communication and relationship-based practice to guarantee our practice appropriate and effective.
- Parents' Aid undertakes all these activities for the public benefit in furtherance of its aims and objectives (for these, please refer to our *Constitution*).



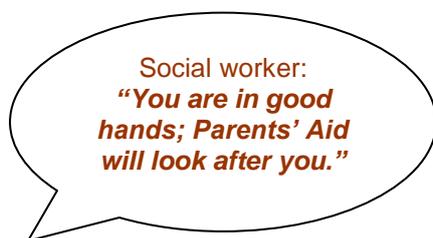
Partnership:

Parents' Aid is an independent organisation supporting families but partnership has always been our core policy. We maintain open channels of communication with local Social Services departments and liaise closely with other statutory and voluntary agencies supporting children and their families.

- Our networking has led to affiliation with Basildon, Billericay and Wickford Council for Voluntary Services; Thurrock C.V.S.; Castle Point C.V.S; Rayleigh, Rochford and District Association for Voluntary Services; Brentwood C.V.S.; Maldon C.V.S.; Colchester C.V.S.; Chelmsford C.V.S., the Southend Association for Voluntary Services, the Essex Alliance and Essex Compact.
- We enjoy good working relationships with the Family Rights Group, the N.S.P.C.C., Home-start, Sure Start, Family Lives, *Safer Places*, Connexions, Family Solutions, BATIAS, *Mind*, the Family Group Conference Project, Victim Support, *Open Road*, *In Touch*, local Youth Services, area Mental Health teams, Behavioural Support, local

Housing Departments, SERICC, the Haven Project, *Action for Children, Men have Rights Too, Motivated Minds, Restart 360* and other allied organisations.

- We have been represented at Multi-Agency Cluster (MAC) Meetings in Essex and ourselves make referrals at the request of our clients to specialist agencies providing appropriate services.
- As members of the Project Advisory Group for User-Carer Involvement at Anglia Ruskin University, our representatives have from time to time been involved in the provision of training to students taking the social work degree course at that university in both Cambridge and Chelmsford. Parents' Aid has been actively involved in A.R.U.'s *SUCI* (Service User and Carer Involvement) Advisory Group and is one of the founder members of the Essex Alliance, a group created to give voice to the voluntary and community sector in Essex. We are also members of the Mid-Essex Child Poverty Action Group.



Projects, Old and New:

Parents' Aid, like many small voluntary organisations these days, is currently unfunded. We are able to continue delivering services because we are running on reserves, the legacy of our founder trustees, who faithfully set aside any increase for the year towards their vision of securing our own premises. In consequence of recent austerity measures and of increased needs resulting from the pandemic, the Committee has freed up these funds to cover running costs.

*In the past, our various projects were identified on a geographical basis, determined by the amount of funding obtained from various local authorities and by user demand in different areas. For the last year, however, these boundaries have become irrelevant. Thanks to Covid-19, we are now delivering all services remotely to families living all over Essex and indeed beyond. The Committee has decided that distinguishing between families on the basis of their locality would, in the circumstances, be both officious and inequitable and it has been agreed that, for the time being, our unrestricted reserves will be best employed providing services remotely to any family at risk of social exclusion anywhere in the U.K. The services most in demand are: - **Family Mediation, Advocacy and Emotional Support, Anger and Aggression Management, Parenting Skills training and Personal Therapy**, where the client is in a position to engage.*

- **In the administration of these projects**, the trustees have had due regard to the Charity Commission's guidance on public benefit, regularly reviewed at trustee meetings.
- **G.D.P.R.** We have updated our systems and policies to ensure that all personal information provided will be held and only shared with others in accordance with the conditions of the Data Protection Act 2018.

- **COVID-19:** In consequence of the restrictions on direct contact and travel during the Coronavirus pandemic, the Management Committee has approved the delivery of services to our clients remotely, using devices capable of supporting an app such as Zoom – most clients have smart phones these days. Some of our existing services, for example Anger Management, have adapted to this form of delivery very readily whilst others – such as Family Mediation – present more challenges in relation to the maintenance of boundaries necessary to ensure client safety and confidentiality, and the Management Committee has agreed an organisational *Remote Working Policy* which can be made available to interested parties on request. The current climate has obliged us to develop virtual interventions and we trust families will gain confidence in this approach, which is being replicated elsewhere.



“The Mediation Time Warp: They start out as adults...Regress to children screaming ‘mine’... Then grow up again and compromise...hopefully.”

Staff and Surgeries:

The Organisation has always been fortunate in benefiting from the time and energies of some outstandingly committed and capable volunteers, including former service-users whose lives are back on track and disabled parents and parents with disabled children, who wish to draw on their own experience to assist others. The mainstay of our team are local mothers and other concerned individuals who wish to give of their time and goodwill, but we are fortunate also in having amongst our members a number of qualified professionals who together form a consultancy resource on which other volunteers are able to draw.

- **All our locality surgeries**, in both Essex and Thurrock, have been closed for the last year due to the pandemic and services and training delivered remotely. Following the inevitable initial adjustments, this new system of operation is working so well that currently our intention is to re-open occasional surgeries purely by appointment for cases where client preference or circumstances render face-to-face service delivery advisable. This will begin to happen once all social distancing restrictions have been lifted.
- **The seventh edition of our information booklet, “A Guide for Families: Your Child and Social Services”** is available for download from our website, www.parents-aid.org.uk.
- **In the last year new volunteers have joined us** whose contribution to the work of the Organisation has proved uniquely valuable. Some volunteers train with us for a few months in order to acquire insight into supporting socially excluded families and

confidence in their own abilities, then move on; others discover the rewards of this challenging work and stay with us for much longer.

Volunteer recruitment within the Organisation is ongoing: we routinely lose promising volunteers when they leave us in order to take up salaried positions or university placements and of course there are always a percentage of new recruits who decide after a while that their talents could be put to more effective use elsewhere. Either way, they leave their particular mark on the organisation: we are sorry to lose them but grateful for their individual contribution. We have also been actively seeking individuals who are able to bring their life experience to the work of the Management Committee. On 9th and 10th June 2021 we were finally in a position to host the online training event originally planned for January but delayed by the consequences of the pandemic. Deborah Beharie delivered the training with her usual sensibility and expertise and although the event was not over-subscribed she was impressed by the ability shown by those who did attend.

Lavinia Moore (“Vinnie”), local authority senior safeguarding and quality assurance manager with over thirty years’ experience in front line work, took over as Chair of Trustees in October 2019. We believe Vinnie will be able to help us raise the professional standards of the organisation whilst retaining the user-friendly ethos which has become our hallmark. Vinnie writes:

“I first became aware of *Parents Aid* in early 2000 when I was working as a commissioner for children services at Thurrock Council.

I was immediately impressed with its founder, Hazel Davies, who not only had the academic credentials to run the service but also had the compassion, knowledge and understanding of the impact of statutory service interventions to family life, especially with issues around drug and alcohol misuse, mental health, deprivation and domestic abuse.

The mentoring, coaching and befriending that *Parents Aid* offer children, young people and their families enable social service users to receive objective, unbiased help and support – as well as provide guidance and understanding of social children services process and what to expect at any given time from social work professionals – especially within court proceedings.....

It is my unquestionable belief that *Parents Aid* offers invaluable services to children, young people and their families and will be needed even more, in the present unsettled climate”.



Just over a year ago we additionally welcomed to the Management Committee a colleague of Vinnie's, **Gary Anderson**. Gary is a former Chief Inspector with the Metropolitan Police, (Trident Central Gang Command) with a long and successful career. Gary's experience includes leading youth diversion and engagement from gangs, including child criminal exploitation, CSE, knife and gun crime across London and the UK. Gary has worked as an advisor with the Home Office and Mopac on serious youth violence and is an accomplished H/R professional, trainer & facilitator, coach & mentor. Gary is also Chair of Trustees at Arca Generation, a youth engagement programme within deprived locations in London. We welcome Gary's input in an advisory capacity and propose offering him the portfolio *Safeguarding and Community Safety Consultant*. We look forward to upgrading and improving the organisation's systems and procedures under Gary's guidance.

The recent austerity measures have meant that everyone needs to earn money to survive and it has become extremely difficult to recruit and retain volunteers, since even those keen to train with us are often obliged to leave in order to take up paid positions elsewhere. The Committee is also aware that, following lockdown, the social distancing measures necessary to prevent a resurgence of the Covid-19 pandemic have entailed changes both to service delivery and to in-house training and supervision. We are formulating the development of a "socially distant" model which will mean that certain services continue to be delivered remotely – which would have the benefit of enabling us to outreach a much larger area of Essex – and technology is used to convene less formal meetings and to provide routine training updates. Much will depend on the government guidelines of the day and given that a considerable variety of remote networking platforms are available all our plans are fluid at present.



Mother: "I just wanted to send over a quick email thanking you for the session today. It really is of great benefit and I appreciate all your time and effort."

Funding:

Parents' Aid had always been challenged in attracting core costs: relatively few funding sources are willing to invest in revenue; the modest size of our Organisation is prohibitive of cost-effective fund-raising projects, and the stigma attaching to our client group tends to alienate public sympathies. In consequence, we have in the past been obliged to depend on local authority funding for our basic income. We are currently unfunded and running on reserves, which we are fortunate to hold due to the wise stewardship of our founder Trustees.

- *Parents' Aid* has received no revenue funding from **any local authority** since the **Family Innovation Fund 1** award we received in 2013 for our **Family Mediation** project.
- Since the conclusion of our *FIF1* agreement with Essex County Council **Parents' Aid** has been unfunded and we continue to deliver services across those areas where our presence is established from reserves, which at the moment are being used to finance volunteers' training and organisational expenses. We currently service all Essex

and are outreaching neighbouring counties such as Buckinghamshire; the combined statistics for our 2020-21 referrals make a grand total of 55 separate families, all attracted without funding or any serious attempt to push out publicity in the course of a year spent largely in lockdown, at which time the Social Services' Department was not making referrals.



Volunteer: "I really enjoy volunteering with Parents' Aid and seeing how the mediation work can make a positive difference to families".

Business Development:

Parents' Aid has previously sought to progress the development of the Organisation in a business capacity by introducing systems and policies that:-

- will ensure the delivery of our services to a quality standard and
- will seek to secure sustainable sources of revenue to provide the stability for future expansion.

However, due to our current lack of funding, plans for capacity-building are on hold, we hope temporarily. In recent years, our team has worked on:-

- the updating and improvement of mega databases to contain all relevant client/volunteer information;
- the installation of upgraded software/hardware on the I.T. equipment of team members to facilitate the exchange of data;
- the re-structuring of volunteer training by the editing and updating of training manuals (all our in-house training is certificated);
- the standardisation of the volunteer induction process and the maintenance of regular volunteer supervision;
- the issue of identity cards for volunteers and business cards for staff members;
- the retrieval and recording of information necessary for monitoring and quality control purposes, e.g. job descriptions, appraisals, volunteer and client feedback;
- the ongoing development of a user-friendly soft monitoring framework system;
- the broadening of the Trustee base and the revision of induction processes for new Trustees;
- the introduction of additional policies to comply with new legislation and current Charity Commission requirements and the updating of existing policies;
- the introduction of independent and professional bookkeeping procedures;
- the enhancement of our website and the creation of online tools for public research so that the Organisation can ascertain which social needs are most pressing to our client group and so plan the development of new projects;
- the updating of our information booklet and its online publication as a resource for families everywhere;
- the revision and updating of our Constitution, this last with specialist legal advice from the Family Law team at *4 Paper Buildings*;

- policies and procedures necessary to facilitate the remote delivery of services where this is practicable.
- The delivery of both services to clients and training to volunteers online via appropriate platforms in order to provide ongoing support to families at risk of social exclusion irrespective of social distancing regulations, distance and other commitments restricting access.

As ongoing financial uncertainties have evidenced, it would be advantageous to establish the Organisation on a business footing that will enable us to fund essential core costs irrespective of the vagaries of local authority funding. Accordingly we have explored avenues that might enable us to branch out into social enterprise to secure sustainability of future income.

- a) The Committee has sought specialist advice appropriate to produce the marketable by-products of service delivery to a commercial standard.
 - ❖ We have consulted experts on the viability of charging on a sliding scale for the delivery of our *Advocacy, Family Mediation, Anger and Aggression Management* and *Effective Parenting Skills* programs, both popular interventions with client families and social care teams. We refuse however to charge socially excluded families for our services whilst we have any alternative means to fund delivery.
 - ❖ The Organisation holds reserve funds which our founder Trustees saved over a period of many years for the purpose of securing our own office. The Board will continue to re-evaluate options, in consideration both of the area which our service now covers and the current financial climate, and to take advice in order to ensure that these monies are spent for the public benefit on the continuation of service delivery and the development of ancillary projects in response to user demand, such as our recent *Return to Employment* workshops.
- b) The Committee continues to progress the matter of upgrading systems and policies in line with a PQASSO Quality Mark. In the past we have commissioned an interim evaluation report in respect of our *Services to Families at Risk of Social Exclusion* (please contact the Organising Secretary for an electronic copy of this document) based on the information then currently available; as we continue to refine our self-evaluation system we are likely to consider, subject to funding, an independent evaluation of the service as a whole.

Hazel E. Davies

June 2021

