



Parents' Aid Southern Essex: Annual Report 2014.

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 receiving or who may require support from the local Social Services department, or who are at risk of social exclusion.

A steering committee of eight, formed of four retired professionals and four former service-users, manages our affairs. We have an executive team consisting of the Organising Secretary and a Project Co-ordinator for each quadrant of Essex that we cover, whilst our funding permits. 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 previously have been members of it.



Aims, Services and Area of Operations:

Parents' Aid seeks to help families overcome difficulties that may lead to a child being taken into care or prevent the reunification of already accommodated children. Our services of

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

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

- We also offer 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 so we seek to convene public meetings in different areas according to demand, giving parents the opportunity to share experiences, pool strengths and exchange encouragement.
- We issue all our client families with an information booklet free of charge: this is on sale to professionals at the cost price of £2 (£2.50 inc. postage).
- We are currently progressing the development and improvement of our website, www.parents-aid.org.uk. We have replaced our original site with a more dynamic, interactive and user-friendly interface through which both users and volunteers can be kept updated about the organisation's activities, new projects and Management Committee resolutions.

- In addition, Parents' Aid offers its user families a free, confidential and qualified counselling service from professionals who are either already accredited with, or members of a professional body and working towards accreditation.
- Selected volunteers who are trained in-house provide our representation, information, befriending and ancillary services.
- Parents' Aid works with families living in the south of Essex, including Thurrock, but we are not currently funded to provide Southend-on-Sea or North Essex with any services. Any individual is welcome to access our website and to call our information line and we regularly receive enquiries from all over the country.
- Parents' Aid undertakes these activities for the public benefit in furtherance of its aims and objectives (for these, please refer to our *Constitution*).



Colleague Agencies:

Parents' Aid is an independent organisation supporting families; we uphold the principle of partnership and our policy is always to reinforce rather than complicate the relationships between our users and the professionals who provide services that their children require. We seek to 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.; Brentwood C.V.S.; Maldon C.V.S.; the Chelmsford Volunteering Centre, and the Southend Association for Voluntary Services.
- We enjoy good working relationships with the Family Rights Group, the N.S.P.C.C., Home-start, Sure Start, Parentline Plus, Women's Aid, Connexions, Family Solutions, BATIAS, *MAPME-Mind*, the Family Group Conference Project, Victim Support, *Open Road*, *In Touch*, the local Youth Service, Mental Health teams, Behaviour Support, local Housing Departments, SERICC, the Haven Project, *Action for Children* and allied organisations.
- We now regularly receive referrals from Multi-Agency (MAGS) Panels throughout Essex and Thurrock and ourselves make referrals on behalf of our clients to specialist agencies providing appropriate services.
- We have been members of the Advocacy Alliance Group and the Advocacy Consortium Empowering Southend. As members of the Project Advisory Group for User-Carer Involvement at Anglia Ruskin University, our representatives are from time to time involved in the provision of training to students taking the social work degree course at that university in both Cambridge and Chelmsford. We are one of the early members of the Essex Alliance, a newly-formed group created to give voice to the voluntary and community sector, and through this, to the people of Essex.



Current Projects:

In July 2009 Parents' Aid was successful in obtaining funding from Essex County Council under a *Local Priority Fund* contract, the first award allocated to our project by that authority on a tendering and procurement basis. This funding was to be distributed between Basildon, Castle Point, Rochford and Maldon in varying amounts to finance the following initiatives:-

- to provide preventative services to families at risk of social exclusion to preserve the integrity of family life
- to recruit and train additional volunteers to extend the range of these services.
- to maintain detailed statistics of families assisted
- to monitor client feedback
- to encourage user involvement in every initiative
- to facilitate the participation of young people in every phase of the project
- to develop the Organisation in a business capacity

This contract was due to expire in March 2012: however, along with certain other providers, we were granted an extension of our LPF contract until 31st May 2013 due to difficulties encountered by Essex County Council in administering the *Early Intervention Fund* tender process. **At the end of 2012, we submitted applications for grant aid to Essex County Council's *Family Innovation Fund* to develop our *Family Mediation Service* across South-East, South-West and Mid-Essex. These applications were all successful.**

- ***Parents' Aid North Essex*** was a flourishing project that had to be put on hold in 2009 when our County Council funding was withdrawn abruptly under the terms of our *Local Priority Fund* contract. With support from Colchester M.P. Bob Russell, we have continued to explore possible avenues of alternative funding to re-launch the project. Meanwhile, enquiries received on our helpline from both professionals and families based in North Essex evidence an ongoing demand for our services in that area. Twenty-five North Essex families approached us with requests for help during 2012-14, when we were able to offer only telephone support.
- ***Parents' Aid Thurrock***, always a thriving project since the Borough first became a unitary authority, has in the last three years dwindled to a skeleton service run from reserves. In 2009, *Parents' Aid* first expanded and adapted our former intergenerational Mediation Service to accommodate couples in conflict whose dispute was impacting detrimentally on their children and piloted the new *Family Mediation Service* in Thurrock. This project proved a resounding success, but unfortunately our Framework Contract with Thurrock Children's Services was cut short in 2010 as part of the austerity measures introduced in that year.

The Management Committee is reluctant to pull out of an area we have serviced for many years and so we continue to deliver a limited Thurrock service from reserves based at our Grays Health Centre Drop-In, where we shall offer support to clients who are able to attend this weekly surgery as long as our financial situation permits. Keen and committed volunteers continue to offer their time and energies, including qualified professionals taking time out from their careers and student social workers. The mainstay of our team of course remains local mums and other concerned individuals who wish to offer their life experience and sympathy for our client group in order to assist families in crisis. Our aim is simply to maintain a presence in the Borough until funding again becomes available or until such a presence ultimately becomes financially unsustainable. An application for £5,000 to the Thurrock Voluntary Sector Development Fund has been submitted during the current financial year.

- ***Parents' Aid Family Mediation Service*** is the new project, originally piloted in Thurrock during 2009-10, that attracted grant aid from Essex County Council's *Family Innovation Fund* for the financial year 2013-14 throughout South-West, South-East and Mid-Essex. Our Family Mediation service provides an opportunity for concerned individuals to assist parents who are vulnerable or struggling to cope. This service is provided direct to the home by appointment with the client or at local venues offering the facility for service provision in a neutral environment as opportunity permits. Many families struggle with multiple problems which impact on their ability to care for and communicate with their children: such families need support to address the relational challenges that may jeopardise their children's welfare. Mediation between family members helps improve communication, fosters family agreement even when members hold different points of view and through this builds resilience both within individuals and families as a unit.



Margaret's skills as a peacemaker had exceeded expectations at the mediation.

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The Management Committee appointed Project Co-ordinators in all three areas, South-East, South-West and Mid-Essex, who were commissioned to recruit and train volunteers. We opened additional locality surgeries, publicised the new service as widely as possible in all three areas in order to attract referrals and had by the close of the year exceeded our targets. The organisation is fortunate in having a committed and enthusiastic team: in the South-West, Ashley Lewis, previously the volunteer manager of our Grays Health Centre surgery, expanded her duties to become Project Co-ordinator; in the South-East, former staff member Sonia Zdanczuk resumed her former role as Project Co-ordinator and in Mid-Essex longstanding committee member Pam Bean took up a frontline position for the first time.

- **Conflict Workshops for Primary and Junior Schools**, an enormously successful pilot project launched in 2006-7, had to be wound down in 2009 following the withdrawal of funding. This project is currently on hold due to lack of financial support but we have continued to explore the possibility of re-launching the initiative as a programme for delivery to families.
- **Assertiveness project – under development.** This is the intervention we proposed delivering to Essex families at risk of social exclusion in our unsuccessful *FIF4* application. “(This) project is a unique assertiveness programme designed for delivery to any family member. Delivering this programme we will improve family relationships, skills and the capacity within families to function effectively.....The.....program aims to address inequity and imbalance within the family, giving each member the tools required for effective communication. In addition to the knowledge and evidence provided by practitioners and clients, the program also incorporates elements of *Engender Health's Gender Matters* (Gen.M) program and *The Power to Change* program. Both programs take account of how the genders are socialised, the differing expectations society places on men and women and how this can lead to inequality.” We have under review alternative funding applications to finance this project.
- **In the administration of these projects**, the trustees have had due regard to the Charity Commission’s guidance on public benefit, which is regularly reviewed at trustee meetings.

Parents' Aid user on feedback form:
The sessions gave us the tools to move forward in a positive way. Now we are able to talk about problems in the open more freely.

Staff:

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 also 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.

- **Our Thurrock project** is currently without a dedicated co-ordinator following the withdrawal of funding. Our **Wednesday surgery at Grays Health Centre**, the main base for delivery of our Thurrock service now that financial constraints have obliged us to curtail home visiting, was for a time managed by committee member Abigail Bryan. When Abigail found that the increasing demands of her Social Work degree course made the ongoing commitment impossible, former volunteer **Ashley Lewis** took over the management of our Thurrock project, training up local volunteers and assessing newly-referred clients. Following a suggestion from Frances Barbour, formerly a staff member with *Thurrock Women's Aid*, we launched in June 2012 a subsidiary surgery at the **Flagship Centre in Tilbury** to outreach families in that area and promote partnership working with the Refuge staff. This development was funded from unrestricted reserves and spearheaded by Ashley. Expansion in Tilbury has however been suspended for the time being to allow Ashley, now **Project Co-ordinator for South-West Essex**, to focus her energies on her new responsibilities.
- **Our Chelmsford surgery** at the Chetwood Children's Centre in South Woodham was closed in June 2013 following re-structuring of the Centre services and replaced by a **locality surgery in Chelmsford Library**, a venue far better situated as a base for our Mid-Essex project, under the management of **Mid-Essex Project Co-ordinator Pam Bean**. Our **Maldon surgery at the Elim Church in Wantz Road** continues operative on an appointment-only basis. **Sue Johnston**, longstanding volunteer and trustee, a skilled parenting adviser who formerly helped head-up our Colchester project, was last year obliged to stand down due to the pressure of commitments and she will be greatly missed. However Sue's daughter **Beca Johnston**, who has studied statistics as part of her degree course, has once again this year kindly agreed to examine our Accounts.
- Following the emigration of our webmaster, the work of enhancing and maintaining the site was delegated to **Sonia** and **Pam**, who between them have some expertise with website layout and design. Together, with assistance from **Ashley**, they have re-developed and transformed the whole site, making it more dynamic and informative, easier to keep updated and essentially user-friendly – so watch this space: www.parents-aid.org.uk!
- Following the demise of Don Harrod, founder-Trustee and Treasurer, overseeing the finances of the organisation from its foundation in 1989 until 2010, our youngest volunteer and trustee **Jodie Davies** has been managing the Accounts and has valued this opportunity to contribute to the running of the organisation whilst remaining behind the scenes. Jodie has no financial experience but has taken foundation accounting courses in order to equip herself for the task and has quietly proved herself conscientious and reliable when it comes to ensuring the books balance. Jodie has recently begun direct client work for the first time and is steadily gaining confidence in her abilities as a support worker and advocate. Although towards the end of his life too frail to take an active part in the running of the organisation, Don has left a huge void at the heart of our trustee board and we are grateful still to have the support of his widow **Dawn Harrod**, although she is unable to attend many meetings these days.
- **Arnold Lutton**, founder-trustee and Chair of the Organisation for over twenty years, felt last year that the time had come to step down from an officiating position. At the invitation of the Management Committee, former volunteer **Lisa Raftery** agreed to take over the newly-vacated chair and was unanimously elected at our 2013 AGM. Although too heavily committed with both professional and family ties to undertake direct client work, Lisa has for the last three years provided advice and assistance with major funding applications and was directly instrumental in the success of our *FIF1* application. Lisa has over 10 years' experience as a grant-maker in both local and central government, commissioning public services to support the most vulnerable in society. She lives in Essex and is the mother of two. *"I started out as a volunteer for Parents' Aid in 2010 and was delighted to be asked to take on the role of Chair in 2013 to support the challenging and vital work Parents' Aid do to support families in Essex. Through the skills and experience I have gained in my work as a public sector funder and as a local mother, I hope to strengthen the work of this fantastic team and ensure this work continues"*. The trustee board is looking forward to benefitting from her skills and experience in giving the organisation a more contemporary image and fresh momentum.
- **Sonia Zdanczuk**, onetime project co-ordinator for *Parents' Aid* at the time of our North Essex Service Level Agreement with Essex County Council, last year returned to the team in a paid capacity as Project Co-ordinator for South-East Essex. Following the restructuring necessitated by the failure of our *FIF4* application however she has decided to stand down and will be greatly missed. **Pam Bean**, longstanding committee member and trustee, last year took up a frontline position as Project Co-ordinator for Mid-Essex and for this financial year will be covering South-East Essex also. **Ashley Lewis**, previously the volunteer manager of our Thurrock service, expanded her sphere of duties to become Project Co-ordinator for South-West Essex and continues in this role. Ashley has been successful in applying to the University of Essex to take their Social Work degree course (following the example of Thurrock co-ordinators Vicky Bigmore and

Abigail Bryant before her!) and will commence her studies in October of this year. She intends however to continue working for *Parents' Aid* during the first year of her course, at least on a part-time basis. Both Pam and Ashley will be stretched to manage the full range of our Essex services between them, but each has built on their efficiency and expertise during the financial year just gone and the two have undertaken to share the workload, a token of their commitment to the organisation.

- **In the last year many new volunteers have joined us** whose contribution to the work of the Organisation has proved uniquely valuable. We have benefitted from the services of qualified counsellors and social workers, a former police officer, a trainee barrister and several student social workers. Many volunteers train with us for a few months in order to acquire insight into supporting socially excluded families and confidence in their own abilities but then move on, whilst others discover the rewards of this challenging work and decide to stay. Several promising volunteers have left us in order to take up salaried positions whilst others have decided after a few months that their talents could be put to more effective use elsewhere. Either way, their input benefits the organisation in a particular way: we are sorry to lose them but always grateful for the privilege of their individual contribution. Volunteer **Danielle Mealing** has offered the following feedback: "I would like more experience with clients and mediation and hope to further my learning with *Parents' Aid*. I think *Parents' Aid* is an excellent service and can give me the experience needed for my choice of career." **Pam Bean** feeds back on her experience of working with volunteers **Jan Westall** and **Sheila Doran**: "*I really enjoy working with my volunteer Jan on family work, including mediation and advocacy support, and her input and enthusiasm is really appreciated. I have really valued Sheila's input as a volunteer for Parents' Aid, her warm and friendly approach and her willingness to learn the skills that are needed for family mediation work*". **Jan Westall** offered her services to us already qualified as a counsellor and during the last year has kindly worked with a number of our clients in that capacity. However, her purpose in volunteering was to develop mediation skills and more recently she has had opportunity to engage with clients also in that capacity. Jan is enthusiastic about her experience of mediation and the rewards of the process for everyone, including volunteers. Jan has lately agreed to join our trustee board and we anticipate that her insight and experience will prove a great asset to that body.

Social Worker:

"I think that Parents' Aid is an excellent service and I refer to them whenever I can."

Funding:

***Parents' Aid* had always been challenged in attracting core costs, due to the facts that 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. Accordingly we are obliged to depend on local authority funding for our basic revenues.**

- The bid submitted by *Parents' Aid* in 2009 to Essex County Council's *Local Priority Fund* for our *Support Services to Families at Risk of Social Exclusion* was successful in respect of South Essex and the Organisation was awarded funding for our initiatives in Basildon, Castle Point, Rochford/Rayleigh and Maldon for the next three years on a tendering and procurement basis, subject to satisfactory monitoring reports. This contract was extended to run for a fourth year until the end of March 2013, following the withdrawal of Essex County Council's *Early Intervention Fund*. **Last year, all three bids submitted by *Parents' Aid* in 2012 to the local authority's *Family Innovation Fund* for our new *Family Mediation* project proved successful.** This meant that the area of our operations was extended to include Mid-Essex – Chelmsford and Braintree as well as Maldon. In order to meet our targets we had to develop our infrastructure: we recruited three paid workers to recruit and train volunteers and attract referrals from partner agencies in each of the three quadrants for which we were funded. We established an additional surgery in Chelmsford and have re-opened our Basildon Library surgery on Friday mornings. We continue to operate a Maldon surgery in the Elim Pentecostal Church in Wantz Road on an appointment-only basis. At the close of 2013, *Parents' Aid* submitted bids to Essex County Council's *Family Innovation Fund 4* for both South and Mid Essex, to deliver a new project, **Choices**, an assertiveness programme for which our Family Mediation project had revealed a widespread need. It was proposed that the funding would be utilised to develop and deliver this project. These applications have not been successful.

- **Thurrock Borough Council** has suspended the Voluntary Sector Grants application process for the foreseeable future and due to cuts from central government the Council were compelled to terminate all Framework Contract Agreements at the end of November 2010. Our use of the *Bungalow* at the Culver Centre as a base was a further privilege withdrawn in February 2011 when the building was requisitioned for other purposes, leaving our Wednesday morning surgery at Grays Health Centre as the sole facility for both client interviews and volunteer training. From that point on, our Thurrock project has faced serious financial crisis and is currently financed from reserves. In June 2012 we nevertheless launched a subsidiary surgery at the Flagship Centre in Tilbury to outreach local families and work in partnership with *Thurrock Women's Aid*, who proposed referring clients to us on a regular basis, but the project has this year been suspended due to lack of support. Ashley Lewis, who had been managing the surgery, is currently fully occupied with her duties as project co-ordinator for South-West Essex. We have in May 2014 submitted an application for £5,000 to the Thurrock Community Development Fund for the purposes of recruiting and training additional volunteers to deliver family mediation from our Grays Health Centre base.
- In consequence of the failure of our FIF4 bid combined with the termination of Framework Contract Agreements in Thurrock, **Parents' Aid is currently unfunded and we continue to deliver services across those areas where our presence has become established from reserves**, which are fortunately healthy at the moment. We have by agreement of the Management Committee pulled out of Braintree and Brentwood, but are currently servicing Thurrock (although home visiting is restricted), Basildon, Billericay, Castle Point, Rochford, Maldon and Chelmsford. We are in the process of drawing up new funding applications, including one to the Henry Smith Foundation, and will obviously have to keep our financial position under continual review.

Volunteer:

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

Business Development:

Between April 2013 and March 2014 Parents' Aid has continued to work towards 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
- secure sustainable sources of revenue to provide a solid basis on which to plan future expansion.

During the financial year just gone, whilst in receipt of a level of funding that enabled the Management Committee to plan systematic expansion, Parents' Aid progressed plans for capacity-building which previous financial restrictions had obliged us to place on hold. Over the last twelve months, 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 for our re-designed *Family Mediation Service* (all our in-house training is certificated). These have been re-formulated to a standard which would accommodate eventual publication;
- 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 an induction process 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 revision of our governing document to include guidelines for the appointment of Trustees. Our Chair has undertaken to update the Constitution, now over twenty years old, to reflect current practice in line with Charity Commission recommendations. The new governing document will provide direction for the appointment of Trustees and the length of their service.
- the introduction of more contemporary accounting procedures;
- the computerisation of our accounts. This relatively straightforward procedure has proven invaluable in expediting the retrieval of financial information for auditing and monitoring purposes.
- the introduction of a reserves policy. The trustees have agreed to designate a level of reserves to cover the Organisation against contingencies and risks, as well as a reasonable sum to prevent families from being thrown into crisis by the sudden withdrawal of services when funding is terminated without warning, as indeed happened at the beginning of this financial year.
- the restructuring and enhancement of our website.

As ongoing financial uncertainties have evidenced, it is an imperative that we 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 been exploring avenues enabling us to branch out into social enterprise where this could secure sustainability of future income.

- a) The Committee continues to seek the specialist advice necessary to produce the marketable by-products of service delivery to a commercial standard. We are currently consulting experts on the viability
- ❖ of charging schools for the delivery of our recently piloted Conflict Workshop program, the first initiative to take *Parents' Aid* volunteers into primary and junior schools;
 - ❖ of charging in the future on a sliding scale for the delivery of our *Anger and Aggression Management* and *Effective Parenting Skills* programs, both interventions rapidly gaining popularity with both client families and social care teams, and for our proposed *Assertiveness* program, albeit as yet in an embryonic form.
 - ❖ of publishing our updated training manuals, now used regularly both for volunteer training and for client interventions.

The recent marketing of our *Support Services for Families at Risk of Social Exclusion* to local authority commissioners on a tendering and procurement basis bears witness to the potential financial independence of the Organisation. We can justifiably expect to be paid for the services we provide.

- b) The Committee has additionally prioritised progress in the matter of upgrading systems and policies in line with the PQASSO Quality Mark and in particular the development of a more accurate self-evaluation system with codified user feedback forms. Interventions involving a process through which user and *Parents' Aid* volunteers work together (e.g. *Parenting, Mediation, Anger Management*) are now evaluated using a base line questionnaire to be completed before and interim evaluation sheets to be completed both during and after completion of the course. The introduction during 2010 of a soft monitoring framework system constitutes the logical continuation of this process. 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.

June 2014

Hazel E. Davies | Organising Secretary
Parents' Aid

