



## Parents' Aid Southern Essex: Annual Report 2015.

### 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 professionals and four former service-users, manages our affairs. We have an executive team consisting of one full-time volunteer, an administrative assistant and a technical advisor. 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 cost price. The seventh edition of this booklet is under production and will be available later this year.
- We are currently progressing the development and improvement of our website, [www.parents-aid.org.uk](http://www.parents-aid.org.uk). We recently 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 Committee proposals. Further enhancements are under consideration.
- In addition, Parents' Aid offers its user families a 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, North or West 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*).

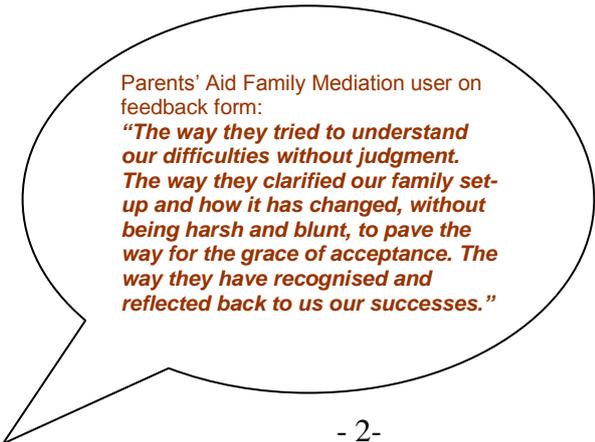


Parents' Aid user on feedback form:  
*"Just enormous thanks for setting us back on the road to a happy family life."*

### **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.; Rayleigh, Rochford and District Association for Voluntary Services; Brentwood C.V.S.; Maldon C.V.S.; Colchester C.V.S.; Chelmsford C.V.S., 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, area Mental Health teams, Behaviour Support, local Housing Departments, SERICC, the Haven Project, *Action for Children*, *Men have Rights Too*, *Motivated Minds* and allied organisations.
- We attend Multi-Agency Cluster (MAC) Meetings in Essex 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 founder members of the Essex Alliance, a group created to give voice to the voluntary and community sector, and through this, to the people of Essex. We have recently joined the newly-formed Mid-Essex Child Poverty Action Group.



Parents' Aid Family Mediation user on feedback form:  
*"The way they tried to understand our difficulties without judgment. The way they clarified our family set-up and how it has changed, without being harsh and blunt, to pave the way for the grace of acceptance. The way they have recognised and reflected back to us our successes."*

### **Current Projects:**

At the end of 2012, *Parents' Aid* submitted applications for grant aid to Essex County Council's *Family Innovation Fund 1* to develop our Family Mediation Service across South-East, South-West and Mid-Essex. These applications were all successful. However, subsequent applications, both for local authority funding and to grant-making trusts, have not been successful. These applications have been for the continuation of our Family Mediation Project and also for the launch of new projects, e.g. an assertiveness program for young people and vulnerable adults. A proposed consortium bid to Essex County Council's *FIF4* tender together with Barnado's South Essex and other providers collapsed in January 2015 after the PQQ failed on two specifications, not relevant to *Parents' Aid's* role, undermining the project's financial viability as far as Barnado's was concerned.

- ***Parents' Aid North Essex*** is a project now on hold. This flourishing branch of our service had to be wound up in 2009 when our County Council funding was abruptly withdrawn under the terms of our *Local Priority Fund* contract. With support from Colchester M.P. Bob Russell, we continue 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. During 2014-15 five North Essex families travelled to Chelmsford to access our services, unable to find any equivalent locally.
- ***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.
- ***Parents' Aid Thurrock***, always a thriving project since the Borough first became a unitary authority, has in the last five 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 funded 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, submitted during the last financial year, was rejected, the reasons given for this decision indicating that the application had not been read beyond the first page.



- ***Parents' Aid Family Mediation Service*** is the project, originally piloted in Thurrock during 2009-10, that attracted grant aid from Essex County Council's *Family Innovation Fund 1* throughout South-West, South-East and Mid-Essex. 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.

During 2013-14, we provided family mediation to a total of 504 Essex residents, of which 276 were referred to us by Social Care. Funding was discontinued in March 2014 and subsequent applications for continuation funding, both to Essex County Council, to external funders and to grant-making trusts, have to date proved unsuccessful. *Parents' Aid* held an amount of unrestricted reserves prior to the *FIF1* award received in 2013, and our Management Committee elected to utilize these to sustain the project in consideration of the continuing demand. We have accordingly provided mediation to families in the Basildon, Chelmsford, Maldon and Castle Point areas for the last twelve months without additional funding and have delivered mediation to a total of 400 Essex residents, of which 232 were referred to us by Social Care teams. In addition, a further 53 Essex residents have been referred to *Parents' Aid* by Social Care teams for ancillary services, viz. parenting support, anger management and counselling.

However, with the beginning of the current financial year and the collapse of a proposed consortium bid with Barnado's South Essex and other partner agencies, the rate of referrals suddenly dropped. *Parents' Aid* had sought to introduce a £50 referral fee for families referred to us by Social Care and it appears that this ill-advised attempt to oblige the Department to invest in our project, together with the fact that in April 2015 Essex County Council commissioned other providers, rang the death-knell of what has been one of our most successful projects. This project is now on hold and our paid staff laid off: trained volunteers are once again employed to cope with the modest rate of mediation referrals which we still routinely receive.



- ***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.

### **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 in 2010. 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 most of 2014 managed by Project Co-ordinator **Ashley Lewis**, 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 was however suspended to allow Ashley to focus her energies on her new responsibilities when she became Project Co-ordinator for South-West Essex in April 2013.

- **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. Our **Maldon surgery at the Elim Church in Wantz Road** continues operative on an appointment-only basis. In July 2015, Parents' Aid entered into a firm agreement with the Rev. Tim Ball, the **Vicar of Meadgate Church in Great Baddow**, to commence delivery of services from the church's new building in the '**Orchards**', **Mascalls Way** at the beginning of September as part of the church's vision to support local families and help prevent family breakdown. Young volunteers **Lucy Laing** and **Jodie Davies** have been invited to head up the team and are excited about the prospect of training local residents to work with families from the surrounding area.
- The work of enhancing and maintaining our website continues with fresh input from new volunteer **Tom Synnott**, who comes to us fresh from De Montfort University with skills in at deploying social media to create a public profile for voluntary organisations, an area in which he would like to work. Recently-appointed trustee **Chris Laing** also has innovative ideas for updating our publicity materials to create a new, more modern image for the Organisation. So watch this space: [www.parents-aid.org.uk](http://www.parents-aid.org.uk)!
- Volunteer treasurer **Jodie Davies** has been managing the Accounts now since the demise of our longstanding treasurer Don Harrod. Jodie has no financial experience but has taken foundational online 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 embarked on direct client work and has now completed a mentoring course with *Foundation 66* equipping her to work with individuals whose difficulties relate to drug and alcohol dependency. Jodie is closely supervised in her bookkeeping by our Independent Examiner **Beca Johnston, B.Sc. (University of Essex)**, who has in the last year undertaken to inspect our outgoings on a monthly basis in order to pick up any errors in staff invoices so that they can be adjusted promptly.
- **Dawn Harrod**, founder-trustee and widow of Don, has now moved out of the area and so is unable to get to meetings, yet continues to take an interest in the work of the Organisation and to provide her views by e-mail. Following the resignation of Arnold Lutton, founder-trustee and Chair of the Organisation for over twenty years, former volunteer **Lisa Raftery** agreed to take over the chair at the invitation of the Management Committee and was elected at our 2013 AGM. Lisa had for the previous three years provided advice and assistance with major funding applications and was directly instrumental in the success of our *FIF1* application. She headed up the organisation during the two year period following the launch of our Essex Family Mediation Project, when we were inundated with referrals and mediation became our primary service, and her business experience and skill at managing staff have proved invaluable. However Lisa, heavily committed with both professional and family ties, found close involvement in the work of the organisation and attendance at meetings a pressure and made the decision to step down in May 2015, preferring to remain involved with the organisation only in an advisory capacity. This has left *Parents' Aid* without a formally appointed Trustee Chair and we are currently advertising for a replacement: in the meantime, recently-appointed trustee **Lucy Laing**, volunteer with the Organisation and wife of Chris, has agreed to stand in the gap as Acting Chair.
- **Pam Bean**, trustee since 2006, who in 2013 took up a frontline position for the first time as Project Co-ordinator for Mid-Essex, took over from Sonia Zdanczuk as Project Co-ordinator for South-East Essex in April 2014 and worked hard and devotedly to manage both quadrants. **Ashley Lewis**, Project Co-ordinator for South-West Essex, applied successfully to the University of Essex to be admitted to their Social Work degree course (following the example of Thurrock co-ordinators Vicky Bigmore and Abigail Bryant before her!) and commenced her studies in October 2014. She soon found the time commitment demanded by her studies made continuation of her *Parents' Aid* responsibilities impossible and was obliged to submit her resignation quite suddenly in the November, leaving Pam Bean as the only remaining Project Co-ordinator. This left Pam in an impossible position and volunteer counsellor and mediator **Jan Westall**, trustee since July 2014, was invited to take over from Ashley on a trial basis to assist Pam. Despite some serious health problems early in 2015, Jan rose to the challenge and for five months she and Pam worked closely together, sharing casework and conducting mediations in tandem, until our Family Mediation Project as such was wound up in May 2015 (see p.4 above).
- **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 student

social workers, a teacher and coach, a qualified civil mediator, a theatre nurse, a university graduate with a degree in history and a sociology student who previously worked in the local authority's fostering department! 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 and then move on, but 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 and of course there are always a percentage of new recruits who decide after a few months 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 the privilege of their individual contribution. 2015 has further seen considerable restructuring of our Trustee board: Arnold Lutton resigned finally in July 2014, Pam Bean and Jan Westall chose to leave the Organisation following the closure of the Family Mediation project and Lisa Raftery stepped down from the Board in May 2014. In their place we welcome Steve Brown, for a long time our Technical Adviser and now trustee, and Chris Laing, husband to Lucy Laing, recently-trained volunteer and now also a trustee. Chris works for *Thurrock Open Door* and so brings to the Committee a wealth of experience and some invaluable contacts. Hazel Davies, Organising Secretary, briefly joined the Trustee Board in July 2014, when her role was mainly administrative, but her return to a volunteer management position in June 2015 necessitated that she step down again, for fear of a conflict of interests. The Organisation is actively recruiting additional trustees, in particular a replacement Chair, whom we hope to have in post by the time we convene our 2015 AGM, scheduled for October this year.

Self-Directed Support  
Facilitator:

*"It has meant a lot to my client to be able to see her boys more often and for longer. You have been a great help."*

### **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 have in the past been obliged to depend on local authority funding for our basic revenues. We are currently unfunded and running on reserves, which we are fortunate to hold due to the foresight of our funder trustees.

- In 2013, all three bids submitted by *Parents' Aid* in 2012 to **Essex County Council's Family Innovation Fund 1** 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 add to 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 re-opened our Basildon Library surgery on Friday mornings. We continued 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 demand. It was proposed that the funding would be utilised to develop and deliver this project. However, these applications were not 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 since been suspended due to lack of support. In May 2014 *Parents' Aid* 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. This application was rejected on grounds that indicated it had not been read beyond the first page.

- 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 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 serving Thurrock (although home visiting is restricted), Basildon, Billericay, Castle Point, Rochford, Maldon and Chelmsford. In September 2014, *Parents' Aid* applied to **Essex Community Foundation's Provide fund** for £5,000 to finance the recruitment and training of 20 additional volunteer mediators to work with mid-Essex families. This application was turned down on the basis that we still held reserves, although the possession of reserves was not listed in the guidance as an obstacle to an award. Following the launch of Essex County Council's **Family Innovation Fund 5** tender in January 2015, *Parents' Aid* entered into negotiations with *Barnado's South Essex* and partner agencies to submit a consortium bid, but these broke down when the *Barnado's* PQQ failed on two specifications (not those in which *Parents' Aid* were bidding), which meant that the enterprise ceased to be financially viable for such a large organisation. It was by this point too late in the day for *Parents' Aid* to make alternative arrangement to join another consortium.

Volunteer:

*"I have met some wonderful people along the way during my time with Parents' Aid and I have gained valuable experience for which I am grateful to both clients and colleagues alike."*

### **Business Development:**

**Between April 2014 and March 2015 *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
- will secure sustainable sources of revenue to provide a solid basis on which to plan future expansion.

**During the financial year just gone, despite our current lack of funding, *Parents' Aid* has nevertheless progressed plans for capacity-building.** 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 (all our in-house training is certificated). These are being 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 introduction of more contemporary accounting 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.

**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 in the future on a sliding scale for the delivery of our *Family Mediation, 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 re-editing and publishing a seventh edition of our information booklet, *A Guide for Families: Your Child and Social Services*, updated in line with current legislation. A barrister from 4, Paper Buildings, one of the Inns of Temple, has agreed to undertake the work of rewriting the booklet and our plan is to distribute it free to families whilst marketing the new publication to partner agencies and statutory services.
  - ❖ The Organisation is holding reserve funds which our founder Trustees have saved over a period of years for the purpose of purchasing our own building. The Board is currently re-evaluating this objective, in consideration both of the wide area which our service now covers and the current financial climate, and taking advice in order to decide whether the money might not be better spent on the development of additional projects.
- 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.

**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.**

July 2015

Hazel E. Davies | Organising Secretary  
Parents' Aid

