

Parents' Aid Southern Essex: Annual Report 2016.

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 of eight minimum, formed of a balance of professionals and 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 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 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.

- 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 will convene public meetings in different areas according to demand, giving parents the opportunity to share experiences, pool strengths and exchange encouragement.

- All client families are encouraged to read our recently updated information booklet: this is now available on our website for download free of charge. Hard copies are available 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 with, or members of a professional body and working towards accreditation.
- Selected volunteers who are trained in-house deliver 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 or to use 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:

"As a parent I found it a great advantage to talk over my feelings and this enabled me to cope with the problems that faced us."

Colleague Agencies:

Parents' Aid is an independent organisation supporting families but partnership is 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., 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, Family Lives, Women's Aid, Connexions, Family Solutions, BATIAS, *MAPME-Mind*, the Family Group Conference Project, Victim Support, *Open Road*, *In Touch*, the local Youth Services, 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 are represented at Multi-Agency Cluster (MAC) Meetings in Essex and ourselves make referrals on behalf 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 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. Parents' Aid is actively involved in A.R.U.'s *SUCI* (Service User and Carer Involvement) Advisory Group. 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.



Projects, Old and New:

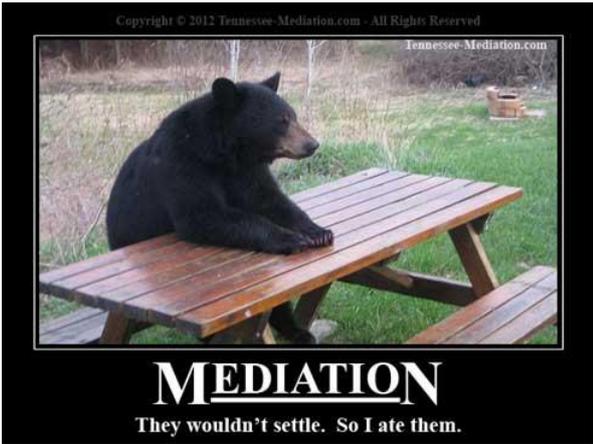
At the end of 2012, *Parents' Aid* submitted applications for grant aid to Essex County Council's *Family Innovation Fund 1* to develop our Family Mediation Service across South-East, South-West and Mid-Essex. These applications were all successful. However, subsequent applications, both for local authority 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.
- ***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.
- ***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. 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 based at Grays Health Centre, 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.

Parents' Aid user on feedback form:
"Family have aired their issues and our mediator has tried to advise on ways in which we can improve the family."

- **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. 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.

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. *Parent's 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 240 Essex residents, of which 165 were referred to us by Social Care teams. In addition, a further 25 Essex residents have been referred to *Parents' Aid* by Social Care teams for ancillary services, viz. parenting support, anger management and counselling.



- **Parents' Aid Return to Employment Workshops: Finding the Job of your Dreams.** As the grip of the current austerity measures tightened on the third sector, *Parents' Aid* became increasingly aware that many of our users have been far from the job market for some years and are now under pressure to find work. As part of our support package for families at risk of social exclusion, we seconded our in-house trainer on a train-the-trainer course run by Hertfordshire Development Corporation that enables delegates to

recognise their own personality types, match them to the type of work that will give them the most happiness and further identify any stress triggers of which they may need to be aware. In November 2015, *Parents' Aid* ran a pro bono workshop in Rayleigh Mega Centre to offer this training and its materials to our own team of volunteers and also to representatives of any local voluntary organisations who might wish to take advantage of the opportunity to add to their tool kit. In January 2016 a bid submitted to Essex County Council Independence, Choice and Control Fund for £1,000 to run a further six of these workshops in and around the Basildon area was successful. *Parents' Aid* went on to offer the training to customers signposted by Chelmsford and Basildon Jobcentres at *Chelmsford YMCA* and to the staff and volunteers of *Signpost* at Fryerns Library. Basildon Council recognised the potential of our little course and invited us to run the workshop at Vange Community Hub in Vange Library. It is anticipated that this event will be repeated at intervals and possibly replicated at other libraries in the Basildon area. The trustees are considering whether to seek continuation funding for this project and, if so, to which fund they should apply.

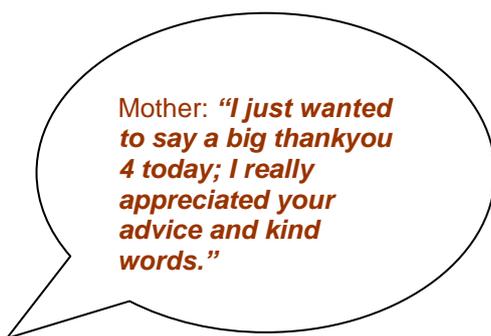
- ***In the administration of these projects***, the trustees have had due regard to the Charity Commission's guidance on public benefit, which is regularly reviewed at trustee meetings.

Staff 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 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 a skeleton service 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, is however very regularly used for training up local volunteers and assessing newly-referred clients.
- **In Mid-Essex, our Tuesday morning Chelmsford Library surgery** is manned and well-used on a fortnightly basis and our **Maldon surgery at the Elim Church in Wantz Road** continues operative on an appointment-only basis. In September 2015, *Parents' Aid* entered into an 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** as part of the church's vision to support local families and help prevent family breakdown. This Thursday afternoon surgery continues on an appointment-only basis due to the low level of demand for our services locally. Our **Basildon Library surgery** alternates with Chelmsford Library.
- The work of maintaining and enhancing our website has continued with fresh input from volunteer **Tom Synnott**, who came to us 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. Tom filmed and produced *Parents' Aid's* first video clip, which has now been linked to our website, www.parents-aid.org.uk! We are enormously grateful to Tom for his contribution.

- **Dawn Harrod**, founder-trustee and widow of former treasurer Don, last year moved out of the area and, unable to get to meetings, continued to take an interest in the work of the Organisation and to provide her views by e-mail. However in June 2016 Dawn, now 86, indicated that she felt the time had come to step down. The Board is very sorry to see her leave and we shall always be enormously grateful for the twenty-seven years of support that she has devoted to the organisation and its work.
- **Lucy Laing**, committee member and wife of trustee **Chris Laing**, took over as Chair at our 2015 A.G.M. but was obliged to stand down at the end of the financial year due to the pressure of her professional commitments. New trustee **Frances Barbour** kindly agreed to stand in the gap as Acting Chair and the situation will be reviewed at this year's A.G.M. Frances is a longstanding volunteer with *Parents' Aid* and took part in the mediation training program last year; she has a background in management and in supporting the victims of domestic abuse. Frances currently works for a Care Company supervising Care Workers and is Chair of Governors at a local primary school.
- **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 both retirees and student social workers, a teachers and coaches, a qualified civil mediator, nurses, 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.



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.

- *Parents' Aid* has received no funding from **Essex County Council** since the **Family Innovation Fund 1** award we received in 2013 for our **Family Mediation** project. At the close of 2013, we 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. However, these applications were not successful. At the close of 2015, the organisation submitted a bid for £1,000 to Essex County Council's **Independence, Choice and Control Fund** to deliver six workshops designed to enable and encourage long-term unemployed, such as single parents or the disabled, back to the job market. This application, administered by the Basildon, Billericay and Wickford Council for Voluntary Service, was successful and the consequent partnership working has fostered collaborative working with other organisations supporting the unemployed, such as the Y.M.C.A. and local libraries.
- **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.
- 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 adequate at the moment. We are currently serving Thurrock (although home visiting is restricted), Basildon, Billericay, Castle Point, Rochford, Maldon and Chelmsford. 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 really enjoy volunteering with Parents' Aid and seeing how the mediation work can make a positive difference to families'.**

Business Development:

Between April 2015 and March 2016 *Parents' Aid* has continued 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.

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);
- 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 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;
- the updating of the seventh edition of our information booklet and its online publication as a resource for families everywhere.

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 been exploring avenues that may enable 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 on a sliding scale for the delivery of our *Family Mediation, Anger and Aggression Management* and *Effective Parenting Skills* programs, both popular interventions with client families and social care teams, and for a proposed *Assertiveness* program, albeit as yet in an embryonic form.
 - ❖ 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 options, 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 continuing service delivery and the development of ancillary projects in response to user demand, such as our *Return to Employment* workshops.

- b) The Committee has additionally progressed the matter of upgrading systems and policies in line with a PQASSO Quality Mark and in particular the development of a more accurate self-evaluation system with codified user feedback forms. 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.

July 2016

Hazel E. Davies | Organising Secretary
Parents' Aid

