

Parents' Aid Southern Essex: Annual Report 2020.

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 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 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:

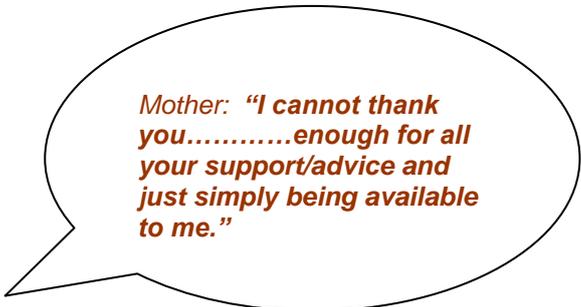
Parents' Aid seeks to help families overcome difficulties that may lead to the separation of children from their parents. Our services of

- 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 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 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 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 visit our website or to use our information line and we regularly receive enquiries from all over the country. Parents living outside our area of operations can access our support services by attending one of our mid- or south Essex-based locality surgeries.
- 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, Serenity Welfare* 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 is actively involved in A.R.U.'s *SUCI* (Service User and Carer Involvement) Advisory Group and are 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 current austerity measures, the Committee has freed up these funds to cover running costs.

- **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. In February 2018 we received the sad news that use of the room in Grays Health Centre, our Thurrock base for over the last twenty years, was to be withdrawn. The building was closed for refurbishment for the next three months and at the end of this period we were not invited to return, since the offices were rented out to larger organisations in a position to pay. The Management Committee is reluctant to pull out of an area we have serviced for many years, so we are now actively seeking alternative premises. In the meantime, we continue to assist Thurrock families (we receive a higher rate of referrals from Thurrock than any other single area) as best we can by employing a system of home visits, a form of service delivery neither cost-effective nor favourable to good time management, supplemented by occasional Saturday morning surgeries in the interview

room of Grays public library, for the use of which of course we have to pay. We desperately need a safe space in the borough to carry out assessments and train new volunteers.



- **Parents' Aid Family Mediation Service** is the project that most recently 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.
- **Parents' Aid Return to Employment Workshops: Finding the Job of your Dreams.** As the grip of 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 were now under increasing pressure to find work. As part of our support package for families at risk of social exclusion, we have incorporated this workshop to enable clients 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. Best delivered in small groups, it can also be offered one-to-one.
- **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 been exploring the viability of delivering services to our clients remotely, using any device capable of supporting an app such as *Zoom* – most clients do have smart phones these days. Some of our existing services, for example Anger Management, will adapt to this form of delivery very readily whilst others – notably Family Mediation – present more challenges in relation to the maintenance of boundaries necessary to ensure client safety and confidentiality. However, the current climate obliges us to develop virtual interventions and we hope that families will gain confidence in this approach, which will certainly be replicated by other agencies.



She began to wonder if they were beyond mediation.

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.

- **Our Thurrock project** is currently a skeleton service. Unfunded since 2010, in March of 2018 we lost the use of our Wednesday surgery at Grays Health Centre, the main base for delivery of our Thurrock service for over twenty years. Whilst actively seeking an alternative facility for the delivery of services we have been endeavouring to continue work with families by operating a system of home visits, although this is neither cost-effective nor productive of good time management. We received 35 separate Thurrock referrals during the last financial year and such a need cannot be met within a reasonable time-frame without use of premises, however basic, within the borough.
- **In Mid-Essex**, the use of Chelmsford Library for our **Tuesday morning surgery** was also withdrawn in 2018 and has been replaced by a fortnightly surgery in **'The Orchards' Community Centre, Mascalls Way, Meadgate, Chelmsford CM2 7NS**, where Meadgate Church runs a café and is happy to offer Parents' Aid occasional room use to deliver services as part of the its vision to support local parents and help prevent family breakdown. Our **Basildon surgery** at **Fryerns Baptist Church in Whitmore Way, Basildon SS17 8LD** is very well-used, thanks to the hospitality of the leadership team who have generously made their small hall available for our use on alternate Tuesday mornings, and our **Maldon surgery** at the **Elim Church in Wantz Road** continues on an appointment-only basis.
- **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 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 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.

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. Always an encourager of our service, Vinnie has already begun to contribute a fresh perspective on strategy and is able to signpost the organisation to a wealth of training opportunities. 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.

Approximately a year ago, I had the privilege of being invited by Hazel Davies to join the *Parents Aid* committee and have been further honoured to now be the committee chairperson.

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”.

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 further aware that, following lockdown, social distancing measures necessary to prevent a resurgence of the Covid-19 pandemic will entail changes both to service delivery and to in-house training and supervision. We are giving consideration to the development of a “socially distant” model which may well 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 programmes are available all our plans are fluid at present.

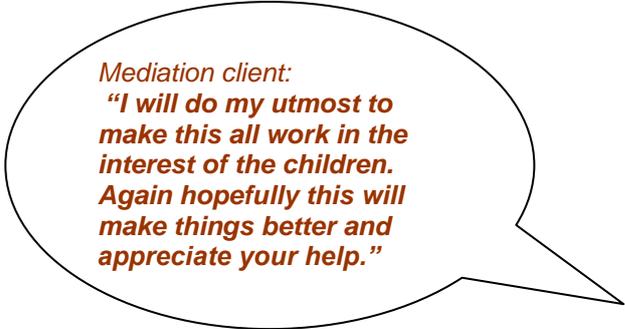


Mother: "It was helpful that the meeting was controlled and did not go away from the focus of the session."

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 **Essex County Council** since the **Family Innovation Fund 1** award we received in 2013 for our **Family Mediation** project. 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** no longer awards voluntary sector grants to established organisations and due to cuts from central government was 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, and more recently our Wednesday morning surgery at Grays Health Centre, which continued until February 2018 as the sole facility for both delivery of services and volunteer training, was abruptly terminated when that building closed for refurbishment. Our Thurrock project now faces serious crisis: yet for some years now, we have received a higher level of referrals from Thurrock than from any other area.
- 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 expenses. We currently service Thurrock, Basildon, Billericay, Castle Point, Rochford, Maldon and Chelmsford and the combined statistics for our 2019-20 referrals make a grand total of 89 separate families, all attracted without funding or any serious attempt to push out publicity.



*Mediation client:
"I will do my utmost to
make this all work in the
interest of the children.
Again hopefully this will
make things better and
appreciate your help."*

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.

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 2020

