

Parents' Aid Southern Essex: Annual Report 2013.

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 Projects 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, originally designed by Sam Roberts, our former Public Relations officer who has emigrated to the States. We are in the process of reconstructing this original site with the intention of creating 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 an accredited professional.
- 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 user on
feedback form:
*Our Parents' Aid worker was
there for me and my son.
Because of her, things have
got better and better.*

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., Homestart, Surestart, 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 are 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.



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. The applications have all been successful.**

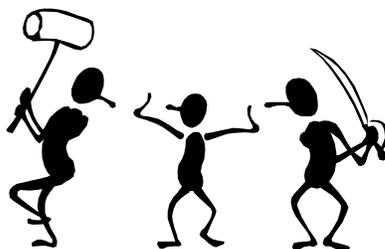
- ***Parents' Aid North Essex*** was a flourishing project that had to be put on hold in 2009 when our County Council funding was withdrawn abruptly under the terms of our *Local Priority Fund* contract. With support from Colchester M.P. Bob Russell we continue to explore possible avenues of alternative funding to re-launch the project. Meanwhile, enquiries from both professionals and families based in North Essex

evidences an ongoing demand for our services in that area. Nineteen North Essex families approached us with requests for help during 2012-13 and we were able to offer them only telephone support.

- **Parents' Aid Thurrock**, previously a thriving project since the Borough first became a unitary authority, has in the last two 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 intend to offer support to clients who are able to attend this weekly surgery as long as our financial situation permits. Keen and committed volunteers have continued 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 at present is simply to maintain a presence in the Borough funding should again become available or until such a presence should ultimately become financially unsustainable.

- **Parents' Aid Family Mediation Service** is the new project, originally piloted in Thurrock during 2009-10, that has 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.



The Management Committee has already appointed Project Co-ordinators in all three areas, South-East, South-West and Mid-Essex, where we are presently recruiting and training volunteers. We have opened additional locality surgeries and are about to move into our own office in Basildon, made available to us by a local business on a grace and favour basis. We are pushing out the publicity in all three areas in order to attract referrals and have now begun to deliver mediation to newly-referred families. The organisation is fortunate in having a committed and enthusiastic team: in the South-West, Ashley Lewis, for some time now the volunteer manager of our Grays Health Centre surgery, has expanded her duties to become Project Co-ordinator; in the South-East, former staff member Sonia Zdanczuk has resumed her role as Project Co-ordinator and in Mid-Essex longstanding committee member Pam Bean has for the first time taken up a frontline position.

- **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 are exploring the possibility of re-launching the initiative as a programme for delivery to families as our response to Essex County Council's *Family Innovation Fund* outcome "Children, young people and adults within families will be able to stop/manage aggressive and violent behaviour towards each other".



Parents' Aid user on feedback form:
I feel better for having somebody to talk to about things that have been getting me down. It feels like a weight has been lifted.

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 both 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 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. But last year Abigail found that the increasing demands of her Social Work degree course made the ongoing commitment impossible and since that time former volunteer Ashley Lewis has been managing our Thurrock project, training up local volunteers and assessing newly-referred clients. Following a suggestion from volunteer 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 made possible by the news that our *Local Priority Fund* contract was to be extended until March 2013, which enabled us to dedicate unrestricted reserves towards our Grays project, 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** has now become the main base for volunteer training and client work in Mid-Essex, under the management of Project Co-ordinator Pam Bean. We are urgently seeking a second venue in the Braintree/North Chelmsford area, since our *Family Innovation Fund* grant aid has extended the area of our operations to cover Braintree as well as Chelmsford and Maldon. Debbie Nichol, longstanding volunteer and committee member and formerly the mainstay of our South Woodham Ferrers project, has this year been obliged to stand down due to the pressure of commitments and will be greatly missed. Sue Johnston, who formerly helped head up our Colchester project, is however still very much a part of the team although due to the distance entailed rarely able to attend the surgery. Sue works with Chelmsford clients, delivering services to the home, and her daughter Beca, who is studying statistics as part of her degree course, last year kindly agreed to examine our Accounts.
- **Sam Roberts**, previously our Public Relations Officer and Webmaster, emigrated to the States in 2011 where he married and was last heard of living in Iowa. We have unfortunately lost contact with Sam and so the work of enhancing and maintaining the site has been delegates to Sonia and Pam, who have some expertise with website layout and design. Together they have plans to re-develop and transform the whole site, to make it more dynamic, easier to update and essentially user-friendly – so watch this space! (www.parents-aid.org.uk)
- **Don Harrod**, founder-Trustee and formerly our Treasurer for many years, overseeing the finances of the organisation from its foundation in 1989 until 2010, sadly passed away in August of 2012. 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. We are grateful still to have the support of his widow Dawn, although she is unable to attend many meetings these days. Since Don's retirement volunteer 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.

- **Sonia Zdanczuk**, formerly Projects Co-ordinator for *Parents' Aid* at the time of our Service Level Agreement with Essex County Council Children's Services to expand our advocacy service to cover North Essex, has returned to the team in a paid capacity as Project Co-ordinator for South-East Essex. Sonia was the creator of our former *Conflict Workshop* project and has currently under consideration the viability of re-launching it as an intervention to address the problem of aggressive and violent behaviour within families in our submission to Essex County Council's *Family Innovation Fund 2*. **Pam Bean**, longstanding committee member and trustee, has now taken up a frontline position by accepting the post of Project Co-ordinator for Mid-Essex. Pam has completed her in-house training and is currently busy training volunteers and delivering services to clients. **Ashley Lewis**, for some months now volunteer manager of our Thurrock service, has expanded her sphere of duties to include the responsibilities of Projects Co-ordinator for South-West Essex. All three practitioners share an equal zeal to promote the success of our *Family Mediation Project* and their individual skills and specialisms have already proven to be correlative and complementary, forming a strong team.
- **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 a law graduate, a psychology graduate, a qualified social worker, a local school governor, and several student social workers and trainee care 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.



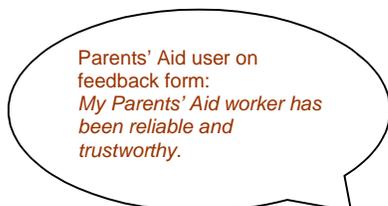
Parents' Aid user on feedback form:
I am very grateful for the help and support for my daughter and myself and the kindness.

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 recently extended to run for a fourth year until the end of March 2013, following the withdrawal of Essex County Council's *Early Intervention Fund*. **This year, all three bids submitted by Parents' Aid in 2012 to the local authority's Family Innovation Fund for our new Family Mediation project have achieved success.** This has meant that the area of our operations has once again been extended to include Mid-Essex – Chelmsford and Braintree as well as Maldon. In order to meet the ambitious targets which we set ourselves we have been developing our infrastructure: we now have three paid workers in post who are individually recruiting and training volunteers and inviting referrals from partner agencies in each of the three quadrants for which we are funded. We are in the process of establishing additional surgeries in both Canvey Island and Rayleigh and have re-opened our Basildon Library surgery on Friday mornings. We have been promised the exclusive use of premises currently standing empty in Sylvan Court, Sylvan Way, Basildon on a grace and favour basis, a facility which will open up new realms of possibility for us previously unimaginable. We have under consideration the re-launch of our Maldon surgery in the Elim Pentecostal Church in Wantz Road. We are urgently seeking premises in the Chelmsford/Braintree area but funding restrictions have proved a limiting factor here, since our budget prohibits the payment of rent proper.
- **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.



Business Development:

Between April 2012 and March 2013 *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.

Now once again in receipt of a level of funding that enables the Management Committee to plan systematic expansion – at least for the time being - *Parents' Aid* is progressing 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 adaptation 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 the 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 Chairman 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 restructuring and enhancement of our website.

As ongoing financial uncertainties have established, 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 has been seeking 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 courses that are rapidly gaining popularity equally with client families and social work teams, and
- ❖ of publishing our training manuals when updated, now used regularly both for volunteer training and for client interventions.

Of course, the recent marketing of our *Support Services for Families at Risk of Social Exclusion* to local authority commissioners on a tendering and procurement basis has in itself established 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. For example, interventions involving a process through which user and *Parents' Aid* volunteer 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.

May 2013

Hazel E. Davies | Organising Secretary
Parents' Aid

