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**Report of Mark den Hollander, Independent Visitor Service  
Coordinator, County Durham Youth Justice Service**

**Electoral division(s) affected:**

Countywide

**Purpose of the Report**

- 1 This report provides an update about Durham County Council's Independent Visitor (IV) service for children and young people who are looked after.
- 2 The report highlights the challenges experienced during the Coronavirus pandemic and subsequent lockdowns whilst outlining the steps taken to manage risk during this period ensuring that the IV service resumed with some degree of normal functionality.
- 3 The report outlines the progress made in the recruitment and training of IV's, and the wider targets set for the service.
- 4 This report also responds to the questions posed by the National Independent Visitors Network in an '*Open letter to Chairs of Corporate Parenting Panels and Children and Young People's Committees*' on 26 February 2021 (attached as Appendix 2).

**Executive summary**

- 5 The role of Independent Visitor (a volunteer) was first introduced as a statutory service for '*looked after children*' in the Children's Act of 1989. The Act outlined the statutory responsibility of local authorities to offer an Independent Visitor to any child that they are looking after.
- 6 The volunteer's role is to visit, befriend and encourage participation in positive activities. The appointment of an Independent Visitor is considered within the child / young person's care plan and is subject to ongoing review in the child / young person's Looked After Review.

- 7 Like many services, the IV Service experienced difficulties throughout 2020/2021 due to the Covid-19 pandemic and national lockdown measures. This directly impacted the services' ability to retain existing volunteers, recruit new volunteers and to grow the service.
- 8 A Covid Risk Assessment was developed which reviewed visiting arrangements for the small number of children / young people (7) who were matched with a volunteer, to ensure these took place outside and were delivered in line with Covid-19 guidance.
- 9 As of March 2021, there were 17 children and young people accessing an Independent Visitor, with a projected target of 30 children and young people accessing this service by September 2021.
- 10 Given the successful recruitment of new volunteers since September 2020, which has increased from 7 volunteers to 31 currently, further work is now starting to take place with teams across the Children and Young People's Service to promote the IV Service and its benefits.

## **Recommendations**

- 11 Members of the Corporate Parenting Panel are asked to:
  - (a) Recognise the impact that the restrictions imposed due to Coronavirus have had on the service since April 2020
  - (b) Acknowledge the progress made over recent months and the wider targets for the service.

## Background

- 12 Prior to April 2020, Durham County Council commissioned its statutory IV service with an external provider, through a regional commissioning arrangement. Due to the challenges the provider experienced in relation to the recruitment of IVs in the Durham area, the number of children and young people accessing an IV was always very low (under 10 children and young people).
- 13 Whilst the regional commissioning arrangement continues to be in place, with Durham using this contract for children living outside of County Durham, work was carried out to explore the possibility of developing an in-house IV service which would enable an increased number of children and young people to access an IV when it is in their best interests to do so.
- 14 A business case was developed by the Commissioning Service, and funding secured to support the implementation of the new in-house IV service, which commenced on the 1 April 2020. A comprehensive service specification and service delivery plan were subsequently developed in 2020/21 by the newly appointed Independent Visitor Coordinator, who is responsible for delivering the new in-house service and overseeing the commissioned service. The Commissioning Service continue to have strategic oversight of the Independent Visitor Offer in Durham.
- 15 The appointment of an IV is considered by a child / young person's Social Worker when it is in their best interest. The child / young person must give their consent before a referral is made to the service, with their wishes and feelings fully considered as part of the process for appointing an IV.
- 16 When a child / young person consistently accesses the support of an Independent Visitor, we strive to achieve a range of outcomes. These are dependent on the individual needs of the child / young person, with examples captured below.
  - (a) The establishment of a consistent supportive relationship
  - (b) Building trust with a consistent adult
  - (c) Gaining a friend / trusted adult
  - (d) Establishing a broader outlook on life
  - (e) Increased self-esteem and confidence
  - (f) Development of social skills

- (g) Increased emotional wellbeing
- (h) Increased opportunity to access a range of cultural, leisure and sporting activities which promote emotional wellbeing
- (i) A greater awareness of keeping themselves safe and understanding risks.

## **Current Position**

- 17 Similar to other services, the Independent Visitor Service has experienced difficulties throughout 2020/2021 due to the Covid-19 pandemic and national lockdown measures. This has impacted the services ability to retain existing volunteers, to recruit new volunteers and to grow the service.
- 18 As of the end of March 2021, there are 17 children / young people matched to a volunteer and one young person waiting to be matched.
- 19 During the pandemic a risk assessment was developed which clearly outlined how both children / young people and volunteers would be protected from Coronavirus whilst ensuring that a statutory service operated. Each visit required an individualised COVID Risk Assessment, social distancing observed, PPE used, transport guidance observed and all visits taking place outdoors. Since the roll out of the vaccination, all active volunteers have been offered and accepted the opportunity to be vaccinated. This positive take-up has supported the effective recovery of this statutory service.
- 20 The IV Service has recruited new volunteers over recent months, using a range of methods, increasing the number of volunteers from 7 to 31, with a total of 42 volunteers in place by the end of April 2021.
- 21 The service opened to new referrals in September 2020, however referral numbers have continued to be lower than expected, particularly as the country entered a second lockdown in January 2021.
- 22 At the end of March 2021, the IV service had matched with 1.8% of Looked After Children living in County Durham. If working towards matching 10% of CLA in County Durham as outlined in the Right Friend campaign, this would reach 95 CLA.
- 23 Due to the restructure of the service and as all matches with a volunteer are new, there are plans in place to capture the impact that the service has on children and young people. All IV's complete a visitor report form for each visit they carry out. The views of children and young people accessing the service will also be gathered, to collectively understand the overall impact and benefit to children and young people.

- 24 The service specification for the IV service is guided by the principles and standards of National Independent Visitor Network including training and practice.
- 25 The IV service is currently offered to young who have reached school age to the age of 18. If a young person is matched with an IV when they reach care leaving age, the IV may continue to support the young person if this is the young person's wishes. An extension of this offer to 18-25 can be investigated to understand any impact it may have to children looked after aged 4-17.
- 26 As volunteer capacity has been grown over recent months, work is now starting to take place with teams across CYPS to promote the service and to understand the anticipated demand for an IV, so the supply and demand model can be effectively managed.

## **Conclusion**

- 27 The appointment of an Independent Visitor Coordinator coincided with the first national lockdown in response to the Coronavirus. The role diversified to conduct an overall review of the current service resource, assess current matches, and contact existing volunteers to establish their continued interest.
- 28 The service has successfully recruited new volunteers with 42 active volunteers available for children and young people by the end of April 2021.
- 29 Whilst the target of 30 matches has not been achieved by the 31 March 2021, due to the Covid Pandemic, the closure of the service to new referrals and limited volunteer capacity, the in-house Independent Visitor Service is now in a strong position to reach 30 matches by September 2021.
- 30 Work is being planned with teams across CYPS to understand the likely demand for the service and to encourage more referrals to the IV service in a planned way.

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## **Appendix 1: Implications**

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## **Legal Implications**

It is a statutory duty of the Local Authority to ensure that all children and young people who are looked after, can access an independent visitor if they request one and it is in their best interests. The requirements of the service must however fully take on board the current pandemic situation and local and national restrictions in place which set out how individuals in different household are able to meet up socially, both inside and outside.

## **Finance**

NONE.

## **Consultation**

NONE.

## **Equality and Diversity / Public Sector Equality Duty**

NONE

## **Climate Change**

NONE.

## **Human Rights**

NONE.

## **Crime and Disorder**

NONE.

## **Staffing**

NONE.

## **Accommodation**

NONE.

## **Risk**

This report identifies the ongoing risks in relation to Covid-19 in the context of the IV service and how these risks are being mitigated.

## **Procurement**

NONE

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## **Appendix 2: Open letter to Chairs of Corporate Parenting Panels and Children and Young People's Committees**

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Attached as a separate document