

Corporate Parenting Panel

21 October 2022

Review of the Independent Visitor Service for Children in Care



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

Electoral division(s) affected:

Countywide

Purpose of the Report

- 1 This report introduces the role of the Independent Visitor (IV) Coordinator, centrally coordinating the service from within County Durham Youth Justice Service.
- 2 The report examines the impact of the pandemic upon the Independent Visitor service and highlights how the service responded to the restrictions to ensure a high quality and effective delivery.
- 3 To summarise the current position of the IV service and highlight developments that have taken place since the restrictions caused by the pandemic were lifted. This includes recruitment of volunteers, referrals of young people to the service and ensuring effective matching of young people with Independent Visitors.
- 4 To examine the future development of the service including potential issues and challenges and how these can be effectively resolved.

Executive summary

- 5 On 9 May 2019, a report was submitted to the Senior Managers of the Children and Young Peoples Service which outlined the proposed arrangements for the Independent Visitor (IV) Service in County Durham run in-house by an Independent Visitor Coordinator based in the County Durham Youth Justice Service (CDYJS). A volunteer programme had been in operation within CDYJS for many years and was an established and well-respected programme.
- 6 On the 1 April 2020, the Independent Visitor Coordinator began employment with County Durham Youth Justice Service (CDYJS) which notably coincided with the beginning stages of the national lockdown

due to COVID-19. The service was significantly disrupted by the national lockdown for the first six months which required diversification of the IV Coordinator role for this period.

- 7 During September 2020, the service began face-to-face work with young people and the recruitment of volunteers to be Independent Visitors. The service has grown and exceeded its targets of 30 matches in the period 2020/21 and 2021/22.
- 8 With two years of active service in place, the IV service can now effectively look at patterns, challenges and issues that may affect the continued development in the future, such as ongoing recruitment of volunteers or budget implications.

Recommendations

- 9 Corporate Parenting Panel is recommended to:
 - (a) Note the content of this report
 - (b) Acknowledge the potential challenges to the service as it develops in the future.
 - (c) To receive further updates at a schedule to be decided by the Corporate Parenting Panel

Background

- 10 The role of Independent Visitor 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. A volunteer to visit, befriend and advise the child as part of their care plan.
- 11 The Independent Visitor Service sits with Durham County Council within the Youth Justice Service. The Youth Justice service has already established links with appropriate services which benefitted the role of Independent Visitors

Challenges faced during Covid Lockdowns

- 12 In March 2020, there was the first of the national lockdowns. This had a serious impact upon essential and statutory services within local authorities including the Independent Visitor service.
- 13 The IV service is dependent upon relationship building and face to face contact between the volunteer and young person. Lockdown impacted the services by preventing face to face appointments, effectively halted referrals to the IV service, halted the recruitment of volunteers and stopped all but essential contact between IV's, social workers, key workers, and young people.
- 14 Despite this unprecedented period of disruption, the role of IV Coordinator diversified for a 6-month period. During this time, the IV Coordinator conducted a full review of the service and ensured that all databases, paperwork, service advertisement, specification, current cohort of volunteers and live matches were current, effective, and efficient, suitable to manage the service when it became fully live and fully active again.

Current position

- 15 At September 2020, there were 9 active volunteers and 7 'on hold'. By the end of August 2022, there were 49 active volunteers and 8 'on hold'. During the period, 88 volunteers had been recruited and trained in total, 31 leaving for personal reasons. Response to recruitment drives can vary enormously, a recent campaign generating 14 new volunteers (included in the totals).
- 16 At September 2020, there were 2 active matches in the IV service. By the end of August 2022, there have been 93 referrals to the service for a match. 70 matches have been made, with 37 matches having concluded. Such conclusions are mainly due to changes in the

circumstances of young people and occasionally with volunteers. The service will rematch young people where an IV leaves the service.

- 17 By the end of August 2022, there are 33 matches occurring. There are currently 23 young people waiting for a match with 15 of these in the process of being matched. The remaining 8 are waiting for permanent accommodation and will be matched once this has been secured.

Future Development and challenges

- 18 As the IV service moves forward, our target is to meet the National Independent Visitor Network (NIVN) target of matching 10% of all children in care in the local authority area. In County Durham, this equates to approximately 100 young people. This will occur but will require ongoing monitoring of matches to pinpoint when. Currently, for every two matches that occur, 1 will conclude within one year. At the current rate of referrals, this equates to the 10% figure being met by June 2024.
- 19 To meet this 10% target also requires the recruitment of 100 volunteers. This is a challenging target where personal circumstances can affect volunteers and therefore service delivery. It also requires the examination of service resources particularly with emphasis on increased staffing.
- 20 Working towards the 10% target will result in the current budget becoming challenging. Current spend on activities averages at £27 per visit with an additional 50-mile round trip mileage claim for the volunteer (£24). As the cost-of-living rises, the cost of activities increases. This combined with a developing service will obviously increase the stress on the current budget and will require review moving forward.
- 21 Current referral levels will mean the service reaching the 10% target of matches without further need to promote referrals from social workers.

Conclusion

- 22 The appointment of a specific IV Coordinator based in County Durham Youth Justice Service has been a positive move for the service, ensuring a significant increase in the number of referrals (93), matches (70) and volunteers (88) to the service.
- 23 Although the unprecedented restrictions during lockdowns affected direct person interventions in the service, it has also allowed a full review of the existing resource and created a positive change to allow the service to be more efficient and effective in the future.
- 24 Using the current patterns as an indication of future development and working towards the nationally recommended target of 10% for IV

services to match children in care, it is likely that the IV service will achieve this target by approximately June 2024. This positive outlook will put pressure on existing resource and the current budget will need reviewing.

Author

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Appendix 1: Implications

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.

Finance

Not applicable

Consultation

Not applicable

Equality and Diversity / Public Sector Equality Duty

Not applicable

Climate Change

Not applicable

Human Rights

All children in care have the right to an independent visitor

Crime and Disorder

Not applicable

Staffing

Not applicable

Accommodation

Not applicable

Risk

Not applicable

Procurement

Not applicable