

Corporate Parenting Panel

10 November 2023

Review of the Independent Visitor Service for Children in Care



Report of County Durham Youth Justice Service

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Electoral division(s) affected:

Countywide

Purpose of the Report

- 1 This report introduces the role of the Independent Visitor (IV) Service managed by the Independent Visitor Coordinator, based with County Durham Youth Justice Service.
- 2 To summarise the current position of the IV service and highlight developments that have taken place over the past 12 months. This includes recruitment of volunteers, referrals of young people to the service and ensuring effective matching of young people with Independent Visitors.
- 3 To examine the impact of the matches upon young people and volunteers and evidence the development of the service in response to need and request. (Case Study – Appendix A)
- 4 To examine the future development of the service including challenges and how these can be effectively resolved.

Executive summary

- 5 The Independent Visitor Service is a statutory obligation of every local authority highlighted in the Children's Act 1989 to provide to a young person an Independent Visitor when requested and in conjunction with the advice of a social worker, key worker or family member.
- 6 Since September 2020, the service began face-to-face work with young people and the recruitment of volunteers to be Independent Visitors. The service is funded to meet a target of 50 referrals and 30 matches in each year and has exceeded this every year.

- 7 Being an Independent Visitor is considered a long-term commitment with a young person and after three years of service, the service has begun to examine the impact of the involvements on volunteers, young people and with social workers.
- 8 With three 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.

Recommendation(s)

- 9 Corporate Parenting Panel is recommended to:
 - (a) Note the content of this report.
 - (b) Note the challenges to the service as it develops in the future.
 - (c) To further update the Corporate Parenting Panel in 12 months on progress and development.

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 appropriate links to services that link with Independent Visitors – Children and Young Peoples Services, speech and language services, criminal justice services and other relevant partnerships.

Current position

- 12 Since October 2022, 43 Independent Visitors have been recruited. By the end of October 2023, there were 75 active volunteers and 18 inactive due to personal circumstances (130 volunteers since September 2020, 37 leaving for personal reasons). Periods of recruitment can be busy or quiet, a recent campaign generating 18 new volunteers included in the totals.
- 13 Since October 2022, there have been 73 referrals to the service and 60 matches (145 referrals and 130 matches since September 2020). 27 matches have concluded this year (70 matches in total). 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.
- 14 By the end of October 2023, there are 59 matches occurring. There are currently 15 young people waiting, 11 of these in the process of being matched. The remaining 4 are waiting for permanent accommodation and will be matched once this has been secured.

Service Impact

- 15 Service impact is important for a person-centred service but is also challenging to collect. The impact is based on qualitative rather than quantitative responses. The service examines the responses from young people, volunteers and social workers taken from face-to-face contact with the young people by the Independent Visitor Coordinator, from volunteers during supervisions and group events and social workers at Care Review meetings.
- 16 After a young person has been matched for over one year, the Independent Visitor Coordinator arranges a visit with that young person to talk about the service. During these conversations, the young person

is asked their thoughts about the service and their independent visitor. Having had 12 visits with young people, 98% have been very satisfied with the person they have been matched with and feel they have benefited from having an IV.

- 17 Independent Visitors and the Coordinator attend Care Review meetings for young people approximately every 6 months to talk about the matches. This is also an opportunity to review objectives and receive feedback from social workers and other professionals. Since October 2022, 106 Care Review meetings have been attended (246 since Sept 2020), there has been 100% positive feedback from social workers and professionals about the impact of the IV service for the young person.
- 18 Independent Visitor receive supervision every 12 weeks with the Independent Visitor Coordinator. During this supervision, IVs are asked about the impact they feel they are having with the young person (92% could identify positive impact) and if they are enjoying the experience of being an IV (96% gave a positive response).

Future Development and challenges

- 19 As the IV service moves forward, the specific target is to meet the Durham County Council target of ensuring 50 referrals of children in care, of which 30 are matched annually. There is an aspiration to meet the National Independent Visitor Network (NIVN) target of matching 10% of children in care, currently 120 for County Durham.
- 20 To meet the Councils annual target, requires the recruitment of additional volunteers. Discussions are occurring with the Commissioner to examine a feasible level of recruitment as current levels are being exceeded annually and this puts pressure on the service.
- 21 Original budgets estimated that the budget would cover 50 active matches, under review, the current budget will cover approximately 60 active matches. The cost of current activities averages at £30 per visit with an additional 50-mile round trip travel expenses (£24). As the cost of living rises, the cost of activities increases. This clearly places an increasing pressure on the budget and discussions are occurring with the Commissioner about the finances.

Conclusion

- 22 The appointment of a specific IV Coordinator based in County Durham Youth Justice Service and the development of the service over the last three years has been a positive move for the service, ensuring a significant increase in the number of referrals (2020/21 – 17, 2021/22 - 68, 2022/23 – 70) matches (2020/21 – 15, 2021/22 – 41, 2022/23 – 74)

and volunteers (2020/21 – 14, 2021/22 – 44, 2022/23 - 68) to the service.

- 23 After three years of active delivery, we can evidence the positive impact the service has on a qualitative basis, talking with volunteers, young people and professionals, the service is reported as having a positive impact upon the young people it works with.
- 24 Discussions have been taking place with Commissioning about the implications of increasing volunteer numbers and the impact to the budget of increasing referrals.

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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

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

NONE

Procurement

NONE.

Appendix 2: Case Study

Susan (name changed) has been with the Independent Visitor (IV) Service the longest of all current young people in the service. Having first been matched at 14, Susan was given a taste of what the service can offer, having trips out with the IV and an opportunity to discuss and receive support in challenging areas of her life.

In December 2021, Susan was matched with two IVs as a couple, the first time the service has tried this. This was an instant hit, and they began a productive and fun relationship, allowing time to build trust and rapport. As the relationship developed, the IVs began to develop skills with the young person, budgeting, shopping, bills, public transport and looking at future opportunities for training or work. Mostly, however, a real friendship was building.

Leaving care in July 2023, the service received permission from Commissioning to continue IV service into the journey into independence and Susan moved into a flat. The IVs were very supportive during this transition, supporting the practical elements of the move whilst having trips out to explore the transition from being in care to independence and the emotion behind this.

There was further move in September 2023 into a house. Once again, the IVs supported this move whilst supporting Susan to cope with the complex welfare state, organising training and offering emotional support.

In a settled place, the IV Coordinator explored the possibility of stopping the match and the IVs and Susan becoming friends. This must be a decision that the young person must come to. It was decided that the freedom that friendship offered outweighed the boundaries of the IV service at this stage of her life.

The match concluded in October 2023, and they are now friends, for life! They are all spending Christmas day together.