

## Corporate Parenting Panel

6 December 2024

### Review of the Independent Visitor Service for Children in Care



## Report of Martyn Stenton, Head of Early Help, Vulnerable Children and Inclusion, CYPS, DCC

### Electoral division(s) affected:

Countywide

### Purpose of the Report

- 1 This report introduces the role of the Independent Visitor 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 The Service was able to maintain 60 active matches within the original budget however given the increase of numbers of Children Looked After and requirement to grow the service the activities and mileage budget was doubled from April 2024 to anticipate the scheme would be able to facilitate up to 120 active matches and a 0.5 admin post was added to support the coordinator role who came into post in September 2024.
- 8 Being an Independent Visitor is considered a long-term commitment with a young person and after four years of service, the service has begun to examine the impact of the involvements on volunteers, young people and with social workers.
- 9 With four 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**

- 10 Members of the Corporate Parenting Panel are 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**

- 11 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.
- 12 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**

- 13 Since October 2023, 42 Independent Visitors have been recruited. By the end of October 2023, there were 78 active volunteers and 6 inactive due to personal circumstances (164 volunteers since September 2020, 80 leaving for personal reasons). Periods of recruitment can be busy or quiet, a recent campaign on social media resulted in 40 expressions of interest, with applications from 16 people.
- 14 Since October 2023, there have been 94 referrals to the service and 57 matches (239 referrals and 187 matches since September 2020). 50 matches have concluded this year (120 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.
- 15 By the end of October 2023, there are 75 matches occurring. There are currently 27 young people waiting, 9 of these in the process of being matched. The remaining 18 are waiting for a suitable IV for matching. Not accounting for further referrals, the waiting list will be cleared by February 2025. The average waiting time for a match is now 6 weeks but this is very dependent upon geography and IV availability.

## **Service Impact**

- 16 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.

- 17 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. Over 10 visits with young people, 97% have been very satisfied with the person they have been matched with and feel they have benefited from having an IV.
- 18 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 2023, 198 Care Review meetings have been attended (336 since Sept 2020), there has been 99% positive feedback from social workers and professionals about the impact of the IV service for the young person.
- 19 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 (93% could identify positive impact) and if they are enjoying the experience of being an IV (98% gave a positive response).

### **Future Development and challenges**

- 20 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. Dependent on how the 10% is measured, the service has matched with 12.8% of the looked after children in County Durham, 6.8% at any given time.
- 21 It was agreed the budget for the IV service be increased in 2024/2025 and would include finance for a part-time business support worker. The service has now employed this person and it has allowed the service to develop quickly as business support tasks which were previously completed by the IV Coordinator can be tasked by business support. The service will work with Commissioners to ensure that this business support is continued to allow for further development of the service.
- 22 Volunteer recruitment and subsequently faster matching times remain the priority of the service. The use of social media to recruit has increased levels of volunteers, and the IV service is retaining volunteers at a higher rate than the national average (33%). However, retention is an issue when working with volunteers and an area of work that requires exploration and development.

- 23 With the increased budget allowance, the service can work with 108 active matches and the business support worker. By Christmas 2024, the service will have approximately 90 matches and will achieve 108 matches by March 2025. The service will work with Commissioners to review this and look for the budget for 2025/26. Costs of activities and transport are aligned with other IV services nationally, average activity cost of £35 and transport of £30 per visit.
- 24 The service has also introduced group activities over the reporting period, encouraging some peer support. Some of these group activities are focussed upon workshops which cover financial management, budgeting, training, employment, and cooking. The service has linked with professional organisations to run these, but the workshops are informally run.

## **Conclusion**

- 25 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, 2023/24 - 84) and volunteers (2020/21 – 14, 2021/22 – 44, 2022/23 – 68, 2023/24 - 77) to the service.
- 26 After four 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.
- 27 Having discussed the budget implications of a constantly developing service, the introduction of a business support worker has supported the future development of the service. Moving forward, the service will work with Commissioners to budget effectively to ensure the service can develop positively with increased numbers whilst preserving the unique nature of the service and what this achieves.

## **Author**

Mark den Hollander

Tel: 07584345947

---

## **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

---

Matched in Sept 2020, with a young man at the time, 9 years old who was struggling in a residential placement. Behaviour was poor, running away a lot and caused a lot of concerns for placement, social worker, and the general care team about him. Referral for an IV to try and bring some stability to his life, look at why behaviours were poor, look at risk-taking behaviour and allow a relationship to develop with a trusted adult. Mindful this young person has no contact with his parents, and this remains so.

Instant hit and reduction in behaviour issues from when the first visits occurred. Although we cannot say it was perfect, it was evident that the YP acknowledged that this IV was just for him, that what he said did not automatically get reported back to staff or social workers. Nothing serious, of course! Activities together, trips to McDonalds and generally enjoyed the attention given to him. Shortly afterwards, the YP moved placements to a new residential home. This improved the behaviour dramatically as well. So, a troubled young man, started to show all the elements of a settled young man who engaged well with others. It was not always perfect and on visits, behaviour could still get heightened, and he could struggle with social situations.

However, the IV engagement has been nothing more than exemplary over the 4 years. Just three missed visits due to personal reasons on either side, two or three visits per month, introductions to the IVs family, agreed in advance and not regular, continued adaptation of the visits to suit a developing young man. Ongoing conversations about the future. More realistic goals being set, plans being made. Total consistency particularly when other young people are seeing family, he has the IV to go out with.

So, after 4 years, where are we? We have a well-behaved, well-adjusted young man who is considering his future. Behaviour is excellent and engagement is positive. Makes friends on visits out, something that was an issue for long periods. Knows what he wants to do and plans this. Matured amazingly. Only 14 now so long way to go with the match to independence and beyond. This is one of those matches that without it, I would not be sure where the young person might be. I have no doubt that the intervention prevented possible moves of placement, risk-taking behaviour, and lack of motivation in the future. Now, there are plans and someone to support him with this. Incredible journey, not finished by any means but a positive pathway created with a future that looks much brighter than it did once upon a time.