

REPORT FOR THE CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE'S TRUST EXECUTIVE GROUP

Date of meeting:	14 th October 2021
Report Title:	Highlight Report of the Children's Rights and Independent Visitors Services April 2020 to August 2021
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Status of report:	Not confidential
Approved by:	Children's Services DMT

1. Background and Legislative Context

The purpose of this report is to provide an overview of service provision and performance for the Children's Rights and Independent Visitors advocacy services for looked after children and young people. The Targeted Youth Support Service's Youth Voice and Participation Team deliver both service elements on behalf of the Local Authority and have done so for some time prior to which they were provided by third sector organisations.

Due to the challenges faced for service provision during the pandemic and that fact that the last annual report period did not reflect a 'normal' year, this report will provide an overview for an extended period of 18 months from April 2020 to September 2021. This will provide context to the contrast in delivery models at different points of the pandemic and where these have impacted on service provision.

Independent Visitors

The role of Independent Visitor was created under the 1989 Children Act which placed a duty on Local Authorities to offer services to befriend children and young people in care. Under Section 3.262, an independent visitor "is a volunteer who is able to be consistent and reliable in order that children and young people can build a trusting, positive relationships with them over time". By definition, the Independent Visitor volunteer is impartial of any formal or informal care or support otherwise provided to looked after children.

The Children Act states that a Local Authority has to appoint an independent visitor for any child they are looking after if this is felt to be in the child's best interests. Section 23 states "A Local Authority looking after a child must appoint an independent person to be the child's visitor if (a) a child falls within a description prescribed in regulations made by the appropriate national authority or (b) in any other case it appears to them that it would be in the child's interests to do so. A person appointed under this section must visit, befriend and advise the child".

Children's Rights and advocacy

Section 26A of the Children Act 1989 imposes duties on Local Authorities in respect of advocacy

services. All Local Authorities with social services responsibilities should ensure that advocacy services are provided for children and young people making or intending to make a complaint under Section 24d or section 26 of the Children Act.

This report will discuss information interchangeably between both the Children's Rights and the Independent Visitors Service models as there are common issues, themes and trends relating to delivery and performance during the last 18 month period.

Like most services, the challenges presented throughout the pandemic have been unprecedented. Barriers imposed due to national restrictions impacted on the service's ability to engage with young people in face to face work which made initial engagement and contact difficult. Staff, volunteers, carers and young people themselves have all been impacted upon at some point which are discussed in more detail throughout the report.

The Children's Right's Service – Our COVID Response

The Children's Rights Service saw a reduction in enquiries from 'new' young people that is, young people not previously known to have worked with the service during the course of the pandemic. There are a number of reasons why this would have occurred. It is reasonable to suggest that young people were not focused on their own issues at that time as the pandemic became the single most concerning issue in their life.

During the peak of the first lockdown, all services were supporting the Children's Vulnerability Tracker arrangements to ensure the most vulnerable children and young people were being seen and supported. As these emergency powers were invoked, some of the more traditional and established routes of signposting between professionals were impacted by the superseding challenges of COVID and the barriers presented through virtual working and absence levels in the early stages.

At the same time, a temporary suspension of the corporate complaints procedure was implemented. This system facilitates looked after young people and care leavers to raise an issue or make a formal complaint and signposts to the Children's Rights service. New and existing requests for advocacy support could not be progressed as usual leading to a delay in issues not being resolved at the earliest possible stage. The corporate complaints system was temporarily paused in March 2020 and re-opened at the end of July 2020 which equated approximately to a four month period within the pandemic.

However, the monthly Children's Rights update meetings with stakeholders from the Feedback and Improvement Team, Targeted Youth Support and Social Care Team Senior Leaders have continued throughout the duration of COVID to ensure that issues were managed and supported in a timely manner. These meetings take place every six weeks and provide a platform through which to discuss new and current case progress and to advice where individuals have sought advocacy elsewhere, as is their entitlement.

The Independent Visitor Service – Our COVID Response

The Independent Visitor service faced similar issues to that of Children's Rights in that face to face delivery was impacted upon by restrictions and this in itself impacted on the pace at which relationships could be fostered and matches between young people and adults identified and supported.

One unique challenge to service delivery was the recruitment of new volunteers to Independent Visitor roles. Due to the nature of the role and the inherent safeguarding function, prospective

volunteers are required to undertake a comprehensive induction and training package before they can 'qualify' as an Independent Visitor and be matched to a suitable young person.

Elements of this training were not considered to be suitable for virtual delivery and therefore, certain training components were temporarily paused until such a time that face to face delivery for mandatory aspects could be reinstated to ensure safeguarding procedures took precedent.

Restrictions around transport, venues and activity options also had an impact on new and developing relationships between volunteers and young people as choices were limited in relation to activities that volunteers could access with children. This was more apparent during the winter months when young people were not as attracted to meeting outdoors and relationships built with mentors had to be sustained via virtual platforms as an interim measure, which was not always the preferred choice of the young person. Despite this challenge, adult mentors worked hard to provide support and understanding to the frustrations expressed by young people in not being able to meet their mentor face to face.

Volunteers were actively encouraged to consider alternative creative methods to keep in touch with the young person they were matched with. These contacts ranged from virtual catch up's, telephone calls and texts, letters, baking recipes and sharing photos of the finished products. One volunteer used the opportunity to start to teach their young person to play guitar over zoom. Young people also developed their own new and innovative ways of keeping in touch when physical visits were not permitted.

Current Position

Children's Rights Service

There are many ways in which the Children's Rights Service works with partners and other agencies to support looked after young people and care leavers. The service extends to:

- Supporting young people to attend court cases,
- Supporting and facilitating contact where necessary
- Welfare checks and ad hoc visits
- Drop in visits to residential centres and providers to highlight and promote the service and make contact with young people who are currently being supported with an issue
- Distribution and signposting to resources and making contact with other support services ie; Future Directions
- Representation and access to the National care leavers benchmarking forum to access resources, share information and exchange practice ideas
- Representation on the Children in Care Regional Network – signposting to opportunities to engage with colleagues and young people across the sub region through the Yorkshire and Humber Regional Youth Work Unit to work collaboratively
- Links with the Children's Commissioner on strategic priorities and 'Corum Voice', the National Advocacy Service which provides an alternative signposting resource.

Where there are common themes or issues evidenced from Children's Rights, these can be raised as a discussion topic at the Care 4 Us Council, which is representative of children in care and care leavers across the Borough. The Care 4 Us Council provides a forum through which broader issues can be debated and where supported, may formulate part of the Children in Care Council workplan priorities. The Care 4 Us Council reports directly into the Corporate Parenting Panel which ensures that the panel are cited on issues being presented and of significant priority by children in care and care leavers. Additionally, the strategic positioning of the Children's Rights and Care 4 Us Council within the Targeted Youth Support's Youth Voice and Participation Team provides a supported pathway into other positive opportunities for young people to

participate and influence services.

Referrals and enquiries into the Children's Right's Service remain lower than 'usual' as we exit national restrictions. Whilst there is no annual 'benchmark' to indicate a standard figure, this may be reflective of the recovery state of services emerging from the pandemic. This is likely to increase now that children and young people have returned to school and relationships can be reconnected.

The service recognise the need to promote the offer of advocacy to ensure a fair and equitable take up from across all relevant service areas that is representative of need. One area for consideration is to re-establish with designated teachers in schools to ensure that pathways are understood and young people are supported to pursue issues or concerns around their rights. Drop in and ad hoc visits to residential homes and private providers will further support awareness and uptake of the service and help to build relationships.

The Children's Rights monthly meetings have also introduced a tracking mechanism to ensure no drift in issues and avoid unnecessary escalation. We are also looking to expand the membership to be more representative of wider issues that are not directly related to children in care but to other social care teams to further support a timely response to all nature of enquiries

Independent Visitor Service

Referrals into the Independent Visitor service are peaking once again as the services continues to expand its reach to young people with increasing demand being requested for adult volunteers. Whilst this is a fluid position, the current trajectory suggests that the number of referrals translating into positive matches is reaching the point of saturation within the available financial envelope.

Barnsley are a partner in the National Independent Visitor Network which allows providers to share practice, updates and innovative ways of delivering services across the region. We are continuously reviewing our training and development offer for adult volunteers to ensure that they are equipped with the appropriate skills, knowledge and understanding to be able to support young people in complex and challenging circumstances. Having access to the Independent Visitor Coordinator role for supervision and support is a further mechanism through which adult volunteers are nurtured and developed in order for them to remain committed to the role and purpose.

Our aspiration moving out of the pandemic is that not only can we support sustained long term relationships between our existing matches, but that we can develop our offer for young people as a larger network and that we can also increase the training and development opportunities for our current and prospective adult volunteers. This could include group experiences and interest led activities and signposting into the Targeted Youth Support activity where appropriate.

The service aims to mark special occasions for volunteers and young people alike as this is an important part of the nurturing of relationships and helps to retain volunteers. Additionally, the service always aims to recognise the contribution of our volunteers during the National Volunteers Week in June and provides adult volunteers with a gesture of appreciation for their continued efforts for investing their time and commitment into some of our most vulnerable young people.

The feedback the service received from young people reinforces the positive impact that independent visitor roles are having on young people:

"My preferences with my match were listened to and acted upon".

“Matches were discussed with me and my views were taken into consideration”

More illustrative feedback and experiences of young people are included as an appendix to this report.

Data and Performance – April 2020 to August 2021

Children’s Rights

- The service have physically worked face to face with 36 young people through the Children’s Rights service who were identifiable. Young people who do not wish to be known to the service are recorded as anonymous and not included in these figures.
- A further 209 welfare checks were undertaken by telephone or checks
- From April 2021 to August 2021, there have been 90 sessions or activities / welfare checks which have been a combination of face to face visits and telephone calls.
- In the 18 month reporting period, the Children’s Rights service has assisted 4 care leavers through the Public Law Outline (PLO) process including support care leavers to seek legal advice and accompanying them to court in a supportive capacity.

From the period that the Corporate Complaints Procedure resumed to August 2021, there have been 9 formal complaints which have been facilitated by the Children’s Right’s Service in partnership with the Council’s Feedback and Improvement Team.

The nature of issues and complaints during this time have been around topics such as lack of support, missing documents, access and visiting rights to birth family, placement issues, access to careers in the armed forces, access to Junior ISAs and change of social worker at 16 years. The cases received have primarily been self referrals from young people or referrals from foster carers, independent reviewing officers and the Future Direction Service. Most issues are referred from care leavers.

One area of continued effort is in regards to children placed out of authority and their knowledge and access to the Children’s Rights service which is promoted through other partners. This could be improved through wider promotion across Children’s Services of access to advocacy services and the TYS service are producing up to date literature and web content to support this.

Independent Visitors

- There are 20 active young person / adult volunteer matches
- There are 14 current referrals pending a match with an adult volunteer, 7 of which are in the process of being assimilated to a match
- 7 independent visitors have completed all training requirements and have initial joint visits booked with potential matches.
- 2 further adult volunteers are progressing through the training and vetting process
- The service has also built an expression of interest procedure to allow prospective adult volunteers to find out more about the volunteering role and the commitments before proceeding or committing to training.
- We currently have 4 individuals on a waiting list for an introductory session.

2. Recommendations

TEG are asked to:

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consider the content of the report and endorse the current approach to service delivery • Provide feedback and recommendations in order that advocacy services continue to strive for excellence and improvement, exceed young peoples' expectations and meet national standards for practice.
<p>3.</p>	<p>Conclusion/ next steps</p> <p>Given the context and challenges of operating within a global pandemic, both the Children's Rights and Independent Visitor service are now in full recovery model, operating 'business as usual' services.</p> <p>Our focus over the next six months will be to provide outreach and service promotion to our partners and stakeholders to ensure that both service elements are understood and referral pathways are reconnected across children's services, schools and care providers.</p> <p>Our digital presence and service literature has been refreshed ready for a soft 'relaunch' of our service offer aided by the fact that schools are now operating as normal.</p> <p>The service will work towards a formal review of the Independent Visitor service to review outcomes, sustained matches and their 'success criteria' which will include an annual survey to all adult volunteers. Young people will co-design the survey to ensure they are included in the development and the findings.</p> <p>We are also exploring an AQA Community / Voluntary Sector Quality Award for our services and as our portfolio strengthens, this will be used as evidence of the service standards we are achieving.</p> <p>We continue to operate at near capacity with both service elements, primarily with regards to the Independent Visitors Service. If the current trends and level of interest continues, then it is likely that by the end of the financial year that our active matches will have reached capacity and we will have to consider resourcing implications which would be subject to a robust business case.</p> <p>Most importantly for young people, normal face to face activities both individual and group, have resumed to facilitate their coming together as wider peer network.</p>
<p>4.</p>	<p>Risks/ barriers</p> <p>Looking ahead, the most significant risk to service delivery is the financial resourcing required to continue to delivery high quality services and experiences for our most vulnerable young people.</p> <p>This may present an issue in the eventuality that service demand exceeds the available service budget. If referrals into the Independent Visitor service continue on the current trend then this will increase volunteer costs and activity expenses which may exceed budget.</p> <p>The aforementioned service review will inform any decisions around future resourcing and budget deployment to ensure a fair and equitable service offer is provided for all eligible young people.</p>
<p>5.</p>	<p>Financial Implications</p> <p>The annual budget for the Independent Visitors Service is £40k and the Children's Rights</p>

	<p>Service £33k. The funding to provide these services covers the cost of core staffing for the two Coordinator positions and for the Independent Visitor Service, the cost of activities, volunteer expenses, training and support materials.</p> <p>The last 18 months have not been 'business as usual' for both services and therefore expenditure in the last financial year was not truly indicative of normal or expected expenditure on a full service recovery model. However, data from May 2021 is illustrating a more normal pattern of expenditure in line with the expected trajectory as recruitment, training and activity costs increase as matches increase, visits and activities resume.</p>
<p>6.</p>	<p>Co-production/ stakeholder engagement</p> <p>In compiling this report, colleagues and partners from Social Care, Foster Carers, Independent Visitors have all contributed to the service evaluation and feedback.</p> <p>Young people have co-produced materials and information as part of their sessions and have been open and honest about how these services have impacted on their lives, particularly during the crisis of the pandemic and the value and support they have found in the relationships that have been established.</p> <p>The voice of young people fortifies our service improvement process and we continually involve them in discussions as to how we can improve as a partnership to ultimately impact on opportunities and outcomes for themselves.</p> <p>Feedback from young people who access the statutory and independent advocacy services is included in more detail as an Appendix to this report for consideration.</p>
<p>7.</p>	<p>365 The Barnsley Children Young People 's Trust Offer</p> <p>Please tick as appropriate to identify the related CYP Trust Strategic Priority(s) and CYP Plan Priority(s) covered in this report.</p> <p>6 Strategic Priorities:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Keeping children and young people safe <input type="checkbox"/> Improving education, achievement and employability <input type="checkbox"/> Tackling child poverty and improving family life <input type="checkbox"/> Improving staff skills to deliver quality services <input type="checkbox"/> Supporting all children, young people and families to make healthy lifestyle choices <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Encouraging positive relationships and strengthening emotional health <p>CYP Plan Priorities (if applicable).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Early Help <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Emotional Health and Wellbeing including access to Therapeutic Services <input type="checkbox"/> Improved Life Outcomes for CYP with SEND & Transitions at all key life stages <input type="checkbox"/> Inclusion & Engagement <input type="checkbox"/> Youth Council key issues & Local Campaign Priorities
<p>8.</p>	<p>Appendices/ background papers</p>

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| | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Young people, Carers and Staff Professionals Feedback (Appendix A) |
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Please note that any presentations need to be sent to the CYPTrust mailbox no later than a day before the meeting. Presentations cannot be brought on a datastick.