Independent Visitor Scheme

(IV Scheme)

Annual Report 2018-2019
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**Executive Summary**

The Independent Visitor (IV) Scheme is a service provided for children looked after between the ages of 8-17, who have little or no contact with their birth parents (*Children Act 1989, c.41, Part III, Section 23ZB*), or where it is considered in the child’s interest (*Children & Young Persons Act 2008, c.23, Part 2, Section 16*) for an Independent Visitor to be appointed.

It is the right for children looked after and the local authorities’ statutory responsibility, to consider the appointment of an Independent Visitor as part of a child’s on-going care plan. In accordance with the Children’s Act 1989, Guidance and regulations, this should be kept under regular review and if a child objects, the local authority has to be satisfied that the child has sufficient understanding to make an informed decision.

In 2018 the IV scheme has supported a total of 85 matches. These have included 44 on-going matches and 18 which have ended during this period. At the start of the year the scheme had 15 referrals waiting. The scheme has received 43 referrals during this time and with the increase of capacity the service has been successful in making 41 new matches this year, which includes 5 rematches.

Following a successful recruitment campaign the number of volunteers has increased from 47 to 75 (10 IVs retired in 2018) providing some of our most vulnerable children with support and friendship.

During 2019 the IV Scheme will continue to focus on addressing the need of IV matches for children with disabilities, Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children and those placed out of county. Promotion of the scheme amongst children looked after, carers and professionals will remain a priority to increase awareness and subsequently the number of referrals.

*It’s going great, I like talking with him. I don’t feel alone. I can ask him for advice and we plan things together. Having a few hours with an IV can make someone happy for an entire day – or a week!!*

(Male aged 18)
Meet the Independent Visitor and Advocacy Team

New Structure

Francesca Sacco Jimpson
IV & Advocacy Manager

**IVS**

- Susan Maunder
  - IV Project Support Officer

- Jo Evans
  - IV Co-ordinator

- Celia Taylor
  - appointed start date: 29.04.19

- Recruit early 2019

**Advocates**

- Claire Poley, Richard Johnson, Caroline Wriglesworth, Celia Taylor and Kheya Moulton

Following a restructure, the team manager John Dickson retired in December 2018 and Francesca-Jo Sacco-Jimpson has now been promoted to Independent Visitor & Advocacy Team Manager.
The Independent Visitor and Advocacy teams were brought together under the restructure to form the Independent Visitor and Advocacy Service. This has allowed for exploitation of synergies between the teams, especially in the areas of team management and publicity.

The new structure has created a single point of accountability and the development of a joint Independent Visitor & Advocacy service plan, communications plan and steering group which has enabled us to demonstrate the service we deliver.

Since John retired in December the team has been working with a vacancy and we have now successfully recruited Celia Taylor. She will be joining the IVS on 29 April 2019. We have also started the process of recruiting for the third IV Coordinator and are awaiting a decision from the Corporate Leadership Team.

Responsibilities of the IV team are:

- Recruiting, training, assessment and supervising volunteer Independent Visitors (IVs)
- Matching IVs with children and young people looked after by the Council
- Internal and external promotion of the service to children and young people, carers and professionals and potential volunteers
- Growing the scheme in line with development plan from 36 matches in April 2017 to 151 in March 2021
- Annual report to Corporate Parenting Panel
- Quarterly Steering group meetings

**About the Independent Visitor Scheme**

The Independent Visitor Scheme in West Sussex has been running for over 10 years, and was initially provided by the Children’s Society. The Scheme was brought in-house in 2013 within the Independent Reviewing Service. Since 2015 the IV Scheme has been part of the Customer Relations Team in the Communities & Public Protection Directorate. The IV Scheme is thus completely independent of Children’s Services.

The National Standards for the provision of Independent Visitor Services (Barnardo’s 2016)*1 describes an Independent Visitor as below:

“An Independent visitor is a volunteer who doesn’t work for social care services and is there to visit and befriend the child.

Independent visitors need to be consistent and reliable in order that children can build a trusting, positive relationship with them over time.
They will endeavour to become and remain a consistent adult in the child’s life who doesn’t change when placements or social workers change and will at all times stay child focussed.

The child will have the opportunity to try new activities, and spend time with their independent visitor, away from their placement.

Independent visitors are someone to ‘stick up’ for the child, to promote the empowerment of the child, and to make sure their rights are respected.

It is important to note that independent visitors are not skilled advocates. If a child is unhappy with their care plan or they feel they’re not being listened to, the independent visitor service should make a referral to an advocacy or children’s rights service.”

The IV Scheme works to the National Standards and these were fully endorsed by WSCC in 2017. The IV Scheme recruits, trains and supervises volunteers. IVs are carefully matched with a child and this is kept under regular review.

West Sussex IVs are aged 21 years or older, they volunteer their time to visit an individual child/young person on a regular basis – usually monthly - and commit to establishing a relationship with them over time (minimum 2 years). Department for Education Regulations (1991) stipulate that an IV must not be connected with the local authority as a result of being an elected member, an officer of the local authority with a role in children’s social care, or the spouse or civil partner of either – in other words, they bring a lay person’s perspective to their role.

**IV Scheme Improvement Plan 2017-2021**

Following both the December 2015 - OFSTED inspection of Children’s Services and an internal evaluation, a lack of capacity was identified.

In order to address this, the County Council formulated the Independent Visitor Scheme 2017-2021 development plan which received agreement from the Council in February 2017. This will increase the number of matches from 36 in April 2017 to 151 by March 2021, which will meet 85% of demand and will be reviewed regularly.
Following a very successful recruitment campaign in Year 1 of the development plan, we have been able to concentrate in Year 2 on:

- Training and approval of 46 new volunteers across the year
- Promoting the scheme with children and young people and Children’s Social care to encourage referrals.
- Consultation with Children in Care Council to explore collaboration on service development.
- Awareness raising activities for children and staff, including being an active member of the Exceptional People in Care Awards Reference group.
- All children who become Looked After have received a letter, co-designed with young people, letting them know about the Advocacy service, the IV Scheme and the Compliments and Complaints procedures. A reminder letter is sent to all Children Looked After every six months to keep these three services at the forefront of their minds.

Currently our service is at capacity so recruitment of volunteers has been temporarily put on hold since October 2018. Since then we have received 20 expressions of interest from potential volunteers which we are holding in abeyance until recruitment begins again.

Review of the Year

At the start of the year we had 44 matches and 15 young people on referral waiting for an IV.

Due to the success of the 2017-2018 recruitment campaign, where we received 88 new applications from volunteers to join the scheme, we were able to train and approve a total of 46 applicants. There are 5 applications on hold as well as

It has always been great, we are very close. She’s been there for me since day one, through everything
(Female aged 18)
20 expressions of interest from potential volunteers, once we recommence recruitment.

Taking into account some IVs have been approved for more than one match and IV resignations during the year, there are now 62 IVs matched with a total of 67 children and young people. This includes 2 IVs who have been matched as a couple with 1 young person as agreed at Approval Panel.

Following the approval panel in February the team have prioritised matching young people on our waiting list. We are 3 matches short of our target for 31 March 2019 which was 70 matches however since 1 April we have made a further 2 matches, have 3 matches pending and have identified 5 potential matches which we are progressing. Of these 9 young people, 3 are placed out of county.

There are 4 remaining approved IVs, of these 1 is on hold and 3 are waiting for an appropriate and viable match to become available. A good match is essential to the success of the relationship.

A further 18 children and young people during the year have had matches which ended due to:

- IV resignation (5)
- IV on hold due to personal circumstances (3)
- Child moving out of county (1)
- Match ending at young person’s request (7)
- Young person over 18.5 years (1)
- Vulnerable care leaver over 21 years (1)

Due to the high demand of male young people requesting male IVs we have prioritised the training of male applicants. At the start of 2018 we had 13 male IVs and this has been increased to 22 by 31 March 2019.

There have been 43 children and young people referred to the IV scheme this year. Currently we have 23 young people waiting for a match. This represents a small proportion of our children looked after population and we continue to receive a steady flow of referrals.

It’s fun and exciting. Having an IV is one advantage of being in care

(Male aged 11)
New Matches by Quarter

Ongoing matches at quarter end

Matches by Gender of matches open during year 2018-2019

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<th>Gender Comparison</th>
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<td>Female YP: Male IV</td>
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<tr>
<td>Male YP: Male IV</td>
<td>22</td>
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<tr>
<td>Female YP: Female IV</td>
<td>25</td>
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<tr>
<td>Male YP: Female IV</td>
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Total Matches by Gender

- Female YP: Male IV: 33%
- Male YP: Male IV: 30%
- Female YP: Female IV: 37%
**Feedback from Children and Young People**

The IV team have offered all the children and young people an opportunity to meet and discuss the progress of their match at their 3-month or annual reviews. The team were able to meet with all but 2 young people who declined the offer of a meeting.

Of the children and young people who took up the offer, the feedback received was encouraging and reflected the positive impact having an IV has made to the young person. The feedback and comments were shared with the IVs, with a number of the children and young people writing a personalised postcard for their IV.

*One young child aged 8 years scored their IV as 10/10 and a foot high five!!*

The role of the Independent Visitor is to be a consistent reliable adult, even when placements or social workers change the IV remains in the young person’s life. We are seeing good examples of where an IV has been the most consistent, caring adult in the life of a young person and the significant difference this makes. Two examples of this are shown below:

- A young person who has been matched with an IV for just under a year has moved placement 5 times during that time. They are now living out of county and a significant distance away. The IV has been able to give the young person a consistent message of care and support throughout this really challenging time and has worked so hard to find a way of maintaining their relationship. The young person has made it very clear through communication and finally through using ‘Mind of My Own’ and the Advocacy service, that continuing to see the IV was important. A plan is now in place for the YP to continue to see their IV regularly.

- A vulnerable care leaver, matched with their IV since summer 2018, experienced an emergency placement move after just a few months. The young person had been living in the foster placement for a long time and coupled with their learning difficulties, this was a particularly difficult and traumatic move. The IV proved to be a huge support for the young person and provided them with the reassurance and consistency that they desperately needed. The IV was able to increase their visits, seeing the young person weekly, whilst they settled in to the new placement. The IV’s fantastic relationship with the young person led to them being approached by the care team to offer additional support.

At each review children and young people are asked if they would like their IVs to attend their Children Looked After review’s and it is positive to see more children taking up this offer. Independent Reviewing Officers have fed back to
the IV Scheme the value in the IVs contribution to these meetings and the children’s overall care plan.

Our IVs empower and advocate for their children and young people, one example of this is where the IV has been in direct contact with the young person’s social worker to explain the young person’s worries about post 18 accommodation.

She is like a friend out of school. If you’ve ever had a bad day you can just let it all out and then chill together

(Female aged 14)

Involvement of Children and Young People

Participation

IV training and assessment

Young people and their IVs are invited to participate in the introductory IV training days for new applicants.

The IV introductory training is run over 2 days and we endeavour to have one young person and their IV on each day. They have the opportunity to talk about their match journey i.e. building their relationship, what they enjoy doing together and what it means to them both.

These sessions are always well received by the new applicants and highlighted as their favourite part of the training as they find it invaluable to hear direct from a child about their experiences.

The young person is given a thank you card and voucher as recognition of their contribution. Feedback is given to the young person’s Independent Reviewing Officer and Social Worker, as speaking to an audience of new people is a huge achievement on the part of the young person.
In May 2018 we supported a young person, accompanied by their IV, to participate in the Young Person’s Conference in London. This was run by Barnado’s and involved a spoken word workshop where the young people wrote and performed poems about their IV’s.

The young people’s work was presented at the professionals conference held later in the year to demonstrate what IV means to them and whether the term ”Independent Visitors” is appropriate or what the alternatives might be.

### Comic Strip

The NIVN were looking for IV schemes who were willing to participate in children’s workshops to develop a comic strip to promote Independent Visitors to younger children. We will be hosting a workshop delivered by the network in April 2019 which will be attended by a group of 3 children with their IVs from West Sussex.

### Become magazine

In January 2019 the NIVN were contacted by Become (a magazine for young people in care) who were looking to interview young people and their IV’s about their experiences of the scheme. The service nominated one of our young people and their IV who were subsequently selected for interview. Their interview will be published in the magazine due for release in April 2019 but see below for a brief extract:

“We’ve got an amazing relationship; we’re more like friends than anything else. After I turn 18, she still wants to keep seeing me and she doesn’t care that she won’t get money for the activities anymore, she just cares about spending time with me.

We talk about anything and everything and I feel like I can really trust her. If I was ever struggling with something and needed to talk, she’d be who I’d turn to first.”

The full interview is shown in Appendix B on page 20.

### Research on IV influence

A PHD student from Bristol University contacted the NIVN about completing research into young people’s experience of having an Independent Visitor and how it impacted on their self esteem. As there is little research in this area, we were keen to be involved as it would provide an indepth study into the benefits of the IV relationship. We contacted all our young people who met the criteria for the study and one young person’s details was passed on to take part.

This is ongoing research and the findings will be shared at a later stage.
Consultation

Over the last year we have continued to build on the knowledge and understanding of the IV scheme with children looked after. We have been working with the Voice and Participation team in consulting with the Children in Care Council (CICC) about how children and young people can contribute to the development of the scheme.

The IV scheme met with the CICC twice this year. Once in June 2018 to consult about formulating young people’s questions for approval panel and "What makes a good IV profile?” and secondly in January 2019 for the young people to score and give feedback on the new IV profiles prior to the approval panel in February 2019.

Following an observation of 3-month reviews by the Head of Service, the young people involved were asked if they thought IV video profiles would be more appealing than the current paper versions. As a result of their feedback we have successfully trialled 3 profiles by video. The children these were shared with have responded positively as it has enabled them to get more of a sense of what the IV is like before meeting them. We will continue to roll out video profiles with the next cohort of volunteers as we know many children engage better with the digital world.

It’s a way to get out of the house and do things you haven’t done before – maybe find new hobbies. You get to know someone new

(Male aged 14)

Survey 2018-2019

IV Scheme Evaluation

Between November 2018 and January 2019, the IV Scheme ran a “Have Your Say” on-line survey. 4 responses were received from young people currently matched with IV’s, 23 responses from professionals (foster carers, social workers and Independent Reviewing Officers) and 30 from IVs currently active.

The results of the survey are currently being evaluated but the initial review shows that, again, overall there is a high level of satisfaction with the scheme. In particular there was a strong indication of the benefits for young people having IVs including, having 1:1 time with a safe, independent adult, building confidence and the opportunity to do fun activities.

100% of the young people said that they would recommend having an IV to another young person. When asked why one YP responded:
'It's a good thing as I've been told that I'm much more outgoing now and my confidence and self-esteem have shot up loads'.

When asked what some of the best things are about having an IV the young person responded:

"He is my special friend and he likes me but I don't have many friends so it's great having him".

Others commented on the fact that they welcomed the opportunity to have special days out, having different support outside of social services and some private time 1:1.

The survey has highlighted some helpful areas for development over the next year, including the monitoring of matches, communication with stakeholders, particularly social workers and involving foster carers more in the matching and monitoring of matches.

Support to IVs

We continue to provide all IVs with regular 1:1 supervision. In addition to this, the service provides bi-monthly support groups in various parts of the county to give as many IVs as possible the opportunity to attend.

The support groups are a mix of peer support, training (such as Prevent and Mind of my Own) as well as guest speakers which included the CICC, to build IVs knowledge, skills and confidence in subjects relevant to their role.

At these support groups we also present long-service awards. Each IV will receive a long service award for matches for over a year, then at two, three, five and ten years.

All IVs have access to the WSCC Learning & Development Gateway and can apply for relevant courses free of charge.

It’s been good. I don’t feel like an ‘IV’ we’re just friends having fun. Time goes really quick when we’re together.
National Benchmarking

In October 2018 we ran a benchmarking exercise against other authorities IV schemes and gained responses from 9 authorities.

In terms of size of the IV service, WSCC are performing well. Of the 9 authorities who responded, only 2 authorities appear to have a higher ratio of CLA with IVs. We currently have 67 matches and our expectation is that approximately 10% of WSCC CLA will have an IV by end of May 2019. With a target of 103 by end of 2020 our expectation is that just under 15% of WSCC CLA will have an IV.

The NIVN have recently run a Freedom of Information request to assess the landscape for Independent Visitor services in England. This will serve as a helpful marker for us to compare our service against other services in England.

South East Region Independent Visitor Schemes Group

We are a committed member of the South East Region Independent Visitor schemes group (SERIV) this is a professional network group of IV Co-ordinators and managers across both voluntary and in-house services. It acts as a forum for IV Co-ordinators to share common issues and best practice in order to improve standards and consistency of IV services for children in care.

National IV Conference

Back in June 2018 two team members and one of our longstanding IV’s attended the National IV Conference. This helped us to understand some of the challenges faced by IV schemes nationally, including resources and funding and the recruitment of male IVs.

WSCC IV Steering Group

The WSCC IV Steering group continues to meet quarterly to develop and reflect best practice and review the service performance against the IV National Standards.

There are 14 IV standards, which are made up of 66 sub-standards. Currently 61 are green, where we are fully compliant, and 5 are Amber, where work is underway to become compliant.

Following the restructure of the service in January 2019, the steering group has become the WSCC IV and Advocacy Steering group and now reviews the quality of both aspects of the service.
Agreed Activity and Focus for 2019-2020

This year the IV scheme will continue into year 3 of the agreed development plan which aims to achieve 103 matches by March 2020, with the overall total of 151 matches by March 2021.

Recruitment

Following the restructure, the team has been running with a vacancy for an IV Co-ordinator and we have recently appointed Celia Taylor who will start on 29 April 2019. The third IV Co-ordinator post is currently being advertised so we are able to continue to grow the service and support the additional 33 matches.

Recruitment of volunteers has been on hold since October 2018 but we have 5 applications currently held in abeyance and 20 expressions of interest from possible volunteers. The year 2019-2020 will see a programme of recruitment, training and approval of new IVs to fulfil the development plan.

Referrals

There will be a continued focus on identifying matches for disabled children, Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children (UASC) and children placed out of county:

- We currently have 2 children and 2 vulnerable care leavers matched who are supported by the Child Disability team (CDT) and 1 young person waiting for a suitable match.

  CDT are aware of the scheme but given the complex needs of the young people, social workers consider carefully before referring to our service. This year we have worked on developing more accessible leaflets.

- We have 4 children and 3 vulnerable care leavers matched who are supported by the UASC team and 3 young people waiting.

  We recognise the value that an IV relationship can bring to a UASC as they often do not have any other support network outside of Children Social Care and we will continue to prioritise these referrals.

- We have 2 children and 1 vulnerable care leaver matched out of county and 5 young people waiting.

  We have identified 3 possible matches from the latest cohort of IVs which are being actively progressed. Matches for children placed out of county are a challenge nationally and we continue to explore opportunities for spot purchase from other authorities. We have also tried recruiting IVs out of county, without success so far.
We have attended a number of Children Social Care team meetings as well as Foster Care Support Groups to promote both the IV scheme and Advocacy service for referrals.

The IV scheme and Advocacy service had a stall at the Newly Qualified Social Worker market place in October and one at the Exceptional People in Care (EPIC) awards ceremony in December.

We have also met with various other professionals within the Children Looked After network including Designated Teachers and Children Looked After Nurses.

**Vulnerable Care Leavers**

Generally, matches are supported by the IV scheme until a young person reaches the age of 18.5 years, at which point they can continue to see their IV under a private arrangement. Since 2016 we have been able to extend the service to vulnerable care leavers (e.g. those with Learning Disabilities, mental health difficulties, UASC). We currently have:

- 6 vulnerable care leavers, including 2 young adults with learning disabilities and 2 young adults who are UASC. We have extended the service for 2 care leavers beyond 18.5 where the young person is soon to be a young parent and 1 where life is unsettled and they have a very limited support network.
- 1 vulnerable care leaver turned 21 this year who is continuing to see her IV regularly outside the scheme.
- There is also one 18.5 year old who is continuing their relationship with their IV outside the scheme.
- 

**Co-Design Approach**

This year the service will continue to work with the CiCC and would like the co-production work to focus on how best we can engage young people and how they would like to feedback about the IV and Advocacy Service. Seeking young people’s input at every level of the service from recruitment to delivery. We have interviews for a new IV Co-ordinator in May 19 and have a WSCC Care Leaver on the interview panel.
The workshops this year have highlighted that both the IV and Advocacy Service need to ‘go digital’. When we asked young people about how they get information many of the young people opted for online sources such as YouTube, Google, Instagram and Snapchat. In order for us as a service to reach as many young people as possible, we need to be using platforms that they engage with, ensuring we do not exclude anyone.

The IV and Advocacy Service would like to explore the potential for an annual information event for children in care across the county. Where young people in care are invited to an event to hear about their rights and the services that are available to them. This could include IVS, Advocacy, MOMO, Voice and Participation, Virtual School, Health, CiCC etc.

**Next steps...**

In line with the agreed development plan, the IV scheme is currently in the process of recruitment of a third IV Co-ordinator which will give the service capacity to expand further and recruit more IVs.

Following the recruitment of a new Co-ordinator the scheme will implement the recruitment, training and approval of enough IVs to meet the agreed target of 103 matches by the end of March 2020.

Promotion of the service continues to be a priority, to ensure that children, carers and Children Social Care staff know about the IV scheme and children’s right to an IV.

The IV and Advocacy Service have a joint communications plan in place which outlines the work around increasing awareness of the service, including visits to social care team meetings, foster carer support groups and work with the CICC.

Whilst the WSCC New into Care pack is under development the joint Advocacy, IV scheme and Compliments and Complaints letter will continue to be sent to all new children into care and a reminder letter every 6 months.

We recognise the challenges faced by the Children Looked After teams and the demands on social workers time and we do not want completion of referral paperwork to be a barrier to social workers referring young people to our service.

This year the Fostering Service Supervising Social Workers and residential support staff have been a great help in getting referral forms completed but we recognise that our referral process needs review and will be looking at streamlining the referral process during the coming year.

Francesca-Jo Sacco Jimpsom  
11.04.19
Appendix A:

National Standards for the Provision of Independent Visitor Services

January 2016

Children and young people (referred to as children here on)

1. All looked after children understand their right to an independent visitor. Services are promoted, publicised and accessible. Local authorities promote independent visitor services in line with their duties as corporate parents.

2. Independent visitor services are child-led. The needs and views of the child are at the centre of all work including; referrals, matching, visits and endings.

3. Independent visitor services work to a high level of confidentiality between the child, independent visitor and service co-ordinator. Children and volunteers understand the service’s policy on safeguarding and record keeping with a good understanding of why and when information needs to be shared.

4. Children are given the opportunity to participate and be actively involved in the development of services. Children’s views, opinions and skills are recognised and influence the service delivered.

Volunteer independent visitors

5. There is a thorough recruitment and selection process for volunteer independent visitors, which is safe and transparent. Independent visitors understand the long-term requirement of the role, with an expectation to commit to a minimum of one year.

6. Independent visitors complete a thorough induction and training process specific to the role, and receive ongoing support to give them the skills and knowledge to confidently fulfil their role.
The relationship

7. There is a clear and consistent process in place for referral, matching, and positive endings.

8. The independent visitor will seek to befriend the child and establish a relationship of trust through regular visits and contact with the child.

9. Independent visitor relationships are regularly monitored to make sure the child is safe, happy and developing a positive relationship with their independent visitor.

Management

10. Independent visitors are unpaid volunteers independent of the child’s social services department. Independence of the service is important, for the child’s feeling of separateness from social services, and the important safeguards this provides.

11. Independent visitor services are safe, with policies and procedures in place to ensure the safety of children, independent visitors and independent visitor coordinators.

12. Local authorities allocate an appropriate level of resources to the service to ensure sufficient funding, management and staff are in place to support a wider group of looked after children in line with current legislation.

13. Services have clear policies to promote equality and diversity ensuring that no child or volunteer is discriminated against. The service promotes equality when meeting the diverse needs of the local authority’s looked after children.

14. There is a clear and easy to use complaints procedure. Volunteers and children know how to complain and their complaints are dealt with seriously and quickly.

Having an IV is fun, you get to do different things that you might not get to do. You won’t get bored of them.

(Female aged 13)
Appendix B: Become Magazine Article

INDIVIDUAL VISITORS

What are they and what can they do for you?

By Natasha Finlayson

Do you ever wish you had an adult in your life you could depend on, who was there just to hang out with you and be on your side? Someone you could trust who wasn’t part of the care system? Well, listen up. All children in care are supposed to be offered the chance to have something called an “independent visitor” (IV) for short. If you don’t think you’ve ever been asked if you want one, read on to see if it’s something that could work for you... young people in care who have had IV’s say that it can be life-changing. It gives you the chance to have someone who maintains a relationship with you through any placement moves (as long as you aren’t moved too far away for them to travel to you), who helps you to trust, have fun and grow as a person.

Ms. has an active interest in the lives, hopes, and concerns of young people and is there to listen and help. They meet up regularly with a young person to do activities together, talk, be supportive and have fun. It might be a trip to the cinema, a sports activity or just a coffee and chat – it all depends on what you fancy doing!

So what exactly is an independent visitor (IV)? IV’s aren’t like social workers or carers. They’re completely independent from the care system. They are volunteers, which means they don’t get paid to spend time with you, although they do get some money to pay for any activities they do with you that cost money.

The fact that they aren’t part of the care system means they can keep stuff you tell them confidential, unless they feel you are in danger for any reason.

Independent visitors meet up with their young person for a few hours roughly every three weeks or so. They will usually spend a few hours with you.

How does it work? Most IV’s don’t have a regular contact with the young person, but they will be flexible and do a few things like cooking, crafts, and watching movies.

ALANA’S STORY

“I found out about independent visitors when the social worker showed them to me. They’re like a friend, but not in a way that you are with your family. They’re just someone you can talk to and they’re really good at it.

I’ve worked with my independent visitor Ruth for a few months now. We’ve got an amazing relationship; we’re more like friends than anything else. After I turn 18, she wants to keep seeing me and she doesn’t care that she won’t get any money for the activities anymore, she just cares about spending time with me.

We talk about anything and everything and I feel like I can really trust her. If I was ever struggling with something and needed to talk, she’d be the one who’d listen first.

The first time we met, we had an interview and I could see if I liked her. She was so nice, she was like: “we’ll do whatever activity you like!” and “we’ll have lots of fun.”

We go horse riding together every month now. It’s something she does with her two daughters and something she’s always wanted to do.

Ruth is thoughtful and kind. It’s made being in care so much better and easier. If she wasn’t there, I wouldn’t be able to go out and that’s something that really helps me and something I really enjoy.

The team in foster care for six years and my foster carer doesn’t really do any activities with me. We just spend all the time together, so it’s nice to get out and do some activities.

I would say to any young person considering getting an independent visitor, do it because it’s really great.”