What is an Independent Visitor (IV)?

According to the 1989 Children Act, an Independent Visitor can be appointed to “advise, befriend and visit” a child in care if they had no or little contact with their birth family. The question has to be asked at each Child Looked After (CLA) Review, “Will the child benefit from having an IV?”

With the 2008 Children & Young Persons Act, the criteria for appointing an IV was extended to any child for whom it is in “their best interests” to have an IV – an adult outside of the professional network around them to provide a supportive relationship, as long as the child themselves wants to have an IV.

The role of the IV

An Independent Visitor is just that - a volunteer who is independent of all the professionals working with a child who is looked after. They visit a child and take them out from their placement to do activities that the child enjoys or perhaps wants to try out, eg. having a walk on the beach, watching a game of football, window shopping, having a hot chocolate. It’s a great opportunity for the child to have some 1:1 time with an adult who is there just for them. The role includes:

- To visit a looked after child regularly (usually once a month and for a minimum of 2 years)
- To develop a positive, consistent and supportive befriending relationship with the child
- To contribute to the child’s care plan and work in co-operation with people who have responsibility for the child, eg. their foster carer(s) and social worker
- To listen and provide sound advice to the child from a lay perspective
- To ensure the child’s voice is heard, eg. attending meetings if the child asks for their support
- To encourage the child to participate in decision-making about their life
- To have fun with the child!

How the IV Scheme works in West Sussex

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, and is now managed within the Customer Service Team of the Directorate of Economy, Infrastructure & Environment. The Scheme is thus completely independent of Children’s Services.
There is one full-time Co-ordinator for the Scheme who has to be a qualified social worker. It is the Co-ordinator’s job to match volunteer visitors with children who fit the referral criteria and who would like to have an IV.

**What are the referral criteria for having an IV?**

The IV Scheme is for looked after children whose care plan is that they will be remaining in care – that is, they will not be going home or become subject to Special Guardianship Orders. Referrals can be accepted for children between the ages of 8 and 17 years.

There are a very limited number of IVs, so referrals have to be prioritised. Priorities at present take into account the following questions:

- Has the communication between the child and a parent, or any person who is not a parent but has parental responsibility for the child, been infrequent or not positive for the child?
- Is the child able to go out independently or are there restrictive factors relating to the age of the child?
- Does s/he experience difficulties in communicating or building positive relationships or attachments?
- Is the child likely to engage in behaviour which will put him/her at risk as a result of peer pressure or forming inappropriate?
- If the child is placed in a residential setting where there have been many recent staff changes, would s/he benefit from a more individualised and consistent relationship?
- Has the child had many recent changes, eg. placement, social worker, so s/he would benefit from a more individualised and consistent relationship?
- Would it make a positive contribution to promoting the child’s emotional wellbeing and/or cultural/religious/linguistic identity?

If they meet the referral criteria and at least some of the priorities above, a child can be considered for an IV. It is important that the child wants to have an IV – it’s not something which can be imposed on them because adults think they’ll benefit. The IV Scheme Co-ordinator is always willing to meet the child and their carers/keyworker to explain what having an IV involves.

A child may try it out and not get on very well with their IV and ask to have a different IV. Or they may try it out and decide it’s not for them. This is something the IV Co-ordinator will talk to them about. If the child says they no longer want to have an IV, they can have up to 3 months “thinking time” in case they change their mind, and their IV will remain available to them in that period.

**Who can make a referral to the IV Scheme?**

It is often the child’s Independent Reviewing Officer or social worker who first suggest having an IV. A child or young person can also refer themselves, by contacting the IV Scheme Co-ordinator and completing a young person’s referral form. This gives the Co-ordinator the child’s permission to share information
about them with a potential IV. A referral and risk assessment is also needed from their social worker.

If a foster carer or keyworker thinks that a child they are looking after would benefit from having an IV, they should speak to their own FPSW/Supervising Social Worker/Manager or contact the child’s social worker. The child’s statutory review is a good time to discuss this - whether the child would benefit from having an IV should be considered at each review.

**What happens when a child is matched to an IV?**

If everyone is agreed that it’s a good idea for the child to have an IV and a suitably matched IV is available, the IV Scheme Co-ordinator will share the IV’s profile with the child and their adult carers. The Co-ordinator will find out what sort of an introduction the child wants/will be best for them – to meet the IV informally with their foster carer/keyworker first, or to go straight to having a matching meeting.

The matching meeting is where the child, their foster carer/keyworker, the IV and the Co-ordinator get together to discuss and agree when and where the first three visits will take place. Some children also like their social worker to be there. The Co-ordinator reminds everyone of the simple rules of the Scheme – eg. IVs must never take a child to their home, there is to be no verbal or physical aggression towards the IV, etc. A date is set for after three visits to check how the relationship is going and if all parties are happy for it to continue. If so, having an IV then becomes part of the child’s care plan. Before the IV takes the child out for the first time, either their parent or their social worker signs a form giving the IV permission to agree emergency medical assistance, eg. if the child has an accident during a visit.

**Who pays for activities with the IV?**

IVs are volunteers and are entitled to claim expenses to cover their mileage in connection with their volunteering. There is also a very limited IV budget to cover the cost of activities that IVs and their matched children take part in. The emphasis is not on “treats” which cost a lot of money, but rather on doing simple things together which will enable conversations either during the activity itself or on the way there and back. These are things like a game of crazy golf, having a walk or cycle ride, swimming, doing craft activities, reading together, mooching round the shops – all depending on the child’s interests.

If the child really wants to do something special with their IV that costs more than the IV budget allows, the placement can contribute towards the cost of the outing, eg. by providing a packed lunch for the child, or paying for their entry. An example is where foster carers were unable to go to London due to other family commitments, although the child they care for was keen to do so; they gladly paid for the child’s train fare to go with the IV.
Who checks if the IV relationship is going well?

An informal IV review meeting is arranged at the matching meeting to take place after 3 visits. The people at the matching meeting will attend the review. Before the review starts, the IV Scheme Co-ordinator sees the child on their own and checks if all is going well and if they’d like to continue seeing their IV or not.

After the review meeting, the Co-ordinator sees the child once a year to monitor how the relationship is developing and to check there are no problems or concerns, either from the child’s side or from their placement. Of course, anyone with any concerns about the IV relationship can contact the IV Scheme Co-ordinator outside of these meetings.

What happens when young people leave care?

Once a young person is 18, they are no longer looked after. When they are 18.5 years of age, the IV Scheme generally no longer supports the IV. If the young person and the IV want to continue seeing each other as a private arrangement, this is encouraged. Many IVs do continue to stay in touch with the young adults they have visited as looked after children. If a care leaver is particularly vulnerable, eg. due to disability or mental health problems, the IV Scheme will support the IV if they carry on seeing the care leaver.

How are IVs recruited?

Applicants go through a rigorous selection process as follows:

- One professional and two personal references
- Medical questionnaire with no concerns identified
- Clear Local Authority checks & enhanced DBS check
- Two in-depth assessment interviews considering their experience with children, motivation to volunteer, personal history, etc.
- Attendance at 2-day training course
- Attendance at IV Approval Panel

The Approval Panel is drawn from senior staff from within Children’s Services, including a Fostering Group Manager and an IRO.

How are IVs managed and supported?

IVs are required to have supervision with the IV Scheme Co-ordinator. Following a new match, this takes place once monthly; more experienced IVs receive supervision once every 2-3 months. They can also attend the quarterly IV Support Group. IVs can access the same training opportunities as foster carers and staff in Children’s Services.

Louise Williamson, IV Scheme Co-ordinator  January 2017
louise.williamson@westsussex.gov.uk  Tel: 0330-222-4129