

Independent Visitors

Role of the IV

- An Independent Visitor, also known as an IV, is a trained volunteer who is matched with a looked after child or young person to befriend them and act as a positive role-model. They build “trusting, positive relationships with them over time” (National Standards for the Provision of Independent Visitor Services). The role was introduced as a statutory service in the Children Act 1989 but remains a hidden entitlement that many professionals, care-experienced children and young people are unaware of.

Voices from children

- *“Seeing my IV lets me re-set my mind for the rest of the week so I can think about other things. It’s been good because there’s not many people who just listen to me and listen to my story.”*
- *“When I have something on my mind she will sit and listen and give me good advice”.*
- *“Me and my IV always do things I have never done before.”*
- *“I trust (my IV) with a lot of things – I consider her my best friend. When I split up with my girlfriend she was one of the first people I told.”*
- *“It’s nice to talk to someone who is not involved with Social Services. It gives me the chance to have a break away from things and someone to talk to when I’m feeling down. It’s talking to someone that I can trust...It’s good to have the time with my IV to just chill. We have done lots of different things together.”*

Legislation

- **Children Act Section 23ZB** requires local authorities to consider the appointment of an IV where it appears that it would be in the child's interests to do so
- **The Childrens Act Guidance and Regulations Vol 2** states that the IV role **requires the child's wishes and feelings** should be ascertained in deciding whether or not an IV should be appointed. It states that the appointment should be considered as part of the development of the child's care plan and looked after child review process.
- **Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act 2014**
- **Practice Standards and Good Practice Guide: Independent Visitors (Wales)**

Reports

- [The importance of Independent Visitors for children in care | Children's Commissioner for England \(childrenscommissioner.gov.uk\)](#)
- ***“I believe there is a role for us all to play in making sure children, and the professionals that support them, are aware of their entitlement. We must also make sure that there are enough Independent Visitors across the country to support children and provide them with advice and guidance from an adult they can trust and rely on”***
- [The state of children and young people’s advocacy services in England | Children's Commissioner for England \(childrenscommissioner.gov.uk\)](#)
- [National Standards for the Provision of Children and Young People’s Advocacy Services \(education.gov.uk\)](#)
- [The National Independent Visitor Data Report.pdf \(barnardos.org.uk\)](#)

Findings of CC 'state of advocacy' and NIV reports

'On average, local authorities employed one advocate for every 3,053 children eligible for advocacy services, ranging from one advocate per 58 eligible children to one every 26,639 eligible children.'

Referrals

- The highest levels of referrals was for 16-17 yo homeless people (50%)
- Children on protection plans (33%)
- SEND and children in need (2-3%)
- Referral to representation rate is very low overall

Quality

- **Qualifications requirements are variable to each LA and are not compulsory**
- *“I don't think there's any formal qualification that our advocates have to go through. They are closely supervised by the provider”*
Commissioner
- *“I am lacking in knowledge about the SEND needs and entitlements so I think specialist knowledge in that area would be helpful to all advocates”*: **Non-instructed advocate**

Support and development

- Lack of supervision, management or ongoing development
- *“The person who managed me for about 3 years, she didn't have any qualifications in children because she knew nothing. She couldn't even grasp, like, consent”*
- *‘I don't have any one to ones, I don't have a review of how things are going generally. [...] Which you know, sometimes, when you're dealing with safeguarding concerns, it can be quite harrowing what you're listening to, you know, to what you're dealing with, and you should be able to offload that [...] and you know these children and young people are relying on you”*

Difficulties with independence and mental health

- In house advocates often have other roles
- Conflict of interest: *“It's a weird concept, isn't it, that the County Council has to provide advocacy? Then you provide advocacy, but if you then come up with something they don't like, then they then try and get you sacked”*
- Another advocate spoke about how the tension between needing to work alongside the local authority at the same time as challenging them can be very difficult.
- *“...I had a very astute 16-year-old [...] she said, “Well you're not really independent, because the local authority is funding your contract”*
- There is poor data relating to children subject to the Mental Health Act requiring advocacy

CCO Recommendations

- A new independent, national advocacy service should ensure local authorities have access to a sufficient number of advocates who can provide independent and high-quality advocacy for children and young people.
- The Children's Commissioner's office should be formally established as escalation point for all commissioned advocacy services in England
- A minimum qualification standard for non-instructed advocates should be established and prior experience working with this client group
- Advocacy services to set out how their independence statement will be enacted to ensure its independence from its funders
- The evaluation criteria for leadership within Ofsted inspections of local authority children's services should focus on assessing the effectiveness of the advocacy services
- To improve accountability the DoE should collect and publish annual data from local authorities on referrals and representations for children

- The Victims and Prisoners Bill should introduce a statutory entitlement to advocacy for child victims who come into contact with the criminal justice system
- Amend the Mental Health Act to ensure that all children have access to opt-out advocacy, including informal patients.
- A minimum qualification standard for all advocates should be established
- The opt out model of advocacy provision should be explicitly extended to all children who have a statutory entitlement to advocacy