

REPORT TO:	Corporate Parenting Panel 29 th September 2020
SUBJECT:	Independent Visitor Service and Mentoring Services
LEAD OFFICER:	Nick Pendry Director of Early Help and Children Services
CABINET MEMBER:	Cllr Alissa Fleming Lead Member, Children, Young People and Learners
WARDS:	All
PUBLIC/EXEMPT:	

SUMMARY OF REPORT:

- Provides overview of volunteering services provided to children looked after in Croydon.
- Demonstrates value of volunteers and relationship based practice with children looked after.
- Good practice can be sustained, and be innovative, in the context of Covid 19 evidenced by;
 - a. The use of digital platforms to maintain existing volunteer relationships.
 - b. The increased reach of services to children looked after who live outside of the borough and increasing learning opportunities by the Virtual School.
 - c. The growth of specific mentor schemes for unaccompanied asylum seeking children using group work and peer mentor approaches.
- Volunteer Services are a growing resource in Croydon which benefit our children in diverse ways.

POLICY CONTEXT/AMBITIOUS FOR CROYDON:

Our children and young people thrive and reach their full potential:

- Research indicates children value consistent, flexible, practical and emotional support from caring adults. These relationships enhance resilience and safeguarding for vulnerable young people in care.
- Volunteer Services in Croydon support academic achievement, the integration of children into families, peer networks and the local community, and to have caring adult relationships which support their emotional development.

FINANCIAL IMPACT: None

RECOMMENDATIONS: None

1. Independent Visitor Service and Mentoring Services

- 1.1 Croydon Children's Services are expanding the one to one work they do with children using volunteers, continuing to enhance existing services such as the **Learning Mentor Volunteer Scheme** and **Independent Visitor Service**, and introduce new services such as the **Young Roots** and **Croydon Council Mentoring Schemes**.
- 2.2 *Learning Mentor Volunteer Scheme*
- 2.3 The Virtual School runs a bespoke Learning Mentor service for young people aged 14 to 19 who are learning in mainstream schools/settings.
- 2.4 The Learning mentoring scheme in Virtual school was set up for two key reasons. One, at the direct request of a number of CLA young people in academic year 9 (through the Children in Care Council and our visits to schools) who told us they felt they needed non-school based support and someone independent but with relevant skills, to take an interest in and assist with their studies and career progression.
- 2.5 It was also identified through PEPS, that there were a small but clearly identifiable group of Y10 and Y11 students who were felt to be slightly coasting and when discussing with these students what may support them, a carefully designed academic mentoring programme was felt to be the best solution.
- 2.6 Throughout the academic year 20/21 a total of 19 young people benefitted from sustained, 1:1 interaction with a trained volunteer mentor. These volunteers, use their own experiences of education to support and aid the young person through the challenges of studying and preparing for exams. Exploring interests and future life choices are also a key part of the mentor/mentee relationship.
- 2.7 During COVID-19 the relationships were all sustained via digital means and in some cases were seen as really 'invaluable' by the young people'. One young man said: "It meant someone was there who got it. Not my teacher, someone who like me liked physics, and sometimes found it hard." Sessions will now be offered online or face to face over the next academic year meaning we can reach more out of borough young people.
- 2.8 Our volunteer Mentors (19 in total) are expected to commit for a minimum of six months, offering an hour of their time per week to meet with their assigned young person. In over 70% of cases these relationships have been sustained over the whole academic year and have requested to continue. Mentors are starting to have more than one young person at a time.
- 2.9 Our full time Mentoring Lead, Nardia Turner, is available daily to support, guide, train and recruit more mentors. We are aiming to have 25 in operation across the year. 19 are already assigned and ready to begin. Referrals are made by schools and Social workers, or by young people themselves at their PEPs.

- 2.10 We have the capacity to recruit mentors specifically for individual young people, meaning matches can carefully consider background and needs. Our mentors are drawn from all areas and levels of the council and externally from local businesses too. In September we had our first whole team training session online, where Virtual School staff updated the volunteers on what education looks like now for young people with care experience and how best to support them.

3. *Independent Visitor Service*

- 3.1 The Independent Visitor Service has a legal definition and function defined by the Children Act 1989 and subsequent amendments. It forms part of the child and young person's care plan and is often recommended by the Independent Reviewing Officer as a key part of the support package for Looked After Children and Young People.
- 3.2 The Independent Visitor can support the young person to share and be heard in receiving the full care and support they are entitled to. The nature of the relationship means that Young People often trust their Independent Visitor with concerns and needs that they may not share with professionals and Carers. The Independent nature of the role, and the fact it is being done without payment, is important for our young people who often feel surrounded by people who are being paid to care for them.
- 3.3 The Independent Visitor service in the council has been operating within the Quality Assurance service of Children's Social Care for over ten years. There are currently three dedicated Independent Visitor Co-ordinators who train and support over 100 volunteers at present and we plan to continue to increase the numbers in the coming months.
- 3.4 Independent Visitors support the social and emotional development of children and young people through building a long term supportive relationship which allows them to develop trust in a caring adult.
- 3.5 Due to the nature of the Independent Visitor relationship it can be used in many different ways depending on the child or young person's needs and interests. It also changes over the lifetime of the relationship as the young person grows and their needs change.
- 3.6 Volunteers are initially asked to commit to the young person for 12-18 months, however as you can see below many of our volunteers commit to their young people for longer.
- 3.7 Currently 104 young people are matched with a volunteer, 9 of whom are care leavers;
- This is approximately 13% of Children who are looked after in in Croydon (the National average is 3.2%)
 - 8% of matches are over 4 years old, with 1 match in its 9th year.
 - 37% of matches are over 2 years old (the National average is 29%)

- Further 58% are over a year old (the National average is 50%, with ours higher due to increased recruitment of volunteers in the last year)
- 3.8 The Independent Visitor service has adapted to the covid-19 crisis and the additional isolation of our looked after young people. Independent Visitor's found creative ways to stay connected and maintain the important relationship they have with our young people.
- 3.9 The following case studies demonstrate some of these aspects of the Independent Visitor Relationship.
- 3.10 *Maintaining consistency*
 The Independent Visitor (G) and young person (J) have been matched since February 2019. J is quite a withdrawn boy but he gets on really well with G. They cemented their friendship trying out different pizzas around South London, and learning how to play chess together. During the lockdown they have a weekly meet up over Zoom to chat, play chess and they've now embarked on a new project – coding a computer game together! Once the restrictions changed they have resumed seeing each other face to face and were excited to catch up in person and eating pizza again.
- 3.11 *Transitions*
 M and S have been matched since March 2019. S is in a residential home in South East London. M had been taking her around the sights of South East to help her settle in, sharing their cultural connections and food. For their last visit before lockdown they talked about wanting to stay in touch if lockdown happened and worked out how they would do it. They talk 2-3 times a week, longer chats at first to help each other adjust to the new reality, and now informal chats and catch ups whenever S feels like it. They also watch Netflix recommendations in-between chats. They've helped each other adapt and maintained a friendship that is precious for them both. Currently S is preparing to return home to her family. M has pledged to remain her IV during her transition from care to ensure S has additional support and care in that time.
- 3.12 *Building positive relationships*
 N and L was matched over video call during lockdown and have been having contact via video. They were keen and excited to meet in person. They have met up in person 4 times since lockdown has eased and have been getting on brilliantly. This was demonstrated recently when N surprised L with a hand painted rock he made especially to his IV.
- 3.13 *Encouraging talents and creativity*
 G and L have been matched since October 2019. G is Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Child and she had only been in the country for a couple of months. G and L both share an interest in music and arts and would often attend events and street shows together. During lockdown G taught L how to play L's favourite song on the guitar. L has always wanted to go to the sea life centre, L and G have scheduled a date to visit and they are excited to see each other in person.

4. Young Roots Department for Education grant funded mentoring scheme

- 4.1 With the awarded funding from Croydon, Young Roots is proposing to provide tailored and enhanced support to five cohorts of five newly arrived Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children and Young People over the course of a 10 month mentoring programme. This scheme launched on 11th September 2020.
- 4.2 Croydon will identify and refer the relevant young people, and Young Roots will then match them with peer mentors, taking into account country of origin and language, age and any other important factors we are informed of at the point of referral.
- 4.3 For three consecutive weeks, they will attend the weekly Advice & Support Hub on Thursday evenings and also come back together on the following Friday afternoons for a series of activities using bilateral body movement, alongside their peer mentors.
- 4.4 They have decided on three week blocks so as to ensure it's a manageable commitment for the peer mentors so that they remain engaged, see the benefits of their support and feel the rewards.
- 4.5 As the newly arrived young people settle and integrate, they will be given the opportunity if appropriate, and support, to become peer mentors themselves for the later cohorts.
- 4.6 This period of enhanced support, coupled with therapeutic activities that promote positive mental health and emotional wellbeing, will facilitate their social integration, helping them to feel less isolated, scared and reducing the impact of trauma. We will support and encourage them to remain engaged with our activities and services.

5. Croydon Council UASC mentoring scheme

- 5.1 Croydon Care leavers will be recruited to become mentors by co-designing and running workshops for other young people who are new to the country. They will share their experiences to help others make positive lives for themselves in London.
- 5.2 The recruited young people (who will be of migrant and refugee backgrounds) will be offered training on; the asylum process, care system, safeguarding and wellbeing. Training begins on 12th October for 5 weeks.
- 5.3 The young people will then run workshops on the above topics to newly arrived young people while also sharing their own experiences and providing guidance. These will begin at the end of November 2020.

5.4 The aim of the mentoring scheme is to provide newly arrived children and young people with better support and guidance via mentors for their first few months while giving those who have already been through the process an opportunity to volunteer

5.5 Newly arrived young people will be able to build their network as soon as they enter the country as well as connect with and understand more about the system from the perspective of those who have been through it before. Mentors and Mentees will be paired for 3 months and will not have to carry on after unless they feel it necessary.

6. CONSULTATION

N/A

7. FINANCIAL AND RISK ASSESSMENT CONSIDERATIONS

None

8. LEGAL CONSIDERATIONS

None

9. HUMAN RESOURCES IMPACT

None

10. EQUALITIES IMPACT

None

11. ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT

None

12. CRIME AND DISORDER REDUCTION IMPACT

None

13. DATA PROTECTION IMPLICATIONS

WILL THE SUBJECT OF THE REPORT INVOLVE THE PROCESSING OF 'PERSONAL DATA'?

NO

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APPENDICES TO THIS REPORT:

None

BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS:

None