

REPORT TO:	Corporate Parenting Panel
SUBJECT:	Independent Visitor Service and Mentoring Services
LEAD OFFICER:	Roisin Madden Director of Early Help and Children Services
CABINET MEMBER:	Cllr Alissa Fleming Children, Young People and Learners
WARDS:	All
PUBLIC/EXEMPT:	N/A

SUMMARY OF REPORT:

Provides overview of volunteering services provided to children looked after in Croydon

Invites Corporate Parenting Panel to view a short WhatsApp video prepared by a child looked after by Croydon, describing their relationship with an Independent Visitor and capturing the value of the relationship based practice and volunteering

Good practice can be innovative, with the IV service diversifying its reach to children and young people.

- a) The development of 'Trusted Adult' approach
- b) Sustaining matches between independent visitors and young people after they have left care (either when turning 18 or returning to their families)
- c) Exploring matches between independent visitors and younger children

The voluntary sector continue to work with our children individually, however collaboration between the local authority has diminished as government funding has led to the ending of pilot schemes discussed at last report.

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: To note the report

1. DETAIL OF YOUR REPORT

Croydon Children's Services are expanding the one to one work they do with children using volunteers, by diversifying the reach of the **Independent Visitor Service**.

Independent Visitor Service

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.

The Independent Visitor service has been operating within the Quality Assurance service of Children's Social Care for over ten years. There are three dedicated Independent Visitor Co-ordinators who recruit, train, and supervise our Independent Visitors. Currently 1 of the Independent Visitor Co-ordinators is on Maternity Leave and we have welcomed a new staff member to cover her post.

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.

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.

Volunteers are initially asked to commit to the young person for 12-18 months.

Currently 103 young people are matched with a volunteer, 15 of whom are care leavers

- This is approximately 15% of Children who are looked after in in Croydon (the National average is 3.2%)
- 17.5% of matches are over 4 years old, with 1 match in its 10th year.
- 27% of matches are over 2 years old (the National average is 29%)
- Further 28% are over a year old (the National average is 50%, with ours higher due to increased recruitment of volunteers)
- 3 recruitment and training cycles have been undertaken since September 2020.
- 55 applicants have been trained.
- 19 have been matched, 8 are waiting to be matched, 15 are going through panel interviews
- 13 volunteers have elected to not continue due to personal circumstances.
- 26 children matched with an IV are aged between 6 and 12 yrs. old (of which 4 are aged between 6 and 9 years old)
- 62 children matched with an IV are aged between 13 and 17

The Independent Visitor service adapted to the covid-19 crisis. Independent Visitor's found creative ways to stay connected with our young people. As of July 21st 2021 volunteers are seeing children face to face again.

The conventional routine of monthly visiting, is now added to by connectivity between Independent Visitors and children and young people through digital platforms. Some relationships continue via social media if children prefer this.

We estimate that IV and their matched children and young people meet up every 2 weeks, the majority meet every 3-4 weeks, some once a month and IVs with care leavers once a month/once every 6 weeks.

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.

This has energised the IV Service to find new ways to meet the needs of children in our care. We are exploring whether the structures of supervision and safeguarding delivered by the Independent Visitor Co-Ordinators to volunteer's can be used flexibly. By doing so we plan to provide services to a greater range of children and young people.

The development of 'Trusted Adult' approach

Children and professionals form meaningful relationships in the course of their work together. These end when children move schools or social workers leave the employ of a local authority. With this approach we offer the supervision and monitoring of an independent visitor co-ordinator to enable these relationships to continue if the child or young person wishes it to, in a safe and supported way for everyone. Below are examples of the Independent Visitor Services exploration of this approach this year.

"A young person who already had an IV identified was moving to a new area and school, and his head teacher having supported him through coming into care and having an existing positive relationship wanted to maintain contact with him and his sister after they moved to a new area. The IV team advised and supported his social worker and carer on how best to assess and support this relationship and helped carry out checks. The head has had two visits since with the siblings which have been positive.

As Croydon's UASC CLA cohort reduces, one of our UASC CLA teams has been seconded to work for the Home Office with UASC YP. In discussions with the team's manager, the IV team identified two social workers who wanted to continue a strong and supportive relationship with one of the young people they had worked with who were remaining in Croydon's care. We are training and supporting them to be matched with these children with our oversight and

guidance to ensure the young people are able to continue to access an existing positive relationship.”

The mapping of process and practice, will be shared with the local authority designated officer for quality assurance with this approach being promoted by the IV Service in the next quarter across all social work services.

Sustaining matches between independent visitors and young people after they have left care (either when turning 18 or returning to their families)

The statutory remit of the Independent Visitor conventionally ends when the child or young person turns 18 years old as they are no longer looked after by the local authority. Nonetheless the IV Service has provided support to these relationships on a child by child basis offering children and young people the choice to determine whether these relationships continue.

15 care leavers are currently matched with independent visitor's which an increase of 6 matches is since we last reported. We have recognised that the approach to supporting these relationships, and how to manage endings needs to be mapped.

‘Y and A were matched 2 years ago when Y was 16 years old. They got on well from the very beginning and built a strong relationship based on their similar interests, sports. Y has recently become 18 years old and A went the extra mile to find a very special birthday present for Y. A found a charity which gives away bicycles and he managed to secure one for Y. Both Y and A was very happy to learn that they can continue with the IV relationship after Y turned 18. A was one of the first person to reach out to Y when events in Y’s homeland escalated and he made sure that Y knows he is there and approachable’.

Mapping the process and practice will ensure consistency across IV co-ordinators interventions. This will prepare the service to focus promotion of the approach with the new 16 – 25 year old service being created in the Children Looked After Service over the next quarter.

Exploring matches between independent visitors and younger children and children returning home

We recognise that the majority of our matches include children and young people aged over 12 years old.

As seen by the examples below younger children also benefit from input from Independent Visitors and we have seen these numbers increase over the last year as we welcome referrals for these children.

‘S is 9 years old and has been matched with her IV for 7 months. S and her IV share creative interests and explore different creative activities during their

virtual meetings. The most recent meeting involved baking and decorating unicorn cookies, playing I spy and 'when I went to the shops I bought'. Since the restrictions eased, S and her IV can continue to enjoy their creative interests outside'.

We can see the safeguarding role that the independent visitor exercises, particularly with younger children who will share worries and concerns with them as in the example below.

'N and L were matched in April 2020 when N was 9 years old. We were able to introduce them to each other face to face in a park. N was very friendly and excited, he bought a bag of Maltesers to share with L at the match meeting and it was obvious from the first minute that they will get on well.

N and L, with the support of the carer, adapted to the Covid restrictions brilliantly and they enjoyed their online gaming sessions just as much as their face to face meet ups.

When N had a crisis and self-harmed for the very first time, L made sure that N knows she is there for him, and he can share his feelings with her.

Despite the unprecedented circumstances N and L really managed to build a strong relationship and as a symbol of that, N gave a rock to L which he found while on holiday and which he decorated with 'To N from L' and which is now on display on L's sitting room shelf.

Since the restrictions eased, N and L were very happy to return to their outings, but they learnt that they don't need to miss a session just because the weather is bad and they enjoyed a couple of gaming sessions when rain stopped them from going out'.

Volunteers who work with younger children will require revised training and support, we will incorporate this into our next training cycle with volunteers (expected in November/December 2021).

Feedback from children and IV:

Independent Visitor Co-Ordinators check in with 10% of all matched children on a quarterly basis, to seek feedback about our service. Below is their feedback:

Its' really fun and you get to spend time away from what you normally do'

'I've got someone to talk to I guess'

'I would say, if you want it, you should get it if you can. They could just, instead of being on the computer, they could just go out'

'Since I have moved into independent living my IV has been supporting me with employment skills'

'She calls me on Wednesday and Fridays after school, I tell her what I eat and who I played with'

The following case studies demonstrate aspects of the Independent Visitor Relationship from the Independent Visitors perspective.

'I was matched with my young person around Nov 2019. She was 15 at the time. We immediately hit it off! We had similar personalities. Many a time it has felt like she is a mini me! 😊

We were able to enjoy quite a few outings and activities before lockdown arrived.

Activities ranged from just a quick bite to eat and a movie, to a trip into Central London and exploring by buses and the Docklands light railway..

It's been a really rewarding experience so far, knowing I'm a positive part of my young person's life. She and myself alike, look forward to our meetings and I try to plan and involve her in our upcoming outings to try and expose her to new areas around London and also get her involved in our routes to help her learn how to read maps etc. such as the London Underground system as it can be a very confusing form of travel!

Due to Covid, we were forced to spend many months apart however we would try to keep in touch through video calls, some virtual games and regular phone calls.

It wasn't the same but it was something.

One day I had a Eureka moment and thought to make up a little care package of small bits like a sachet of hot chocolate, packet of cookies, face pack, a chocolate dessert and microwave popcorn etc. I dropped this to my young person's front door and we had a short social distance chat which was so refreshing! 😊 It was so good to see each other from a distance even though we were clad with masks!

In the coming months as we were allowed to meet outdoors, we arranged a little picnic locally which we really enjoyed and still talk about! I brought some card games and a picnic rug with some shop bought snacks. We had such a good time.

It's not about spending money on fancy activities. It's about quality time spent with your young person. Giving them your valuable time. My small gesture of organising a few snacks and games and a picnic rug meant so much to her, and in return, just seeing her face light up and seeing her smile and laugh and just have fun with me always means so much to me.

I can't really explain the feeling that you get when you can see the difference you make in your young person's life. It's truly an amazing feeling.

I'm so grateful for being given this opportunity because by being my young person's independent visitor, she has really made a big difference in my life too.

I look forward to seeing and spending time with her, just as I'm here to be a role model to her, she has taught me so much too'.

2. CONSULTATION

N/A

3. FINANCIAL AND RISK ASSESSMENT CONSIDERATIONS

3.1. Revenue and Capital consequences of report recommendations

N/A

3.2. The effect of the decision

N/A

3.3. Risks

N/A

3.4. Options

N/A

3.5. Future savings/efficiencies

N/A

4. LEGAL CONSIDERATIONS

4.1. None

5. HUMAN RESOURCES IMPACT

5.1. None

6. EQUALITIES IMPACT

6.1. None

7. ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT

7.1. None

8. CRIME AND DISORDER REDUCTION IMPACT

8.1. None

9. DATA PROTECTION IMPLICATIONS

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

NO

9.2. Approved by: Róisín Madden Director of Early Help & Children's Social Care

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APPENDICES TO THIS REPORT

None

BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS:

None