



**London Borough of Hammersmith & Fulham**

**CHILDREN AND EDUCATION POLICY AND  
ACCOUNTABILITY COMMITTEE**

**21 September 2015**

**THE INDEPENDENT VISITORS SCHEME**

**Report of the Director for Children's Services**

**Open Report**

**Classification:** For review and comment

**Key Decision:** No

**Wards Affected:** All

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**1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

1.1. The Children and Education Policy and Accountability Committee (CEPAC) requested a report describing the role of the independent visitor's scheme. This report informs members about the service along with other support services aimed at supporting the transition of Care Leavers to independence.

**2 RECOMMENDATIONS**

2.1 For the Committee to review the report and recommend ways in which the Council can support recruitment of appropriate volunteers for the service.

**3. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND**

3.1 Local authorities have a number of statutory requirements in order to fulfil duties associated with being effective Corporate Parents. Corporate Parenting is the term used to refer to the collective responsibility of the Council to provide the best care and protection for children and young people who are 'looked after', that is, who are in public care and for those who have left care at 18 years of age and who are 'Care Leavers'. Effective Corporate Parenting needs the

commitment from all Council employees and elected Members and an authority wide approach. These responsibilities for Local Authorities were first laid out in the Children Act 1989, the Children Act 2004 and reinforced in the Children and Young People's Act 2008.

- 3.2 Government's Guidance for Councillors "If this were my child" reinforced the leading role of Councillors in ensuring that their Council acts as an effective Corporate Parent for every child in care, actively supporting standards of care and seeking high quality outcomes that every good parent would want for their child. "When you became a councillor you became responsible for ensuring that the Council acts as the 'corporate parent' for all the children in its care." This duty is to promote positive outcomes, which encompass their education, their health and welfare, what they do in their leisure time and holidays, how they celebrate their culture and how they receive praise and encouragement for their achievements.
- 3.3 Recently the Looked after and Care Leaving service has re-organised to two specialist looked after children's teams aged 0-15 and two teams for Care Leavers aged 16 -24 years of age. The aim of this re-organisation is to ensure that care leavers are able to develop and sustain a working relationship with their allocated social workers and to reduce the numbers of changes in those professionals supporting young people with their transition to independence. By ensuring that the service now has a fully qualified social work service it is also anticipated that service standards will improve.
- 3.4 Social workers working with Care Leavers are required to offer advice and assistance and will maintain contact with the young person on a regular basis up to the age of 21 (or up to the age of 24 for those completing an agreed course of education or training).

The level and nature of the contact will be specified in the young person's Pathway Plan and the Social Worker will monitor its progress through direct contact with the young person and the agencies and individuals identified in the Plan as providing a service or being significant. The key roles of the Social worker's in the 16 plus service are as follows:

1. To advise on and monitor progress of the young person's Pathway Plan Assessment;
2. To take a lead role in the preparation of the Pathway Plan;
3. To participate in reviews of the Pathway Plan;
4. To liaise with other agencies, including other local authorities in the implementation of the Pathway Plan and to advocate for the young person;
5. To coordinate the provision of services under the Pathway Plan and take steps to ensure the young person makes use of such services;

6. To keep informed about the young person's progress and well-being;

And to keep written records of contact with the young person monitoring the effectiveness of services in preparing the young person for a time when they will move to greater independence or when they cease to be looked after.

- 3.5 The social workers assessment of the care leavers needs will determine the level of support provided within the semi-independent accommodation and this can range from 3- 15 hours of support per week. Additionally we are seeing an increase of young people remain within their foster placement under 'Staying Put' arrangements i.e. 64 per cent of young people leaving foster care remained within their foster placement at the end of March 2015 which is a significant increase from 25 per cent in the previous year.
- 3.6 Other support services available to care leavers is the Virtual School teaching staff who are responsible for the tracking and monitoring of the looked after child's attendance, progress and attainment. The Education Development Worker holds a 3 day caseload of pupils in Years 12 and 13 and also has responsibility to ensuring each pupil in education has an up to date Personal Education Plan and targeted education support. The remaining 2 days are focused on offering advice and guidance to Leaving Care teams for students aged 19 and above. From October 2015 the team will also have an Education, Employment and Training Personal Adviser who will provide direct support to those aged 16 plus young people who are Not in Education, Employment or Training. The Virtual School is responsible for developing and organising the team's enrichment programme of activities and projects to support the achievement and learning of children.
- 3.7 Local authorities have a statutory duty through Section 23ZB of the Children's Act 1989 to appoint an independent visitor to visit, advise and befriend a looked after child or young person where it is believed to be in their best interests. The previous criteria of having limited, or no, family contact no longer exists. The purpose of Independent Visitors is to develop a consistent and committed relationship with potentially isolated children and young people which fosters inclusion and broadens experience.
- 3.8 Locally the Independent Visitor Scheme (IVS) is run under the umbrella of the Children's Rights Service for the London Borough of Hammersmith and Fulham.
- 3.9 In the borough, Independent Visitors are expected to befriend a child or young person who is looked after by Hammersmith and Fulham, providing support, and taking them out on engaging activities.

#### **4. THE LOCAL SCHEME**

- a. Advertising takes place for new volunteers. There is a particular need to identify male volunteers and those who are from different ethnic backgrounds to meet the particular needs of our children in care.
- b. Volunteers are recruited and fully trained by the borough's Children's Rights Service. Training includes involvement of guest speakers and home interviews. Once trained and following DBS checks, health checks and seeking of references, volunteers are asked to commit to the Scheme for at least one year
- c. Monthly outings between young person and their independent visitor with a £35 -£45 allowance dependant on location.
- d. The Scheme is promoted for children and young people via social workers for looked after children.
- e. Referrals for children/young people in care can be made directly from the child/young person, from social workers, teachers, carers etc. The Independent Visitors Project Worker then seeks to match referrals with appropriate Independent Visitors. The project worker follows up referrals with visits to the young people and their carers to ensure they are fully briefed about the scheme. A report recommending a match be also produced which is then considered by an Approval Panel, which includes a social work practitioner, and at least two young people who have previously used the Children's Rights or Independent Visitors service. The panel then deliberates and provides feedback on their view of the proposed match.
- f. Current matches between volunteers and young people are monitored including follow up on any safeguarding issues that may emerge.
- g. A regular support group is provided for volunteers along with individual support and ongoing training. Group outings such as bowling are also organised.

#### **5. OVERVIEW OF CURRENT RESOURCE AND MATCHES**

- a. There are currently 12 independent visitors. There is ongoing progress being made to increase this resource by the end of the year. There are 8 young people currently matched with volunteers with a further three going through the process of matching. Over the past 12 months (September 2014 to August 2015) there have been 14 enquiries about potential referrals from social workers and other professionals.

- b. In the last 6 months, four volunteers have been trained. One has since been matched with a young person and another is in the process of being matched. One is still undergoing relevant checks. Five training sessions were attended by each of them, covering topics including: the role of the IVS, communication skills and boundaries, safeguarding and the journey of a child in care.

## **6. SUPPORTING THE INDEPENDENT VISITORS**

- 6.1 IV support meetings provide opportunities to network, discuss challenges and offer support to each other through sharing experiences. It is also an opportunity to disseminate training information. Training and topics discussed at these meetings have included working with challenging behaviour, gangs and sexual exploitation; and mental health.

## **7. FEEDBACK FROM CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE**

- 7.1 This report includes some feedback from local children in care about their views of being matched with an independent visitor.

“I like having an independent visitor. It’s fun, but James needs to practise his football skills. I like the cinema, Princess Diana Park and Wetlands” (young person age 9)

“Having an independent visitor is good. It’s good to go out with someone separately and you get to go to some good places. My favourite places have been the Aquarium, rock climbing and Ripley’s Experience. Having an independent visitor is fun.” (young person age 16)

“My independent visitor is a perfect match for me. I can tell her anything and she helps me to overcome my problems. I enjoyed Ravenscourt Park, the Science Museum and the Ceramics Café. I would like to do horse riding in the future if possible. Independent visitors are great because they take you out and keep you safe and give their own time to be with you” (young person age 11)

“She (my independent visitor) is fun, energetic and very happy and good company and it’s nice to go out once in a while. I like my independent visitor very much and would really like to see her more often.” (young person age 10)

## **8. MEETING LOCAL NEEDS**

- a. Nationally, 80% of children who don’t have an Independent Visitor report that this is because they’ve never been offered one. (Independent Visitors: Children’s Rights Director for England 2012).

- b. In LBHF children and young people learn about the existence of the Scheme via their social worker, promotion made through Family Services and at looked after reviews where it is promoted by the IRO. All looked after children should be informed of the IV service. If a child or young person chooses to have an IV they would meet regularly and arrange fun activities, which are tailored to what they wish to do. Children and young people have an opportunity to further meet with the Independent Visitors Project Worker who will make themselves available to talk and answer any questions about the Scheme.
- c. The current Independent Visitor Scheme in the main have been able to provide IV's to those children and young people who are looked after and care leavers who live in London generally and Greater London who wish to be matched with an IV. All enquires are always followed through promptly whether this results in a child or young person being eventually matched or not. Promotion has to be consistent and active collaboration with Family Services is a must. This is essential, as the Scheme needs regular publicity. Some further work is required when considering recruiting volunteers who may need to be matched with disabled children and young people. We are envisaging raising the numbers of volunteers to between 18-22 as in the past year we have had enquiries into double figures (more than 10 but less than 20) and believe that will be about the same. We have previously had a waiting list of 3/4 children and young people and wish to avoid a waiting list for an independent visitor in the future.
- d. The Scheme is actively seeking to recruit more males as they are currently underrepresented in the Scheme. Also there is an idea of recruit of specifically targeting volunteers who may wish to work with disabled children and young people and either offer their experience or attain an additional skill set.
- e. The Scheme has 12 independent visitors currently and in terms of management of volunteers this number could be raised to 18-22 as previously mentioned. The Independent Visitors Project Worker works 18hrs a week and could cope with managing and supporting more volunteers.
- f. In terms of recruitment and how the Scheme seeks the support of the local volunteer service offers help to promote the Scheme. Promotion takes place across family services. Local community centres, gyms, shops and libraries are also targeted. The Scheme will also use an opportunity to promote itself at events that occur in the calendar organised by departments within Family Services. It will also be considering organising an open day at its offices for people to come along and find out more about the Service.

- g. The independent visitor's role is generally one of a befriender to a child or young person. IV's matched with young people have felt that it is a rewarding role and it's an opportunity to give back something to society. IV's may possibly participate in meetings which involve a looked after child or care leaver and may come as a direct request from themselves. IV's have found this useful as this provides them with a better awareness about the care system. Independent visitors do also feel that the support they receive from the Independent Visitor Project Workers (IVPW) and regularly meeting and sharing experience with other independent visitor's is an essential component in terms of the support received. Independent visitors range from people who have come from those who like to volunteer to persons in paid work and retired individuals.
- h. The Scheme has supported in the past and continues to support those care leavers who opt to be matched with an independent visitor. It helps those individuals who are making transitions from care to more independent living. An independent visitor is there to act as a befriender to a care leaver who could only have their social worker there and who could still be feeling isolated. It is a relationship and resource available for them personally.
- i. Young people value the voluntary commitment of the Independent Visitors involved in the scheme. They appreciate that Independent Visitors provide a different relationship from their local authority workers. The relationship can help improve self-esteem and social development, while the schemes provide opportunities to take part in fun activities that broaden the experience of the young people

## **9. CONCLUSION**

- 9.1 The Scheme has operated in the Borough for about 7 years. Retention of independent visitors has been steady. Most children and young people who access the Scheme usually participate in the Scheme for more than the minimum required period of a year. The Service is seeking to stretch to a much bigger and wider recruitment as there are identified gaps in the provision.

The permanent IV Project Coordinator was seconded to another position in April 2014 and has now decided to take up a post elsewhere. Since then the position has been covered by an agency worker as we were unable to recruit to a fixed term contract despite several recruitment drives. Recruitment to the permanent position is due to commence but this is one of the main vulnerabilities in the Service at the moment.

## **10. EQUALITY IMPLICATIONS**

Children and young people with some protected characteristics tend to be over-represented in the care system. This report highlights the need to recruit independent visitors from particular parts of the community to meet the needs of all the children who require this kind of support.

## **11. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS**

Local authorities have a statutory duty through Section 23ZB of the Children's Act 1989 to appoint an independent visitor to visit, advise and befriend a looked after child or young person where it is believed to be in their best interests.

## **12. FINANCIAL AND RESOURCES IMPLICATIONS**

- 0.5 FTE IV Project Co-ordinator
- 0.2 FTE Administrative Support

Total IV Service costs including staffing = £33,530

If the scheme is to expand to reach a wider cohort of young people, beyond the 22 mentioned above, an increase in IV Project Coordinator hours will be needed and additional resources will be required to fund this.

### **LOCAL GOVERNMENT ACT 2000** **LIST OF BACKGROUND PAPERS USED IN PREPARING THIS REPORT**

None.