

Independent Visitor Report 2021/22

Executive Summary:

An Independent Visitor is a trained volunteer who is there to “befriend and support children and young people in care”. Independent Visitors are generally considered for children and young people in care aged 8. An Independent Visitor can be a significant person in a child’s life where there may be few constant or stable relationships, or Independent Visitors may be important and significant for a child at a particular point in their lives. Independent Visitors provide consistency within the lives of young people who may be experiencing a number of changes. They will be a source of information and guidance, encouraging and supporting young people to achieve their full potential and access the full range of opportunities that are available to them, for example helping young people develop new interests, skills and hobbies or participating alongside them in leisure interests. Independent Visitors’ are truly ‘independent’ as they are outside the care system but provide the young person with continuity (a minimum 2 years commitment is required) which is something not always possible with changing carer’s and social workers.

Statutory and local guidance outlines how an Independent Visitor should be considered for any child in care when it appears to be in the child’s interests to have one, and where a child or young person wants one. This should occur as part of the development of the child’s care plan and child in care review process. Independent Visitors should in particular be considered for a child or young person who has limited or no contact with their family, if they are living far from their home area, if they are unable to go out independently, experience difficulties in building relationships, have had a lot of change, and are at risk due to being likely to form inappropriate relationships.

Change Grow Live (CGL) is the Walsall’s Independent Visitor provider and this is as part of a sub-regional contract in partnership with Dudley, Sandwell and Telford and Wrekin. The service is reviewed in line with the contractual arrangements and involves commissioners and strategic managers across the four Local Authorities. The Programme Manager provides quarterly reports and there is a sub-regional quarterly meetings to review take up of the service. Walsall’s strategic lead is the Group Manager for the Safeguarding and Review Service.

The Independent Visitor action plan developed in 2021/22 primarily focused on increasing the numbers of children in care referred for an Independent Visitor. This has been actioned, Independent Visitors are now regularly discussed at child in care reviews and social workers within the Corporate Parenting teams have a good understanding of the offer; this has resulted in an upward trend of referrals. At the end of 2019/20 there were 7 children with an allocated Independent Visitor with 3 waiting to be matched. At the end of 2020/21 there were 11 children with an Independent Visitor with 5 waiting to be matched.

As of March 2023 we have 14 children matched to an Independent Visitor with a further 11 referred awaiting allocation, which will take us beyond the current proposed target of 20 children in our care with an Independent Visitor. We currently compare favourably to the other 3 commissioning local authorities with both more children matched and more referred awaiting match (as of Q3).

There are however, currently some challenges in matching all children referred with an appropriate volunteer. CGL report post Covid that a shortage of volunteers, they report this is a national issue and is a sector wide challenge, not specific to the role of the Independent Visitor. Regular assurances are sought from CGL regarding the activity undertaken to recruit volunteers and they are able to provide evidence of regional and Walsall specific promotional activity. As Local Authorities we are working to support CGL in the recruitment of volunteers through external promotions and an agreement has been made across all four commissioning authorities to undertake a targeted promotion campaign to council staff. There is robust scrutiny on volunteer recruitment within all service contract review meetings.

Reason for bringing to the Corporate Parenting Board:

This report is to provide an update regarding the uptake and engagement with the Independent Visitor programme by children and young people in care in Walsall for 2021/22. This report also sets out a proposal to attract Walsall council employees to volunteer as Independent Visitors.

Recommendations:

That the board notes the Independent Visitor annual report.

Background papers:

None

Corporate Parenting Pledges

The Walsall Promise for all Children in Care and Care Leavers

Resource and legal considerations:

The relevant legislation is contained within the body of the report. There are no direct legal implications arising from the report.

Council Corporate Plan Priorities:

- Children have the best possible start and are safe from harm, happy, healthy and learning well.

- People have increased independence, improved health and can positively contribute to their communities.

Citizen impact:

The services and the improvements play a key role in the quality of life and outcomes for the children, young people and families of Walsall. The Council and its partners as Corporate Parents make critical contributions to improve outcomes.

Environmental impact:

There are no direct implications arising from this report

Performance management:

Corporate Parenting Board ensures everyone works together to fulfil the corporate parenting role and to hold each other to account for making this happen.

- It acts as the visible organisational champion for looked after children and young people and care leavers, promoting their rights, entitlements and aspirations;
- The mobilisation and optimum use of resources available to get the best chance of success for children in care and to support care leavers to positively move on to live independently

Reducing inequalities:

The Corporate Parenting Strategy 2022/2025 sets out the response to secure improvements in the equality of services, which, when achieved will have a positive impact on our most vulnerable children, young people and families. By being effective Corporate Parents for Children in Care and Care Leavers, we collectively seek to redress the disadvantage that looked after children and care leavers face.

Consultation:

The CICC is one of the key forums through which services for children in care and care leavers seek to consult on service delivery and where children and young people are able to shape and influence the parenting they receive at every level.

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