

“ She made me forget about being in care and brought me up on my down days” “ Life generally would not have been so good.” “ She always comes when she says she will. She never lets me down.” “ I can truly talk.” “ Having an independent visitor has been the only stable thing in my life recently.”

National Standards for the Provision of Independent Visitor Services

January 2016



Foreword

The role of the independent visitor was first introduced as a statutory service for looked after children in the Children Act 1989. Since then, the service has had a relatively low profile with limited recognition and lack of understanding amongst professionals, children and young people. The Children’s Rights Director reported that 80% of children who did not have an independent visitor said this was because they were never offered one; “I have never been given the choice and never heard of them”. Independent visitor networks and key stakeholders have been calling for increased awareness and improved consistency across local authorities. In response to this call the Tudor Trust agreed to fund a three year project; The National Independent Visitor Network Development Project, launched in March 2014.

The National Independent Visitor Network members are calling for the Department of Education to endorse these quality standards to ensure greater awareness of the service and improved standards across England and Wales. The network asks all local authority independent visitor services to work from and promote the standards. The aim of the standards is to outline a framework for a good independent visitor service. The standards will be reviewed every three years by the National Independent Visitor Network, who will also liaise closely with Ofsted to ensure local authorities are providing an accessible and good service for children and young people, so they can form meaningful long-term relationships with their independent visitors.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank all the independent visitor services, voluntary organisations, local authorities, Children in Care Councils and many individuals who have taken part in the development of these standards. Particular thanks to SERVIS (South East Regional Independent Visitor Schemes) for initiating and championing this work. We have also referred to the Mentoring & Befriending Standards and the National Advocacy Standards. We would also like to thank the Tudor Trust which kindly funds this invaluable project which will enable more children and young people to understand their right to an independent visitor.

“Without [the IV] in A’s life for the past 10 years I believe that he would be a lot more delayed in his development and he would still be having suicidal thoughts like he was when I first became his foster carer. [The IV] has improved A’s self esteem. [The IV] is a consistent person in A’s life and has cared for him unconditionally which is so important. The most important thing about the service is there is a good match between the IV and the young person, [The IV] has been with A for 10 years and they are great friends... I think A has got a friend for life.”

Foster carer

Introduction

The role of the Independent Visitor

“She made me forget about being in care and brought me up on my down days”

An independent visitor is a volunteer who doesn't work for social care services, and is there to visit and befriend the child. Independent visitors need to be consistent and reliable in order that children can build a trusting, positive relationship with them over time. They will endeavour to become and remain a consistent adult in the child's life who doesn't change when placements or social workers change and will at all times stay child focussed. The child will have the opportunity to try new activities, and spend time with their independent visitor, away from their placement. Independent visitors are someone to 'stick up' for the child, to promote the empowerment of the child, and to make sure their rights are respected. It is important to note that independent visitors are not skilled advocates. If a child is unhappy with their care plan or they feel they're not being listened to, the independent visitor service should make a referral to an advocacy or children's rights service.

“I really like my IV because she is really nice, we do really nice things and I really enjoy everything we do and I wouldn't change anything. “X” listens to me and I think it has helped me be a bit more confident and it is nice to have some who isn't family to talk to. I'm really happy I have her because she is really nice and fun to be around”
Young person

What children and young people say

“Listen to what I have to say, help me when I need it”

Children and young people told the Children's Rights Director that they want independent visitors to (1) give help and support and (2) have someone to talk to. Very few children said they had been given an independent visitor because they didn't have much contact with their birth family. Children who did not have an independent visitor said it would have been good “to speak to someone who is not employed by the local authority”, “telling them things you can't tell other people”. Children said the most important skill of an independent visitor is to be a good listener.

Independent Visitors – the legal position

The Children Act says that a local authority has to appoint an independent visitor for any child they are looking after, if they feel it would be in the child's best interests. Section 23ZB of the Children Act 1989 states “(1) A local authority looking after a child must appoint an independent person to be the child's visitor if – (a) the child falls within a description prescribed in

regulations made by the appropriate national authority; or (b) in any other case, it appears to them that it would be in the child's interests to do so. (2) A person appointed under this section must visit, befriend and advise the child."

Independent visitor services should follow the Department for Education's guidance found in Volume 2 of the Children Act 1989 Guidance and Regulations which writes:
 "The appointment should be considered as part of the development of the care plan for the child or as part of a review of the child's case. Any decision not to appoint an independent visitor should be kept under review to make sure that the opportunity to appoint such a person is considered if the child's circumstances change. The child's wishes and feelings should be ascertained and the responsible authority may not appoint an independent visitor if the child objects and the authority are satisfied that the child has sufficient understanding to make an informed decision."

"She is the perfect IV and I don't think there could have been a better match for me. She is an enormous part of my life and means a lot to me, as I do to her."

Young person

The standards

Children and young people (referred to as children here on)

1. All looked after children understand their **right to an independent visitor**. Services are **promoted**, publicised and accessible. Local authorities promote independent visitor services in line with their duties as corporate parents.
2. Independent visitor services are **child-led**. The needs and views of the child are at the centre of all work including; referrals, matching, visits and endings.
3. Independent visitor services work to a high level of **confidentiality** between the child, independent visitor and service coordinator. Children and volunteers understand the service's policy on safeguarding and record keeping with a good understanding of why and when information needs to be shared.
4. Children are given the opportunity to **participate** and be actively involved in the development of services. Children's views, opinions and skills are used and recognised and influence the service delivered.

"I have enjoyed the activities that we have done together and things we have tried. Having an independent visitor has been the only stable thing in my life recently"

Young person

Volunteer independent visitors

5. There is a thorough **recruitment and selection** process for volunteer independent visitors, which is safe and transparent. Independent visitors understand the long-term requirement of the role, with an expectation to commit to a minimum of one year.
6. Independent visitors complete a thorough **induction and training** process specific to the role, and receive on-going **support** to give them the skills and knowledge to confidently fulfil their role.

*“My independent visitor is someone to talk to not involved with anyone else... it’s private”
Young person*

The relationship

7. There is a clear and consistent process in place for **referral, matching,** and positive **endings.**
8. The independent visitor will seek to befriend the child and establish a relationship of trust through **regular visits** and contact with the child.
9. Independent visitor relationships are regularly **monitored** to make sure the child is safe, happy and developing a positive relationship with their independent visitor.

Management

10. Independent visitors are unpaid volunteers **independent** of the child’s social services department. Independence of the service is important, for the child’s feeling of separateness from social services, and the important safeguards this provides.
11. Independent visitor services are **safe** with policies and procedures in place to ensure the safety of children, independent visitors and independent visitor coordinators.
12. Local authorities allocate an appropriate level of **resources** to the service to ensure sufficient funding, management and staff are in place to support a wider group of looked after children in line with current legislation.
13. Services have clear policies to promote **equality and diversity** ensuring that no child or volunteer is discriminated against. The service promotes equality when meeting the diverse needs of the local authority’s looked after children.
14. There is a clear and easy to use **complaints procedure.** Volunteers and children know how to complain and their complaints are dealt with seriously and quickly.

How to meet the standards:

Best Practice Toolkit

- 1. All looked after children understand their right to an independent visitor. Services are promoted, publicised and accessible. Local authorities promote independent visitor services in line with their duties as corporate parents.**
 - 1.1 All local authorities have an independent visitor service in place either through a commissioned service or appropriately managed within the local authority. The service is publicised on the local authority website and clear information is given to all eligible children.
 - 1.2 Independent Reviewing Officers have a duty to consider a child's eligibility for an independent visitor in a child's statutory review, and should be discussed before and during the meeting. Any decision not to appoint an independent visitor should be kept under review to make sure that the opportunity is considered again if the child's circumstances change.
 - 1.3 Services should not only rely on the IRO to promote the service at LAC reviews. Foster carers, residential workers, social workers, advocates, participation workers and Children in Care Councils should all consider opportunities to inform children of independent visitors and help them access the service.
 - 1.4 Services should pay particular attention to children placed out of borough, ensuring they are not excluded from the service. Services should collaborate with regional and national networks and work together where possible to support matches for children that are placed out of borough.
 - 1.5 Services and local authorities have a dual responsibility to promote the service. Examples of promotion include training social workers, foster carers, residential workers and reviewing officers, including independent visitors in IRO handbooks, and Cafcass to remind their Guardians of the service and consider promotion in the guardian's final analysis of court process if the relevant criteria are met.

2. Independent visitor services are child-led. The needs and views of the child are at the centre of all work including; referrals, matching, visits and endings.

- 2.1 Services ensure that children are informed and consulted with at each stage of the service, with their needs and views clearly identified in the match and monitoring of the relationship.
- 2.2 The service meets with the child after referral to talk about the service, and create a profile of the child to ensure their views are included in the matching process.
- 2.3 The child is consulted with and given information about prospective independent visitors. The child agrees to being matched with a particular independent visitor.
- 2.4 Whenever possible, children should be given a choice of who they can be matched with.

3. Independent visitor services work to a high level of confidentiality between the child, independent visitor and service coordinator. Children and volunteers understand the service's policy on safeguarding and record keeping with a good understanding of why and when information needs to be shared.

- 3.1 Where services are run in-house through the local authority, particular attention should be made to ensure the confidentiality of the relationship is respected.
- 3.2 Children should be aware of and involved in the referral being made to the service.
- 3.3 Children should understand how their information will be stored with the service, and the confidentiality policy to be fully explained.
- 3.4 Services may choose to request contact reports from volunteers on their visits to support monitoring and safeguarding. If contact records are used, the child must understand how this works and consent. Contact records should be kept brief, so as not to impact on the confidentiality and trust within the relationship.
- 3.5 Services provide training on confidentiality and record keeping to independent visitors to ensure they understand what information can be shared and how.

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- 4. Children are given the opportunity to **participate** and be actively involved in the development of services. Children’s views, opinions and skills are used and recognised and influence the service delivered.**
- 4.1 Services involve children in: designing leaflets, promoting the service at Children in Care Councils, training and interviewing independent visitors, developing panel questions and feedback forms, and organising activities.
 - 4.2 Children are given the opportunity to participate in the planning, monitoring and review of the service.
- 5. There is a thorough **recruitment and selection** process for volunteer independent visitors, which is safe and transparent. Independent visitors understand the long-term requirement of the role, with an expectation to commit to a minimum of one year.**
- 5.1 Where possible volunteers should commit to more than one year, with the view of building a long-term relationship throughout the child’s time in care and potentially beyond, or until the child wishes to end the match. However, services should not exclude those volunteers who may only be able to offer a limited period, as shorter matches may still play a valuable role in the child’s life.
 - 5.2 The selection process should involve sufficient opportunities to get to know the volunteer before approval. This may involve initial meetings, observation at training, home visit and approval panels.
 - 5.3 Approval panels should be made up of members from multi-agency representation so that more than one person is involved in approving volunteers. Panel members could include; young person, experienced independent visitor, social worker, IRO, foster carer.
 - 5.4 All volunteers should have enhanced DBS checks and at least two references.
 - 5.5 Services should aim to recruit a diverse volunteer group ensuring they follow equality and diversity policies and consider the diversity of the children referred.
 - 5.6 Services should recruit volunteers that demonstrate resilience and an ability to effectively support children as evidenced via references, training and interviews.

- 5.7 Services should encourage the recruitment of volunteers who have personal experience of being in care, as children have stated the additional benefits of being matched with someone who has had similar experiences.
- 5.8 Volunteers should be recruited where there is clear evidence that their reasons for volunteering are to support a child in a long-term relationship. Volunteers looking for work experience or social work placements may be directed to more suitable voluntary roles.
- 5.9 Services should recruit volunteers who are willing to travel, so that children placed out of borough can be matched (providing sufficient funding from local authority, see 12.2).

6. Independent visitors complete a thorough induction and training process specific to the role, and receive on-going support to give them the skills and knowledge to confidently fulfil their role.

- 6.1 Initial training includes: safeguarding, children in care, boundaries, confidentiality, communication, equality and diversity, health and safety. Services provide on-going training on relevant topics for example, child sexual exploitation and leaving care.
- 6.2 Specific training should be offered for volunteers working with disabled children and those with additional needs.
- 6.3 Independent visitors are volunteers and expenses are promptly reimbursed.
- 6.4 Services should regularly support volunteers throughout their match with: face to face meetings, group support, social events, training opportunities and written and telephone contact.
- 6.5 Independent visitors are given a clear procedure for accessing out of hours support.
- 6.6 Independent visitors should be provided with and adhere to a volunteer code of conduct.
- 6.7 Services should give independent visitors any feedback on how the match is going, from the perspective of the child (with their agreement), carers and social workers to encourage them and support them with developing the relationship.

7. There is a clear and consistent process in place for referral, matching, and positive endings.

- 7.1** Referral waiting times should be kept to a minimum. Local authorities should be informed of the matching process and estimated waiting time.
- 7.2** Referrals for an independent visitor should be accepted from a child themselves and other professionals working with the child. The relevant information is then completed by the social worker.
- 7.3** Children's views and wishes to be paramount in the matching process. Children are supported to end relationships if they are unhappy.
- 7.4** Volunteer independent visitor's views are sought prior to the match to ensure they have time to consider the match and commitment.
- 7.5** Cultural needs should be considered in matching if requested by the child. Children and social workers should be informed of the likelihood and potential waiting time.
- 7.6** Children are kept regularly informed after initial referral of the expected waiting times and matching process.
- 7.7** A clear matching process should be in place which covers relevant policies and procedures for visits, so that everyone understands the dos and don'ts of the visits.
- 7.8** Services should develop a framework for ending matches. This should include: ensuring the child's views are heard, gathering feedback from all parties, supporting a positive final visit. If the volunteer has to end the relationship for personal reasons, this should be shared sensitively and appropriately with the child, offering a chance to discuss the ending, and celebrate the relationship. Children who have experienced independent visitors leaving the role have told us they would like the independent visitor to tell them themselves why they are leaving, face to face, so that they understand what is happening. If the match is ended early by the volunteer, the child should be offered the opportunity of a new independent visitor quickly.

8. The independent visitor will seek to befriend the child and establish a relationship of trust through regular visits and contact with the child.

- 8.1** The frequency of visits will depend on each individual match, but independent visitors should expect to visit monthly.
- 8.2** Independent visitors should not be matched with more than one child at one time. The role is about forming a long-term relationship with an individual child, and children like to know their independent visitor is just for them. Services may match a volunteer with more than one child in some circumstances (e.g. if a match is about to end), but being matched with more than one child should not be common practice.
- 8.3** Independent visitors may be invited to the child's LAC review, if requested by the child. Social workers and IROs should inform children of this, and if requested an invitation to the review meeting should be sent to the service coordinator.
- 8.4** Children should not visit the independent visitor's home. When consulting with the National Independent Visitor Network, the majority of members agree that visits to volunteer's home should not take place. Some services have agreed this may take place in particular cases, e.g. when the young person is older, and has known the independent visitor for many years. Any plans to arrange home visits must be done in agreement with the local authority and service manager. Appropriate checks and assessments of the home and family should be undertaken.
- 8.5** Independent visitors should promote the child's views and wishes if requested by the child. However the service should ensure independent visitors understand the difference of the advocacy role, and be aware of how to make a referral for advocacy.
- 8.6** Independent visitors should not take their children, partners or friends on visits. Visits should be one-to-one with the child, and any additional people (e.g. child's sibling) must be agreed with the social worker and service manager.

9. Independent visitor relationships are regularly monitored to make sure the child is safe, happy and developing a positive relationship with their independent visitor.

- 9.1** Feedback is asked from the child, independent visitor, carers and social workers. The regularity of monitoring will depend on the length of the match and the child's needs and wishes. Services may wish to have six monthly review meetings or quarterly calls with the relevant people. Services may also wish to carry out annual feedback forms with all four parties.
- 9.2** Services should obtain feedback directly from the child in order to monitor the match. This will be more regular at the beginning of the match.
- 9.3** Children and young people told us if there is a problem with their independent visitor or the visits, they would like to tell their carer or social worker, who should then feed back to the service.
- 9.4** Social workers and foster carers should talk to children about their match with their independent visitor. If any concerns are raised by the child, or the child is not enjoying the visits, the social worker or foster carer should contact the service immediately.

10. Independent visitors are volunteers independent of the child's social services department. Independence of the service is important, for the child's feeling of separateness from social services, and the important safeguards this provides.

- 10.1** The Department for Education guidance 3.262 states "being 'independent' means that an independent visitor must not be connected with the local authority as a result of: being an elected or co-opted member of the responsible authority; being an officer of the responsible authority who is employed in relation to functions referred in section 18 of the 2004 Act; or being the spouse or civil partner or other person (whether of the same or a different sex)
- 10.2** If the service is run 'in-house' the management of the service should remain independent of children's services e.g. to sit within the Independent Reviewing Officer's team.

11. Independent visitor services are safe with policies and procedures in place to ensure the safety of children, independent visitors and independent visitor coordinators.

- 11.1 Services should offer good communication with the child, independent visitor, social worker and foster carer. This may involve updating the social worker on progress or any safeguarding concerns.
- 11.2 Social workers should in turn offer good communication to the independent visitor service including: important updates around the child's life and circumstances that may impact on the relationship/visits. In particular the social worker should inform the service of up-to-date risk assessments, and any plans for placement moves.
- 11.3 The independent visitor should offer good communication to the child, service and foster/residential carer, to ensure professionals are kept up to date with how the relationship is going and any potential concerns or risks for the child.
- 11.4 Changes to commissioned services should not impact on the service delivery. Local authorities should give sufficient notice to ensure a smooth transition and no gaps in support for matched volunteers.
- 11.5 Independent visitor coordinators managing the service should have a safe caseload of matches to manage and support. This may be recommended at roughly one match per hour of work e.g. full time coordinators supporting roughly 35 matches. This will depend on other resources; different staffing structures will support different levels of matches.
- 11.6 Services have clear policies including but not limited to: safeguarding, lone working, data protection, confidentiality, information sharing, volunteer agreement, and use of social media.

12. Local authorities allocate an appropriate level of resources to the independent visitor service to ensure sufficient funding, management and staff are in place to support a wider group of looked after children in line with current legislation.

- 12.1** Local authorities should provide a suitable budget to meet the requirement as stated in the Department for Education guidance ‘to widen the duty so that the appointment of an independent visitor can be considered for a larger group of looked after children should be taken into account as part of the commissioning process.’
- 12.2** A sufficient budget should be allocated by the local authority to ensure services can enable both the independent visitor and child to access an activity together such as cinema, sports or meals. Local authorities must consider the additional travel costs for those children that are placed out of borough.
- 12.3** Services should allocate some money towards a small gift from independent visitors to children. Most services allow £5 - £10 twice a year for birthdays and a celebration. Gifts should be a token gesture, and volunteers should provide receipts and be reimbursed. This is to ensure that children are treated equally, people can volunteer from all backgrounds, and children are safe. Independent visitors should not spend their own money on ‘treats’, regular gifts or cash to children, which may give rise to concerns of grooming. Children have told us they did not want lots of presents and did not want to be ‘groomed’; they wanted someone who would empathise with them but not offer them sympathy.
- 12.4** Local authorities should consider extra resources to extend the service eligibility for care leavers. A number of local authorities already provide independent visitors to care leavers.

13. Services have clear policies to promote equality and diversity ensuring that no child or volunteer is discriminated against. The service promotes equality when meeting the diverse needs of the local authority's looked after children.

13.1 Children accessing the service reflect the local looked after population, and there is a recruitment plan to encourage volunteers from similar ethnicities and backgrounds.

13.2 Independent visitors receive training on equality and diversity.

13.3 Services ensure that disabled children and children with additional needs receive the support they need to access the service.

14. There is a clear and easy to use complaints procedure. Volunteers and children know how to complain and their complaints are dealt with seriously and quickly.

14.1 Children, independent visitors and professionals are given written information on the service's complaints procedure and this is also explained verbally.

References:

- s.23ZB Children Act 1989
- s.4(e) The Children and Young Persons Act 2008
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