

Kirklees Looked After Children Independent Service (Children’s Rights Team)

Independent Visitor Scheme 6 Monthly Report

Reporting Period	1 April 2020 – 30 September 2020
Report of	Kirklees Looked After Children Independent Service (Children’s Rights Team)
Report to	Corporate Parenting Board
Report Originator	Christopher Berridge
Date of Report	8 October 2020

1. Overview of the Service

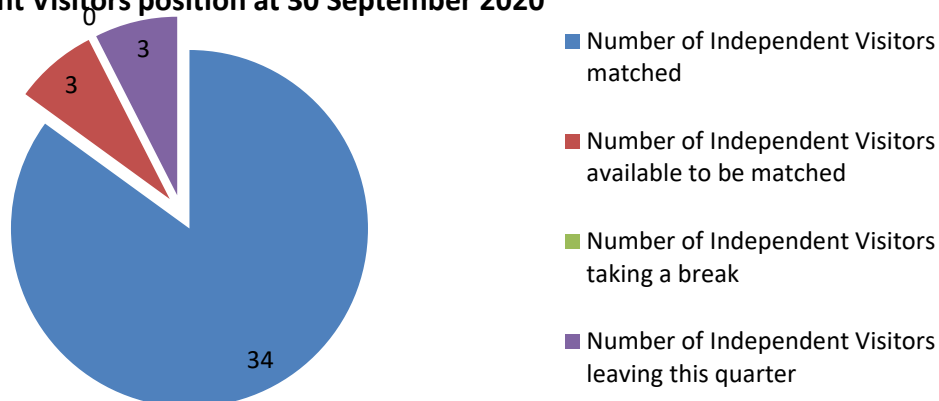
- 1.1 Kirklees Independent Visitors Scheme, also known as Care2Listen, is a Local Authority funded scheme which sits within the Looked After Children Independent Service.
- 1.2 The scheme supports independent adult volunteers to befriend children and young people in the care of the Local Authority; to spend time with them on a one to one basis, undertake positive activities and develop independent meaningful trusted relationships. The volunteers provide children and young people with someone to talk to, seek advice, guidance, and support from, and have fun with, in an informal setting.
- 1.3 The scheme is coordinated by an Independent Service Officer with the support of a part-time Business Support officer. The Children’s Rights Team Business Support Officer provides administration to the scheme by processing Independent Visitor’s expenses and recording the feedback provided by Independent Visitors when they have had a visit or contact with a child or young person.

2. Current Position

Volunteers

- 2.2 As of 30 September 2020, there were 37 trained volunteers involved with the scheme; this represents a reduction of 7 volunteers compared to 12 months ago. Of these 34 Independent Visitors (IVs) are matched with a child or young person on a one to one basis.
- 2.3 At the end of September 2020 there were 3 Independent Visitors available to be matched with a child /young person.
- 2.4 3 Independent Visitors have left the scheme during the reporting period due to moving home/ personal reasons.

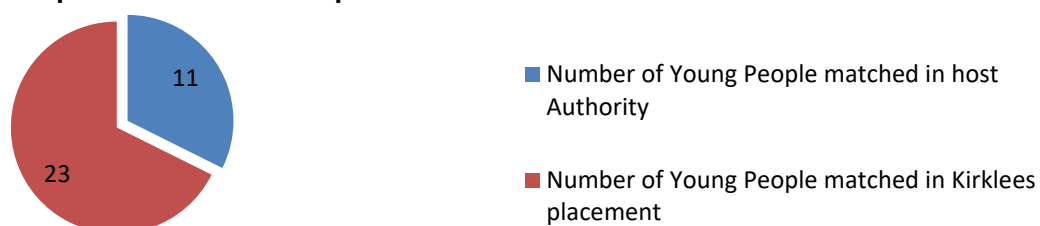
Independent Visitors position at 30 September 2020



Children and Young People

2.5 At the end of September 2020, of the 34 children and young people matched with an Independent Visitor, 23 were living in Kirklees and 11 were living in a host local authority area.

Young People Matched at 30 September 2020



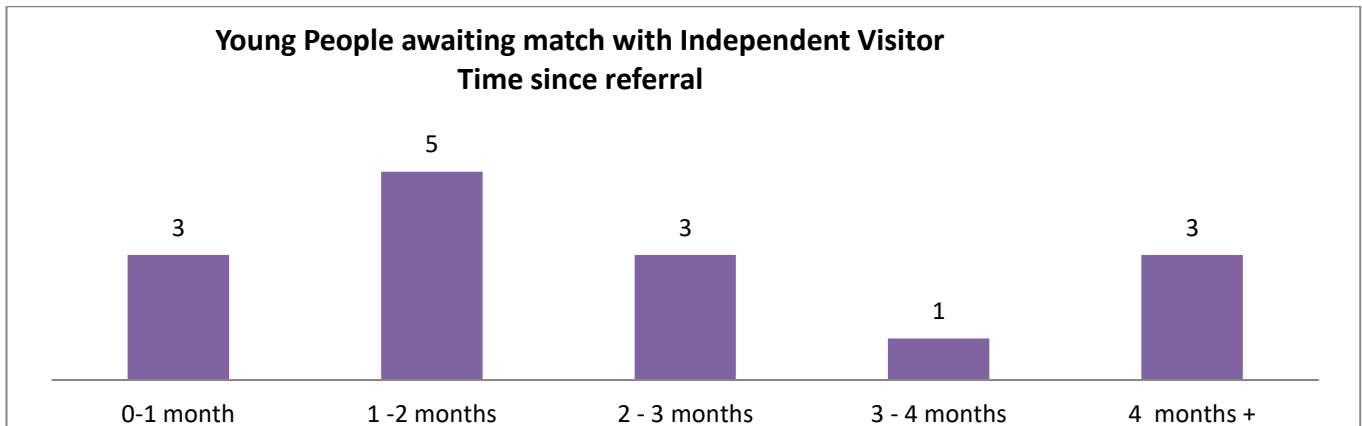
2.6 At the end of the period, there were 14 young people waiting to be matched with an Independent Visitor: of which 8 live in a host local authority area. Although there are 3 Independent Visitors available to be matched with a young person; the complex needs of some of the young people, combined with travelling distance and the impact of the Covid-19 local lockdown has hampered attempts to match the Volunteers.

2.7 For those young people waiting to be allocated an Independent Visitor, the length of time that they have been waiting to be matched from the time they were referred to the scheme is shown in the table below.

As of 30 September 2020:

Number of Referrals	14	Kirklees	6	Out of Area	8
Time since referral	0-1 month	1 -2 months	2 - 3 months	3 - 4 months	4 months +

	2	5	3	1	3
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3. Responding to Coronavirus

3.1 The last six months have been very different for the Independent Visitor's Scheme due to the challenges and opportunities which have arisen because of the Covid-19 pandemic. The main challenge for the scheme has been the suspension of in person visits between children and young people and volunteers as a result of the Covid-19 restrictions.

3.2 Challenges

- With the introduction of the national lockdown restrictions in late March 2020, the initial challenge was to ensure that all Independent Visitors matched with a young person were following Government guidelines not to meet anyone outside of their household. As a result, the scheme's Coordinator surveyed all Independent Visitors regarding their ability and willingness to keep in touch with young people virtually through the use of social media applications such as Skype/WhatsApp/Zoom or telephone calls. A number of the volunteers expressed concern about using social media as they had no experience of doing so, whilst others shared that 'they didn't have that type of relationship' with the young person they were matched with and highlighted that often the best conversations with young people were held when they were driving to their chosen activity.
- To support the volunteers the scheme's Coordinator offered to provide hardware i.e. mobile phones / laptops with social media applications pre-loaded, to facilitate ongoing communication between Independent Visitors and young people, This was not, however, taken up, as all the volunteers felt they had appropriate resources / equipment.
- Initially at the start of the national lockdown period all Independent Visitors sent a personal card or letter to the young person they were matched with, this was followed by a call to the young person / carer to establish the wishes and feelings and practicalities of introducing regular virtual meetings through Skype/WhatsApp/Zoom or telephone calls. After having spoken to the young person / carer, a small number (4) Independent Visitors responded that that the young person did not wish to have virtual meetings, in these cases the Independent Visitor was advised to maintain contact by sending letters /cards / small gifts.
- The challenge to keep all Independent Visitors fully engaged with the scheme during this time was recognised and as a result a series of virtual Peer Support meetings have been

held, (11 in total). This has provided Independent Visitors with opportunities to discuss both their individual relationship with the young person they are matched with, any areas of concern and to challenge guidance issued to them.

- Understanding and interpreting the changing national and local restrictions has been a challenge but this has not impacted on, what is felt, has been clear, concise guidance issued to Independent Visitors. (see Good Practice below)
- One specific and recurring challenge is that based on National guidelines and common practice amongst other Independent Visitor Schemes, guidance was issued relating to Independent Visitors not travelling with the young person they were matched with in the Independent Visitor's car. Some Independent Visitor's view this as a tool to help develop their relationship with children and young people, however where this was viewed as a challenge to achieving this Independent Visitors have maintained relationships with young people through social media.
- The Coordinator has made contact with all Independent Visitors during the reporting period, and 8 supervision sessions and 3 annual reviews have been conducted during the period and virtual supervision's are prioritised by the Scheme's Coordinator with a small number of Independent Visitors who have not maintained regular contact with Coordinator.
- A significant challenge faced during the reporting period related to matching young people on the waiting list with an Independent Visitor. During the period, there have been 3 Independent Visitors available to be matched and up to 14 young people, many of them living in host local authority areas. Although the profiles of a number of Independent Visitors have been shared with some young people, suitable matches were not achieved, in one case an introductory meeting was hampered by local Covid-19 restrictions and will be rearranged.
- During the period, there have been a small number (3) of enquiries from members of the public enquiring about becoming an Independent Visitor. These have been responded to, however none of the initial enquiries made have resulted in a completed application being received.
- A further challenge during the Covid-19 pandemic is for the scheme to offer the level of training necessary to prepare new volunteers for the role of an Independent Visitor, and provide ongoing support to a significant number of new volunteers (12 +), which are needed in order to reduce the waiting list of young people currently referred to the scheme.

3.3 Good Practice / Opportunities

- Whenever the Independent Visitors have been in contact with young people, either virtually or through a face to face outing they are encouraged to submit a short feedback form, and a total of 109 forms have been submitted during the reporting period equating to 175 hours of contact with the young people supported through the scheme.
- Throughout the Coronavirus pandemic many Independent Visitors have chosen to send cards, letters, and small gifts to young people, and where young people have indicated that they would like to remain in contact through social media /telephone calls, Independent Visitors have gone to great lengths to make these fun and interactive, examples being the

setting of weekly quizzes set by an Independent Visitor and young person in turn, and one Independent Visitor presenting a virtual birthday cake for a young person.

- It is evident that the majority of Independent Visitors have embraced keeping in regular contact with the young person they are matched with and some have developed their relationships further through use of social media. As a result of this the Scheme is exploring opportunities to create virtual friendships between young people and Independent Visitors, for young people who live in host local authority areas for whom the scheme would otherwise be unable to find an Independent Visitor due to the travelling distances involved.
- For a relatively short period of time when restrictions were lifted, risk assessments were undertaken in respect of Independent Visitors and young people's households and carer's were asked to transport young people to and from chosen venue, as all agreed to do this a number of outdoor visits to parks and indoor venues such as the cinema were able to take place.
- During the reporting period the Council Communications team ran a campaign to identify and celebrate Local Heroes and two Independent Visitors were nominated by the Scheme's Coordinator for their exceptional dedication to supporting young people through the lockdown period. Each were celebrated on the Kirklees website and it is believed that this helped raise the profile of Independent Visitors and the important role they play in young people's lives. The Scheme's Coordinator also arranged for every volunteer to receive a thank you card during National Volunteers Week.
- Independent Visitors have been supported through this reporting period, and Peer Support Group meetings have been held to enable discussions relating to their volunteering experiences. 20 of the 34 matched Independent Visitors have attended at least one Peer Support Group meeting, some on numerous occasions. Independent Visitors have taken the opportunity to discuss and share ideas about how to make the regular virtual meetings with young people fun; for example, by doing quizzes or setting challenges. The Scheme's Coordinator has supplemented these meetings by issuing two editions of IV News which keeps all Independent Visitors up to date with both local and national issues affecting Independent Visitor schemes.

4. What do we want to improve?

4.1 The priorities for the Independent Visitor Scheme over the next 6 months are:

- Resume matching visits when possible to ensure that the 3 available Independent Visitors are fully engaged with the scheme and actively supporting young people.
- Support the safe resumption of in person visits between Independent Visitor's and young people.
- As a result of the Covid-19 restrictions impacting on the ability for group training to take place, an IV training programme and workbook is to be developed, with a view to it being delivered and completed virtually by new Independent Visitors.
- Explore virtual matching / support for young people placed in host local authority areas who are waiting to be matched with an Independent Visitor