



Annual Report

Looked After Children Independent Service Children's Rights Team

April 2020 to March 2021

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Dated

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(Children's Rights Team)

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Service

June 2021

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1. Introduction

Advocacy and Children's Rights help to create a culture of openness, where listening and responding to children's voices is an integral part of everyday practice.

The Kirklees Children Looked After Independent Service (Children's Rights Team) offer advocacy, advice and representation to children and young people who are Looked After by Kirklees Local Authority.

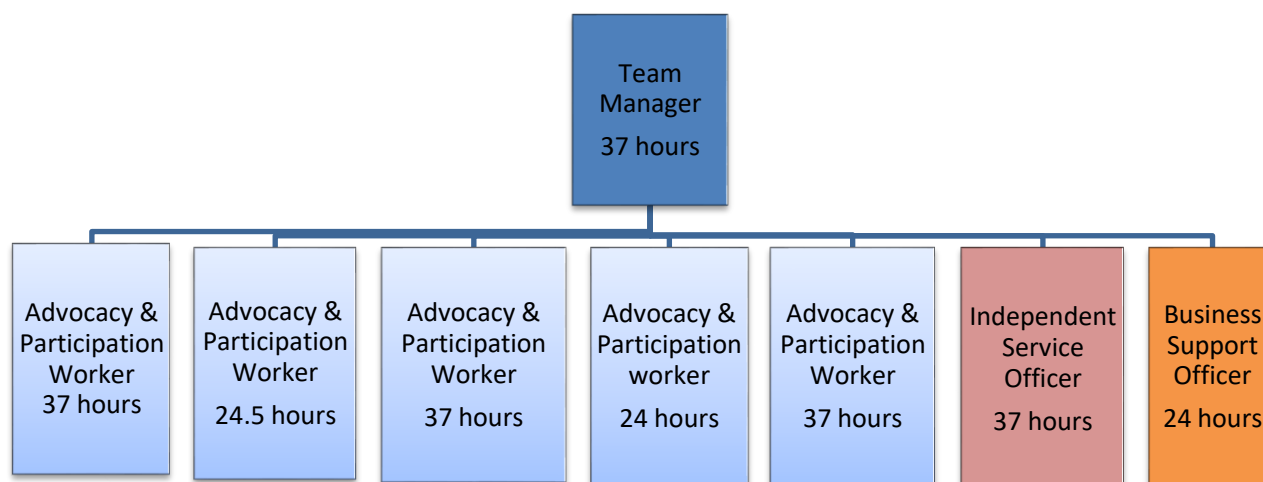
This report covers the period from 1st April 2020 through to 31st March 2021.

2. The Aim of the Children's Rights Team

The aim of the Children's Rights team is to:

- Promote and support the rights of all children and young people Looked After by Kirklees local authority within the current framework of legislation, incorporating the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. (UNCRC)
- Support the empowerment of children and young people Looked After to assist them to engage in meaningful participation in respect of decision-making which affects them, both individually and collectively.
- Provide a quality assurance function in respect of services received by children Looked After.
- Support children and young people subject to the Child Protection process to enable them to voice their thoughts, wishes and feelings.

3. Children's Rights Team Structure



4. Children's Rights Team Overview

- 4.1 The team works collaboratively with Children's Social Care /Children's Services to ensure that the views, wishes, feelings and opinions of children Looked After are heard and considered in respect of service delivery and policy development. The team also supports children and young people over the age of ten, if they are subject to the Child Protection process. Additionally, the team supports children and young people to use the complaints process, and works with children and young people by training and supporting them to undertake a meaningful role in the recruitment process of professionals and to deliver

their own training session to practitioners and professionals (Total Respect Training); this helps practitioners and professionals to consider what the barriers for participation of children are, and why it's important to listen to what children and young people say.

- 4.2 Every child or young person who is new into care (or when they reach the age of 7) receives an 'Initial Visit' from an Advocacy & Participation Worker, to share information about the team, what support that they can receive, and what participation opportunities they can become involved in.
- 4.3 An Advocacy & Participation Worker in the team coordinates and supports the Children in Care Council (CiCC) and Care Leavers Forum (CLF). The CiCC and CLF enable children and young people Looked After and care leavers to come together to work on projects, and to meet with senior managers to enable their voices to be heard and influence service provision. Appendix 1 of this report provides an outline of the Children in Care Council and Care Leavers Forum activities undertaken during 2020 to 2021.
- 4.4 The team also has a full-time officer who co-ordinates the Independent Visitors Scheme. The scheme matches children and young people who are in the care of the local authority with volunteers who spend time with the child or young person they are matched with, supporting, and listening to them, together with undertaking positive activities. A separate annual report for the Independent Visitors Scheme can be found at Appendix 2.

5. Covid-19 Impact

5.1 Challenges

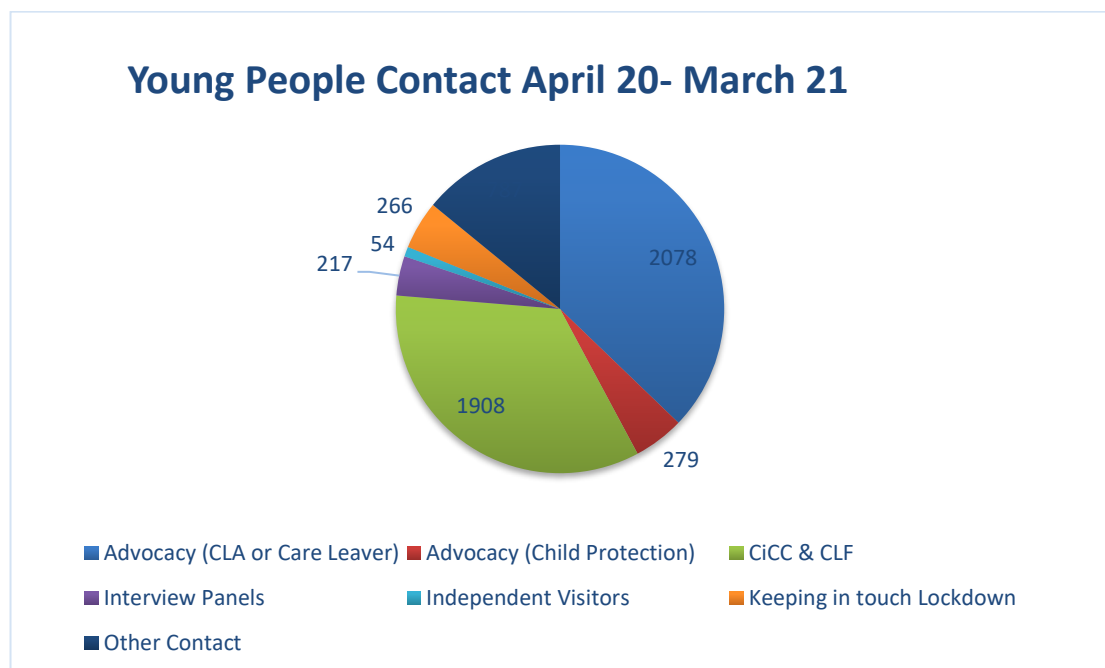
- 5.2 This reporting period has been different for the service due to the challenges and opportunities created by Covid-19. The service has continued throughout the pandemic; however, delivery methods have been adapted, with the service moving from in person service delivery to employing new mechanisms for engaging with children and young people. All requests for advocacy have been actioned in line with the Government guidance and restrictions. When possible, priority has been given to visits and advocacy taking place in person, and currently the service delivery model is a combination of both virtual and in person. Whilst children Looked After and Child Protection Review meetings remain virtual, the service is developing an offer where children and young people will be supported in person by an Advocate at their virtual Conference/ Review, should they wish this.
- 5.3 The team established that a high proportion of children and young people did not feel able to engage positively with virtual advocacy; this particularly related to children and young people subject to a Child Protection Plan and initial visits. When visits could be resumed children and young people in this cohort were prioritised for an in person visit. Each visit is fully risk assessed in line with Government and Kirklees Covid-19 guidance.
- 5.4 Supporting children and young people in virtual meetings has been a challenge due to Advocates not being able to provide the level of nuanced support as they would in person, and as indicated above many of children and young people the team received a Conference Advocacy support request for, chose not to attend a virtual meeting. Additionally, some children and young people who had previously attended their Looked After Review meetings chose not to attend a virtual meeting; where this was the case Advocates continued to attend Review meetings on the child/young person's behalf to represent their wishes and feelings. Feedback from young people who attended virtual

Review meetings indicated that young people preferred to participate virtually via a video call, however technology has presented some issues with this, as carers have not always had the appropriate equipment or software to enable video calls.

- 5.5 The team works closely with the Child Protection and Review Unit which as part of a recovery model is revising consultation documentation and seeking to increase the offer and choice for how children and young people can access their Conferences and Reviews.
- 5.6 Children and young people's participation in the Children in Care Council and Care Leavers Forum has been impacted on by Covid-19, with some members not wishing to participate in virtual meetings, however during the pandemic both groups have attracted new young people. Both the Children in Care Council and the Care Leavers Forum would like to resume in person meetings as soon as practically possible.
- 5.7 Covid-19 restrictions have had an impact on the Independent Visitors Scheme, when in person visits have not been able to occur in line with Government and Council guidance; despite this, some volunteers have undertaken creative good practice to ensure relationships were maintained. (Please see Independent Visitor Scheme full report at Appendix 2 for further details).
- 5.8 **Opportunities**
- 5.9 The use of telephone and video calls has been successful in keeping in touch with some children and young people, i.e., holding the Care Leavers forum meetings virtually has enabled young people who reside outside of Kirklees to attend and participate.
- 5.10 With a focus on well-being, in March 2020 the Children's Rights Team wrote to all children and young people Looked After over the age of 7 and care leavers to ensure they were aware that the service was functioning and that they could get in touch at any time. Additionally, children and young people with an allocated Advocate at that time were contacted to establish if they would like more contact, this resulted in some children and young people having increased levels of contact which has improved some Advocacy relationships, particularly with several children and young people who live outside of Kirklees.
- 5.11 Between April 2020- July 2020 the team set a weekly challenge with the opportunity to win a prize. The challenge was promoted on the Children's Rights Team social media platforms which raised the profile of the service, resulting in children and young people who had not previously accessed the service regularly participating in the challenges set. An end of project report was completed, and a summary article appeared on the intranet with examples of work completed by children and young people.
- 5.12 The Annual Achieve Awards to celebrate the achievement of children Looked After over the age of 16 and Care Leavers which took place on 22nd October 2020 featured young people and was broadcasted virtually through YouTube. Dual planning for the 2021 Achieve Awards is in place, the aim is to hold the Awards in person, however planning involves a contingency plan for virtual delivery if needed.

6. Contact with young people

- 6.1 Every child Looked After by the local authority has the right to an independent advocate, as defined in the Children Act 1989 which placed a duty on local authorities to provide advocacy for children and young people Looked After, who wish to make a complaint. Subsequent updates and other legislation, including The Adoption and Children Act 2002, extended this to include Care Leavers, and to children and young people outside of the complaints procedure when decisions are being made that affects their lives. The Children's Rights team also works with children and young people in connection with the other functions that the service provides.
- 6.2 The service recorded 5585 contacts with children and young people throughout the reporting period, for a total of 663 individual children and young people. The chart below shows the highest proportion of contact related to advocacy for children and young people Looked After (CLA) or Care Leavers, 2075 in total, with 1437 relating to children Looked After and 636 to care leavers. 1908 contacts were made in relation to the CiCC / CLF, this includes distribution of information as well as attendance at meetings.



- 6.3 The team received 79 referrals for advocacy support for children and young people from professionals and carers. This is double the number in April 2019-March 2020. Most referrals were made by social workers (32) and foster carers (23).
- 6.4 A large proportion of the children and young people have received support on more than one occasion; the most common support accessed was in relation to Children Looked After Reviews (CLA Review) or other meetings.
- 6.5 The service has supported 20 children and young people in care, who have a physical or learning disability, on 53 separate occasions. 36 occasions involved support at a CLA Review. For a small number of these children / young people the support offered was non instructed advocacy. This is provided when a child/young person does not have the capacity to clearly communicate their wishes or feelings or have an appropriate level of understanding. For these children / young people their Advocate gathers information from a range of sources such as parents / carers / professionals, to assess if the best interests of the child are being considered in any decisions that are made. The Advocate also ensures that the rights of the child are being upheld.

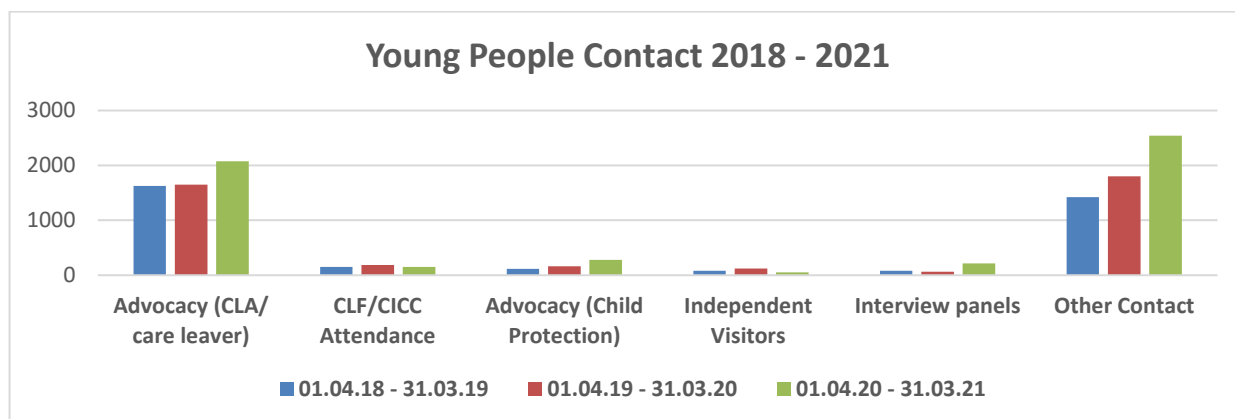
- 6.6 The service continues to receive more requests for advocacy in relation to girls and young women; in this reporting period advocacy support was provided to 307 girls and young women compared with 178 boys and young men.

7. Comparison over a 3-year period

- 7.1 The chart below shows the contacts made by the Service; highlighting that advocacy provided to children Looked After and Care Leavers continues to be the highest proportion of work that the team undertakes, whilst in this reporting period there has been an increase in the amount of advocacy undertaken with children and young people subject to a Child Protection Plan and a decrease of contact with the Independent Visitors Scheme due to the impact of Covid-19 on in person visits.

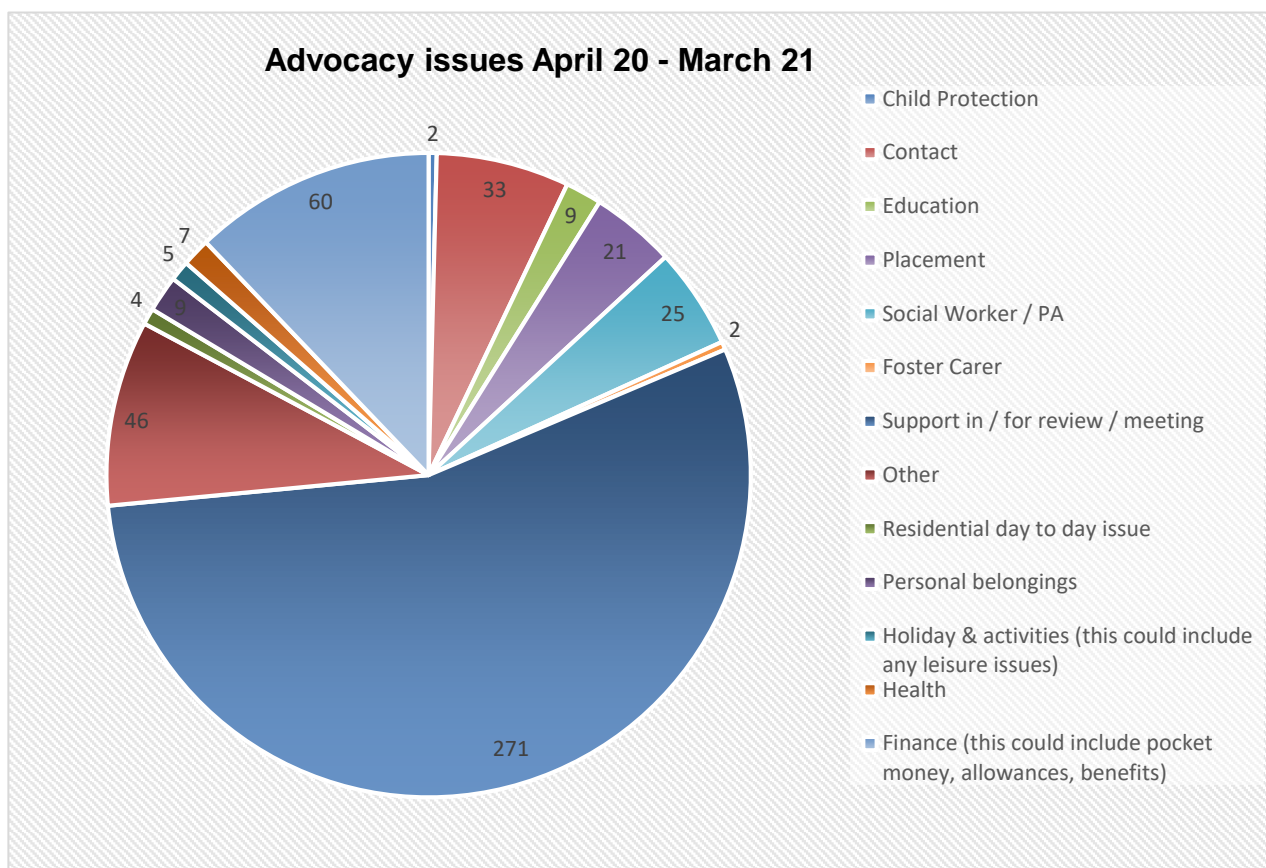
- 7.2 Work undertaken under the heading of 'other' includes:

- Conversations with children and young people who did not want advocacy support, but did want information or guidance
- Children and young people who received a birthday card and Christmas card (these are sent to all Looked After children and young people over the age of 7)
- Information packs sent to children and young people who have come into care
- Contacts to offer support throughout the pandemic



8. Advocacy Issues for children and young people who are Looked After

- 8.1 494 advocacy contacts related to 162 individual children and young people; the majority of contacts were with children Looked After (366) with the remainder being advocacy provided to Care Leavers. The pie chart below shows that advocacy support was provided at a CLA Review meeting on 271 occasions, whilst other advocacy support related to finance (60) family time (33), Social Worker or Personal Advisor (25) and placement (21). The 'other' section relates to several individual issues that children and young people have raised such as requests for body piercings, dental work, name change.



- 8.2 87 individual children and young people were supported with a total of 233 stand-alone advocacy issues, and on 161 occasions a satisfactory outcome was achieved and a compromise on 38. This indicates that in most cases the voice of the child / young person was listened to and advocacy support resulted in a positive difference being achieved.
- 8.3 In the reporting period the team provided support to 70 individual children and young people who live outside of the Kirklees area in 189 instances. 92 of these related to a CLA Review (48 individual young people), the remaining 97 instances related to stand alone advocacy issues (33 individual children and young people). 66 instances resulted in a satisfactory outcome for children and young people, and for 10 a compromise was achieved.

Themes and Patterns

- 8.4 There were 60 issues relating to finance, 52 concerned young people over the age of 16 and 39 related to children and young people living in a host local authority area. Of the 52 relating to young people over the age of 16, 25 were queries about financial support or request for support, i.e., the Leaving Care grant, support at university, bursaries, and support to make applications for maternity grants or Universal Credit. 8 issues related to young people accessing their savings and 5 related to driving lessons. Positive outcomes were achieved for 43 of these young people including access to savings, support in making applications, finance for equipment, allowances being granted and financial support for driving lessons. 4 young people felt that they had received a compromise, whilst 2 young people were not satisfied with the outcome.
- 8.5 33 advocacy support requests related to see family or friends of which, 16 were raised by children and young people living in a host local authority area. Of the 33 requests, 21 young people were satisfied with the outcome and 5 felt they had achieved a compromise.

- 8.6 In terms of the 25 issues raised in relation to professionals (Social Worker / Personal Advisor) 9 were raised by children and young people living in a host local authority area. 11 of the total 25 issues raised related to a request of a change of Social Worker or Personal Advisor, and 4 related to children /young people unhappy with the level of contact or support they were receiving. 17 of the 25 issues resulted in a child /young person achieving a positive outcome and 8 feeling they had achieved a compromise.
- 8.7 There were 21 instances of advocacy support provided in relation to where young people live, 9 of which related to young people living in a host local authority area. Of the 21 issues, 8 related to children or young people requesting a move, with 3 wanting to return to their family home. For 13 children or young people a satisfied outcome was achieved, and for 5 a compromise was reached.
- 8.8 Whilst Advocates endeavour to resolve issues for children and young people quickly by using an informal process, on occasion this has not led to the outcome the child or young person sought, and /or from the outset a child or young person has sought advocacy support to make a formal complaint. In this reporting period, 31 advocacy cases have involved supporting a child or young person to make a formal complaint, this is 7 more than in the previous reporting period. The main issues children and young people have been supported through the complaints process related to finance (14) and request for change of Social Worker or Personal Advisor (10). Of the 31 complaints 25 children or young people said that they had achieved a positive or compromise outcome.

9. Child Protection Conference Advocacy

- 9.1 Whilst the Children Rights team have been notified of over 50% less Initial Child Protection Conferences (ICPC) during this reporting period compared to the previous period (126/307) the service has supported more individual children at a conference. The team contacted children and young people on 150 occasions, 50 of these related to individual children subject to an ICPC. Of the 150 occasions children and young people were contacted, 27 children declined the support offered and 60 were not seen for the following reasons:
- Parents declined support - 13
 - Unable to contact parents - 11
 - No referral received from Social Worker -16
 - Conference was cancelled – 6
 - Team capacity -11
 - Not appropriate for the child or young person to attend - 3
- 9.2 When the team have been unable to support a child or young person at an ICPC, a letter is sent to the child/young person's parents asking them to contact the team if they would like their child to receive support at their Review conference.

10.Participation Opportunities

- 10.1 The Children's Rights team works with children and young people in several ways to support participation opportunities, these include:

- Children in Care Council (CiCC): The council is for children and young people Looked After aged between 12 and 16. The council meets to consider issues relevant to being Looked After and to work with professionals to promote the views of children and young people to inform change and best practice. See appendix 1 for more details.
- The Care Leavers Forum (CLF): is for young people aged 16 and over to support young people to work with professionals to ensure that their views are heard regarding Care Leaver service delivery and provision. See appendix 1 for more details.
- Professional Recruitment Panels: The Children's Rights Team support services to help ensure that children and young people are involved in the recruitment of professionals, i.e., Social Workers, team, service or senior managers and Independent Reviewing Officers. This has continued throughout the pandemic by utilising creative methods and conducting virtual interviews, however the team have struggled to meet the demand for interview panels and timescales are often a factor in relation to this.
- Total Respect training: Due to the Covid-19 restrictions delivery has not taken place in this reporting period. However, it is envisaged that this will resume in 2021.

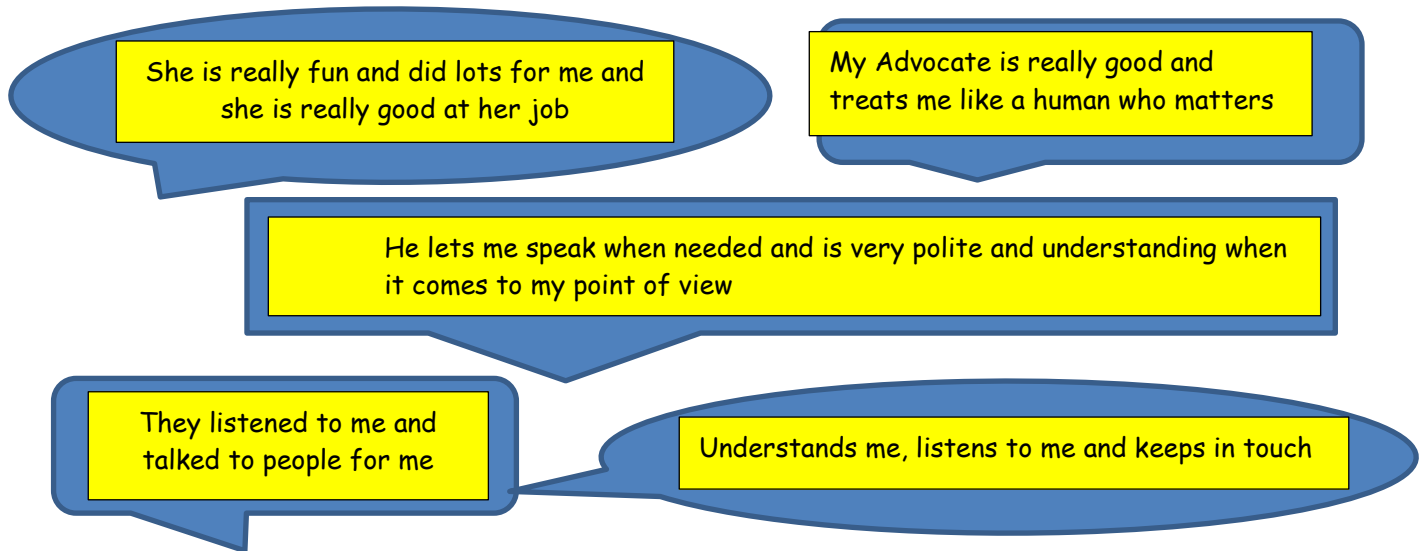
10.2 Skills to Foster training: In person delivery input by young people has not occurred in this reporting period because of the pandemic; however, a video was made by children and young people sharing their experiences of being in care, for a commissioned company who delivered the training package virtually.

11. Quality Assurance

- 11.1 The Children's Right team works closely with the Child Protection and Review Unit (CPRU) to share information such as themes from advocacy, to support positive outcomes and service delivery improvement. The Children's Rights team manager also works closely with the Children's Complaints team to discuss ongoing complaints and cater for joint working to resolve these.
- 11.2 A Children's Rights team monthly report is completed regarding data, including themes and patterns relating to advocacy issues, and in this reporting period a report has been presented to the Children's Services Quality Assurance Panel.
- 11.3 An internal quality assurance audit has been undertaken by the team manager and service manager to assess the standard of service delivered in relation to CLA / care leaver advocacy and the Independent Visitors Scheme. Both these audits identified areas of good practice, whilst action plans have been developed support continuous improvement.
- 11.4 On a quarterly basis the Children's Rights team seek feedback from children and young people who have received advocacy. The returned feedback continues to indicate that children and young people are satisfied with the support and services that they receive.

12. Young People's Voice

- 12.1 Following the completion of any advocacy provision, children and young people are asked to complete an evaluation feedback form to share their views on what went well, and how or if the service could be improved.
- 12.2 In addition to the 'formal' feedback route, how much children and young people value the service they receive can be measured in other ways, such as direct comments to Advocates and /or thank you cards, or by what children and young people say about the service to others. Some direct quotes from young people can be seen below:



13. Independent Visitor Scheme

- 13.1 Whilst this scheme is one of the functions of the Children's Rights Team a separate annual report is prepared which is available at appendix 2.

14. Conclusion

- 14.1 Within this reporting period most issues raised by children and young people were resolved informally, rather than through the formal complaints process.
- 14.2 There has been an increased level of support provided to children subject to a Child Protection Plan
- 14.3 Young people have continued to be actively involved with professional recruitment
- 14.4 The Children in Care Council and Care Leavers Forum has seen fluctuating numbers, with a small core group of members. With the aim to increase membership and ensure children and young people views inform service delivery and provision, representatives from the Children Looked After and Care Leavers Service, Fostering Service, Virtual School and the Child Protection and Review Unit are to form a task and finish group.
- 14.5 During the reporting period demand for the Independent Visitor Scheme has continued, however, several volunteers have left the scheme and as a result, a recruitment campaign is planned to occur in the summer.
- 14.6 The team will face some changes later in the year, with the current long-standing manager undertaking phased retirement and reduced working hours (18.5). Succession

planning will involve a full-time temporary manager post to work alongside the current manager to ensure minimal negative impact.

15.Key areas of development (2020 to 2021) – What was achieved

- 15.1 To ensure that virtual methods of communication were developed and are used effectively with children and young people. - **The team consistently use virtual methods of communication and service delivery methods now includes Microsoft Teams and Whatsapp.**
- 15.2 To update social media platforms regularly with relevant and interesting information to enable the service to reach more children and young people. - **Social media platforms (Facebook, Instagram and Twitter) are regularly updated, and information is re-tweeted.**
- 15.3 To develop a young people's Challenge project to be undertaken throughout the Covid-19 lockdown period to help maintain contact with children and young people. - **Challenges occurred throughout lockdown and are now set during school holidays.**
- 15.4 To increase the membership of the Children in Care Council and Care Leavers Forum and to also to develop virtual methods to help capture the views of children / young people who do not attend the groups, to influence service development and provision including those who live out of the Kirklees area. – **During the pandemic, the groups have been held virtually which has supported the participation of young people who reside outside of Kirklees. Over the forthcoming months, the aim of the Task and Finish group is to increase membership and sustain a virtual group offer alongside holding in person meetings.**
- 15.5 To increase the offer of advocacy support to children and young people aged ten and over, subject to a Child Protection plan. - **An additional 50 children /young people have received support compared to the previous 12 months.**
- 15.6 To develop the Independent Visitor training package to make it relevant to delivering training to smaller groups / or individuals virtually. - **A virtual training package has been developed which incorporates opportunities (when possible) to meet in person.**

16.Key areas for development

- To promote and improve children and young people's participation in their Looked After Reviews
- To promote and improve children and young people's participation at Child Protection conferences.
- To ensure the Independent Visitor Scheme is robust and provides a high-quality consistent service for children, young people, and volunteers.
- To develop the Children in Care Council and Care Leavers forum; including increased membership and improved accessibility, to ensure the voice and influence of children and young people informs service delivery and design.
- To work with others across Children's services to capture children's voices, experiences, and help support participation inform service development
- Introduce improved quality assurance mechanisms, to support the development of the Children's Rights Service and the team.

Appendix 1

Children in Care Council (CiCC) and Care Leavers Forum (CLF)

The Children in Care Council meets bi-weekly. The aim of the group is to discuss the issues for children and young people who are in care, and to work with professionals to improve services to best meet the needs of children and young people.

The Care Leavers Forum is for young people aged 16 to 21 (or 25 if still in full time education) and the remit is to discuss the issues that young people face as they prepare to leave care and move into independence. Young people work with professionals with the aim to improve services and ensure that these meet their needs. The group also meets bi-weekly.

Both the CiCC and CLF have continued to meet throughout the pandemic, although virtually. A small number of core members have continued their involvement, and although some young people have not participated during the pandemic, they have indicated that they may re-join when meetings can occur in person. Both groups have seen a small increase of new members, including young people who live outside of the Kirklees area who have been enabled to join the meetings virtually. During this reporting period the groups have been involved in the following:

- Discussions around the impact of the pandemic including lockdown experiences
- Information / consultation about the Mockingbird Fostering Project
- Discussion and input into children Looked After health assessments
- Discussion and consultation about youth provision in Kirklees
- Discussion and consultation about the planning of the 2020 Achieve Awards
- Climate Change Festival – the groups worked with the Voice & Influence Team in setting up a virtual Climate Change event which was attended by individual young people and school groups
- Meetings with the Director of Children's Services
- Attendance at Regional events which included activities and consultations
- A music project, this was started just before Lockdown in March 2020; one virtual session subsequently took place during which the children and young people confirmed their lyrics and approved the background music. It is hoped that this project will be completed by September 2021 subject to Government restrictions.

What do we want to improve?

- To increase the membership of both the Council and the Forum, to ensure that both are representative of all groups of children and young people.
- To re-introduce in person meetings as soon as possible.
- To complete a music project which was started before lockdown
- To establish virtual sessions for young people who live in a host local authority to enable them to share their thoughts / views / ideas into the two groups.
- Continue to develop links with the managers of services, to ensure that there is an effective mechanism for communication and the development of services which are led by children and young people, whilst also providing a forum for managers to consult children and young people.

Appendix 2

Kirklees Independent Visitor Scheme (IV)

Children Act 1989 Section 23ZB requires that:

(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 Secretary of State or

(b) in any other case, it appears to them that it would be in the child's interests to do so.

1. Introduction

Kirklees Independent Visitors Scheme, also known as Care2Listen, is a local authority funded scheme which sits within the Looked After Children Independent Service. The scheme was established in its current format eight years ago; it is coordinated by an Independent Service Officer and day to day administration is provided through the Looked After Children Independent Service.

The scheme provides independent adult volunteers who befriend children/ young people in the care of the local authority; to spend time with them on a one-to-one basis, undertake activities and develop a positive relationship with a trusted, responsible adult. Volunteers provide children/young people with the opportunity to talk to someone independent, seek advice, guidance, and support from and have fun with, in an informal setting.

Volunteers undergo a recruitment and selection programme which includes, submitting a formal volunteer's application, an adult and young person interview panel, and a bespoke training package; tailored to equip and inform volunteers for the role of an Independent Visitor. Enhanced DBS checks are undertaken, together with employment checks and two references.

Children and young people are referred to the scheme by either their Social Worker or Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO). The IRO has a duty to discuss the scheme at a child's/ young persons' Looked After Review. Young people are also encouraged to express an interest themselves in having an Independent Visitor and can apply through the Children's Rights webpage or they can discuss it directly with the Scheme Coordinator, their Social Worker, key worker or carer.

1.1 Current position

There are currently 32 trained volunteers. 31 Independent Visitors are matched with a child/young person on a one-to-one basis. One volunteer is currently undergoing the training to become an Independent Visitor and 2 Independent Visitors who were not matched have been matched with a young person during this reporting period. One further match is envisaged once a in person

meeting can be arranged between the Independent Visitor and the young person. There have been 3 recent enquiries about becoming an Independent Visitor, however no applications have been received.

11 Independent visitors have left the scheme in the past 12 months. Independent Visitors who have chosen to leave are encouraged to have an exit discussion. Analysis of the reasons for leaving did not highlight a pattern which can influence the development of the scheme. The main reasons provided were, work pressures, change of employment and moving area. Although the number of Independent Visitors leaving the scheme has increased slightly this year, this is not significantly higher than in previous years.

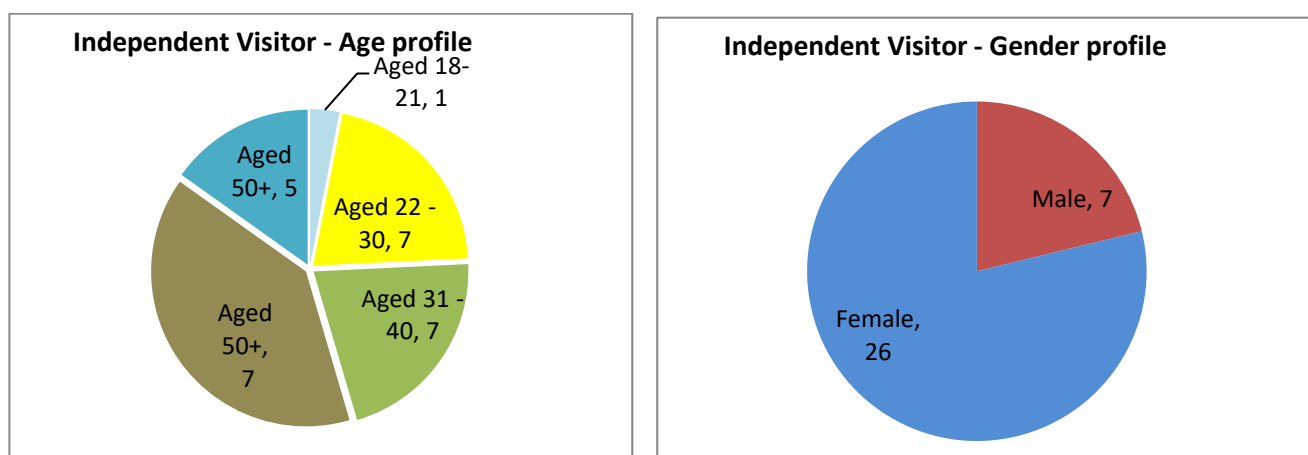
The last recruitment drive was between November 2018 and January 2019 and 11 volunteers completed training in April 2019. Due to the loss of 11 volunteers over the past 12 months, and the increasing waiting list of children/young people, a recruitment campaign will be undertaken during the summer of 2021. Information regarding the scheme has also recently been shared with existing adult volunteers for Kirklees.

There are currently 22 children/young people waiting for a match with an Independent Visitor of these, 10 currently live in a host local authority area a number of miles away, 5 reside in a nearby host local authority, and 7 live in Kirklees. The waiting list is reviewed regularly to ensure the referrals remain appropriate.

2 Volunteers and Young Person Profile

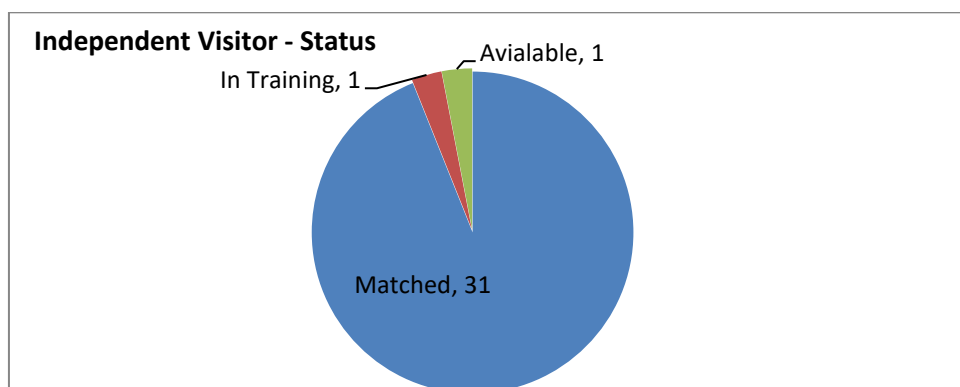
2.1 Volunteer profile

The Independent Visitor scheme has a diverse range of volunteers. Volunteers must be aged 18 or over, with a minimum 5-year age gap between the adult volunteer and the young person they are matched to. Volunteers in the youngest age range are accepted only if they are able to demonstrate a degree of maturity appropriate to managing the challenges which young people may present.



79% (26) of the current volunteers are female and 21% (7) male. This is a similar cohort as seen in other regional schemes. Previously, attempts have been made to specifically identify and recruit more male volunteers with targeted advertising however, this has not been successful. In practice, although some young people have specified that they would like a male volunteer, many have been matched with a female volunteer and these relationships have been sustained.

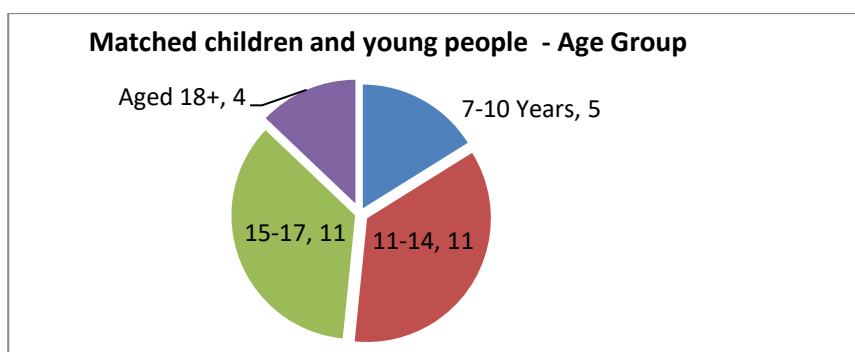
The scheme seeks to match volunteers within 8 weeks with a child/ young person who meets their preference in terms of placement, location, age, and gender. This has however, not been achieved in the past year due to restrictions of Covid-19, which impacted on volunteers being introduced in person to children /young people. Furthermore, there has been only one volunteer available to be matched over the past 12 months.



2.2 Profile of children and young people

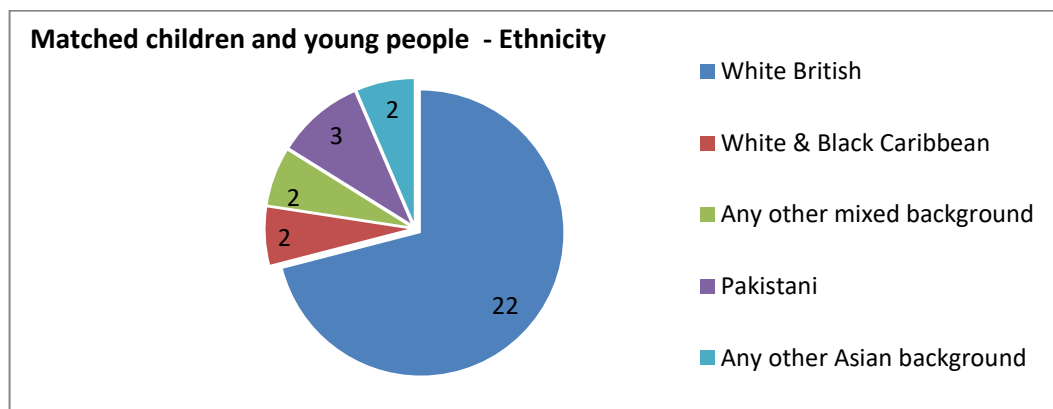
There are currently 31 young people matched with an Independent Visitor. There are more girls (68%) than boys (32%) benefitting from the scheme.

With regards to age, 11 older teenagers (15-17) and 11 young people (11-14) currently have an Independent Visitor. There are also 5 children under 11 years old and 4 young adults over the age of 18 being supported. Whilst some volunteer / young person relationships have ended shortly after the young persons' 18th birthday, the 4 young adults over 18 have each had their Independent Visitor for several years and continue to benefit from their support and guidance.

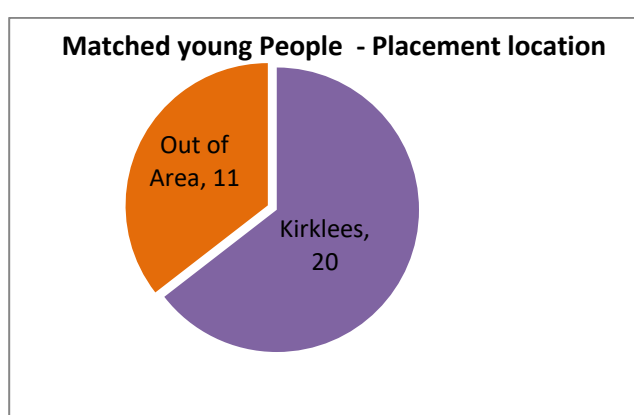


The ethnic background of children/young people who have an independent visitor is broadly representative of the wider Kirklees community. ¹

¹ <http://observatory.kirklees.gov.uk/profiles/ethnorigin>



35% of matched children/young people live in a host local authority area. A high proportion live in neighbouring authorities i.e., Leeds, Calderdale, and Bradford.



3. **Making a difference.**

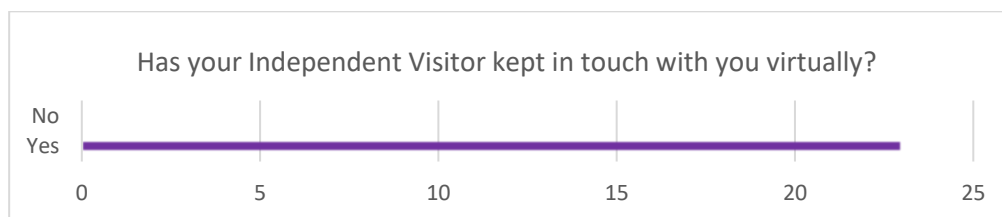
Independent Visitors are required to submit a short feedback form following each visit or contact with the child / young person they are matched with. Most of the contact during the period 1 April 2020 – 31 March 2021 has been virtual due to the Government restrictions, with Independent Visitors speaking to the young person over the phone or making Skype / Whatsapp / Zoom video calls. Analysis of this contact highlighted a total of 174 volunteering hours recorded during the past 12 months. This compares to 799 volunteering hours recorded during 2019-2020. Please refer to the feedback for comments from children/young people regarding the impact of their Independent Visitor.

A quality assurance audit of Independent Visitor activity was undertaken in January 2021 which resulted in an action plan being produced to drive forward continuous improvement of service delivery. It includes robust mechanisms for ensuring that contact is being maintained between volunteers and children / young people and that an annual review is undertaken with each volunteer, to include feedback from the child / young person the volunteer is matched with and their social worker. The plan also includes a recruitment campaign for the summer.

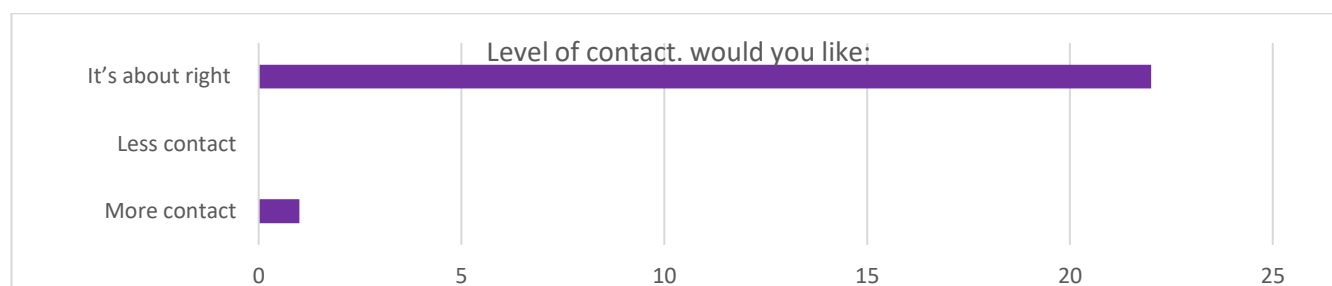
3.1 Feedback from young people

An Independent Visitor Practice Learning Quality Assurance Audit was conducted in February 2021, the Children's Rights team attempted to contact all the 30 young people who were matched with an Independent Visitor, of these, discussions were held with 23 young people.

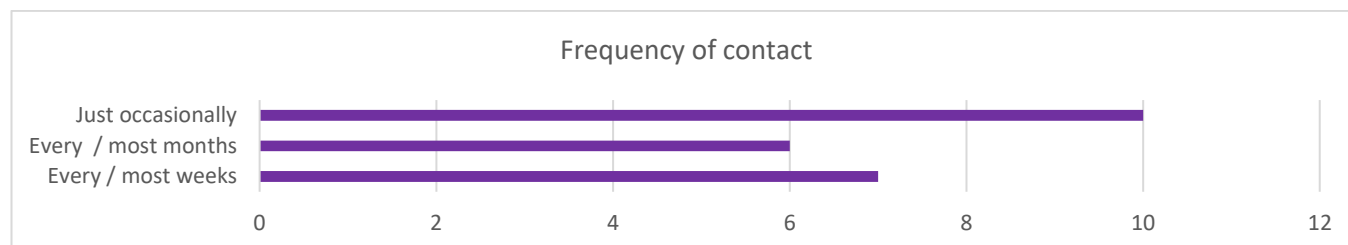
The audit highlighted areas for service improvement to ensuring that children and young people receive the best possible service from the Independent Visitor scheme, together with the impact Covid-19 restrictions had on some relationships between young people and their Independent Visitors. The Graph below shows that for each of the 23 young people their Independent visitor had maintained virtual contact with them during the pandemic.



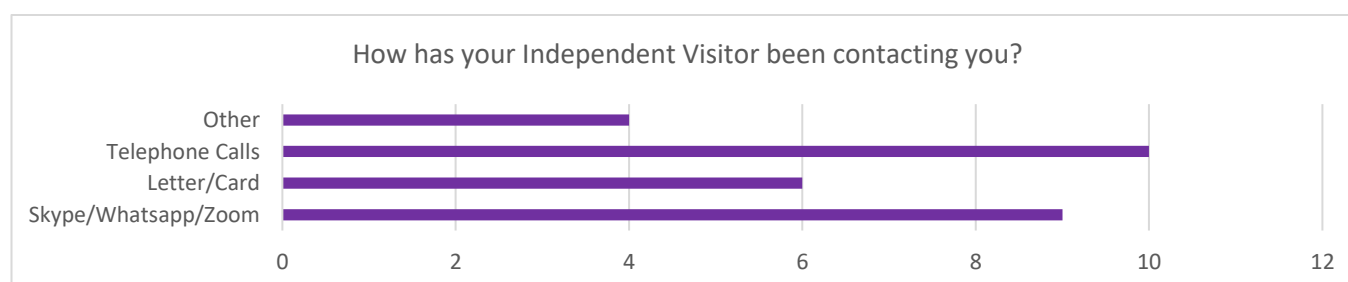
22 of the 23 young people spoken to said that the frequency of contact with their Independent Visitor was 'about right'. Only one said that they would like more contact, and this was shared with the Scheme Coordinator to discuss with the Independent Visitor.



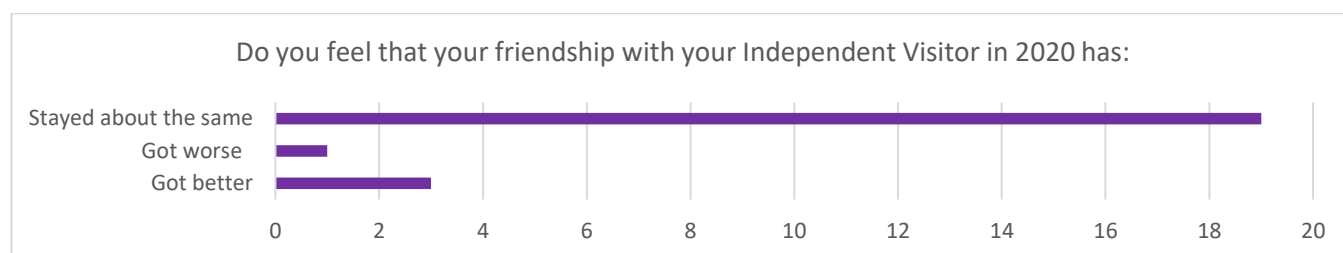
Regarding frequency of contact. 7 children /young people said that contact had been made between themselves and their Independent visitor every or most weeks, 6 said it had been every or most months, and 10 children /young people said that contact had been 'just occasionally'.



Children /young people shared that their Independent Visitor had maintained contact with them through a variety of means, including telephone calls, Skype, WhatsApp or Zoom 'face to face' calls or by sending letters and cards, and many children/young people said that they had contact through a variety of these.



When asked, 3 children /young people reported that their relationship with their Independent Visitor had improved during the Covid-19 pandemic, 18 said it had 'stayed about the same', and one reported that it had 'got worse'



Young People were asked the additional questions:

1. What's been good about having an independent visitor / how has this helped you?

The responses received included:

- *It's been fun as it helped me do something different as I have been bored.*
- *Made me more social, confident, made me at ease going out on my own, with other people and also clearing my head.*
- *She sends me a letter or card*
- *It's someone who doesn't have to follow all the same guidelines as professionals. I can talk to them about anything that I want to. It means I get out of the house and do activities that I wouldn't do on my own. I am given freedom to choose what activities I want to do.*
- *Was good when we could go out and do things*
- *My Independent Visitor is another person I can trust and someone who 'gets me'. She is amazing*
- *I get out a lot more and do more things.*
- *We can go out places and have a good chat.*
- *It's nice to get the occasional card and letter*
- *I am looking forward to seeing him face-face again. I think he is really good at what he does and has really good ideas on what we can do to have fun. He always makes things enjoyable and he is really friendly.*
- *Although she is an adult, I feel as though we are good friends. She is just an older version of me as we have the same interests. I like talking to her and she gives me advice as and when I ask for it.*
- *It's nice to keep in touch*
- *It's good to talk to her and go places*
- *Its nice to have a friend. Would be nice to be able to meet up*
- *I get out a lot more and do more things.*
- *Get to go to the cinema quite often.*
- *She's Very friendly. Getting to spend time with them*
- *Doing something different than you normally do. Sometimes we do the same things, sometimes different things. I cant wait to do Go Karting again!*
- *It gives me a bit of space to talk to another person*
- *It's good for young people who live on their own or don't have many friends. It's good socially. Takes me a while to open up to people so I do hold back but I'm happy with my Independent Visitor, she's good.*
- *It is good just having someone to talk to and hopefully do some activities*

2. Do you feel that you're getting what you thought you'd get from having an independent Visitor?

- *Yes I knew about the scheme before I had an Independent Visitor, it is consistent with what I thought I would get.*
- *It has been good to be able to have someone and being able to go out with her*
- *It has been better than what I thought*
- *Yes, more than that!*
- *Yes I got what I expected out of an Independent Visitor.*
- *I think it is a lot better than what I thought it was going to be like.*
- *Definitely what I expected*
- *yes, its good although it will be better when we can go out again*

3. Is there anything else you would like to say about your Independent Visitor?

- *She is an absolute delight, she is really nice, and she is great. I would recommend the scheme to other young people.*
- *We speak regularly and he is always friendly*
- *She's very friendly and talkative*
- *She's always a funny person, she made a puppet theatre for Christmas.*
- *She's really lovely, she's really good fun to go out with. She takes me to interesting places.*
- *Thank you for your support and being friendly.*
- *I am looking forward to seeing him face-face again. I think he is really good at what he does and has really good ideas on what we can do to have fun. He always makes things enjoyable and he is really friendly.*
- *She is a nice, understanding and supportive person. I am happy she is my Independent Visitor.*
- *He's a very nice person*
- *It will be good when we are able to start doing activities again*

4. The impact of Covid-19

Clear guidance has been issued to Independent Visitors throughout the Covid-19 restrictions to ensure that Independent Visitors have worked within the guidelines.

Throughout Covid-19 Independent Visitors have been asked to keep in touch with young people through letters and cards and/or virtually through using social media applications such as Skype/WhatsApp/Zoom/telephone calls. Mobile phones/sim cards were offered to all Independent Visitors to ensure and promote contact however, this offer was not taken up by any of the volunteers as they all said that they were able to use their own technology.

During the Covid-19 lockdown volunteers were encouraged to agree with children /young people how they would like to keep in touch and how often. This led to some employing creative ways of keeping in touch such as, doing virtual quizzes, undertaking a baking task, setting challenges, playing games, and having a virtual birthday cake. Several volunteers also kept in regular contact by sending cards or small gifts or craft activities for the young person.

A very small number of young people did not wish to have virtual contact with their Independent Visitor and wished to wait until in person visits could resume. When there was a lifting of

restrictions in 2020 volunteers were able to meet with their young person in person, which helped to maintain relationships. When revised Government Regulations again led to in person meetings not being possible, volunteers reverted once more to virtual / postal contact. Maintaining virtual relationships over a prolonged period did pose challenges, however several volunteers and children and young people continue to use technology and post to stay in touch.

A further challenge has been to effectively match children /young people on the waiting list with an Independent Visitor due to Government guidance. During the period, there have been 3 Independent Visitors available to be matched and up to 22 young people on the waiting list, many of which were living in host local authority areas, 1 successful match has taken place, with the introductory meeting conducted virtually and a further match is envisaged when it is possible to arrange an in-person meeting

The challenge to keep all Independent Visitor's fully engaged with the scheme and young people during the pandemic and beyond is recognised, as highlighted by the audit of contact; this is an area of focus and service improvement.

One specific challenge for contact between Independent Visitors and children / young people has been the guidance relating to travelling in a car. Whilst this has caused some frustration for several volunteers, most carers have been supportive in transporting children to meet with their Independent Visitor. To ensure safety and compliance with Covid-19 restrictions where required the Scheme Co-ordinator undertook individual risk assessments with volunteer and home risk assessments have also been completed to enable visits to occur.

The scheme's coordinator has been in contact with all Independent Visitors during the pandemic. However, a small number of Independent Visitors struggled to maintain regular contact and have been prioritised for supervision sessions to establish if they required additional support to maintain contact with their child / young person.

To promote contact, 11 separate virtual Peer Support Group meetings have been held to provide Independent Visitors with the opportunity to discuss both their individual relationship with their young person and any areas of concern or challenge. Additionally, two Independent Visitor newsletters have been circulated.

Due to the Covid-19 restrictions, the Scheme Coordinator has developed a virtual training package, to enable training of small groups or individual volunteers applying to become Independent Visitors. This training will be supplemented through the use of Microsoft Teams or Skype training sessions.

During the Covid-19 pandemic the Council Communications Team ran a campaign to identify and celebrate Local Heroes. Two Independent Visitors were nominated by the scheme coordinator for their dedication in maintaining contact and support with their young person throughout the lockdown period.

Priorities

- In person visits to be resumed with children and young people.
- Recruitment campaign to be held in 2021
- A 'contract' outlining the expectation for contact levels between Independent visitors and children/young people to be introduced, and between Independent Visitors and the scheme coordinator.

- Introduction of enhanced quality assurance processes to identify areas of strength and those of challenge. To include mechanisms to capture regular feedback from children and young people to support continuous practice and service delivery improvements.
- To review the scheme against the National Independent Visitor Scheme Standards
- To review and update the Independent Visitors Handbook as required.
- To undertake a further Quality Assurance Audit of the Scheme by October 2021

