



Photography by Paul Close, posed by models.

# “Someone just for me...”

Independent visitors:  
the benefits for looked after children and young people

Kathleen Toner with Desi O’Hagan, Cleeve Speers and Una Doherty  
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## Introduction

Most children are fortunate enough to have significant adults in their lives who can act as mentors or role models. However, children and young people in the care system may have limited or, in some cases, no contact with their families. The NSPCC is committed to improving outcomes for looked after children, both as individuals and as a group. Through this work, we aim to develop and share knowledge on the effectiveness of this approach.

The NSPCC currently has two independent visiting projects in Northern Ireland. These projects provide a service for looked after children in the Western health and social care trust (HSCT) (Sperrin Lakeland area) and in the Northern HSCT area.

The purpose of this briefing is to look at the benefits of the independent visiting service for young people from their perspective.

Each project is managed by a volunteer coordinator, who has responsibility for approximately 20 volunteers. As per the Children (NI) Order 1995 Volume 3 guidance (DHSS NI, 1996), each of those volunteers is matched with a young person currently in the looked after care system and each young person is allocated an independent visitor (IV), as required under article 31(1) of the same order.

The current NSPCC independent visiting service in the Northern HSCT area was initiated by ChildLine in 2001 and was subsequently absorbed by the NSPCC when the two charities joined together in 2005. The independent visiting service in the Western HSCT area was initially set up with the Sperrin Lakeland Trust through a service level agreement in 2003.

**The NSPCC is committed to improving outcomes for looked after children, both as individuals and as a group.**

As part of its participative practice model, the NSPCC recently undertook a review of its service provision. As well as seeking the views of the young people who benefit from the independent visiting service, the NSPCC also sought the views of the volunteers who provide the service, of professional social care workers and of foster carers. The findings from the review have been used to inform this policy and practice briefing.

## Background

There are currently approximately 60,000 looked after children throughout the UK. Figures for 2007/08 provided by the Community Information Branch of the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS NI) detail that, as at 31 March 2008, there were 2,433 looked after children in Northern Ireland. This is an increase of 3 per cent (77 children) from 2007, when there were 2,356 children in total. These young people are a priority group for the NSPCC.

Many children and young people are looked after as a result of having suffered abuse. In addition to receiving advice and guidance, many such young people need help if they are to overcome the often severe effects of their experiences. Some children and young people are looked after within foster families while others remain in local residential units, but they can all be placed in settings away from the area they came from and which was most familiar to them.

Being in the care system can be a vulnerability factor in itself. Research from the Social Exclusion Unit (2003) shows that young people in care in the UK are disproportionately more likely to be teenage parents, end up unemployed or be homeless. In Northern Ireland, children who are looked after have poorer educational attainment than their peers, are more likely to be the subject of an educational statement, and leave school with few or no qualifications.

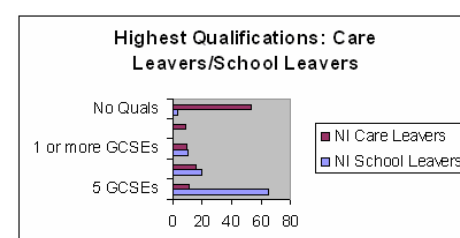
### Gender and age breakdown of looked after children in Northern Ireland in 2007/08

Boys: 52% (1,265)  
Girls: 48% (1,168)

#### This breaks down into:

Infants (under 1 year): 2%  
1–4 years: 15%  
5–11 years: 32%  
16 years and over: 21%

### Qualifications of care leavers/school leavers in 2007/08



Source: DHSSPS (NI)

## What is independent visiting?

An independent visitor is a volunteer who has been appointed for the purposes of article 31(1) of the Children (NI) Order 1995 to have the duty of visiting, advising and befriending a looked after child or young person.

The NSPCC and other voluntary agencies have developed independent visiting services in response to the requirements of the Children (NI) Order 1995. The volunteer status of the independent visitor has added an extra element of independence to these services, which is of great importance to the young people who benefit from them.

However, this does not obviate the need for the NSPCC's independent visiting services to set their own high standards for the recruitment and selection of volunteers. The NSPCC also has in place induction standards and competencies for independent visitors.

In 2000, the NSPCC undertook research (Oakley and Masson, 2000) "to ascertain the knowledge, understanding and experiences of looked after children and young people in relation to the independent visitors service with a secondary focus upon their perceptions of other adults who may be appointed as advisers and befrienders".

It was apparent from the research that young people valued the independent nature of this service because it was something that the independent visitor did voluntarily and not something formal and "official".

The research also showed that young people regarded the independent visitor as having been appointed for their benefit: to befriend and advise them.

### Key data on looked after children in Northern Ireland in 2007/08

- 2,433 looked after children
- 1,695 looked after outside their own home
- 1,376 in foster care
- 319 in residential care

### Length of time in care:

1–3 years:	587 children
3–5 years:	435 children
5–10 years:	600 children
10 years+:	261 children

## Range of service provision for looked after children in Northern Ireland

Over the past 10 years, there has been a significant growth in services for looked after children across Northern Ireland, both in the voluntary and statutory sector. These services include: advocacy and mentoring services provided by Voice of Young People in Care (VOYPIC); independent visiting services provided by the Northern Ireland Association for the Care and Resettlement of Offenders (NIACRO), by Extern and by the NSPCC; the development of personal adviser services for young people eligible to leave care; and family group conferencing and other group work options for looked after young people.

NIACRO provides an independent visitor scheme that operates in the Belfast, South Eastern and Southern HSCT areas. According to their website, the NIACRO independent visitor scheme was used by 57 young people in the Eastern and Southern board areas in 2007/08.

Extern provides an independent visitor programme in the western area of Northern Ireland, run in partnership with the Western HSCT.

VOYPIC offers an advocacy service to children and young people who have experienced the care system. It offers those children and young people a confidential source outside of the social services system where they can get advice, information and support. VOYPIC also offers a mentoring service to young people, providing a structured one-to-one relationship with a volunteer mentor who meets the young person weekly for a period of one year. All young people using this mentoring service also get the chance to meet together through workshops, events and activity days.

A national study of children's advocacy services in England by Thomas Coram Research Unit (Oliver et al, 2006) stated that: "Historically, children's advocacy services have tended to focus on children in public care and those considered 'in need', including disabled children."

The study found that “most young people grasped that the role of the advocate was to act firmly on the side of the young person: an advocate was described as someone who would ‘be on my side’, ‘fight my corner’, ‘stand up for me’ or ‘back me up so that others listen and take notice’.” Using this definition, there is a distinct difference between advocacy and independent visiting.

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The Children (Leaving Care) Act (Northern Ireland) 2002 created the role of personal adviser for young people in care at the age of 16. Personal advisers provide practical advice and support for looked after children. They can also negotiate on the young person’s behalf, act as an advocate, make sure their needs are assessed and ensure that a pathway plan is written and reviewed. Personal advisers have been operating for some time in Northern Ireland and are employees of the HSCTs.

## What young people want

Early in 2009, Ofsted published *Future rules*, a report by the Children’s Rights Director for England that detailed the views of children and young people on legislation relating to how children in care should be looked after. The children and young people consulted clearly indicated that they wanted regular visits from key workers from the council who had placed them in care.

In answer to the question “What sort of people would be independent enough to be a child’s special personal visitor and adviser?”, the children and young people consulted chose people who had experienced care themselves.

Where an additional person was made available for young people in care, those consulted felt that such a person should be a personal friend and adviser.

They considered this role should be filled by “somebody who don’t [*sic*] have anyone else” and that provision should be made for “children who have no family and needed an extra visitor”, “ones [children] living under a lot of pressure” and “sad, depressed lonely kids”.

There was a consensus among the young people interviewed that children with special needs or disabilities should have an extra visitor.

Interestingly, those children and young people living in children's homes considered children who did not have contact with their family as being most in need of an extra visitor. This was followed closely by children with special needs.

## Care matters

In 2007, the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS NI) published *Care matters in Northern Ireland – A bridge to a better future*. In responding to this document, the NSPCC outlined its position on the benefits of independent visiting based on evidence from practice (NSPCC NI, 2007).

“The Independent Visitor's role is about encouraging a link with the child in order to build up a trusting and supportive relationship. It is befriending; it models friendship, which is an attachment to children who have usually experienced poor or disordered attachment with their own parents and families.

“NSPCC approaches every match with hope that it has the potential to be the beginning of a lifelong friendship. It is about building and modelling continuity for children and young people who rarely have this experience in care.”

*Care matters in Northern Ireland* considered the role of the independent visitor to be “an imprecise role” and proposed changing the name to independent adviser. Based on the views of the young people receiving the independent visiting service, the NSPCC was concerned about this proposal.

The young people consulted felt that the use of the description “adviser” was too official and took away from the informal friendship nature of the independent visitor. They again emphasised the importance of the non-official nature of the service.

The NSPCC has continued to argue for the need to keep independent visiting and advocacy separate.

## Findings of a review of the NSPCC independent visiting scheme

The review process sought the views and perspectives of a variety of stakeholders and used a range of multi-method data collection techniques.

All the young people in the NSPCC independent visiting service were interviewed individually by the two service coordinators. The independent visitors were invited to attend one of two focus groups to discuss their experiences of the service.

Approximately 80 per cent of the independent visitors attended. Both the focus groups and the interviews were recorded and transcribed.

In addition, a short questionnaire was sent to 14 key professionals, including foster carers, residential social workers and key workers involved with the young people. The response rate was 85 per cent.

The NSPCC's independent visiting service in Northern Ireland currently covers two HSCT areas. Figures collated in June 2009 show that the service benefits a total of 25 young people: 16 females and nine males.

The service in the Northern HSCT area is currently provided to 14 young people, nine of whom are female and five of whom are male.

In the Western HSCT, the service is currently provided to 11 young people, seven of whom are female and four of whom are male.

## Average age of young people using an independent visiting service at the time of referral

At the time of referral, the average age of a young person using the independent visiting service was 12.8 years.

The oldest age at the time of referral was 17 years, while the youngest was eight years old. Some young people have been receiving the service for more than eight years and are now moving into adulthood, having had only one or two independent visitors during that time.

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### Continuity of independent visiting in the lives of young people

The average amount of time a young person in the Northern HSCT area has had an independent visitor is five years. Half of the young people have been involved with the service for more than five years, with 28 per cent involved with the service for more than seven years.

The service in the Western HSCT area has been operating since 2003. The average amount of time a young person in this HSCT area has had an independent visitor is two years and six months.

The service in the Northern HSCT area has been in existence since 2001. In this area, 50 per cent of the young people involved with the service have only had one independent visitor. In one case, a young woman in residential care has had the same visitor providing continuity of contact for over seven years, since she was ten years old. By comparison, during this period of time, the same young person has had a total of seven social workers.

In most cases, the independent visitors meet with the young people fortnightly or monthly.

### Current care arrangements

The same pattern of continuity of involvement is to be found in the Western HSCT area. Fifty per cent of the young people have only had one independent visitor. The longest amount of time has been for a 17-year-old female in foster care, who has had the same visitor since she was 13.

### Profile of the independent visitors in the NSPCC scheme

The independent visitors who are placed with young people in care in the NSPCC service vary in age, from 22 to 60 years. However, 43.5 per cent are aged between 20 and 29 years of age. The oldest independent visitor currently is a 60-year-old woman, matched with a 16-year-old female in foster care. The youngest is a 21-year-old female, matched with a 15-year-old female in foster care.

Currently, there are three male independent visitors; two of whom are placed with young men who have been receiving the service for more than six years and who are now living back at home or in independent living.

### Care arrangements for young people in NSPCC independent visiting services

	Female	Male	Total
Foster care	8	4	12
Home	1	1	2
Independent living	0	4	4
Residential care	7	0	7
<b>Total</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>25</b>

The other male independent visitor is placed with an 11-year-old male who is in foster care and who has been receiving the service for almost four years, since he was eight.

Within each independent visiting service, in total there is currently a waiting list of 12 people waiting to be matched. Eight of these are in the Northern HSCT area and four in the Western HSCT. Social workers have also made enquiries about independent visiting placements for a further 10 young people.

### Frequency of contact

When volunteers sign up to become an independent visitor, they agree to meet with the young person with whom they are matched on a monthly basis as a minimum or fortnightly as a maximum.

Sixty per cent of the young people meet with their independent visitor on a monthly basis, while 20 per cent meet with their visitor on a fortnightly basis. Two young people are waiting for a new visitor to be allocated. Three others have more flexible arrangements based on their needs.

### Reasons for referral

There are a range of reasons why a referral has been made for a young person to be placed with an independent visitor. These include:

- facilitating positive time out of a residential unit
- facilitating positive time away from a residential unit and engaging with a positive female role model
- increasing social skills
- young person not at school and unhappy in residential placement
- foster carers wanting the young person to utilise the service, having had a positive experience of the service previously with another young person in their care
- need for support as the young person has moved from a residential unit to independent living
- support for a young person in residential care after a foster placement broke down
- respite for the young person and foster carer
- young person requesting the service, having had a previous positive experience of it.

### Prior expectations of the service

Many of the young people indicated that, prior to being matched with an independent visitor, they were initially unsure of what to expect. Emotions ranged from excitement to anxiety about what they and the independent visitor would think of each other. A number of young people were very clear that, if they had been advised that the independent visitor was another social worker, they would not have been interested.

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In terms of their choice in relation to the age and gender of the independent visitor with whom they wished to be matched, the young people interviewed were divided. Some thought it best to be matched with someone only several years older than them as they may have similar interests; others thought that they would prefer someone much older as they wanted to get advice and guidance. Gender was also important, with boys mostly preferring to be matched with males, and girls with females. This sometimes related to the young person's expectations of what activities they would be doing with their independent visitor or just with what they would be most comfortable.

Almost all the professionals and carers knew very little about the independent visiting service before they became involved with it through the young person. There was an assumption beforehand that it was a professional service with an advocacy role, with one social worker thinking it was like the "guardian ad litem" service. However, since becoming involved with the service, there has been a unanimous realisation that it is more of a befriending service than an advocacy one.

### Beginnings

Prior to their first visit with an independent visitor, some young people talked about feeling easy and relaxed while others talked about feelings of anxiety. One young woman described her initial feelings:

**"The first few visits was [sic] very nerve-wracking because meeting new people for me is difficult and...sorta [sic]... nerve-wracking until you actually get to know the person."**

Several young people were able to attribute this anxiety to a lack of trust of people in general, which was directly related to their history of being taken into care:

“...was hard for me to trust anyone because of being taken into care and stuff like that. So it took probably a long time, you know.”

The information shared with an independent visitor about the young person was a key issue for this group. Many young people did not think their independent visitor should be told a lot about their background before they met and that getting to know each other should be a natural part of developing their relationship. One young person was concerned that information on their past would upset their independent visitor and thought that this information could best be shared naturally as they got to know each other.

On the whole, the young people seemed clear, although not always happy, about the sharing of information with independent visitors, and the circumstances in which this would not be kept between the two of them. While not necessarily being pleased that safeguarding concerns would always be passed to their social workers, the young people generally accepted that this was necessary and that it was known from the outset. One young person commented on their understanding of this:

“If I told her I was unsafe, she would go back and say to a member of staff because, erm, all the stuff is confidential but if you’re at risk, she’ll have to say.”

Like the young people, independent visitors also had anxieties about the relationship at the beginning. Concerns focused on being too formal and being conscious of not wanting to break any boundaries, which could result in some nervousness between them and the young person. Initially, independent visitors had a sense of offering advice and guidance instead of relaxing into the relationship.

### **Building a relationship**

Both the young people and the independent visitors talked about initial feelings of nervousness and anxiety when they first met, and how this eased over time as a relationship started to develop.

Contact between the independent visitors and the young people took the form of visits, telephone calls, shopping and going out for meals. The importance that young people placed on developing a relationship with their independent visitor through shared activities was apparent throughout the interviews carried out during the NSPCC's independent visiting review. One young person described how she bonded with her independent visitor through climbing mountains:

"...like, I think, climbing Donard, like, was, like, the main one that helped us, like, to get closer together because we both had to help each other, because she had to help me on the way up and I had to help her on the way down."

Another girl described being very nervous about talking to her independent visitor but then relaxing and opening up when they went out on visits together and gradually got to know each other:

"...I mean, if I have a problem, you know what I mean...I speak to her, you know, just for her to give me advice on how to sort it out and stuff."

Overall, the young people valued being able to talk to their independent visitor and felt that they did not judge them, but would mostly listen and then provide advice. This advice was what they valued most.

Young people also referred to how their independent visitor was different from other people involved with them, such as social workers. There are clear indications that most young people prefer that their independent visitor is independent from the other services they receive and that their role is not professional or intrusive. One young person commented:

"I mean, they are not there, not making decisions or they're nothing to do with the decision process or what's going to happen wit ya [*sic*] and they are just there, just like they don't have anything to do with social workers or, you know, they are there to just...basically for you...in that it was never anything to do with social workers because I don't think young people would've, well I know, I definitely wouldn't have, you know, joined it."

**...the young people valued being able to talk to their independent visitor and felt that they did not judge them...**

This same young person also described a previous independent visitor who took a more structured and professional approach with them. This did not please the young person, who described it as too “formal”.

Many of the young people also expressed the view that they wanted to be able to manage the information that was shared with their independent visitor; comparing this to the lack of control they had over information that was shared with social workers or social services.

For some, sharing concerns with their independent visitor and discussing possible remedies was a source of support and made their relationship closer. Likewise, the independent visitors felt that providing a listening ear and helping the young person to work through concerns or difficulties was very important in establishing and developing the relationship. One young person commented:

“There was a thing – I really wouldn’t want to say it but there was a thing that I could chat to her about a year ago, or not even a year ago, when I couldn’t chat to anyone else. I asked her advice on it and then I could chat to Mummy and people about it; after I told [the independent visitor] I felt more comfortable to chat to other people about it.”

Another young person described how she kept her independent visitor as a person to confide in:

“She is the kind of person that if something is going on with my group of friends, I have someone else to turn to, to talk to about what I couldn’t say to my group of friends. She is like a separate friend.”

Nonetheless, concerns about confidentiality could remain, with one young girl stating that: “[I] don’t talk to her about things that are going on for me ’cause she will tell everything back.”

Overall, the young people talked about having a valued and close relationship with their independent visitors, describing them as like older sisters, mothers or close friends.

A recurrent response from many of the young people was that independent visitors were considerably more constant than other professionals involved with them, and that this lent itself to building trust and stronger relationships.

This view was also shared by the independent visitors themselves, who recognised the importance of stability and continuity in the young people's lives, and who strived to maintain a consistent and supportive presence.

Of clear importance to the young people was the idea that this was a non-formal relationship in which they could dictate the level of information sharing and have a separate person outside formal systems in whom to confide:

“She’s like a relative that calls...doesn’t feel professional. It’s relaxed. There is trust there.”

“If she told me ways to budget, I would probably listen to her more – that’s an example. She is an independent visitor, not a social worker. It’s better.”

Independent visitors also perceived this as a strength of the service, which enabled them to establish a “genuine” relationship with the young person rather than being paid to spend time with them.

As such, young people were able to choose the degree of involvement that their independent visitor had in more formal processes. Some young people wished to keep the relationship with their independent visitor totally separate from the professional side of things, such as looked after children meetings, while others were quite happy for their independent visitor to attend professional meetings.

## Endings

Many of the young people had been with the service for a number of years. One young woman, who had turned 19, talked about growing with the service and how she would find it difficult to separate from the service and her independent visitor. She recognised that the independent visitor also came with the backup and support of the NSPCC.

...the independent visitors...recognised the importance of stability and continuity in the young people’s lives...

One young man said: “Oh aye, you know, thinking of it now, I just don’t know what I would have been like if I hadn’t, you know, hadn’t had the independent service.”

This suggests that, while seeing the significance of the relationship with the independent visitor as being important, these young people also understand and appreciate the support of the service as a whole.

When discussing what should become of the relationship when young people become adult, one young man stated:

“It’s important that the support’s still there and, you know, continues awhile, ’cause you know, it’s a continual process if you know what I mean. You’ve always something to learn, you know, once you’ve moved out, like, and it’s always important that you know you’ve someone there to talk to and stuff, like.”

### **The views of professionals and carers**

The responses given by the professionals and carers surveyed echoed much of what was said by the young people involved in the service and by the independent visitors. Relationships took time to develop and longevity was considered a significantly positive factor.

Confidentiality, however, could be something of a sticking point, with one keyworker highlighting the difficulties that one of the young people had in accepting the NSPCC’s safeguarding role in relation to confidentiality. However, this issue was overcome by a discussion that led to an understanding of the need to pass on concerns.

The fact that the independent visitor is not an official was reported as a beneficial outcome from both social workers and foster carers. One foster mother said:

“She [the young person] seems to be more at ease with her visitor because she is not official. As she is now older, she wants less and less to do with social workers, and her IV is good for her and does give her a lot of time.”

Similarly, a social worker commented:

“I particularly like the fact that there is no obligation or expectation on the young person to engage at a particular level. She [the young person] likes the sense that it is ‘her’ IV and the time they have is special.”

The more relaxed nature of the relationship was commented on by several respondents. The independent visitor role is more like that of a friend, with several of the professionals commenting on the positive influence on the young person that they felt was evidenced by improvements in behaviour. One foster carer reported:

“I have seen an improvement in A’s behaviour; he is well-behaved now. They have a great relationship. It is all positive to me.”

The consistency of the independent visitor’s relationship with the child or young person was another aspect that was highlighted as being positive. The majority of young people in the independent visiting service have had many different social workers moving in and out of their lives. In contrast, the independent visitors in the service have tended to stay with the same child for significant periods of time, providing a consistent adult presence in their lives. One keyworker said:

“This has been consistent and enjoyable when other things [in the young person’s life] have been inconsistent and problematic.”

For one young person who has found it difficult to maintain relationships with professionals, the independent visiting service has proved to be particularly effective. Their social worker commented:

“B’s relationship with his IV is key in trying to ensure all his needs are met. If he did not have this secure established relationship...I am sure he would not be doing as well as he is.”

**The fact that the independent visitor was reported as a beneficial outcome from both social workers and foster carers.**

## Key findings

From the interviews with the young people involved in the independent visiting service, it was clear that, despite some initial anxieties about meeting their independent visitor for the first time, they greatly valued them and the relationship they were able to develop. The non-intrusive and informal nature of the role enabled the young people to develop trusted relationships despite the lack of stability they had experienced in their own backgrounds and with other professionals.

It was evident that the consistency of this relationship over significantly long periods of time was something many of them had not previously experienced and this was greatly valued by the young people. Consequently, the young people reported responding much more positively to the advice and guidance given to them by independent visitors than to advice from professionals. Professionals and carers also reported that the young people's relationship with their independent visitor had led to increased feelings of security and improvements in behaviour.

Choice was also an important factor. Being able to develop a relationship with a non-professional adult in whom they had a choice about their age and gender, the level of information they shared with them and the degree they were involved in their lives was also clearly empowering and beneficial. Indeed, those young people who had had an independent visitor for long periods of time (more than six years) attached such significance to the independent visiting relationship that they found it hard to envisage the relationship ending.

Young people also demonstrated an awareness of the importance of the support structure of the independent visiting service. They were aware of the work of the NSPCC, who facilitated the work of the independent visitors and who provided a link to other professional services when the need arose. They were also aware of the infrastructure and organisation around the provision of the service, and the safeguarding aspects of the role played by the NSPCC.

**The non-intrusive and informal nature of the role enabled the young people to develop trusted relationships...**

## Recommendations

- The independent visiting team should develop promotional materials for professionals and young people, explaining how the service works and the benefits it offers.
- Providers of independent visiting services in Northern Ireland should explore the possibility of establishing a network/forum for the consideration of practice issues and standards, and should contribute to the policy debate in relation to looked after children.
- The involvement of young people in the development of the independent visiting service should be encouraged and resourced.
- Due to the long-term nature of the relationship between the young people and their independent visitors, independent visiting service provider organisations should give consideration to the development of criteria for exit strategies.
- The NSPCC should seek to promote the service to potential male volunteers in order to address the current gender imbalance.
- Legislation relating to the provision of independent visiting services should be reviewed to take account of how practice has developed. In particular, article 31 of the Children (NI) Order 1995 could be amended to facilitate the appointment of independent visitors in more cases.

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NSPCC Policy and Research Unit Northern Ireland  
Block 1, Jennymount Business Park  
North Derby Street, Belfast  
Northern Ireland BT15 3HN  
Tel: 02890 351135  
Email: kathleen.toner@nspcc.org.uk

NSPCC registered charity numbers 216401 and SC037717