

## **Official friends and friendly officials: support, advice and advocacy for children and young people in public care**

### **Summary of research and findings**

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### **Introduction**

#### **The focus of the research**

The main focus of the research was 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.

#### **Why listen to young people?**

Young service users can make a key contribution to the evaluation of the services they receive. Feedback from looked after children and young people ensures this vulnerable group have a voice about their particular situation, empowers them by their involvement and serves to question assumptions held by adults about their needs and wishes.

#### **Exclusive friendship?**

Independent visitors are volunteers, not professionals employed to work with young people, appointed to befriend a young person on a one to one basis.

#### **Corporate parenting**

The local authority becomes a corporate parent for looked after children and young people. Such children and young people require more than looking after in the sense of food and shelter, they need to be cared for and parented by people who are mindful of both their current needs and future potential. In practice, it is difficult for corporate structures to ensure the personal care for looked after children and young people.

#### **Current concerns**

There have been many recent concerns about the past quality of care for children and young people who are looked after. Numerous scandals came to light in the 1990s and numerous reports discussed the way to improve the care of looked after children and young people.

## **Background and method**

### **Background**

This research study developed from previous NSPCC funded research into children's and young people's experiences and perceptions of adults appointed to represent them in public law proceedings. It emerged that children and young people were concerned with issues relating to the responsibilities of the local authority for planning and delivering appropriate care. The concept of representation was broadened out to consider looked after children's and young people's experiences and perceptions of other adults who may be appointed to advise and support them.

### **Method**

Through the co-ordinators of independent visitors schemes and through children's rights officers, the researchers contacted 20 children and young people with independent visitors to find out their views about the independent visitors service and their experiences of having an independent visitor. The researchers also met with a further 15 children and young people who did not have an independent visitor. Some were aware of the service and wanted an independent visitor; some were not aware of the service and lived in areas where there was no scheme. Some of those interviewed had used other advice or advocacy services.

Fifteen independent visitors also participated in the research together with another 20 adults either involved with the independent visitors service, children's advocacy services or employed by the local authority and concerned with the care of looked after children and young people. As with the previous research, all children had to be over the age of 8 years so that they had some understanding of the research and could consent to participate. The 35 children and young people were 17 girls/young women and 18 boys/young men from different ethnic backgrounds, some with disabilities. At the time of interview, which was semi-structured and discursive, 15 were in foster care, 9 in residential care, 3 in secure units and 8 were recent care leavers.

## **Access to independent visitors**

### **Schemes**

Access to independent visitors schemes depends upon whether the young person resides in an authority with a service and if so, whether they are eligible according to the criteria stipulated by the individual scheme, subject to the supply of independent visitors.

### **Where do visitors come from?**

Existing scheme co-ordinators actively canvas for volunteers whilst being mindful of child protection issues. There were some variations between the independent visitors schemes as to who would make a possible volunteer. Although the

researchers spoke with both male and female volunteers and volunteers from white, black and Asian origin, in the main independent visitors are white females.

### **Appointments**

Some schemes only appoint independent visitors to those children who have no parental contact. Other schemes will appoint a volunteer even though the child is having some parental contact. Independent visitors commented upon the lack of awareness and understanding of their role, surprisingly by other adults working within the care system, as well as professionals from health and education.

### **Matching**

Co-ordinators endeavored to match the young person with an independent visitor with similar interests, being mindful of their background, religion and gender. This could mean the young person waiting for such an appropriate person to be found.

### **Eligibility**

In the main it is the local authority social worker who will identify a looked after young person as being in need of an independent visitor. Concern was expressed as to the role of a social worker who was responsible for a young person, who in lacking parental contact could benefit from an independent visitor, but worked in an authority that failed to provide this service.

## **The role of the independent visitor**

### **What is an independent visitor?**

Both young people and adult volunteers recognised that an independent visitor was a friend to the young person and listened to them. Whilst the independent visitors, co-ordinators of schemes and other adults pointed out the need for the independent visitor to be seen as being independent of the local authority, the young people defined independent visitors as being independent of everyone else involved with their care. This definition included local authority carers as well as their own family members.

### **Advocacy and reviews**

Independent visitors were not substitutes for professional services such as counsellors or advocates although there was some acceptance within existing schemes, and by the independent visitors themselves, that in befriending young people, the independent visitor may need to advocate on their behalf too. There was some concern that some independent visitors defined advocacy as promoting the best interests of the child rather than their rights and wishes as a skilled advocate would do.

Increasingly independent visitors were being invited to the young person's review. It was recognised that independent visitors needed an understanding of the care system in order to appreciate procedures such as reviews.

## **Young people's and adults' perceptions**

### **Who is an independent visitor for?**

Children and young people were clear that their independent visitor represented a service that was for them. Some adults involved with the research were less clear. One foster carer assured the researcher that the independent visitor had been appointed to assist her with her role. Some independent visitors had met local authority carers who had actively prevented them from developing their role with the young person.

Some other local authority carers were keen to promote the independent visitor role and to extend it to other looked after children and to care leavers.

### **What do you do together?**

Children, young people and independent visitors, were all very enthusiastic about the activities and interests that they had developed together. Such pursuits ranged from a variety of sports activities to cultural and theatre trips. Many young people were aware that such trips could be costly and did not continually make demands. On the contrary, children and young people commented upon the significance of just meeting and chatting with their independent visitor. This was important.

Independent visitors were keen to point out that they too looked forward to their meetings and chats with the young people. The flow of enjoyment was definitely two way.

### **Independent visitors and feedback?**

A number of independent visitors discussed their initial expectation of feedback from the young person about their developing relationship. With hindsight independent visitors realised that lack of feedback was not necessarily an indication that things were not progressing and although some independent visitors endured long silences from their young partners the young people were appreciating the visits and given time would begin to engage with their visitor.

### **Telling others about your visitor?**

Some children and young people did tell other looked after young people about their visitor and the scheme. There was some concern by those with visitors that other young people, in wanting a visitor too, may attempt to take over 'their' visitor. Other young people said that they would not tell their peers about their independent visitor, particularly if their friends were not looked after and so may find the appointment strange. Young people do not like to be seen to be different.

### **In foster care**

Young people in foster care recognised the benefit of having an independent visitor because they could support them when they had to change placement and they could discuss difficulties in the placement with them as outsiders.

## **Issues around child protection**

### **Going to your friend's home**

Schemes varied in allowing young people to visit their independent visitor at their home. For some schemes, this was a natural progression of the friendship between the independent visitor and the young person. Other schemes did not allow such visits; some would not let the young person know the address of their visitor. Some young people, and independent visitors, felt that such exclusions were barriers to the friendship developing.

### **Trust and keeping a confidence**

Young people understood that independent visitors would keep a confidence unless any disclosure concerned the young person being at serious risk. They also realised that independent visitors, unlike the professionals, did not have to write details of their visits down and report on to others. There were instances where both the adults and young people felt they needed a clearer understanding of the policy on confidentiality and agreement upon what constituted a breach of confidence.

### **Bullying**

A number of children and young people raised the issues of bullying and making complaints. Some young people, particularly those living in children's homes, said that they appreciated having an independent visitor to talk issues over with. Often young people wanted to discuss issues informally rather than make formal complaints. They felt that local authority staff did not always have the time to listen to them about such issues and misunderstood the responses that young people sought.

### **Complaints**

Discussions with independent visitors did not however preclude the need for young people to have direct access to children's rights officers and skilled advocates and complaints procedures. Young people wanted and need these services.

## **Continuity and endings**

Young people appreciated the continuity the independent visitor role brought particularly when there were major changes in the young person's life such as changes of placement and regime or the loss of a valued social worker. However some independent visitors had

been prevented from supporting young people through placement changes, particularly those involving a move out of the area, and some had been advised not to visit new placements.

Three young people had experience of their independent visitors leaving and they were not always aware of the reason they had gone.

Older young people were aware that the appointment of their independent visitor would end when they left care but they were keen to point out that they had discussed this with their visitor and the friendship would continue nevertheless.

A number of adults, lay and professionals, referred to the 'short sightedness' of the system in withdrawing the support of an independent visitor at a time when the young person was moving out of care and so in need of support. An independent visitor could act as a safety net.

Some independent visitors commented upon the fact that they had been previously matched with other young people and the appointment was terminated, in two cases by the foster carer. One independent visitor was angry that she was not even allowed to meet the child to say goodbye.

Both young people and independent visitors referred to the fact that once matched successfully then the relationship should only end because the young person or visitor made the decision to bring it to an end.

Independent visitors are not paid to befriend young people and although some expenses could be claimed, most admitted they were out of pocket but that this was not a complaint. Generally this lack of payment did not affect their continuity as visitors although some unemployed visitors had terminated their roles either through lack of finances or because they later gained full employment and could not make the commitment required.

A number of independent visitor schemes and advocacy schemes had begun to ask older young people to advise them upon the wishes and needs of looked after young people. Some care leavers had been approached and offered a small remuneration for their input. The young people said that they appreciated this as it reflected a respect for their knowledge and understanding of the issues.

Whether or not young people had a good relationship with their independent visitor, young people said that a good relationship with their social worker was important to them. Unfortunately, social workers time is limited and they often had to be very focused upon specific tasks.

## **Conclusion and recommendations**

This child focused research analysed the knowledge, understanding, and experiences of looked after children and young people. Its main focus was in relation to independent visitors but also included other advice services - children's rights officers, advocates and independent representatives.

When a child or young person is looked after in the public care system the local authority becomes their corporate parent. Under the *Children Act 1989* (Schedule 2, para 17), local authorities are required to appoint independent visitors to 'visit, advise and befriend' any child who has little or no contact with parents or those with parental responsibility. There still exist local authorities who continue to fail in their duty to provide this service although some may appoint individuals as independent visitors ad hoc. The *Quality protects* programme has led to a number of local authorities considering the development of this service.

Local authorities either opt to run their own schemes 'in house' or to contract the service out to voluntary organisations. In 1996 a national forum for independent visitors was developed although schemes continue to have different policies and practices.

Little is known about how children and young people access such services or about their views of them. Such feedback not only adds to the existing adult perspectives but provides information direct from the children and young people about their wishes and needs.

## **Recommendations**

- All local authorities must fulfill their statutory duty and ensure that they provide independent visitors for eligible young people who are looked after. It is hoped that the *Quality protects* programme will assist in the development of schemes nationwide. There is an argument for extending the current legislation to allow other children and young people who are looked after to be eligible for this service.
- Written, taped and web based information outlining the rights of looked after young people to such services should be made widely available. Advice should be made available to young people about how to demand services that are not provided.
- Independent visitors must be prepared to make a long term commitment to the young person. This commitment would in turn ensure that the continuity of the appointment over rode disruptions and changes in the 'care life' of the looked after young person. Practical issues such as children being moved to long distance placements would need to be addressed.
- There is a need for nationally agreed standards on the policies and practices of such schemes and upon the training and recruitment of independent visitors with

input from young people on these matters. Special attention must be paid to the role of an independent visitor, particularly in respect of advocacy. In some situations the young person will need to seek the advice of a skilled advocate rather than the independent visitor dealing with the issues beyond their understanding. Both the young people and the independent visitors need a clearer understanding about what levels of confidentiality should be afforded to young people. There is a need to establish some professional consensus on best practice.

- There needs to be some training for adults working within the care system as well as others such as those working in education and health about independent visitor schemes, and the role of the independent visitors. There is a particular need for others to understand that independent visitors are appointed to assist young people.
- All looked after children and young people should have easy and direct access to advocacy services. In requesting the use of such services, looked after children and young people should not be seen as time wasters or fear retribution as whistleblowers. Others should not be able to block their access to this service.
- Attention should be given to the clarification of roles and the provision of consistent terminology is the first step to providing understandable and accessible services.

The *Quality protects* programme highlights the importance of improving the quality of services provided to looked after children and young people. Those who participated in this study continually repeated positive views about how they had benefited from having an independent visitor or access to an advocate or children's rights officer. It is to be hoped that this message from research will be taken on board by local authorities, especially those where children and young people have little or no access to such services. It is also hoped that the need to meet more specific targets in improving services, for example reducing placement change and increasing placement choice, will not divert attention from the need to implement existing obligations and provide an independent visitor service.

The very limited availability of independent visitors services leaves open the question of the ability of schemes to provide for a much larger group of children and young people who spend substantial periods in public care. The development of schemes available in all authorities and to all children and young people who would benefit from them will challenge existing structures and recruitment, training and support practices. Nevertheless the comments of those children and young people who have successfully been matched with independent visitors would suggest that such efforts are likely to be repaid.

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