

<b>14 September 2021</b>		<b>ITEM: 8</b>
<b>Corporate Parenting Committee</b>		
<b>Independent Visitor Service for Looked After Children</b>		
<b>Wards and communities affected:</b> All	<b>Key Decision:</b> Non key	
<b>Report of:</b> Ruth Murdock, Strategic Lead Quality Assurance and Reviewing, Childrens Social Care		
<b>Accountable Assistant Director:</b> Janet Simon, Interim Assistant Director Children's Social Care and Early Help		
<b>Accountable Director:</b> Sheila Murphy, Corporate Director Of Children's Services		
<b>This report is public</b>		

## **Executive Summary**

This report outlines the role of an Independent Visitor (IV) for Looked After children, when consideration should be given to appointing an independent visitor and how the service is provided in Thurrock.

The report also addresses the questions raised in a letter dated 26 February sent to Chairs of Corporate Parenting Committees by the National Independent Visitor Network ([ivnetwork.org.uk](http://ivnetwork.org.uk)) hosted by Barnardo's. The letter is presented in Appendix 1 of the report.

Thurrock Looked After children have commissioned Open Door to provide an Independent Visitor service. Open Door also provide an Advocacy service to all looked after children. An Independent Visitor is a volunteer who voluntarily gives some of their time each month to support and befriend a child or young person in care who has little to no contact with their birth family or where it is considered to be in the child's best interest. To become an Independent Visitor there is a full assessment process and once approved, they are also supervised and supported by Open Door. Independent visitors and children/young people are matched to each other. Activities are age appropriate and child centred/child led with the expectation of a monthly contact.

This report responds to the questions raised in the open letter from the National IV Network and also provides information about how Thurrock meets the IV standards

There has not previously been a specific report to the Corporate Parenting Committee about the Independent Visiting service. It is proposed that this report is accepted by the Committee.

## **1. Recommendation(s)**

**1.1 The Committee understands the duties as Corporate Parents regarding Independent Visitors for children who are looked after.**

**1.2 The Committee has the opportunity to scrutinise practice against questions set out by the National Independent Visitor Network ([ivnetwork.org.uk](http://ivnetwork.org.uk)) hosted by Barnardo's.**

## **2. Introduction and Background**

2.1 The Children Act 1989 outlined that an Independent Visitor (IV) can be appointed to “advise, befriend and visit” a child in care if they had no or little contact with their birth family. Each Child Looked After (CLA) Review should address whether the child/young person would benefit from having an IV. However, in the Children & Young Persons Act 2008, the criteria for appointing an IV was extended to any child for whom it is in “their best interests” to have an IV. An IV is an adult outside of the professional network who provides a supportive relationship, as long as the child themselves wants to have an IV.

2.2 The aim is that an IV will visit, talk with, listen, share interests and hobbies, help with any worries, speak up for the child/ young person and be an adult friend. The relationship maybe be for months but can often continue for years. IVs are asked to commit to supporting children and young people to whom they are matched for at least 12 months. IV are not paid but can claim expenses.

2.3 Not all children /young people want an IV but they should be asked if it is thought it might be of benefit. The Independent Reviewing Officer, who chairs the CLA review, will give consideration to whether a referral should be made, if it would benefit the child/ young person and if they want it. In Thurrock from Sept 2019 to April 2021 13 children have been referred for an IV service, 5 declined the service immediately or stopped engaging in it after a month or two. In May 2021 there were 7 children engaged in the IV service and receiving support from an IV. The longest period of engagement has been 1 year 7 months.

2.4 In February 2021 an open letter was sent from the National Independent Visitor Network –NIVN- (which is hosted by Barnardos) to the chairs of all Corporate Parenting Committees raising the profile of IV services and asking a number of questions. This report addresses the questions raised below;

- *Duty was imposed by The Children Act 1989 and then expanded in the Children and Young Persons Act 2008, for the provision of Independent*

*Visitors for children who are looked after. Does your LA have an IV provision? If not, are you aware of the reasons for this?*

Thurrock does have a commissioned IV service provided by Open Door – an independent charity which has been in operation since 1978.

- *Are you aware what percentage of your eligible children in care are matched with an IV?  
Are you aware of the value this service has given to them?*

All children who are considered eligible and would benefit from the service have been offered a service. In the CLA cohort not all children would benefit from a service as;

- they are too young,
- have not been looked after for very long,
- have regular contact with their birth families/significant adults in their network,
- have good relationships with their carers and feel part of their foster family
- do not want the service.

All children currently in receipt of the service are in foster care and we will be reviewing how the service take up can be improved for children in residential settings and supported living accommodation. Feedback will be sought from young people as part of an annual service review.

- *Do your panel or committee members and your Children in Care Council know everything they should about IVs and IV entitlement? We recommend you visit: <https://ivnetwork.org.uk/national-standards/>.*

This report will provide members with information about the IV scheme in Thurrock. The Children in Care Council (CICC) is aware of the IV scheme and the National Standards are set out in 2.5.

- *Who is running your scheme and is this provision working well and following the National IV Standards? (IV schemes are run in-house or contracted out with some LAs spot purchasing).*

The scheme is run by Open Door who is independent from the local authority and a charity. Please see 2.5- in most part the national standard is being met.

- *Is IV provision on your panel/committee agenda at least once a year? Does your LA receive an annual report from your IV service? This will help you ensure that children in care in your area are getting the support they are entitled to.*

The LA will be requesting an annual report from Open Door on the Independent Visiting Service where the National Standards will be addressed

and to ensure that all looked after children in Thurrock who are eligible are offered an appropriate IV service.

- *Do you have an action plan to ensure that your IV service in your area is well run, adequately funded and has sufficient capacity to ensure no child misses out?*

The IV commissioned service is reviewed quarterly and it is proposed there is an annual report presented to the Local Authority.

- *An NIVN campaign objective is to extend statutory provision of IV beyond 18 to 25-years, to reduce social isolation and build a positive pathway to independent adulthood. There are many examples of good practice in relation to continued and new IV relationships for care leavers, in line with the Children and Social Work Act 2017 corporate parenting principles. Are you aware of an IV offer to care leavers in your LA?*

Open Door offer services to children and young people up to the age of 25.

## 2.5 The National IV standards –

There are 14 standards – which are listed below and responded to

1. *All looked after children understand their right to an independent visitor. Services are promoted, publicised and accessible. Local authorities promote independent visitor services in line with their duties as corporate parents. –*

The service has been promoted with all managers to be cascaded to all staff, it has been promoted at young people events in Thurrock. In addition Independent Reviewing Officers (IRO) promote the service in CLA reviews.

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

Involvement with the IV service is run by the young person who is receiving the service, they decide on the content of their activities, if they are happy with the IV matching and they decide when the service ends.

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

All young people sign a form of confidentiality which allows for sharing when safeguarding disclosures are made, however the remainder of the content is between the IV and young person. Independent Visitors are

provided with safeguarding training and provided with policies and procedures which include confidentiality.

4. *Children are given the opportunity to participate and be actively involved in the development of services. Children's views, opinions and skills are used*

–

Children are invited by the Participation & Engagement Officer to get involved in various engagement events and also staff recruitment. The Participation & Engagement officer gathers their views and feedbacks to managers through management and staff meetings and also training events. Children & Young people also get involved through CICC activities. The CICC are present and contribute to the Corporate Parenting Committee agenda.

5. *There is a thorough recruitment and selection process for volunteer independent visitors, which is safe and transparent. Independent visitors understand the long-term requirement of the role, with an expectation to commit to a minimum of one year.*

All IV's have been through application stage before an in depth interview. If successful they are given safeguarding training and are given the company's policies and procedures before beginning their role. All are aware of the commitments required of an IV role.

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

The induction process for IVs includes safeguarding training, policies and procedures and also case note writing and the correct use of forms. All staff have supervision monthly to raise any concerns but can also contact their line manager anytime.

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

The process is clear to log referrals, the young person is then considered with the information included on the referral to which IV would be best suited. The young person also chooses when to end the relationship if they feel they are ready and how this happens.

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

All young people are seen once a month for an activity of their choice but contact can happen frequently in between these via phone calls, messages etc.

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

Each child or young person is discussed in supervision to ensure a positive relationship is forming. Also the service will be discussed with the child/ young person by the IRO prior to and during CLA reviews.

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

All IV's working for Open Door are not working under or supervised by children's social care; this ensures their independence.

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

All staff are given the policies and procedures at the start of working for Open Door and these are always accessible for anyone to access. IVs are closely supervised and if there were any safeguarding issues these would be taken very seriously.

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

This is a commissioned service and the resource allocation is reviewed annually. To date the service has been able to meet the need.

*13. Services have clear policies to promote equality and diversity ensuring that no child or volunteer is discriminated against. The service promotes equality when meeting the diverse needs of the CLA population –*

Policies and procedures address equality and diversity, and it is also addressed in the recruitment and supervision processes. There will be continuing efforts to attract a diverse group of IV's in order that the diverse needs of all looked after child needs can be met.

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

The complaints procedures is explained to all young people at the start of the first session, when completing the introduction forms and all contact details are on the website and social media accounts. The complaints procedure is also explained to young people by the IRO and allocated SW.

### **3. Issues, Options and Analysis of Options**

3.1 That this report be accepted by the Committee

3.2 It is important that the Committee has an overview of the services offered to looked after children and care experienced young people, and there is an

opportunity to discuss if the services are meeting the needs of children and young people, or if they need to be reviewed and strengthened. This report provides that opportunity.

#### **4. Reasons for Recommendation**

4.1 As the service is commissioned from an external provider and is uniquely provided by volunteers, the LA will be requesting an annual report from Open Door. This will enable a review to be undertaken by the LA annually.

#### **5. Consultation (including Overview and Scrutiny, if applicable)**

5.1 Consultation has been undertaken with the commissioner and provider. It is proposed the annual report from Open Door will contain specific feedback from children and young people.

#### **6. Impact on corporate policies, priorities, performance and community impact**

6.1 There is no specific impact on the community.

6.2 There is no specific impact on corporate policies, priorities and performance and is in keeping with the corporate drive to work in collaboration with local agencies to provide services which are relevant to the community.

#### **7. Implications**

##### **7.1 Financial**

Implications verified by: **David May**  
**Strategic Lead Finance**

This is budgeted for through Commissioning Services. Open Door are commissioned to provide an advocacy and IV service

##### **7.2 Legal**

Implications verified by: **Judith Knight**  
**Interim Deputy Head of Legal (Social Care and Education)**

The Local Authority must appoint an independent visitor for a child being looked after by the authority if it appears to them it is in the child's best interests to do so – Section 23ZB(1)(b) Children Act 1989. The role and function of the independent visitor is subject of the statutory guidance on care planning, placement and review. The Local Authority must follow this

guidance unless there are exceptional local circumstances which justify departure from this.

### 7.3 **Diversity and Equality**

Implications verified by: **Rebecca Lee**  
**Team Manager – Community Development and Equalities**

The IV service should be offered to all looked after children and young people who would benefit from it, and where possible a relevant IV matched to a young person depending on their wishes and feelings and also their interests and hobbies. The service has been commissioned and will be delivered with commitment to practice which promotes inclusion and diversity. Delivery of the service will be in accordance with the Equality Act 2010 and related Codes of Practice and Anti-discriminatory policy.

### 7.4 **Other implications** (where significant) – i.e. Staff, Health, Sustainability, Crime and Disorder, or Impact on Looked After Children)

There are no other implications- this is a specific service for children who are looked after or who have been care experienced.

### 8. **Background papers used in preparing the report** (including their location on the Council's website or identification whether any are exempt or protected by copyright):

- There are no back ground papers

### 9. **Appendices to the report**

Appendix 1 - National IV Network Open Letter to Chairs of Corporate Parenting Committee

### **Report Author:**

Ruth Murdock

Strategic Lead Quality Assurance & Reviewing  
Children's Social Care