

# Corporate Parenting Board

30 November 2022

## NYAS Advocacy and Independent Visitor Service Report

Choose an item.

**Portfolio Holder:** Cllr A Parry, Children, Education, Skills and Early Help

**Local Councillor(s):** Cllr

**Executive Director:** T Leavy, Executive Director of People - Children

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**Report Status:** Public

### Brief Summary:

This report is designed to update young people in Dorset, the Corporate Parenting Board, Portfolio Holders, Commissioners, and other interested parties, on progress for the provision of advocacy and independent visitor service to care experienced young people from August 2021 to September 2022.

### 1. Introduction

1.1 NYAS became the commissioned provider of Advocacy and Independent Visitor Service for Dorset young people on the 1<sup>st</sup> of August 2021.

1.2 An advocate is allocated to young people in Dorset to ensure their views and concerns are heard, especially when they are involved in statutory processes which they may not understand, to help them to explore their options without prejudice or influence, to ensure they know their rights and to ensure they have the information to help them to make informed choices and decisions. We will ensure they are in contact with the relevant people or contact them on their behalf and accompany young people to meetings or appointments if they require it. NYAS also works with young

people to develop their self-advocacy skills and the confidence to advocate for themselves, which will grow into a lifelong skill.

1.3 The children's Independent Visiting service provides volunteers to visit, befriend and support Children who are Looked After. Those who live in foster care, residential homes and residential special schools and supported living arrangements up to the age of 18 years old. Dorset Council refers via the NYAS portal any eligible children and young people to use the service, up to a maximum of 33 Independent Visitor matches per contract year. An Independent Visitor is an adult who has volunteered to spend time with children looked after, and are someone they can trust, and someone they can rely on. The role of the independent visitor will be to visit at least once a month, so the young person will see them regularly. They'll plan for whatever the young person wants to do and the time they spend will be all about the young person

## **2. Advocacy Service Report**

2.1 Referrals into the service in the first 12 months (August 2021 to July 2022) totalled 842, of these, 456 were for issue-based advocacy where the young person is in care or is a care leaver, and 386 referrals were for young people needing advocacy support due to their involvement in the child protection processes.

2.2 Out of the total 456 issue-based advocacy referrals in Year 1, 194 (42%) received an advocacy service through to completion. Of the 262 referrals that did not receive a service through to completion:

- 93 were declined by the young person after the advocate explained the service and their right
- 15 young people stated they no longer wanted the service
- 31 young people were not able to be contacted
- 30 young people couldn't be contacted because there was incomplete information provided
- 94 cases during the period were declined by NYAS – the overwhelming majority of these were in August to December 2021 when an opt-out system was in place and NYAS was not able to respond to all the requests

2.3 Referrals for the first quarter of Year 2. Referrals for the first quarter of year two (July 2022 to September 2022) totalled 128, of these, 56 were for issue-based advocacy and 72 were for child protection advocacy. Out of the 56 cases referred in the first three months of the second year, 46 were allocated to an advocate with advocacy service provided and work completed on their identified work plan. Out of the 9 cases where no service was provided:

- 2 were declined by the young person
- 2 where the young person disengaged during the advocacy process
- 4 where the young person was uncontactable
- 1 duplicate where referral made by social worker and the advocate.

2.4 Further detail is provided as Appendix 1.

### **3. Independent Visitors service**

3.1 As current matches were settled, and existing Independent Visitors completed NYAS induction and compliance training, the focus changed to recruitment of new independent visitors to increase the number of matches. The new independent visitor coordinator focus since April has been on recruiting suitable matches for the young people who were on the waiting list. By the end of August we had 22 young people matched with independent visitors and regular contact with the Independent Visitors, young people, the carers, and the independent visitor coordinator.

3.2 Between February and August we received 6 new referrals for the Independent Visitor service.

3.3 As of the end of August we had 10 young people waiting to be matched. 5 of which were placed out area. We had 3 Independent Visitor recruited and ready to be matched (1 of which had a match pending, 2 did not have any suitable matches yet). We had three candidates going through recruitment/training process.

3.4 Training and support on a group and individual basis has been completed ensuring that there are clear lines of communication and understanding of the NYAS recording and reporting systems. All IV's have completed the NYAS compliance training and quarterly best practice meetings are undertaken with all current IV's (IVs going through recruitment also have the option of attending these meetings). Best practice meetings cover a range of topics, which are chosen by the independent visitors in order to

assess training needs within the service. One to one support is also offered for independent visitors who need additional guidance.

3.5 Further detail is provided as Appendix 2.

#### **4. Summary**

4.1 Since the challenges experienced early in the contract with the high demand with the initial opt out advocacy referral process amended to have social workers to make referrals directly, things have settled down and service delivery has become more consistent.

4.2 Challenges were raised by commissioning with the capacity for NYAS to manage the referral rate with an “opt out” referral system. After the change was made to Dorset’s referral process, there was a reduction during quarter 2 (Jan to March 2022) where the number of referrals from social workers initially reduced significantly. This period of low referrals also coincided with a time when the advocacy service for a period was without a Senior Advocate to lead the team and promote the changes to the referral process with Children Services. With the appointments in March of a Senior Advocate and Independent Visitor Coordinator and following their initial induction period, both have quickly got up to speed with their respective roles.

4.3 The Senior Advocate has worked closely with Children’s Services leads to promote the advocacy referral process to locality teams, emphasising specific points where young people have the right to and would benefit from advocacy support i.e. child in care reviews. This approach has seen a rise in the number of referrals since April, although there is still some fluctuation in the number of referrals coming through. There has been a push within the advocate team to complete internal referral for young people once they have received a service, which removes the emphasis on the social workers needing to make referrals, thus providing a more consistent offer to young people. This approach enables children in care to build a trusting relationship with the advocate over a period of time. A future focus is to work with children services to support young people when they first come into care, so they understand their rights and know how to access the advocacy service.

4.4 Data collected by both Dorset Council and NYAS are shared mostly on a weekly basis with commissioning, which enables any case specific issues to be picked up and challenged as appropriate. Further amendments are

- being made to the way in which referrals are reported to enable identification of any learning needs around advocacy within Children's Services, so that this can be addressed in a more focused manner. This will also include an internal performance dashboard that is being developed for early 2023 and will support this work.
- 4.5 There has been a resumption of face-to-face meeting, where the advocate will always aim to provide a face to face with a young person, including out of county young people where we have advocacy services running in their area and can offer a local advocate. New ways of working and processes have been implemented within the advocacy team, and young people are routinely being asked to provide feedback on the outcomes framework and the data can start to be used to identify trends in young people understanding of their rights regarding their care and the service can respond accordingly.
- 4.6 The Senior Advocate has spent time promoting the service across Children's Services, delivering presentations to the locality team meetings; care leavers' service; quality assurance reviewing officers and via the Thinking Thursday sessions. A further two training workshops will be delivered targeting newly qualified social workers and Children's Services workforce to raise awareness of the service, these will run in November and March 2023. Several drop-in surgeries have been delivered to offer social workers the opportunity to discuss caseloads and identify young people who will benefit from advocacy, and the senior advocate is currently working with service managers to offer regular drop-ins throughout the year.
- 4.7 As the independent visitors are volunteers, it can be challenging to recruit suitable matches particularly in more rural locations, where we have been creative in how we promote the volunteering opportunities. There is always a balance of managing our monthly visit budget on activities against the cost of travel particularly in areas where volunteers are not always able to travel long distances. The coordinator works closely with the refer and young person to manage expectation, particularly when the safer recruitment process can take longer than we would like.
- 4.8 Once matched, the young people and volunteers are very positive about their experiences and the impact it has on their wellbeing. It allows young people to have new experiences and have a safe space where they can be themselves and talk openly, without judgement. Appendix 4 provides some feedback from children and young people.

4.9 In January 2022, NYAS launched our new 'My Things Matter' campaign as NYAS' flagship 2022 campaign. Supported by Madlug (Make a Difference Luggage) – an award-winning UK bag brand and Dorset Council has signed the pledge. This supports young people to have good quality bags to move their belongings when in care.

4.10 Overall, following a challenging start, the service is now showing a good level of growth, whilst maintaining ongoing support for current matches.

## **5. Financial Implications**

5.1 The service operating within agreed contract and budget

## **6. Well-being and Health Implications**

6.1 All requests for advocacy support are allocated in a timely manner, ensuring that the impact on emotional well-being for children and young people are minimised as they receive a service.

## **7. Climate implications**

7.1 NYAS are a national organisation, so where we have request for service for children and young people staying outside Dorset, we can offer a local advocate and reduce travel.

## **8. Other Implications**

8.1 NYAS actively seek to raise the profile of advocacy and this feeds into Corporate Parenting.

## **9. Risk Assessment**

9.1 Low

## **10. Equalities Impact Assessment**

Not required for this report

## **11. Appendices**

- **Appendices 1 NYAS Advocacy Data**
- **Appendices 2 NYAS IV Service Data**
- **Appendices 3 Young People Feedback**
- **Appendices 4 My Things Matter Campaign**

## 12. Background Papers

None