

# Corporate Parenting Board

23 November 2023

## Advocacy and Independent Visitor Services update

### For Review and Consultation

**Portfolio Holder:** Cllr B Quayle, Children, Education, Skills and Early Help

**Local Councillor(s):** N/A county wide

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

**Report Authors:** Tina Ironside  
**Job Title:** Strategic Commissioner  
**Tel:** 01305 228418  
**Email:** [tina.ironside@dorsetcouncil.gov.uk](mailto:tina.ironside@dorsetcouncil.gov.uk)

**Report Status:** Public

**Brief Summary:** The report updates on our advocacy and Independent Visitor service which supports children in care, care leavers and other children in need. It covers performance of the current service for year 2 of the contract (1 August 2022 and 31 July 23).

**Recommendation:** Corporate Parenting Board are invited to note and discuss the contents of this report.

#### Reason for Recommendation:

The rights of children in care to have a say in decisions about their lives is enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and in the Children Act, 1989. Before making any decision with respect to a child in the care, the local authority must ascertain the wishes and feelings of the child. Where children have difficulty in expressing their wishes or feelings about any decisions made about them, or where the child's wishes conflict with the care provider around a specific decision, consideration must be given to securing the support of an Advocate. Advocates can also be offered to when a child wants to be represented at a meeting or assisted in making a complaint or bringing attention to an issue that needs to be addressed by a care provider, the local authority or any regulatory body.

When children are in care, the local authority has a duty to appoint an Independent Visitor if it appears to be in the child's best interest to do so. This should be considered as part of development of the child's care plan and during any child in care reviews. The appointment of an Independent Visitor must be made with the agreement of the child or young person.

## 1. Background

- 1.1 Dorset Council commission the National Youth Advocacy Service (NYAS)<sup>1</sup> to deliver our Advocacy and Independent Visitor (IV) Services. The contract commenced in 1 August 2021 and runs until 31 July 2024. As well as providing advocacy for children in care and care leavers when issues arise (issue-based advocacy), NYAS also provide advocacy for children who are being safeguarded through child protection processes. This report will focus on issue-based advocacy for children in care and care leavers.
- 1.2 Advocacy represents the views, wishes and needs of children and young people to professionals making decisions about their lives. It helps them to navigate the system, especially in times of transition. The service provides independent and confidential advice and representation. High quality advocacy is preventive so practical problems do not escalate. Advocates also support children and young people who wish to make a complaint about council services. 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 An Independent Visitor (IV) is a volunteer that visits and befriends children in care. They need to be consistent and reliable so that children can build a trusting, positive relationship with them over time. IV's will endeavour to become and remain a consistent adult in the child's life, who does not change when placements or social workers change and will, at all times, stay child focussed. The IV visits at least once a month, so the child or young person will see them regularly. IV's can be allocated to children and young people who live in foster care, residential homes and residential special schools and supported living arrangements up to the age of 18 years old.
- 1.4 Although children can refer themselves to NYAS<sup>2</sup>, most commonly their social worker or Quality Assurance Reviewing Officer will use NYAS's referral portal<sup>3</sup> to refer them. NYAS is a national organisation, who provide services across the county and this portal is used by all the local authorities that commission NYAS to provide their advocacy services.

## 2. Advocacy Overview of Performance – August 2023 to July 2023

- 2.1 In 2022/23 the service received 635 referrals for advocacy – 363 (57%) of these were for children being safeguarded in the child protection system, with the remaining 272 (43%) for support to and issues raised by children in care and care leavers. This paper focuses these 272 referrals.
- 60% of referrals were to support a child in care review meeting
  - 39% of referrals were about issues or complaints
  - 1% of referrals were to support other meetings

---

<sup>1</sup> [The National Youth Advocacy Service | NYAS](#)

<sup>2</sup> [NYAS self-referral options](#)

<sup>3</sup> [NYAS referral portal for professionals](#)

- 2.2 Rates of referrals for children in care and care leavers are fairly steady across the year, with an average of 5 per week, with a slight increase in quarter 4 to 6 per week. Over the year there has been an increase in requests for advocacy attendance at child in care review meetings.
- 2.3 Just over seventy-three per cent (193) of these referrals resulted in the delivery of advocacy support. When advocacy is not delivered then the advocate will contact the social worker to let them know and share the reasons for this. There are a range of reasons that advocacy support was not delivered, but the most common circumstances were:
- 14 children/young people declined the offer (17%)
  - NYAS were unable to allocate an advocate to 10 children/young people on time for the event (14%). In all of these cases retrospective support was offered
  - Issues were resolved and it was no longer considered necessary to have an advocate for 7 young people (8%)
  - A small number of children and young people:
    - decided they no longer wanted the service of an advocate (1%)
    - decided to self advocate (1%)
    - were duplicate referrals (>1%)
    - were not contactable (1%)
- 2.4 Of the children and young people using the service:
- 47% were female, 48% were male, 2% were non-binary and 1% preferred not to disclose or to self-identify
  - 22% were aged 5 to 10 years; 43% aged 11 to 15 years; 22% aged 16 and 17 years and 14% were aged 18 and above
  - 90% of those receiving advocacy were White British, 2% were Black and 4% were Mixed race
  - 32 children were identified as having a disability (17%)
- 2.5 In early 2023 Dorset Council worked with NYAS on a service improvement plan to increase the number of eligible children and young people who are receiving advocacy. The plan also covered improvements to how children's views are shared with professionals. All NYAS's actions on this plan were addressed. Dorset Council and NYAS continue to work together to identify and implement improvements. This includes creating a communication plan to ensure all relevant staff in children's services as well as children and young people are aware of the service and how to refer.
- 2.6 NYAS have increased meetings with the teams who refer children in care, and their manager has reported that this is working well. Referrals in the last 6 months of 2022/23 increased.
- 2.7 Dorset Council are working with NYAS on a revised advocacy and IV referral procedure. The key aims have been to resolve barriers of gaining consent from children and young people and sharing proportionate information about their circumstances. The approach with the procedure has changed following the publication of the revised standards, which is summarised in the next section. The new policies and procedures are due to be agreed at

the council's Practice, Policy and Procedures group on the 21<sup>st</sup> November and will be rolled out immediately after this approval. We expect the new procedure to be fully enacted in December 2023.

2.8 The policy and procedures include guidance on identifying children and young people who have the most significant need for advocacy so that they are prioritised. We are also working on changes to our case management system to provide advocacy referral prompts for social workers to ensure that children are prioritised appropriately for advocacy.

### 3. Impact of advocacy

3.1 NYAS have been focused on capturing the impact of advocacy in the last 12 months, and support their advocates by bringing them together to focus on the identification of good practice and the outcomes from their work. The following table provides extracts of recordings of the impact identified by advocates. Names have been changed to protect the identity of children and young people.

What was the impact?
<p>Jane told their mum that they felt "very heard" at the first meeting. This was a highly stressful time for Jane. Janes's social worker reported that my report had helped to facilitate a very constructive conversation with the whole family. Jane's views were taken into account. They experienced constancy of support as they navigated the new status as a child in need and reached a point where they were happy with the situation and no longer needed my support.</p>
<p>The personal adviser felt that the wishes and feelings report was key to the decision being made to extend Jax's stay at their placement and subsequently to finding them a more permanent place to live. Jax was able to stay in the area where they had built a life for themselves and continue on in their studies towards becoming a nurse.</p>
<p>Omar and I have developed a relationship over time; they have experienced consistency in seeing the same advocate prior to meetings and will have me to support them through whatever the next steps will be.</p>
<p>Charlotte knew their views were valuable and that people were going to listen to them. Charlotte made it clear they wanted their mum and dad to stick more reliably to the contact arrangements. They also requested to have overnight stays at their nan's, which was agreed at the review. There will also be discussions with Charlottes's mum and dad about contact, taking on board her wishes.</p>
<p>Charlie felt supported at several stressful and difficult meetings. Charlie was able to be well prepared. I wrote out preparation notes for each meeting so I could explain clearly what was happening as they like having written information. They were able to have their views expressed. After I asked the social worker to explain clearly the difference between Child in Need and Child in Care at review, they understood more clearly the difference between being Child in Need</p>

under Section 17 and Child in Care under section 20. Charlie gained the confidence to move forward and to make a complaint.
Ollie's recent increasing contentment and acceptance of new arrangements for to attend school was set out in statement and this fed into Ollie's care plan for gradually increased hours of school attendance. Ollie's happiness at home and foster family was taken into account as endorsement of continuation of the placement.
A lot of good decisions were made in the meeting which has helped Yousef feel listened to.
Chloe has had their wishes and views heard and they are happy with the outcome. Their complaint had been resolved, and they are happy with the response.
Quinn was able to express their wish to have regular contact with their brother.

3.2 In addition, NYAS ask children and young people *'are you happy with the service you had from your advocate'?*

- 44 children aged under 11 years responded to the question and 91% said yes
- 106 children aged 12 and above responded to the survey and 95% said they agreed or strongly agreed:

3.3 Below were quotes from children and young people in the summer of 2023:

*"It helped having an advocate. I can talk about my feelings that I have in my soul, and then I don't worry about them anymore".*

*"I like advocacy because they help you have a voice, and they help you sort things out and if you have worries, they help you get them out of your head, so they don't have any more worries"*

#### **4. Independent Visitors Overview of Performance – August 2023 to July 2023**

4.1 Up to 31 July 2023, 28 children had been matched with an IV. 11 children were on the waiting list to be matched. NYAS's IV Coordinator for Dorset left in May 2023, so another coordinator covered this service until they appointed to this vacancy, prioritising existing matches. There was a delay commencing recruitment until the contract was confirmed to extend for 2023/24 and a new service.

4.2 We are keen to ensure that more young people benefit from having an Independent Visitor so are pleased to report that a new IV coordinator has now joined the service. She has been liaising with social workers to ensure that all information is up to date for those waiting to be matched and prioritising the following activity:

- Ensuring that all new referrals are addressed in line with contract requirements
- Marketing to attract new IVs
- Matching children to existing trained volunteers (there are 4 fully trained IVs ready to match)
- Establishing regular communication and management support for stakeholders

## 5. Impact of Independent Visitors

- 5.1 Twelve young people gave feedback about their Independent Visitor, and the feedback from was strong, with all children and young people who gave feedback on their IV saying that they like having an IV; they are happy with their IV; they get to choose what they like to do; they enjoy the visits and they feel safe with their IV. Quotes from the children and young people include:

*“Thank you so much for getting my football boots”*

*“It’s nice that I can decide what to do”*

*“I really like experiencing new things with you”*

*“We had great fun at the theme park”*

*“I am happy with my IV as she likes to play sporty games”*

*“He does what I want. He listens to me”.*

- 5.2 An independent visitor was matched with one young person as they were described as having low self-esteem and struggling to manage their feelings. The following is a case study of their experience (names have been changed):

*Jordan was matched with an enthusiastic and caring Independent Visitor in December 2022. They have met regularly since and it is very clear from the visit reports that Jordan has become happy and relaxed in the company of their IV volunteer, who has shown genuine interest in Jordan and their love of football. This led to the IV contacting their Coordinator to request a pair of football boots. The IV Coordinator was able to use NYAS’ Positive Activity fund to purchase the boots, demonstrating practical and prompt support for the volunteer and young person. Jordan’s Independent Visitor has achieved an excellent balance with their visits. The IV provides Jordan with opportunities to ‘lead’ the visit and make decisions. The IV demonstrates excellent listening skills, encouraging Jordan to chat about a range of topics, sharing what’s on their mind. The IV is empathetic and opens conversation topics without being pushy or inquisitive taking their cues from Jordan.*

## 6. Future plans

- 6.1 There are National Standards for both advocacy and Independent Visiting. The Department for Education (DfE) have published revisions to the Advocacy National Standards<sup>4</sup> and Statutory Guidance<sup>5</sup>. The DfE are consulting on these until 18 December 2023, and they aim

<sup>4</sup> [Revised National Standards for the Provision of Children and Young People’s Advocacy Services \(Sept 2023\)](#)

<sup>5</sup> [Effective Advocacy for Looked-After Children, Children in Need and Care Leavers \(Sept 2023\)](#)

to publish them in Spring 2024. Officers from Children's Services have attended a DfE consultation event on the standards and will respond to the consultation.

6.2 The key proposed changes to the national standards and guidance are:

- increased focus on the importance of independent advocacy
- strengthened guidance on commissioning organisation's responsibilities.
- strengthened guidance for residential and secure settings
- strengthened content on children and young people being aware of their rights to advocacy and to ensure they are active partners in the delivery of these services
- a new standard on non-instructed advocacy for children unable to give instruction, including very young children
- emphasising the importance of timely access to advocacy support whenever required
- greater focus on recruiting diverse advocates and ensuring diverse groups are accessing these services
- increased focus on the values, knowledge and training of advocates

6.3 The revised standards broaden the application of the standards to include children and young people who are:

- in receipt of social care services, including children in care, children in need and care leavers
- in residential settings, including residential schools and special schools
- in secure settings, including children placed by the youth custody service in secure children's homes, secure training centres, youth offending institutions and secure schools (when open)

6.4 Page 7 of the revised standards also lists circumstances where children and young people should proactively be offered advocacy assistance to protect their rights. These provide greater clarification than the current standards.

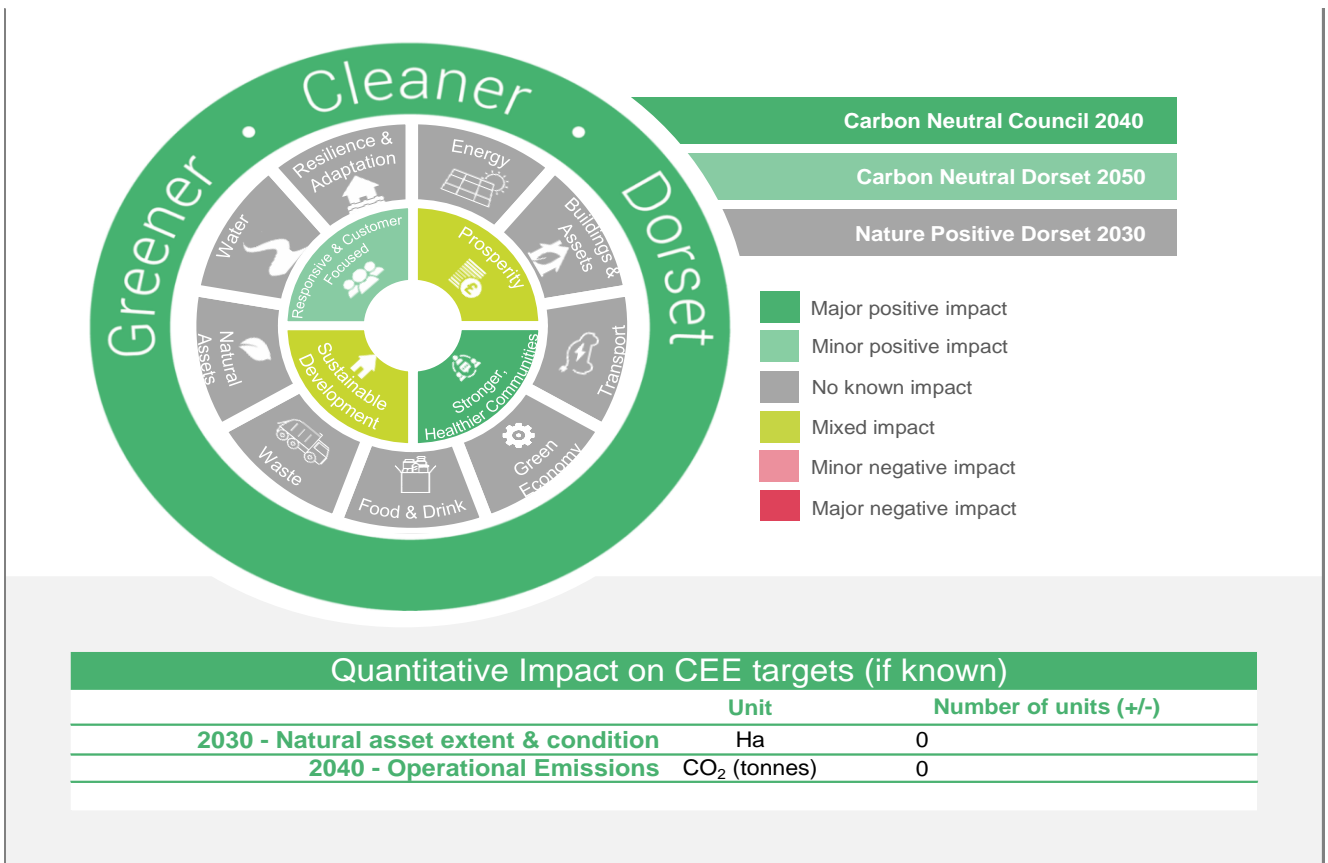
6.5 In preparation for the introduction of these new standards we have reviewed our policy and procedures to reflect these proposed requirements; and they will be included in a revised specification for the service, when we go out to tender early in 2024, in line with procurement legislation. It will be important that we ensure the provider awarded the contract has the skills and capacity to work with all the identified groups, including children with disabilities and very young children who may not be able to provide instruction to advocates.

6.6 We are currently benchmarking our provision against these new standards to ensure that we will be prepared for their implementation and will use this to develop a detailed plan. This will include updating our information to ensure that all children and young people understand their right to advocacy and using our existing information sharing and escalation processes to identify children and young people who should have a proactive offer of advocacy based on their circumstances.

**7. Financial Implications**

7.1 The service is operating within the agreed budget.

**8. Natural Environment, Climate & Ecology Implications**



**9. Well-being and Health Implications**

9.1 Dorset Council require the contracted provider to be responsive to advocates and IVs referrals to minimise impact on emotional well-being for children and young people.

**10. Other Implications**

10.1 The Department for Education selected Dorset Council to deliver the [Families First for Children programme](#). The council are helping develop best practice models for the entire children’s social care system, which will be rolled out across the country. Access to and the service specification for advocacy will be considered in line with these requirements.

**11. Risk Assessment - Low risk**

**12. Equalities Impact Assessment - Not required for this report**

**13. Appendices**



Appendix 1

**ACCESSIBLE TABLE SHOWING IMPACTS**

<b>Natural Environment, Climate &amp; Ecology Strategy Commitments</b>	<b>Impact</b>
Energy	No known impact
Buildings & Assets	No known impact
Transport	No known impact
Green Economy	No known impact
Food & Drink	No known impact
Waste	No known impact
Natural Assets & Ecology	No known impact
Water	No known impact
Resilience and Adaptation	No known impact

<b>Corporate Plan Aims</b>	<b>Impact</b>
Prosperity	neutral
Stronger healthier communities	strongly supports it
Sustainable Development & Housing	neutral
Responsive & Customer Focused	minor positive impact

Appendix 2

**TABLE OF RECOMMENDATIONS**

<b>Recommendations</b>	<b>Responses -will this be incorporated into your proposal? How? And if not, why not?</b>
<b>Energy</b>	
No recommendations found for this category	
<b>Buildings &amp; Assets</b>	
No recommendations found for this category	
<b>Transport</b>	
No recommendations found for this category	
<b>Green Economy</b>	
No recommendations found for this category	
<b>Food &amp; Drink</b>	

No recommendations found for this category	
<b>Waste</b>	
No recommendations found for this category	
<b>Natural Assets &amp; Ecology</b>	
No recommendations found for this category	
<b>Water</b>	
No recommendations found for this category	
<b>Resilience &amp; Adaptation</b>	
No recommendations found for this category	

#### 14. Background Papers

Report to Corporate Parenting Board – November 2022: Dorset Independent Visitor and Advocacy Report. Available at:

<https://moderngov.dorsetcouncil.gov.uk/documents/s31750/NYAS%20report%20corporate%20parenting%20board%20Nov%202022.pdf>

Report to Corporate Parenting - March 2022: Dorset Independent Visitors and Advocacy Report. Available at :

<https://view.officeapps.live.com/op/view.aspx?src=https%3A%2F%2Fmoderngov.dorsetcouncil.gov.uk%2Fdocuments%2Fs28650%2FCPB%2520report%2520-%2520advocacy%2520and%2520IV.dotx&wdOrigin=BROWSELINK>

