

Corporate Parenting Board

10 December 2024

Advocacy and Independent Visitor services update

For Review and Consultation

Cabinet Member and Portfolio:

Cllr. C Sutton, Children's Services, Education & Skills

Local Councillor(s): N/A county wide

Executive Director:

P Dempsey, Executive Director of People - Children

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Report Status: Public (the exemption paragraph is N/A)

Brief Summary:

This report from is written by National Youth Advocacy Service (NYAS), who our council commission to provide our advocacy and independent visitor service for children and young people. The council's Children's Commissioning Service have also input into the report.

The report updates on these services which support children in care, care leavers and other children in need. It covers performance for the contract year 1 August 2023 to 31 July 2024. It also summarises our plans to develop these services for the new contract which commenced on 1 August 2024.

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 NYAS¹ to deliver our Advocacy and Independent Visitor (IV) service. 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 This report covers performance of year 3 of the previous contract (1 August 2023 to 31 July 24). Dorset Council undertook a re-tendering exercise in early 2024 and NYAS were re-commissioned to deliver these services. The new contract started on 1 August 2024 and runs to 31 July 2027, with the option to extend by a further 3 years. This report also summarises our joint-working to develop these services in the new contract.
- 1.3 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.
- 1.4 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 [The National Youth Advocacy Service | NYAS](#)

1.5 Although children can refer themselves to NYAS², most commonly their social worker or Quality Assurance Reviewing Officer will use NYAS's referral portal³ 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.

1.6 It is important to note that children and young people:

- will not all want or need an advocate
- may have a trusted professional or another adult they want to advocate for them
- will not engage with an advocate, even if they initially consented to have one
- may only need an advocate for a short time
- may feel confident (or be given the confidence) to self-advocate

2. **Alignment to our council's priorities**

2.1 The rights of children to independent advocacy and to an IV are legal entitlements and are embedded in Dorset Council's strategy and commitments in working with children and young people in the following ways:

a) Corporate Parenting Principles

Statutory guidance⁴ for local authorities states that they must:

- act in the best interest, and promote the physical and mental health and well-being, of those children and young people
- encourage those children and young people to express their views, wishes and feelings
- take into account the views, wishes and feelings of those child and young people

In some instances, a child or young person might share views, wishes and feelings that professionals might consider are not in their "best interest" or which might conflict with other needs. Local authorities must balance the wishes and feeling of the child and to consider what is "reasonably practicable and achievable", just like any good parent would do.

The child's "right to be heard" and the local authorities' "best interest" duties are not mutually exclusive. It is important that where there is a difference between these that due consideration is given to the child's views and an appropriate explanation is provided in response. This highlights the need and benefits of high quality, independent advocacy.

² [NYAS self-referral options](#)

³ [NYAS referral portal for professionals](#)

⁴ [Applying corporate parenting principles to looked-after children and care leavers](#)

b) The Dorset Promise to Children and Young People

The Dorset promise⁵ is Dorset Council's commitment to care experienced children and young people as their corporate parents. The provision of advocacy and IV services supports the council in meeting these commitments.



c) Dorset Council's Corporate Parenting Strategy 2024-2027 Priorities

The advocacy service works with children in care on the issues that are important to them, and this can touch on many different aspects of their lives including:

- living arrangements and ensuring that the child's voice is heard in decision making regarding where they live and any necessary moves - **Priority 1, safety and permanence**
- their experience and needs in education, as well as their future, plans aspirations, and ensuring that care-experienced young people have a Pathway Plan that meets their needs and is delivered - **Priority 2, education and employment**
- having the opportunities, abilities and confidence to express their views; not only about their Care but also about who they are and their Identity. We work with children to ensure that the adults in their lives listen and respond to their views, wishes and feelings, including their concerns. We support children to understand their rights and entitlements, including the

⁵ [The Dorset Promise](#)

right to complain through informal or formal Local Government processes - **Priority 4, identity**

- our relationships with children can extend beyond care, with our advocacy service available for young people / young adults up until their 25th birthday - **Priority 5, next steps towards adult life.**

Through our IV service children and young people build long-term relationships with adults who they meet regularly to have fun and do things together.

- These relationships form part of the important wider support network for children and give them an adult (who is not paid to be there) that they can rely on - **Priority 1, safety and permanence**
- Children are given choice and control over who they are “matched” with and can give specific criteria for the volunteer that they would like to spend time with. This can include either volunteers with similar interests / hobbies, or volunteers who share some characteristics (e.g. a young boy who wants a male volunteer) - **Priority 4, identity**
- We continue to support the IV relationship beyond a young person’s 18th birthday, if this is something that the young person wants to continue. This is currently being achieved through the IV contract, but we have also started to develop connections with the Council’s lifelong links, recognising the value and importance of these long-term relationships - **Priority 5, next Steps towards adult life.**

3. **Advocacy overview of performance – August 2023 to July 2024**

3.1 NYAS report on two types of advocacy:

- a) Child Protection Advocacy (CPA) representing children and young people at child protection conferences and reviews.
- b) Issue Based Advocacy (IBA) representing children and young people for short-term issues e.g. during child in care reviews. This includes children in care, care leavers and a wider cohort of eligible children.

3.2 In 2023/24 the service received 649 referrals for advocacy. 376 (58%) of these were for children being safeguarded in the child protection system (CPA), with the remaining 273 (42%) supported issues raised by children in care and care leavers (IBA). This section focuses the 273 IBA referrals.

3.3 Of the 273 of IBA referrals, the most common reasons were:

- 56% Child in Care Review (statutory meeting)
- 8% Child in Need (statutory meeting)

- 4% Complaints about the local authority or placement provider
- 3% Living arrangements
- 3% Change of placement

3.4 The 273 IBA referrals made represent 165 individual children and young people. 37% (100) children were referred for advocacy only once during the 12-month period. Most children were referred at least twice. 10 children were referred for advocacy support for separate issues on four or more occasions over the year.

3.5 75% (205) of these referrals resulted in the delivery of advocacy support. When advocacy is not delivered, 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 for these 68 referrals were:

- 23 (34%) Children and young people declined the offer
- 17 (25%) NYAS were unable to make contact to provide the service e.g with the child, foster carer or the person who made the referral
- 10 (15%) Advocacy was no longer required

3.6 Of the 165 children and young people using the service:

Gender:

- 49% were female
- 47% were male
- 2% preferred not to disclose
- remaining 2% either did not conform to a gender, were non-binary or were transgender

Age:

- 17% aged 7 to 11 years
- 32% aged 12 to 15 years
- 29% aged 16 and 17 years
- 21% were aged 18 to 25 years

Ethnicity

- 85% White British
- 4% were Black
- 2% were Mixed race
- 3% Other White backgrounds
- 6% were from other ethnicities

Disability and mental health

- 33 children/young people identified as having a disability (20%)
- 9 children/young people identified as having a mental health issue (5%)

4. Impact of advocacy

4.1 The table below shows the children and young people who answered 'yes' to the questions before they received support (pre) and when it ended (post). It illustrates a significant shift in understanding, confidence and satisfaction following the support.

5. Question	Children aged 11 and under		Children and young people aged 11 to 25 years	
	Yes-Pre	Yes-Post	Yes-Pre	Yes-Post
Do you know what your Rights are?	37% (23/63)	82% (45/55)	39% (37/95)	78% (73/93)
Did you have opportunities to express your views, wishes and feelings?	56% (35/62)	98% (53/54)	44% (41/94)	91% (85/93)
During planning, are changes made to your plan because of your views?	16% (9/58)	63% (33/52)	38% (35/91)	77% (70/91)
Do you tell workers / carers in your life what you think about your care?	65% (39/60)	85% (45/53)	43% (38/89)	75% (67/89)
Are you happy with the service you have from your NYAS advocate?	n/a	96% (52/54)	n/a	98% (87/89)

4.2 Below are a sample of quotes from children and young people during the year (no amendments have been made to how they were worded):

"It now feels like someone is listen"

"I find you always listen and explain my point clearly to the council"

"I can't vouch for all advocates but I was lucky to get a good one, one that listens to me, isn't making me feel unheard and is helping me every step of the way. I got asked if I wanted a advocate and I said no straight away because I was sick of meeting new people, who I thought wasn't going to do anything/help me etc. but my opinion has changed. I would recommend a advocate to any young person who feels not listened to the feeling of not being heard is world wrenching, you feel invisible. but I now have that person who listens. so thank you"

"It helps someone who doesn't have a voice or who struggles talking help them express what they are feeling and needs to be said"

- 4.3 Below are a sample of quotes from family members or professionals during the year (children's names have been changed):

"It was very powerful hearing Olivia's voice, and I will certainly be making an effort to rectify her concerns"

"Thank you for your input it was very helpful for Hamza to have someone completely independent to speak to, and his comments helped me to understand his perspective better and reassure him"

"Skye was talking about you the other day. I think that you have built a good relationship with her, and she feels very comfortable talking to you"

- 4.4 When an advocate completes their support, they summaries the impact for individual children and young people. Below are some examples of the impact that were recorded during the year (children's names have been changed).

"Archie understood his views and wishes were represented at the CiC Review. His concerns around education and his EHCP were directly addressed at the meeting, and this was fed back to him and his foster carer. Archie has asked that I continue to advocate for him on his EHCP".

"Her concerns were listened to and her social worker will be seeing her after the meeting to go through in more detail with her the plans for her to go back to living with Mum full time. Contact with Dad (letter writing only) will remain the same until later in the year when it will be reviewed again. The professionals reassured Maryam that they were listening to what she wanted and that everything was going in the right direction for her".

"Finn is now confident that his social worker is listening to him, and he has a plan which he is happy with to start afresh in Devon and go to college there once he is settled. He now understands his Child in Care status and he is happy with the support he will receive for his mental health and drug use and has decided that being in care is the best place for him to receive this support".

"Jayden knew his views were important and that people at the review would listen to them. He said he wanted to see family members more often. He wanted to be able to visit them and to be able to stay overnight with his nan and mum. (His) requests were listened to and it was agreed at the review that transport would be arranged so he could see his family more often. Assessments will also be done to prepare for day visits and overnight visits with his mum and nan".

- 4.5 Typically, an advocate will be able to listen to the child or young person that they're working with to determine how they're feeling and what their wishes and feelings are. However, sometimes a child or young person may not be able to give a clear indication

of what they're feeling, or what they want to happen in a certain situation. In this instance, non-instructed advocacy can be used to ensure their rights are being upheld, and that decisions are made in line with their preferences and perspective. In the 2023/24 contract year NYAS advocates supported 16 non-instructed advocacy cases for 12 individual children and young people.

4.6 Children and young people are encouraged to give feedback on the quality and appropriateness of the services they receive from Dorset Council, including representations when they are unhappy. An advocate can support a child to navigate the complaints process⁶ and to ensure their views are heard and responded to. In 2023/24 NYAS advocates supported 16 complaints processes for 12 individual children and young people. 13 of the cases related to Dorset Council services and 3 were complaints about their placement provider.

5 Independent Visitor overview of performance – August 2023 to July 2024

5.1 There were 14 new referrals over the 2023/24 contract year (including re-matches) and 9 new matches of children and young people with an Independent Visitor (IV).

5.2 17 existing matches ended. There were a variety of reasons why IV relationships came to an end, including:

- a child no longer wants an IV due to increased extra-curricular activities and hobbies
- a child moves out of the area and the distance means the IV visits can't continue
- changes in personal circumstances for volunteer IVs who are unable to continue to meet their commitment
- a young person turns 18 and the match comes to a planned (celebratory) end

5.3 The year started with 11 children and young people on the waiting list waiting to be matched with and ended with 12 children on the waiting list.

5.4 27 children and young people were matched with an IV at the start of the contract year. At the end of the year, 19 were matched.

5.5 Therefore, despite the service achieving nine new matches during the year, the total number of children who continue to be matched decreased. This provides significant capacity for new matches to be achieved in the year ahead and for more children to benefit from having an IV.

⁶ [Children's social care complaints policy and procedure](#)

5.6 Where an IV match ends, children and young people can decide whether they would like to be re-matched with a new IV volunteer. Of the 17 matches that ended, six children said that they would like to be re-matched (35%).

5.7 The demographics for referrals during the contract year, including those waiting to be re-matched were:

Gender:

- 7 were female
- 6 were male
- 1 did not conform to a gender

Age:

- an even spread of ages between 8 and 17 years old

Ethnicity

- 11 White British
- 1 Other White backgrounds
- 2 from other ethnicities

Disability and mental health

- 3 children and young people identified as having a disability

5.8 If child or young person is placed outside of Dorset, they can still be referred to NYAS. The resident local authority for the referrals over the year were:

- Dorset Council - 11
- BCP Council - 1
- Somerset County Council - 1
- Oxfordshire County Council - 1

6 Impact of Independent Visitors

6.1 Below is a quote from a child during the year:

“I would just like to say that my IV is absolutely amazing and I couldn't imagine my life without her”

6.2 Volunteer IVs provide feedback after their visits. They provide a summary of the activities they have done together and make observations on their relationship and ongoing value for each child. Below is a quote from an IV.

“From my experience over the last 3.5 years, it is evident that my young person feels able to talk to me about anything without any judgement or trust broken. I feel that the time we have together is so valuable, especially for that 1-1 time together and sharing stories and making memories and being that extra person in their life that they can depend on and look forward to doing nice things with to get away from their “normal”

life. It opens out a new dimension – another adult in their life, one who is very constant and one who is exclusive to them and makes them feel special and listened to.”

- 6.3 NYAS also seek feedback from other adults in the child’s life. This is to confirm whether the IV relationship continues to meet the child’s needs and achieves what is wanted. Below is a WhatsApp message from a foster carer to an IV after a visit (child’s name has been changed):

"Thanks so much for all you've done for Umar. I think you're the only person Umar doesn't complain about!!"

- 6.4 Dorset IVs have access to additional funding, Positive Activities Fund⁷, which is grant funding that has been secured by NYAS. This fund is specifically intended to be used to support Dorset’s children and young people in care who are matched with an IV to further their interests, hobbies, sports and developing their skills. In Dorset, our IV’s have been proactive in recognising how this fund can be used in a positive way with more than £1,000 of expenditure requested and approved in the year.

- 6.5 Below is a case study (child’s name has been changed):

Daisy is a young person (aged 15) who has been matched with her IV for 2 years. Daisy is an enthusiastic footballer. She enjoys playing for her school and has recently been selected to play for her local Women’s Team. On visits, the IV often goes to watch Daisy play football, or they go to watch a local match together.

Daisy IV contacted her IV Coordinator and asked if NYAS would be willing to support Daisy with funding for a pair of good quality football boots. The request was readily supported, and Daisy now plays in her new football boots.

“Thank you so much for getting Daisy her boots. She is so pleased with them!!!”

7 Developing the advocacy and IV services

- 7.1 There have been a lot of good delivery and positive differences made for children and young people through the advocacy service and IV services. However, there was some key challenges in the delivery of these services, including:

- staffing gaps / recruitment / end of commissioned contract
- referrals and uptake of services
- volunteer recruitment for the IV service
- building relationships and trust between workers and agencies

⁷ [NYAS Positive Activities Fund](#)

- 7.2 NYAS and Dorset Council worked closely to resolve these challenges and improve the services.
- 7.3 Feedback from children and young people in Dorset who had experienced being supported by an advocate or an IV was used to write the specification when Dorset Council re-tendered the services earlier this year. Below is the image used in the specification to summarise their feedback:



- 7.4 The feedback from children and young people (and other stakeholders) was used to define the requirements of the services. These included requirements to ensure more children and young people can benefit from an advocate or IV, including a big focus on:
- children and young people being involved to shape the services
 - ensuring the referral process is user-friendly
 - maintaining continued relationships with advocates and IVs
 - accessibility for all, including children and young people with special educational needs and/or disabilities.

Extract from the specification:

Hearing the voices of children and young people is at the heart of this specification, the tender process and ongoing contract management.

- 7.5 As part of the tender evaluation process, providers who bid presented to a group of young people and answered their questions. The young people's scores were added to the overall evaluation scores to determine which provider was selected.
- 7.6 NYAS were successful with their bid to deliver these services in Dorset to meet the new requirements which started on 1 August 2024. Dorset Council are now working with NYAS to implement their service development plan. A key element of these plans

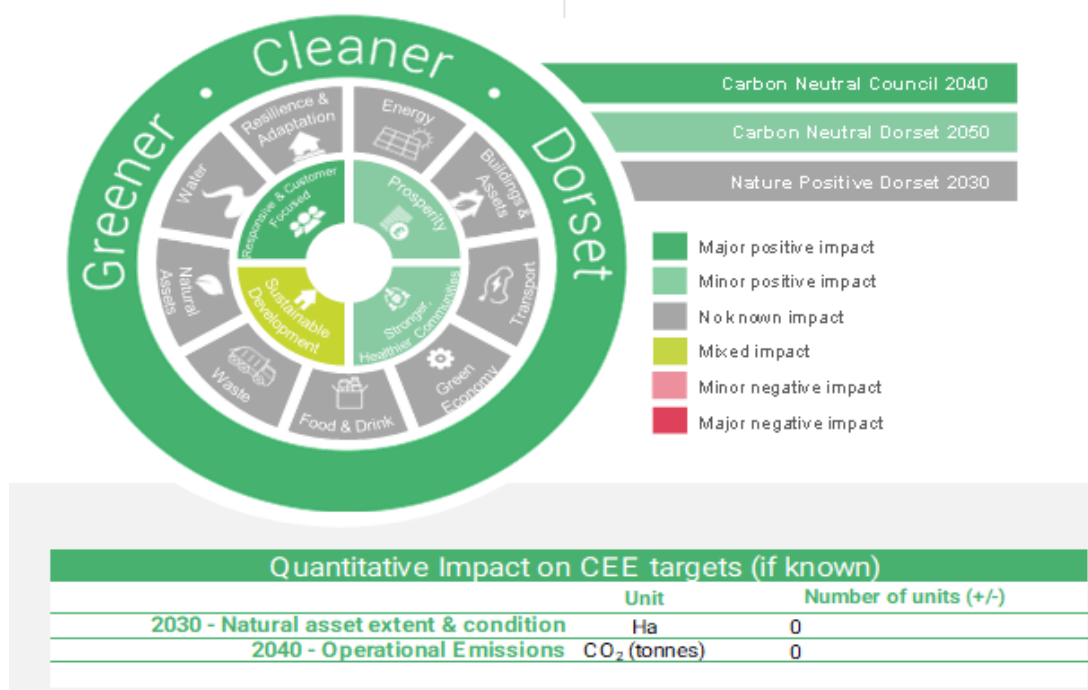
is improving communication and processes so that more children and young people benefit from having an advocate or IV.

7.7 NYAS will be working with Dorset’s Youth Voice⁸ team to ensure that children and young people’s voices continue to shape the services.

8 Financial Implications

8.1 The service is operating within the agreed budget.

9 Natural Environment, Climate & Ecology Implications



9.1 See appendix 1 for the accessible table showing impacts.

10. Well-being and Health Implications

10.1 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.

11. Other Implications

11.1 The advocacy and IV specification included requirements from the revised advocacy standards for children and young people⁹. The Department for Education consulted on these in 2023. They were due to be published in Spring 2024, but this has not happened yet (possibly due to the change in Government). However, we believe the

⁸ [Dorset Youth Voice](#)

⁹ [National Standards for the Provision of Children and Young People’s Advocacy Services](#)

revised standards were robust and are unlikely to change significantly when they are published.

- 11.2 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. Our advocacy approach is being adapted in line with these requirements.

12. Risk Assessment – low risk

13. Equalities Impact Assessment - Not required for this report

14. Appendices

- 14.1 Appendix 1 - Natural Environment, Climate & Ecology Impacts table

15. Background Papers

[Report to Corporate Parenting Board – November 2023: Dorset Independent Visitor and Advocacy Report](#)

[Report to Corporate Parenting Board – November 2022: Dorset Independent Visitor and Advocacy Report](#)

16. Report Sign Off

- 16.1 This report has been through the internal report clearance process and has been signed off by the Director for Legal and Democratic (Monitoring Officer), the Executive Director for Corporate Development (Section 151 Officer) and the appropriate Portfolio Holder(s).

Appendix 1: Natural Environment, Climate & Ecology Strategy Commitments - impacts

Accessible table showing impacts

Natural Environment, Climate and Ecology Strategy Commitments	Impact
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

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

Recommendations

Energy
No recommendations found for this category
Buildings & Assets
No recommendations found for this category
Transport
No recommendations found for this category
Green Economy
No recommendations found for this category
Food & Drink
No recommendations found for this category
Waste
No recommendations found for this category
Natural Assets & Ecology
No recommendations found for this category
Water
No recommendations found for this category
Resilience & Adaptation
No recommendations found for this category