

Corporate Parenting Board

11 December 2025

Advocacy and Independent Visitors Report

For Review and Consultation

Cabinet Member:

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

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

Senior Leadership Team:

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Statutory Authority:

Advocacy

Corporate Parenting Duties: Under Section 22 of the Children Act 1989, local authorities must safeguard and promote the welfare of looked-after children. Advocacy is seen as a key mechanism to uphold children's rights and ensure their voices are heard in decisions affecting them.

Section 26A requires local authorities to make arrangements for the provision of advocacy services for children and young people who wish to make or have made a complaint under the Children Act 1989.

Independent Visitors

Local authorities have a statutory duty to consider appointing Independent Visitors for children in care under Section 23ZB of the Children Act 1989, as amended by the Children and Young Persons Act 2008.

Report status: Public Choose an item.

1. Executive summary

- 1.1 This report has been jointly prepared by the National Youth Advocacy Service (NYAS), commissioned by Dorset Council to deliver advocacy and Independent Visitor (IV) services, and the Council's Children's Commissioning Service.
- 1.2 It reflects delivery and performance during the first eight months of the new contract (1 August 2024 to 31 March 2025). The services support children in care, care leavers, and other children in need, ensuring their voices are heard in decisions that affect their lives and that they have access to consistent, trusted relationships.
- 1.3 The report sets out:
 - service developments
 - performance data
 - the views of children and young people
 - progress made against challenges identified in the 2024 report
 - priorities for the year ahead

2. Recommendation(s)

- 2.1 Corporate Parenting Board are invited to note and discuss the contents of this report.

3. Reason for the recommendation(s)

- 3.1 The rights of children in care to be heard in decisions about their lives are fundamental. These rights are enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, Article 12), which states that every child has the right to express their views freely in all matters affecting them, and for those views to be given due weight. They are also embedded in the Children Act 1989, which requires local authorities to ascertain the wishes and feelings of children before decisions are made about their care.
- 3.2 Advocacy provides a mechanism to ensure these rights are realised in practice. Where children find it difficult to express their wishes or feelings, or where their views conflict with those of the care provider, an advocate offers independent support. Advocates can help children to prepare for and participate in meetings, to raise concerns, or to make a complaint when they feel their voice has not been heard. Importantly, advocates work to the child's agenda, ensuring the child's perspective is central to decision-making processes.

- 3.3 The appointment of an Independent Visitor (IV) is a further statutory duty. Local authorities must consider the appointment of an IV where it is judged to be in the child's best interests, and this should form part of care planning and be reviewed regularly. IVs provide children with consistent, trusted relationships with adults who are independent of their corporate parent and professional network. The role is not task-focused; rather, it is relational. For many children, the IV may be the only person in their life who is there by choice, not by professional obligation.
- 3.4 Both advocacy and IV provision are more than compliance with statutory duties; they are expressions of good corporate parenting. They provide children and young people with trusted adults who listen, amplify their voices, and ensure their rights are upheld. Dorset's commissioning of dedicated advocacy and IV services reflects its commitment to embedding these duties within a child-centred framework of practice.

The report

4. Background

- 4.1 Dorset Council commissions the National Youth Advocacy Service (NYAS) to deliver the Advocacy and Independent Visitor (IV) service. Alongside providing advocacy for children in care and care leavers when issues arise (issue-based advocacy), NYAS also provides advocacy for children who are subject to child protection processes. This report focuses on issue-based advocacy for children in care and care leavers.
- 4.2 Dorset Council undertook a re-tendering exercise in early 2024 and re-commissioned NYAS to continue delivering these services.
- 4.3 This report covers performance during Year 1 of the current contract (1 August 2024 to 31 July 2027, with the option of a further three-year extension). To align with reporting and monitoring with financial years, year 1 of the contract runs from 1 August 2024 to 31 March 2025, and year 2 of the contract began on 1 April 2025.
- 4.4 The report also summarises joint work undertaken to develop and strengthen these services under the new contract.
- 4.5 Advocacy ensures that the views, wishes and needs of children and young people are represented to professionals making decisions about their lives. It enables them to navigate complex systems, particularly at points of transition. The service provides independent and confidential advice,

representation, and support. High-quality advocacy is preventative, addressing issues early so that practical problems do not escalate. Advocates also support children and young people who wish to make a complaint about council services. A further role of NYAS is to help young people build their self-advocacy skills, growing their confidence to speak up for themselves; a lifelong skill that extends beyond their time in care.

- 4.6 Independent Visitors (IVs) are trained volunteers who befriend children in care, providing consistency and reliability to enable a trusting, positive relationship to develop over time. An IV remains independent of the child's professional network and continues to provide support even when placements or social workers change. Visits usually take place at least once a month, ensuring regular contact. IVs may be allocated to children living in foster care, residential care, residential special schools or supported living arrangements up to the age of 18.
- 4.7 Where it is in a young person's best interests, and both the IV and young person wish to continue their relationship beyond the age of 18, this is supported and encouraged as a natural evolution. Dorset Council and NYAS work together to maintain this important relationship.
- 4.8 While children and young people can refer themselves to NYAS, most referrals are made by social workers or Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs) through the NYAS referral portal. As a national organisation, NYAS provides advocacy services across multiple local authorities using this system.
- 4.9 It is important to recognise that:
 - not all children will want or need an advocate
 - some may prefer a trusted professional or another adult to represent their views
 - some may choose not to engage with an advocate, even if initially consented
 - others may only require advocacy for a short period
 - many will grow in confidence and develop their own self-advocacy skills

5. Advocacy standards and strategic context

- 5.1 Dorset's services are benchmarked against the National Advocacy Standards (DfE, 2023).
- 5.2 Statutory guidance requires local authorities to:

- act in the best interests of children and young people, promoting their physical and mental health and emotional well-being.
 - encourage children and young people to express their views, wishes, and feelings.
 - take those views, wishes, and feelings into account in decision-making.
- 5.3 Children and young people may sometimes express views that professionals feel are not in their “*best interests*” or that conflict with other needs. Local authorities must balance these views with what is reasonably practicable and achievable, just as any good parent would.
- 5.4 A child’s right to be heard and the local authority’s best interest duties are not mutually exclusive. Where differences arise, it is essential that the child’s views are given due consideration and that a clear, respectful explanation is provided. This underscores the value of high-quality, independent advocacy in supporting children’s rights and ensuring transparency.
- 5.5 The Children’s Commissioner’s 2023 report, *The State of Children and Young People’s Advocacy Services in England*, highlighted national variability in access, independence, and commissioning practice. It recommended stronger entitlements, clearer oversight, and improved data collection. Dorset’s approach, commissioning a dedicated provider, embedding youth voice in service design, and aligning with national standards, reflects these recommendations and demonstrates good practice.

6. Independent Visitor standards and strategic context

- 6.1 The National Independent Visitor Network (NIVN) Standards (2016), ensuring alignment with best practice and statutory expectations across both service areas.
- 6.2 The Independent Visitor (IV) service is a statutory entitlement for children and young people who are looked after and have little or no contact with their birth family. The NIVN Standards (2016) set out expectations for quality, consistency, and child-centred practice in IV services.
- 6.3 IV’s provide long-term, stable relationships with trusted adults outside the care system. They support emotional well-being, build confidence, and offer opportunities for fun, connection, and personal growth. The IV role complements advocacy by promoting the child’s voice through relational support, not just representation.

- 6.4 The 2024 NIVN report, *A Friend Indeed*, provides the first independent national review of the impact of Independent Visitor services. Drawing on the voices of care-experienced children and young people, it evidences the emotional, developmental, and relational benefits of IV friendships. The report calls for improved access, stronger commissioning, and better outcome tracking. Dorset's structured matching process, youth-led service development, and alignment with national standards reflect many of the report's recommendations and demonstrate good practice.

7. Alignment to our council's priorities

- 7.1 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 the following that align with the [Corporate Parenting Strategy 2024–2027](#):

Priority 1, safety and permanence: living arrangements and ensuring that the child's voice is heard in decision making regarding where they live and any necessary moves

Priority 2, education and employment: 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 4, identity: 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 right to complain through informal or formal Local Government processes

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

- 7.2 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.

Priority 1, safety and permanence: 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 4, identity: 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 5, next Steps towards adult life: 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

- 7.3 [The Dorset promise](#) 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:



8. Advocacy overview of performance Aug 2024 to March 2025 (8 months)

8.1 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.

8.2 In 2024/25 the service received **478 referrals for advocacy**:

- 249 (52%) of these were for children being safeguarded in the child protection system (CPA)
- 229 (48%) were supported with issues raised by children in care and care leavers (IBA)

8.3 This report focuses on the **229 IBA referrals**

8.4 Of the 229 IBA referrals, the most common reasons were:

60% Child in Care Review (statutory meeting)

- 11% Child in Need (statutory meeting)
- 5% Living arrangements
- 3% Issues in home

- 8.5 The 229 IBA referrals made represent **156 individual children and young people**. 94 children were referred for advocacy only once during the 8-month period, and 62 children were referred at least twice, including 4 children who were referred for advocacy support for separate issues on four or more occasions during the period.
- 8.6 Between 1 August 2024 to 31 March 2025 **178 IBA referrals were closed**. This figure includes some instances of advocacy that there open within the service and carried forward from the previous year, and likewise some of the referrals received in this year have remained active and open into year 2 of the contract.
- 8.7 Of the 178 IBA referrals closed, **140 (79%) of these referrals resulted in the delivery of advocacy support**.
- 8.8 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 38 referrals were:
- 14 (37%) Children and young people declined the offer
 - 11 (29%) NYAS were unable to make contact to provide the service e.g with the child, foster carer or the person who made the referral
 - 7 (18%) Advocacy was no longer required, due to the issues being already resolved or the Statutory meeting for which advocacy was referred is no longer going ahead.
- 8.9 The demographics of the 156 children and young people using the service in this period were:
- Gender
- 45% were female
 - 52% were male
 - 3 either did not conform to a gender, were non-binary or were transgender
- Age
- The youngest children who were referred for advocacy were 4 years old.

The oldest young people who were referred for advocacy were 24 years old.

- 3% aged 4 to 6 years
- 25% aged 7 to 11 years
- 28% aged 12 to 15 years
- 28% aged 16 and 17 years
- 16% were aged 18 to 25 years

Ethnicity

- 83% White British
- 4% were Black
- 7% were Mixed / Multiple ethnicities
- 2% Other White backgrounds
- 4% were from other ethnicities

Disability and mental health

- 28 children and young people (13%) were identified as having a disability. The most recorded needs were Autistic Spectrum Disorder and Behavioural, Emotional and Social Difficulties.
- 5 occasions of Non-Instructed Advocacy¹ were provided to safeguard the rights and entitlements of children with complex communication needs, including those with Severe Learning Difficulties.
- 19 children/young people identified as having a mental health issue Resident Authority

8.10 Whilst most children referred for IBA live within the Dorset Council footprint, 36 children were living outside of the county. These children were living in (one child unless otherwise stated):

- Birmingham City Council
- Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole Council (4 children)
- Bristol City Council

¹ Non-instructed advocacy is used when a child or young person is unable to clearly express their wishes or views, for example due to communication difficulties, learning disabilities, or very young age. In these circumstances, the advocate works to uphold the child's rights and best interests by:

- observing the child's behaviour and responses;
- consulting with people who know the child well; and
- ensuring that decisions take account of the child's rights, welfare, and likely wishes.

This approach ensures that children with the most complex needs are not excluded from having their voices represented in decisions about their lives.

- Cambridgeshire County Council (2 children)
- Cornwall Council (4 children)
- Devon County Council
- Hampshire County Council (4 children)
- Isle of Anglesey County Council
- Kent County Council
- London Borough of Hounslow
- North Somerset Council
- Somerset County Council (9 children)
- Southampton City Council (5 children)
- Wiltshire Council
- London Borough of Hounslow
- North Somerset Council
- Somerset County Council (9 children)
- Southampton City Council (5 children)
- Wiltshire Council

8.11 Table 1 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

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% (16/43)	86% (30/35)	45% (28/62)	83% (53/64)
Did you have opportunities to express your views, wishes and feelings?	69% (29/42)	97% (33/34)	56% (36/64)	93% (63/68)
During planning, are changes made to your plan because of your views?	17% (7/41)	50% (16/32)	34% (20/59)	80% (53/66)
Do you tell workers / carers in your life what you think about your care?	69% (27/41)	88% (30/34)	48% (31/64)	77% (50/65)

Are you happy with the service you have from your NYAS advocate?	n/a	97% (33/34)	n/a	97% (64/66)
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8.12 Below are a sample of quotes from children and young people during the year (no amendments have been made to how they were worded):

"I also want to thank my advocate, for being there and making sure my voice was heard throughout everything. Knowing I had that support behind me gave me confidence and helped me feel like I wasn't going through this alone."

"If it wasn't for your support I don't think I would have made it this far. If it wasn't for charity's like the one you work at (NYAS) children like me now an adult would be left on their own and no support."

"Thanks for everything. You're the only one who is doing anything to help me."

"I know you have my back."

"I'm really grateful for the support of my advocate since my time in hospital. The communication has been great. I've decided not to go to future meetings because I trust my advocate to share my views for me."

"I'm really pleased that an issue I raised with my advocate before has now been addressed, and things are much better."

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

"Mum said the advocacy service has been 'worth its weight in gold due to the support received."

Social worker commented "You managed to get more out of the children than I did – thank you."

The Independent Reviewing Officer commented that the child's report submitted for the review had "a powerful impact in letting Sophie's voice be heard in the meeting."

Staff at the residential home thanked me for the advocacy support and "its power in ensuring Jacob was placed at the heart of decision making."

"It absolutely helped Neil having an advocate. It was a huge, huge help!"

- 8.14 When an advocate completes their support, they summarises 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):

Alex — Safety, stability and clear planning

- Issue: Alex repeatedly raised concerns about feeling unsafe in their home and asked for a new social worker
- Advocacy actions: Advocate presented Alex's wishes at their review; ensured immediate escalation; sought clarity on options and requested life-story work
- Outcome/impact: New social worker allocated; concerns acted upon with exploration of alternative living options (remaining with dad/emergency/supported accommodation). Alex understands next steps and has requested continued advocacy
- Next steps: Ongoing advocacy for the next review to monitor safety and placement planning

Ben — Resolving debt and building self-advocacy

- Issue: Long-running financial dispute alongside housing instability and domestic abuse.
- Advocacy actions: 18 months of structured support drafting formal correspondence, negotiating with agencies, and maintaining engagement through multiple moves.
- Outcome/impact: Debt written off; Ben now settled in his own flat. He reports increased control and confidence in managing issues.
- Next steps: Case closed with option to re-open if needed.

Layla — Education plan that fits her needs

- Issue: Anxiety about school moves and timetable.
- Advocacy actions: Secured a child-led planning meeting; presented wishes for practical adjustments and contact with family.
- Outcome/impact: Agreed package for Layla to remain at current school with timetable changes, additional tutoring, plus a two-day practical skills course.
- Next steps: Advocate to remain involved to review whether the plan continues to meet Layla's goals.

Marcus — Entitlements confirmed and pathway support

- Issue: Marcus believed he should have been treated as a child in care from first presentation to social services; needed help understanding rights.
- Advocacy actions: Supported Marcus to articulate his views and navigate complaints and assessments.
- Outcome/impact: CIC status confirmed; care leaver entitlements in place; ASD diagnosis received and ADHD assessment pending. Marcus has maintained full-time work and reports greater confidence.
- Next steps: Continued advocacy to uphold care-leaver rights and grow self-advocacy skills.

Chloe — Practical solutions and transition planning

- Issue: Communication gaps and practical barriers (travel passes, equipment) affecting participation and future planning.
- Advocacy actions: Escalated missed actions; ensured commitments were recorded at review; supported discussion about work options and independent living.
- Outcome/impact: Train pass arranged; bike agreed; pathway plan updated (goal to live independently at 18; explore vocational training options). Chloe requested advocacy again for her next review.
- Next steps: Follow-up on actions and support transition to adulthood.

Dylan — Contact and overnight stays agreed

- Issue: Dylan's priority was to secure overnight stays with his dad and gran and to be part of family activities.
- Advocacy actions: Advocate ensured these views were consistently presented at the review and followed up after delays.
- Outcome/impact: Permission granted for overnight stays and inclusion in family outings, increasing Dylan's sense of belonging.
- Next steps: Continued monitoring to ensure arrangements remain in place.

Priya — Value of continuity where professionals change

- Issue: Priya experienced multiple placement moves and frequent changes of professionals, leaving her feeling unsettled.
- Advocacy actions: Advocate provided continuity across reviews, ensuring her history and views were understood by new professionals.
- Outcome/impact: IRO and social worker acknowledged the value of consistent advocacy in safeguarding Priya's voice during transitions. Priya expressed trust in her advocate as the only adult who had remained consistently involved.

- Next steps: Continued advocacy until placement stabilises, with a focus on supporting Priya to develop her own self-advocacy skills.

9. IV overview of performance Aug 2024 to March 2025 (8 months)

- 9.1 There were **16 new referrals** during the period (including re-matches) and **8 new matches** of children and young people with an Independent Visitor (IV).
- 9.2 5 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
- 9.3 The year started with **12 children and young people on the waiting list** waiting to be matched with and ended with **18 children on the waiting list**.
- 9.4 19 children and young people were matched with an IV at the start of the contract year. **23 were matched by the end of the reporting period**.
- 9.5 Therefore, despite the service achieving 8 new matches during the 8-month period, the total number of children who continue to be matched saw a net increase of four. However, the rate of new matches being achieved has seen an increase since the previous year, and this trend has continued into year 2 of the contract as we celebrate more children who are benefiting from having an IV.
- 9.6 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 5 matches that ended, three children said that they would like to be re-matched.

1 August 2024 to 31 March 2025 (8 months)

New referrals	16
New matches	8
Matches ended	5

No. matched at 1 Aug 24	19
No. matched at 31 March 25	23
No. on the waiting list at 1 Aug 24	12
No. on the waiting list at 31 March 25	18

9.7 The demographics for referrals during the 8-month period, including those waiting to be re-matched were:

Gender:

- 5 were female
- 10 were male
- 1 did not conform to a gender

Age:

- The youngest age of a child referred for an IV was 7
- The oldest age of a child referred for an IV was 17
- Most children were aged between 10 and 13

Ethnicity:

- 13 White British
- 1 Black British
- 2 from other ethnicities

Disability and mental health:

- 1 child was identified as having a Specific Learning Difficulty

9.8 If a 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 13
- BCP Council 2
- London Borough of Enfield 1

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

"He always shows up when he says he will, when he was poorly, he let me know and came the next weekend instead"

"She's always there for me"

"My IV makes me feel less angry about stuff and we end up laughing"

"Sometimes I moan about my mum and feel bad I don't want to see her, my IV always listens to me"

"It's fun, he asks what I want to do, we went to Marwell zoo and saw sea lions, I didn't know sea lions were a real thing!"

"My IV lets me choose where we go. I like being in the car with her and talking, we always get my favourite meal deal. Walking her dog is fun, I would love a dog!"

"One time I didn't want to go out so my IV came to my house and we had hot chocolate, then we went for a walk near my house and I felt better"

"My IV brings me Mario cards, I have loads now"

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 are a sample of quotes from IVs during the year (children's names have been changed):

"Josh had lots of fun and enjoyed our trip to the Christmas lights. Josh said he appreciated the opportunity to be himself and felt safe"

"Sam is moving to another new foster home, he was sad and disappointed at the decision however was responsive to validation of his feelings"

"Ryan invited me to their RAF cadet presentation. Ryan was given an award, they are flourishing...Their confidence has grown, and they have made a wide circle of friends...Ryan has decided to join the RAF as an apprentice"

"Jess was upset about making a decision to not see her mum for a few months, we chatted about this, and this allowed her to make the decision without feeling guilty"

"Jake chose to do indoor climbing, he improves every time. We talked about his online Xbox tournaments & Minecraft playing"

"Daniel said they have done well enough in their exams to get into their college which starts September, I am proud of their determination. We Watched Dorchester FC and chatted over lunch"

"Kai was excited to go fishing again and is getting better at the sport every time. He was keen to ask for guidance and also demonstrate his increasing knowledge and skill base. Kai is looking forward to our next fishing trip"

9.10 Dorset IVs have access to additional funding, Positive Activities Fund, 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.

"We went to a posh restaurant in Bournemouth and got dressed up and went shopping, I hadn't been anywhere like that and I loved it"

"Brian took me to the Christmas lights at Longleat, I have asked to go again. He said we can!"

"Billy bought me fishing gear, I didn't have my own, he said I am getting better than him now at fishing"

"My IV took me on the train to London and we went on the London Eye, I have always wanted to go to London, we walked so far!"

"Me and James went to a bowling day with other IVs and children. I'd never been bowling before! I was nervous but I had fun with everyone."

"At the group bowling day me and my IV went on the virtual motorbikes after bowling, can we go again?"

- 9.11 When a child or young person has been matched with their IV for 12 months, our IV Coordinator meets with them to hear directly about their experiences. This feedback is a central part of our Quality Assurance process, ensuring that children's voices shape how the service is monitored, evaluated, and improved. It provides valuable insight into what works well, what could be different, and how relationships with IVs make a difference in children's lives. In this way, children and young people are active partners in shaping and developing the IV service.
- 9.12 During the period, nine Dorset children participated in an Annual Review conversation with us. Findings included:
- 80% reported trying something new
 - 60% reported learning a new skill
 - 100% felt comfortable talking to their IV
 - 80% rated listening 5/5
- 9.13 Children highlighted the value of activities such as zoo visits, cinema trips, and sports, and placed strong emphasis on consistency: *"He always turns up."*

9.14 These insights will inform volunteer recruitment, training, and activity planning in year 2.

9.15 The following examples illustrate how Dorset's Independent Visitor (IV) service makes a difference in children's lives. Each story highlights the importance of consistent, trusting relationships with adults who are there by choice, not by professional obligation. IVs provide fun and new experiences, emotional support, and continuity through times of change, helping children and young people feel listened to, valued, and supported (children's names have been changed):

Ruby – Rebuilding Confidence after Family Strain

- Context: "Ruby" (14) was finding family contact arrangements difficult and felt guilty about stepping back from contact with her mum.
- IV role: Her Independent Visitor offered a safe space to talk through her feelings, validating her choices and reassuring her.
- Impact: Ruby felt listened to and more confident, saying it helped her to make her decision without guilt.

Hassan – Stability through Placement Moves

- Context: "Hassan" (13) experienced several foster home moves in quick succession, which left him feeling unsettled.
- IV role: His Independent Visitor kept visits consistent throughout, giving him continuity when many other things were changing.
- Impact: Hassan said his IV "still turns up for me," helping him to feel less anxious during times of disruption.

Ryan – Aspirations and Achievement

- Context: "Ryan" (16) lacked confidence and was uncertain about their future.
- IV role: Their IV encouraged them to take part in activities such as cadets, attended their presentation, and celebrated their progress.
- Impact: Ryan received an award at cadets, grew in confidence, and now plans to join the RAF as an apprentice. They said their IV "believes in me and makes me want to try."

Ella – Fun, Exploration and Shared Experiences

- Context: “Ella” (11) had limited opportunities to try new things outside of her placement.
- IV role: Her Independent Visitor planned regular outings chosen together, including a zoo trip, cinema, and sports.
- Impact: Ella described them as “the best days out” and added, “*She always turns up.*” These experiences helped Ella build confidence, learn new skills, and enjoy positive time with a consistent adult.

9.16 Together, these examples show how the IV service supports Dorset’s Corporate Parenting priorities; giving children safety and permanence through consistent relationships, supporting their identity by valuing their voice and choices, and helping them take positive steps towards adulthood with confidence.

10. Developing the Advocacy and IV Services

10.1 There continue to be many positive outcomes for children and young people through Dorset’s advocacy and Independent Visitor (IV) services. The first eight months of the new contract (August 2024 to March 2025) have seen strong progress, while some areas remain a focus for ongoing development. The key challenges highlighted in the 2024 report remain relevant reference points:

- 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

10.2 Dorset Council and NYAS have worked in partnership to address these challenges. Progress and ongoing actions are summarised below:

Staffing, recruitment and contract transition

- The transition to the new contract was managed collaboratively, with retention of key staff to maintain continuity.
- Recruitment to all roles has been successful, and the benefits are evident in performance data and in the relationships now being built between teams.

Referrals and uptake of services

- Dorset Council's *Thinking Thursday* sessions and other promotional/training opportunities have been used to raise awareness with children and professionals.
- NYAS has provided clearer professional guidance on referral routes for both advocacy and IV services.
- Advocacy referrals have increased, and the IV service received six new referrals in quarter 4 alone, reflecting greater confidence and awareness of the service.

Volunteer recruitment for the IV service

- Targeted recruitment campaigns have led to increased applications, particularly through community outreach and university engagement.
- Messaging now emphasises diversity, representation, and lived experience to broaden the volunteer base.
- At the end of quarter 4, 23 children were matched with an IV, with 18 waiting. This represents a significant improvement on the previous year.

Building relationships and trust between workers and agencies

- Joint training sessions and Best Practice Meetings have strengthened collaboration between agencies.
- Feedback loops between advocates, IVs, social workers, IROs, and carers are now more consistent, with a shared commitment to restorative practice approaches when issues arise.
- Case studies (e.g. sustained advocacy through placement changes, long-term IV relationships) demonstrate the positive impact of improved trust and continuity.

11. Forward Focus: year 2 priorities

11.1 In year 2 of the contract (April 2025 to March 2026), Dorset Council and NYAS will continue to consolidate progress and drive improvement in both the advocacy and IV services.

Key priorities include:

- Expanding the reach and uptake of advocacy and IV, particularly among underrepresented groups
- Continuing to embed youth voice in service delivery, governance, and evaluation
- Broadening the use of direct work tools and relational approaches in advocacy practice
- Supporting transitions for care leavers, with stronger links to lifelong networks
- Growing a diverse and sustainable volunteer base to meet demand for the IV service.

- 11.2 These priorities will ensure the services remain child-centred, sustainable, and closely aligned to the ambitions of Dorset's Corporate Parenting Strategy 2024–2027 and the Dorset Promise.

12. Financial implications

- 12.1 The service is operating within the agreed budget.

13. Natural environment, climate & ecology implications

- 13.1 This report does not require a decision; therefore the climate decision wheel is not applicable

14. Well-being and health implications

- 14.1 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.

15. Other implications

- 15.1 Dorset's advocacy approach was adapted during the time we were pathfinders for the DfE's [Families First for Children programme](#). This programme has now rolled out nationally as the [Families First Partnership \(FFP\) Programme](#). This has led to an even greater focus on ensuring children, young people and their parents have their voices heard in meetings we have that impact them.
- 15.2 The advocacy and IV specification included requirements from the revised advocacy standards for children and young people². The Department for Education (DfE) consulted on these in 2023, but they are published yet (likely due to the subsequent change in Government). However, we believe the revised standards were robust and are unlikely to change significantly when they are published.

16. Risk implications

16. The risks are assessed as 'low'.

² [National Standards for the Provision of Children and Young People's Advocacy Services](#)

17. Equalities

- 17.1 This report does not require a decision; An Equalities Impact Assessment is not required for this report.

18. Appendices – none

19. Background papers

[Report to Corporate Parenting Board – December 2024: Dorset Independent Visitor and Advocacy Report](#)

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20. Report sign-off

- 20.1 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)