

Cabinet

19 May 2026

Advocacy and Independent Visitor maximum contract spend approval

For Decision

Cabinet Member:

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

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

Senior Leadership Team:

P Dempsey, Executive Director – Children's Services

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Statutory Authority:

1. Advocacy

The Children Act 1989 (sections 26A, 24D and 26)¹ states local authorities must provide advocacy for:

- children in care
- children in need
- care leavers

This applies when the child is making or thinking about making a complaint or representation about local authority services.

Children detained or treated under the Mental Health Act 1993 (section 130A)² also have a legal right to an advocate.

Government guidance makes it clear that councils should ensure children can access advocacy more broadly, especially where:

- their views conflict with professional opinion
- power imbalance is obvious
- they struggle to engage safely or confidently

¹ [Section 26A of the Children Act 1989](#)

² [Section 130A of the Mental Health Act 1983](#)

Local authority obligations to provide advocacy are also rooted in the Human Rights principles within the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.

2. Independent Visitors

Local authorities have a statutory duty under section 23ZB of the Children Act 1989³ to appoint Independent Visitors for children in care where it would be in their best interests, and they must actively consider this for each child.

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

1. Executive summary

- 1.1 An Independent Visitor is an adult volunteer appointed by a local authority to visit, befriend and advise a child in care. They offer a consistent, trusted relationship focused on the child's wellbeing; someone who spends time with them, listens, and supports them as they grow up.

Independent Visitors:

- are there for the child, not to assess or make decisions
- provide friendship, stability and advice
- complement, but not replace social workers, carers or advocates

- 1.2 An advocate is an independent person who helps a child or young person have their voice heard in decisions that affect them. An advocate helps the child say what they want, makes sure adults listen and supports them to challenge decisions safely if needed.

Advocates:

- support children and young people to understand their rights
- helps them express their views, wishes and feelings
- can speak on the child's behalf or help the child speak for themselves

- 1.3 In September 2023 Cabinet gave approval for the procurement of the Advocacy and Independent Visitors Service for children and young people, based on an estimated contract value of £500k and a term of 4 years. This enabled us to scope a procurement exercise based on need and budget. A contract was subsequently tendered and awarded to the National Youth Advocacy Service (NYAS). The contract was for 3 years from August 2024 with a value of £569k, with an option for 3 additional years, so potentially until July 2030, at a cost of a further 192k per year. No further approval has since

³ [Section 23ZB of the Children Act 1989](#)

been sought from Cabinet to cover the costs which are over the £500k approved in September 2023 and this report seeks to correct that.

- 1.4 The contract with NYAS is performing well, with increasing numbers of children benefiting from advocacy and Independent Visitor support. The contract is regularly overseen, and performance scrutinised by Corporate Parenting Board alongside contract management processes.
- 1.5 The contract spend will exceed the £500,000 estimate originally approved by Cabinet during the 2026/27 financial year. Cabinet approval is therefore sought to increase the maximum contract value to £1,300,000, reflecting the initial contract term of the three-years and the optional extension years built into the contract, subject to continued strong performance. This also allows us to reflect any increase in need for the service across the contract term.
- 1.6 Increasing the maximum spend limit will enable the Council to:
 - extend Independent Visitor support to more children in care and care leavers in 2026/27; and
 - provide capacity and flexibility to respond to future growth in demand for advocacy and Independent Visitor services, including over the three optional extension years
- 1.7 Setting this spend limit does not commit Dorset Council to spend up to the agreed total contract value. It allows up to respond appropriately to need and have consistency of service and also allows for an amount of contingency should it be needed. Dorset Council's internal scheme of delegation will be followed to secure the required additional approval and use of contingency and contract extension processes.

2. **Recommendation**

- 2.1 Council is recommended to approve a maximum spend limit of £1.3million on this contract which will ensure our children and young people have access to an advocate or Independent Visitor in accordance with our local authority responsibilities.
- 2.2 Cabinet delegate authority to the Executive Director for Children's Services in consultation with the Cabinet Member for Children's Services, Education and Skills to negotiate and authorise any further contract extensions or amendments subject to the spend limit in 2.1.

3. **Reason for the recommendation(s)**

- 3.1 The procurement of Dorset's Advocacy and Independent Visitor Service was included in the Additional Procurement Forward Plan 2023-24 approved by Cabinet in September 2023⁴. The Advocacy and Independent Visitor Service line stated an estimated contract spend of £500k and a 3-year contract term in accordance with procurement advice at the time.
- 3.2 During 2026/27, contract spend will exceed the £500,000 originally approved by Cabinet. We also anticipate continued growth in the need for Independent Visitors and advocacy across the remainder of the contract term, including the three optional extension years, should the contract continue to perform well. Through the procurement work the current contract value is up to £192,000 per annum for a three-year term plus 3 optional year extensions. The amount requested for approval reflects the need to continue to negotiate and increase the use of Independent Visitors and advocacy.
- 3.3 Further Cabinet approval is sought for a spend limit to cover the contract value and term, plus increases to allow for actual and anticipated need.

4. The report

NB: details of NYAS's tender submission that are commercially sensitive and are not essential to the context of this report have been omitted.

- 4.1 The National Youth Advocacy Service (NYAS) was awarded Dorset's Advocacy and Independent Visitor Service contract from 1 August 2024 to 31 July 2027, with the option to extend on an annual basis until 31 July 2030.
- 4.2 NYAS has now reached the capacity of the contract for matching children in care with an Independent Visitor. This is positive, as it means more children are being supported than was forecasted.
- 4.3 There are children in care on NYAS's waiting list that cannot be matched unless capacity is increased. Additionally, more children in care will benefit from being referred for an Independent Visitor during the term of the contract.
- 4.4 Care leavers aged 18 to 25 who are already matched with an Independent Visitor would benefit from continuing their relationship, if they wish.
- 4.5 It is beneficial for Children's Services to have the authority to increase the budget for this contract according to need. This would provide the flexibility to grow the service gradually, rather than committing to a large, upfront increase to the contract.

⁴ [Cabinet decision Sept 23 Procurement Forward Plan](#)

- 4.6 The number of hours of advocacy increased in the current contract from the previous contract. Whilst NYAS have remained within the maximum contracted advocacy hours since the new contract started, we also want flexibility to agree increases to the advocacy element during the term of the contract, if there is need.
- 4.7 This report is seeking Cabinet approval for an increased maximum spend limit for this contract.
- 4.8 Any proposed increases to Independent Visitor numbers and advocacy hours will be dependent on available budget and the provider's capacity. This contingency spend limit may not be used, it just gives flexibility for Cabinet to delegate further approval within the council's governance processes for entering into agreements. Section 7 details the actual and contingency approval increase.

5. **Alternative options considered**

- 5.1 Not increasing capacity within the contract is an option. However, this would mean that either:
- not all children and young people who would benefit from an Independent Visitor or advocate can have one and we would not meet our legal obligations and responsibilities
 - we would need to spot purchase these services at a higher cost
- 5.2 We could decide to end the contract in July 2027 and not use the 3 optional annual extensions and procure the service again. However:
- procurement is a costly and resource intensive process to undertake
 - a higher rather than lower value replacement contract is likely
 - the contract is performing well

- 5.3 Therefore, neither of these alternative options are viable.

6. **Legal considerations**

- 6.1 The Children Act 1989 (sections 24D and 26) imposes a duty on local authorities to provide advocacy for children in care, children in need, and children who are care leavers. The Children Act 1989 (section 23ZB) further imposes a duty on local authorities to appoint Independent Visitors for children in care where it would be in their best interests. Cabinet approved an estimated spend of £500,000.00 for this service on 5th September 2023. The Contract was subsequently awarded to National Youth Advocacy Service

(NYAS) and commenced on 1st August 2024 for an initial period of 3 years. The contract included scope for extensions (3 x 1 year) and for the price to be varied.

- 6.2 The costs of the initial 3-year contract, the desire to take up the 3-year extension, and the increase in actual and forecasted demand has resulted in the need for an increased spend limit of £1,300,000. This variation to the total contract value needs Cabinet approval. The increase is lawful under the Public Contracts Regulations 2015.

Financial implications

- 7.1 The total budget for this contract from 1 August 2024 to 31 July 2030 is £1,152,000 (including the three optional extension years).
- 7.2 Increasing the number of children matched with an Independent Visitor in the 2026/27 contract year onwards will incur an additional cost of £10,127.
- 7.3 Cabinet approval is required for a spend limit contingency to provide flexibility to increase Independent Visitor matches and advocacy hours, where need is identified and agreed. Including the amount set out in 7.2, the proposed maximum spend limit is £1,300,000 across the full six-year contract period.
- 7.4 The proposed spend limit reflects analysis of historical demand and anticipated growth in need. As set out in paragraph 4.8, approval of this limit does not commit Dorset Council to spend the full amount.

7. Natural environment, climate & ecology implications

- 8.1 The climate wheel is not applicable as this paper relates to an existing contracted service with no change in delivery method, just quantity.

8. Well-being and health implications

- 9.1 A fundamental purpose of advocacy and Independent Visitor services are to improve outcomes for children and young people, including their well-being and health.
- 9.2 Dorset Council require the contracted provider to be responsive to advocates and Independent Visitor referrals to minimise impact on emotional well-being for children and young people.

10. Other implications

- 10.1 Dorset's new advocacy approach evolved when we were pathfinders for the Department for Education's (DfE) Families First for Children programme. In April 2025 the DfE rolled out the Families First Partnership (FFP) to all local authorities in England. Its purpose is to rebalance the system towards earlier,

family-centred help and stronger multi-agency child protection, keeping families together where it is safe to do so and reducing unnecessary escalation into care. FFP strengthens expectations that children's voices are heard, supported and represented, and it explicitly relies on existing statutory advocacy duties, especially where children are involved in child protection, family decision-making and care proceedings.

10.2 In addition to regular contract management reporting, NYAS report to Dorset's Corporate Parenting Board each autumn.

11. Risk implications

10.3 The level of risk has been identified below:

Risk: Not all children and young people who want one and are eligible have access to an advocate or Independent Visitor

Context:

- here is a statutory duty to provide advocacy and to actively consider Independent Visitors for children in care.
- the contract has reached capacity for Independent Visitor matching and there is a waiting list, meaning some eligible children cannot currently access support. Trends indicate advocacy capacity will also be exceeded by the end of 2026/27.

Current risk	Residual risk
High Likelihood: Likely Independent Visitor demand already exceeds capacity and advocacy may exceed it by end 2026/27. Severity: Moderate Risk of children's voices not being heard, safeguarding issues being missed, adverse inspection findings and reputational impact.	Medium If Cabinet approves a maximum spend limit that enables capacity to be increased: • Independent Visitor waiting lists can be reduced. • flexibility exists to respond to increased demand. • oversight via contract management and Corporate Parenting Board continues. Likelihood: Possible Demand may still fluctuate year to year. Severity: Moderate

12. Equalities

- 2.1 The decisions sought within this paper do not change which children and young people will benefit from the services; only that we can provide them to more of them, including a higher age range if they are matched with an Independent Visitor (care leavers up to 25 years).

13. Appendices

- 13.1 Appendix 1: Case studies evidencing impact

14. Report sign-off

- 14.1 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: Case studies evidencing impact

Independent Visitors case study

actual name has been changed

Background

Holly entered foster care following a period of instability and family breakdown. Over time, she experienced several changes in where she lived, each one affecting her confidence and sense of security. By the time she learned about the Independent Visitor service, Holly felt overwhelmed by the number of new adults in her life. She shared that she was “tired of new people” and wasn’t sure an Independent Visitor would be any different or able to understand what she had been through. Despite her hesitation, Holly did express a wish to get out of the house more, spend time with someone who wasn’t part of her professional network, and “do normal things”: relaxed, everyday activities that weren’t linked to school, appointments, or support plans. These early conversations shaped a fully child-led matching approach.

Child-led matching process

The Independent Visitor Coordinator placed Holly’s voice, preferences, and pace at the centre of the process. Within three months, a carefully selected Independent Visitor was identified; someone with lived experience of care, shared interests in arts and crafts and cinema trips, and a calm, friendly approach. Holly was given clear, age-appropriate information and offered choice at every stage, including the right to say no. A supported introductory visit took place with her foster carer present to help Holly feel safe. This approach reflected the service’s commitment to trauma-informed and relational practice.

Initial engagement and reluctance

At first, Holly was quiet and cautious. She gave short answers, kept her distance, and didn’t feel ready to trust straight away. In response, NYAS and the Independent Visitor planned a low-pressure first outing to do something familiar and fun, not too long, and with her foster carer nearby at the start. This allowed Holly to stay in control and reduced the pressure to connect before she felt ready.

Turning point: the first supported visit

The first outing became a key turning point. Seeing her foster carer relaxed and comfortable helped Holly let her guard down. The Independent Visitor’s own lived experience meant they could gently normalise how Holly was feeling; reassuring her that it was okay to be wary and that many children feel the same after moving between different homes.

The conversation felt natural and unforced, and Holly later said it felt “different to talking to social workers” and that her Independent Visitor “gets it.”

Growth, engagement and outcomes

Over the following weeks, Holly’s confidence grew. She began choosing her own activities, from cinema trips to creative outings, and started to look forward to seeing her Independent Visitor. She became more relaxed, opened up more in conversation, and increasingly led the pace and direction of visits.

Holly now:

- chooses the activities for each visit
- engages consistently and with enthusiasm
- expresses trust and enjoyment in spending time with her Independent Visitor
- shares her thoughts and feelings more openly

She has told the service she feels listened to, safe, and not judged, which are key indicators of improved emotional wellbeing and relational security.

The value of a care-experienced Independent Visitor

Holly’s Independent Visitor’s lived experience has been central to the success of the match. It has helped to:

- reduce the power imbalance
- create a foundation of empathy and understanding
- help Holly feel seen without needing to explain everything
- provide a positive, relatable adult role model

Holly has said it helps knowing her Independent Visitor has “been through similar stuff and is okay,” reinforcing that her feelings are normal and that positive futures are possible.

Oversight and support

NYAS maintains regular oversight through check-ins with Holly, her Independent Visitor, and her foster carer. The pattern of visits, Holly’s emotional wellbeing, and her engagement are monitored closely to ensure the match continues to be safe, enjoyable, and centred around her wishes.

Impact summary

Holly’s story demonstrates:

- Timely matching: achieved within three months
- Trauma-informed practice: pacing, choice, and emotional safety embedded throughout
- Improved wellbeing: increased confidence, happiness, and social engagement

- Trusted relationship: consistent, dependable adult outside professional networks
- Role-modelling: powerful impact of a care-experienced volunteer

Conclusion

Holly's experience shows the profound impact a well-matched Independent Visitor can have on a child who has experienced multiple moves and uncertainty. What began with understandable reluctance has grown into a positive, trusting relationship that supports Holly's emotional wellbeing, confidence, and sense of being genuinely understood. Her story reinforces the value of child-centred, trauma-informed, relational practice, and the unique strength that care-experienced volunteers bring to Dorset's children and young people.

Advocacy case studies

names have been changed

1. Anna – Managing professional contact at school

Age range: 12+

Context: Anna shared that unexpected visits from professionals during the school day left her feeling “upset”, “shocked” and reluctant to engage. She wanted all contact to happen at home unless essential.

Advocacy impact: The advocate presented Anna's wishes clearly at her ICPC, ensuring professionals understood the impact unexpected contact had on her.

Outcome: The plan was updated to prevent school-based visits unless absolutely necessary and with prior notice. At her RCPC, Anna confirmed this had been followed and said she felt much happier.

1. Finn – Choice of school placement

Age range: 12+

Context: After entering care, Finn expected to join Oak Upper School with his friends but was instead enrolled in a different school linked to his placement. He felt unheard and wished to remain with his peer group.

Advocacy impact: The advocate met with Finn who said he wanted to make a complaint about the move of school for him from the area where he knew everyone and he wanted to stay with his school friends. He felt there was “no one listening” to him about his choice of school.

Outcome: The complaint resulted in Finn being permitted to attend his chosen school.

2. Kylie and Keen - Returning home to mum

Age range: 15+ and 12+

Context: Over approximately 18 months, the siblings regularly told their advocate that they were unhappy in their foster placement and wanted to return to their mother's care.

Advocacy impact: Their advocate ensured these wishes were consistently recorded and discussed at CIC Reviews, influencing ongoing care planning.

Outcome: Both young people have now successfully returned to live with their mother, with support in place.

Nina – Transition, recovery and education

Age range: 18+

Context: The advocate first began working with Nina in December 2023, when she was at Child in Need, she spent some time building a relationship with her, as she had some additional needs and attended a specialist school. Nina then suffered a mental health crisis which resulted in a serious incident at home. She was in hospital after this, and the advocate continued to visit, gaining her views to ensure her voice was heard during a very stressful period. She then went into short-term accommodation, as she was unable to live at home. She was also unable to attend school, which she had previously enjoyed. She was supported by the advocate during the transition to her permanent home. During this period it is notable that Nina changed homes, service providers and social workers, as she turned 18, and advocacy provided the one professional constant in her care. Nina had often told the Advocate she wanted to go to school again, so once settled they asked for this to be addressed. They reviewed her previous EHCP, suggesting amendments, and attended review meetings. They reviewed all provision in the EHCP with Nina's views in mind to ensure they aligned, before sharing this with the education lead.

Advocacy impact: Advocacy provided stability through these changes, supporting Nina in hospital, helping her navigate transitions, and assisting with reviewing and amending her EHCP to ensure her educational needs and wishes were reflected.

Outcome: A search for suitable education provision is now underway, and Nina has settled well into her permanent home. Advocacy remained her consistent support throughout a period of significant upheaval.