Corporate Parenting Board

26 November 2026

Annual Report of Children's Advocacy and Independent Visitor Service

For Review and Consultation

Cabinet Member:
Cllr C Sutton, Children, Families & Education

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

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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 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 (the exemption paragraph is N/A)

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 All-Age Commissioning Service.

1.2 It reflects delivery and performance during the second full year of the contract (1 April 2025 to 31 March 2026). 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 demonstrates strong demand for both advocacy and Independent Visitor services during 2025/26. It shows positive outcomes for children and young people, and growing evidence of the impact that independent relationships and rights-based support have on children's lives. It also highlights increasing demand, particularly within the Independent Visitor service, where demand now exceeds current commissioned capacity.

1.4 The report sets out:

- service developments
- performance data
- the views of children and young people
- progress made against challenges identified in the 2024/25 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 Whilst the contract runs from August to 31 July each year, reporting has been aligned with financial years. Therefore, this report covers performance in year 2 from 1 April 2025 to 31 March 2026.

4.3 Throughout the year, both Advocacy and IV services experienced sustained demand and increasing complexity. This report therefore focuses not only on activity and performance, but also on children's experiences, outcomes and

the strategic contribution these services make to Dorset Council's Corporate Parenting responsibilities.

4.4 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.

4.5 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.

4.6 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.

4.7 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.

4.8 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). In October 2026, the refreshed National Standards for the Provision of Children's Advocacy Services were published, providing an updated framework for high-quality advocacy practice across England.

5.2 Whilst these standards were published outside the period covered by this report, NYAS welcomes their publication and will use them to inform ongoing quality assurance, service development and workforce development activities during 2026/27. Many of the themes highlighted within the refreshed standards, including participation, rights, accessibility, independence and relationship-based practice, are already reflected within Dorset's advocacy service and will continue to shape future developments.

5.3 NYAS and Dorset Council will review the revised standards and where necessary, update the contract's specification, including the list of situations where advocacy should be proactively offered to children and young people.

5.4 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

5.5 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.

5.6 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.

5.7 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

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

7.2 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. Part A: Advocacy service overview 2025/26

Advocacy at a glance:

8.1 During 2025/26, Dorset's Advocacy Service continued to ensure that children and young people's voices were heard, their rights were upheld and they were supported to participate in decisions affecting their lives.

8.2 Key achievements during the year included:

- 613 advocacy referrals received
- 3,719 advocacy hours delivered, achieving 103% of the contracted annual target
- 203 individual children and young people received Issue Based Advocacy (IBA) support
- 322 advocacy interventions delivered through closed IBA referrals.
- 85% of closed IBA referrals resulted in advocacy being delivered
- Significant improvements in children's understanding of their rights, confidence to express their views and ability to influence decisions affecting their lives
- Exceptionally high satisfaction levels, with 99% of children aged 11 and under and 97% of children and young people aged 12–25 reporting that they were happy with the support received

8.3 The service experienced strong and sustained demand throughout the year, exceeding its contracted advocacy hours whilst continuing to deliver positive outcomes and high levels of satisfaction for children and young people. Continued referral levels demonstrate ongoing confidence in the service from children, carers and professionals.

About the Advocacy Service

8.4 NYAS delivers two types of statutory independent advocacy on behalf of Dorset Council:

Child Protection Advocacy (CPA)
Supporting children and young people involved in Child Protection processes, including Child Protection Conferences and Review Conferences.

Issue Based Advocacy (IBA)
Supporting children and young people with specific issues affecting their lives, including Care Reviews, education, housing, complaints, safeguarding concerns, transition to adulthood and care leaver entitlements.

8.5 Advocacy remains independent of Dorset Council and exists to ensure children are listened to, understand their rights and can influence the decisions being made about their lives.

Demand for advocacy

8.6 During 2025/26 the service received **613** referrals for advocacy:

- 298 (49%) of these were for children being safeguarded in the Child Protection system (CPA)
- 315 (51%) were supported with issues raised by Children in Care, care leavers and other eligible children and young people (IBA)

8.7 The 315 IBA referrals represented 203 individual children and young people.

- 128 children were referred once during the year
- 75 children were referred on multiple occasions
- 9 children were referred four or more times for separate advocacy matters throughout the year.

8.8 The number of children requiring support on multiple occasions highlights the complexity of many children's circumstances and reinforces the value of advocacy relationships that can support children across several decision-making processes over time.

8.9 The most common reasons for referral were:

- 55% Child in Care reviews
- 5% Child in Need meetings
- 3% Living arrangements
- 3% Local authority complaints
- 3% Housing and homelessness support
- 2% Education-related concerns
- 2% Relationship issues with professionals

8.10 In total, advocates delivered 3,719 advocacy hours during the year, exceeding the annual contractual hours of 3,600 and demonstrating both strong demand and sustained engagement with children and young people.

Who accessed Issue Based Advocacy?

8.11 The demographics of the 203 children and young people using the service in this period were:

Gender
50% were female
45% were male

5% (9 children and young people) identified as non-binary, transgender, gender non-conforming or another gender identity.

Age
The youngest child referred for advocacy was 5 years old and the oldest young person was 24 years old.

3% aged 5–6

25% aged 7–11

33% aged 12–15

29% aged 16–17

10% aged 18–24.

Ethnicity

The majority of children and young people accessing advocacy identified as White British (86%), with additional representation across Black, Asian, Mixed Heritage, Gypsy/Traveller and other ethnic communities.

Disability and Additional Needs

32 children and young people (16%) were identified as having a disability or additional need. The most frequently recorded needs included:

- Autism spectrum disorder

- Communication needs

- Learning disabilities

- Behavioural, emotional and social difficulties

8.12 The profile of children accessing advocacy demonstrates the importance of maintaining accessible and flexible advocacy approaches for children with disabilities, neurodivergence and complex communication needs, including Non-Instructed Advocacy where applicable.

Advocacy for children living outside of Dorset

8.13 Whilst most children referred lived within Dorset, 40 children and young people supported by the service were placed outside of the county. These homes or settings spanned 21 different local authorities, reflecting the increasing complexity of care arrangements and Dorset Council's ongoing commitment to ensuring children can access advocacy wherever they live.

8.14 The list below summarises the number of children and young people living in other local authority areas:

- Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole Council x **8**
- Somerset County Council x **5**
- Cornwall Council x **4**
- Hampshire County Council x **3**
- Shropshire Council x **3**
- Essex County Council x **2**
- Bedford Borough Council x **1**
- Cambridgeshire County Council x **1**
- Devon County Council x **1**
- Kent County Council x **1**
- Leeds City Council x **1**
- Lincolnshire County Council x **1**
- London Borough of Brent x **1**
- London Borough of Enfield x **1**
- London Borough of Haringey x **1**
- Milton Keynes Council x **1**
- Oxfordshire County Council x **1**
- Southampton City Council x **1**
- West Sussex County Council x **1**
- Wiltshire Council x **1**
- Worcestershire County Council x **1**

Advocacy delivered and closed 2025/26

8.15 Between 1 April 2025 and 31 March 2026 **382 IBA referrals were closed.** This figure includes advocacy cases carried forward from the previous contract year.

8.16 Of the 382 IBA referrals closed, **322 (85%) of these referrals resulted in the delivery of advocacy support.** This reflects strong advocacy delivery rates throughout the year and an improvement across quarterly performance. The IBA advocacy delivery rate increased across the year, from 78.5% (Q1) to 89.2% (Q4).

8.17 This improvement reflects stronger referral management, improved allocation responsiveness and strengthened partnership working.

8.18 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 60 referrals were:

- 17 (28%) children and young people declined the offer of advocacy support
- (15%) NYAS were unable to make contact or gain consent to provide the service
- (17%) advocacy was no longer required due to issues being resolved or changing circumstances

Outcomes for children and young people

8.19 Advocacy continues to deliver measurable improvements in children's understanding of their rights, participation in care planning and confidence to express their wishes and feelings.

8.20 Across both age groups, children reported improvements in:

- understanding their rights
- expressing their views and feelings
- influencing decisions affecting their lives
- communicating with professionals
- satisfaction with the support received

8.21 The Advocacy Outcomes Framework provides one of the clearest indicators of the difference advocacy makes to children's lives, measuring changes in understanding, participation and confidence before and after advocacy involvement.

8.22 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:

Table 1: Children and young people's satisfaction with advocacy

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?	33% (30/92)	**83%** (69/83)	59% (54/92)	**89%** (82/92)
Did you have opportunities to express your views, wishes and feelings?	58% (52/89)	**100%** (83/83)	66% (61/92)	**94%** (86/92)

During planning, are changes made to your plan because of your views?	31% (21/68)	**67%** (42/63)	58% (53/92)	**84%** (77/92)
Do you tell workers / carers in your life what you think about your care?	65% (56/86)	**89%** (64/72)	55% (51/92)	**88%** (81/92)
Are you happy with the service you have from your NYAS advocate?	n/a	**99%** (82/83)	n/a	**97%** (89/92)

8.23 Collectively, these findings demonstrate that children who access advocacy are better able to understand their rights, participate meaningfully in decision-making and influence the plans that affect their lives. This directly supports Dorset Council's Corporate Parenting priorities around participation, identity, safety and preparation for adulthood.

What children and young people told us

8.24 Below are a sample of quotes from children and young people during 2025-26 (no amendments have been made to how they were worded):

"You are the only one that is listening to me and calls me to help and find out how I am."

"Having an advocate definitely helped to speed up the process of getting me a home."

"I know you have my back."

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

8.25 These comments reflect recurring themes of trust, participation and advocacy helping children navigate challenging situations.

What professionals told us

8.26 Professionals highlighted the positive contribution that advocacy makes to planning, participation and safeguarding:

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

“The child’s report had a powerful impact in letting their voice be heard in the meeting.”

“Advocacy ensured the child remained at the centre of decision making.”

8.27 These comments reinforce the important role advocacy plays in helping professionals understand children's views and ensuring that children's voices remain central to decision making.

Examples of Advocacy and Impact

8.28 When an advocate completes their support, they summarise 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):

Alicia – Securing Housing and Stability

Issue: Alicia was experiencing uncertainty regarding her housing situation and needed support to understand her options and ensure her views were heard during decision-making.

Advocacy actions: Her advocate supported Alicia to understand her rights and entitlements, helped her communicate her wishes to professionals, and worked alongside her throughout discussions regarding her future accommodation.

Outcome/impact: Suitable accommodation was secured and Alicia reported that advocacy had helped progress the process. She felt better informed, more involved in decisions affecting her future, and more confident in expressing her views.

Bobby – Understanding Rights and Care Leaver Entitlements

Issue: Bobby needed support to understand his rights, care status and the support available to him as a care experienced young person.

Advocacy actions: His advocate helped him navigate assessments and decision-making processes, supported him to express his wishes and concerns, and ensured his voice remained central throughout discussions with professionals.

Outcome/impact: Bobby's entitlements were clarified, additional support was secured, and he developed a greater understanding of his rights and available support. He reported increased confidence and improved ability to advocate for himself.

Chris – Strengthening Participation in Care Planning

Issue: Chris wanted greater involvement in decisions being made about their future and support to ensure their views were properly considered within planning processes.

Advocacy actions: Their advocate worked with Chris to identify their wishes and feelings, supported them to prepare for meetings, and ensured their views were represented to professionals responsible for planning their care and support.

• **Outcome/impact:** Chris's views directly informed planning discussions and agreed actions were clearly recorded. They reported feeling listened to, respected and more involved in decisions affecting their life.

Danuta – The Value of Consistent Relationships

Issue: Danuta had experienced multiple changes in professionals and wider circumstances, leaving her feeling unsettled and uncertain about who she could trust.

Advocacy actions: Her advocate provided continuity during a period of change, maintained regular involvement and ensured Danuta's wishes, feelings and experiences remained understood by the professionals involved in her life.

Outcome/impact: Danuta described her advocate as a trusted adult who remained consistently involved when other relationships changed. Advocacy helped her maintain confidence in expressing her views and ensured her voice continued to be heard during important decisions.

Key rights themes emerging during 2025/26:

The right to be heard and influence decisions

8.29 The most common reason for referral continued to be support around Child in Care Reviews and other statutory planning processes. Throughout the year, advocacy enabled children and young people to understand the decisions being made about their lives, express their wishes and feelings, and influence planning processes.

8.30 Outcome data demonstrated significant improvements in children's confidence to express their views and their belief that their views influenced decisions affecting them. This reflects children's rights under Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), which states

that children have the right to express their views and have those views given due weight in matters affecting them

The right to information and understanding

8.31 Many children and young people sought advocacy support when they were unsure about decisions, processes or their rights and entitlements. Advocacy helped children better understand care planning, safeguarding processes, complaints procedures, education arrangements, housing options and care leaver entitlements.

8.32 Outcome data demonstrated substantial improvements in children's understanding of their rights following advocacy involvement, strengthening their ability to participate effectively in decisions about their lives.

The right to stability, relationships and support

8.33 Children consistently highlighted the value of having a trusted adult who listened, stood alongside them and helped navigate periods of uncertainty or change. Whilst advocacy is often focused on specific issues, the importance of consistent, relationship-based support was evident throughout the year.

8.34 This was particularly evident for children experiencing changes to where they are living, transitions to adulthood, complaints processes and complex safeguarding situations, where advocacy helped ensure their rights and wishes remained central despite changing circumstances.

The right to help when things are not working

8.35 Advocacy continued to play an important role in helping children and young people raise concerns, challenge decisions and access complaints processes where appropriate. Throughout the year, young people were supported with issues relating to housing, planning, education, safeguarding and care leaver entitlements.

8.36 This demonstrates the importance of maintaining accessible, independent advocacy services that enable children to exercise their rights, challenge decisions and seek redress when needed.

8.37 Taken together, the performance data, outcomes framework, feedback and case studies demonstrate that advocacy continues to make a meaningful difference to the lives of Dorset's children and young people. Advocacy is helping children understand their rights, participate in decisions affecting their lives, challenge decisions when required and access support during periods of change or uncertainty. The service continues to make an important contribution to Dorset Council's Corporate Parenting responsibilities and commitment to the Dorset Promise.

9. Part B: Independent Visitor Service Overview 2025/26

Independent Visitors at a glance

9.1 The Independent Visitor (IV) service provides children and young people in care with the opportunity to develop long-term, trusted relationships with adults who are independent of the care system.

9.2 During 2025/26:

- 34 children and young people were matched with an Independent Visitor by the end of the year,
- 16 new matches were established
- 225 visits were delivered
- The service reached full contract capacity in the year, with 33 matches plus an additional Spot Purchase for 1 child
- Children consistently reported high levels of trust, enjoyment and emotional support from their IV relationships
- 100% of children participating in Annual Reviews reported feeling comfortable talking to their IV
- 80% reported trying something new
- 60% reported learning a new skill

9.3 The service continued to provide trusted, enduring relationships which promote emotional wellbeing, identity, belonging, confidence and positive futures for children and young people in care.

About the Independent Visitor service

9.4 Independent Visitors are trained volunteers who develop long-term, positive relationships with children and young people in care.

9.5 The service fulfils a statutory duty under the Children Act 1989 and directly contributes to Dorset Council's Corporate Parenting Strategy 2024–2027 and the Dorset Promise by strengthening emotional resilience, promoting identity and belonging, and supporting successful transitions into adulthood.

9.6 Independent Visitors support children and young people to:

- develop confidence and self-esteem
- access positive activities and experiences
- build life skills and aspirations

- form stable and trusted relationships
- maintain a consistent adult presence during times of change and uncertainty

9.7 Unlike professional relationships, Independent Visitors are volunteers who choose to spend time with a child or young person because they want to build a meaningful and supportive connection. This distinction is frequently highlighted by children as one of the service's greatest strengths.

9.8 NYAS have produced a video 'Someone just for you' that summarises findings from their 2025-26 Independent Visitor Service user survey.

Demand for Independent Visitors

9.9 By Quarter 3, the service had reached full contractual capacity with all 33 funded match places filled. During Quarter 4, the service increased to 34 active matches through an additional spot-purchased arrangement agreed by Dorset Council.

9.10 Across the year:

- active matches increased from 24 to 34
- 16 new matches were established
- 36 volunteer applications were received
- 225 visits were delivered

9.11 Despite these achievements, demand continued to exceed available capacity. By March 2026, 30 children and young people remained on the waiting list.

9.12 The waiting list demonstrates both the value that children and professionals place on the service and the growing gap between funded provision and local demand. Whilst reaching full contractual capacity is a significant achievement, the waiting list demonstrates that there remain children and young people who would benefit from an Independent Visitor.

9.13 From June 2026 Dorset Council increased capacity in the contract to 42 matches to help meet demand. Whilst demand is still higher the increase gave NYAS enough 'headroom' to sustain performance and continue matching at pace throughout 2026/27. It also creates space to review the wider needs of the cohort and consider future scaling in a way that is planned, sustainable and aligned to the optional contract extension periods. Further increases to IV (and advocacy) will be dependent on available budget and spend approval processes.

Who accessed the service?

9.14 Children and young people accessing the Independent Visitor Service represented a diverse range of ages, backgrounds and experiences.

9.15 During 2025/26, the service received referrals for children and young people aged between 7 and 17 years old, with most referrals relating to children aged between 10 and 13 years old.

9.16 The demographic data of referrals is as follows:

Gender

Of the children and young people referred during the reporting period:

31% were female

63% were male

6% identified as non-binary or did not conform to a gender

Ethnicity

The majority of referrals were for children and young people identifying as White British (81%). The service also supported children from Black British and other ethnic backgrounds.

Disability and Additional Needs

Children accessing the service included those with:

- specific learning difficulties
- autism spectrum disorder
- social, emotional and mental health needs
- additional communication and developmental needs

Children living outside Dorset

9.17 Whilst most children accessing the service lived within Dorset, the service also supported Dorset children placed across neighbouring authorities and wider geographical areas. This reflects the complexity of modern care arrangements and Dorset Council's commitment to ensuring children can access trusted adult relationships regardless of where they live.

Table 2: Location of children matched with an IV or on the waiting list

LA area	Matched	Waiting list
Dorset Council	24	14
Bournemouth, Christchurch & Poole	6	5
Somerset	2	2
Kent	1	-
Wiltshire	1	1
Hampshire	-	2
London	-	3
Devon	-	1
Essex	-	1
Birmingham	-	1

What children told us

9.18 Throughout the year, children consistently highlighted that the most valuable aspect of the service was having a trusted adult who listened, cared and remained involved over time.

9.19 Children described their Independent Visitors as adults who:

- listened without judgement
- provided emotional support
- kept their promises
- helped them try new things
- remained alongside them during difficult periods

9.20 Children told us:

"He's always there for me."

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

"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."

"When I moved into a hotel… I got freaked out. My IV made me feel better."

"He said he would still see me even if I moved… he's kind."

9.21 These comments demonstrate that consistency, trust and emotional support are often more important to children than the activities themselves.

What volunteers told us

9.22 Volunteer feedback demonstrated the positive impact that consistent relationships can have over time. Volunteers frequently observed:

- increased confidence
- improved emotional regulation
- growing independence
- broader social opportunities
- increased aspirations

9.23 One volunteer reflected *"Ryan was given an award, they are flourishing. Their confidence has grown and they have made a wide circle of friends."*

9.24 Another noted *"Kai is getting better at fishing every time and was keen to demonstrate his increasing knowledge and skill base."*

9.25 These observations suggest that IV relationships contribute not only to social opportunities, but also to children's confidence, resilience and personal development.

What difference did the IV service make?

9.26 NYAS's annual review process empowers children and young people to directly evaluate their relationship with their Independent Visitor.

9.27 During 2025/26:

- 100% felt comfortable talking to their IV.
- 80% reported trying something new.
- 60% reported learning a new skill.
- 80% rated their IV's listening skills 5 out of 5.

9.28 The Independent Visitor service is fundamentally a relationship-based intervention. Whilst activities are important, feedback gathered throughout the year consistently highlighted that the greatest value for children and young people was having a trusted adult who listened, remained consistent and stayed involved during periods of change.

Themes emerging during 2025/26:

The right to consistent relationships

9.29 Many children in care experience frequent changes in homes, schools and professionals. Throughout the year, children consistently identified reliability, trust and continuity as the most valuable aspects of their relationship with an Independent Visitor.

9.30 Comments such as *"He's always there for me"* and *"She always turns up"* demonstrate the significance of having a trusted adult who remains alongside them through change and uncertainty.

The right to be heard and understood

9.31 Children repeatedly described their Independent Visitor as somebody who listened, cared and helped them make sense of difficult experiences.

9.32 Annual review findings demonstrated exceptionally high levels of trust and communication, with all participating children reporting that they felt comfortable talking to their Independent Visitor.

The right to enjoy childhood, leisure and new experiences

9.33 Many children described trying new activities, visiting new places and developing new interests through their Independent Visitor relationship.

9.34 Examples during the year included:

- bowling events
- fishing activities
- zoo visits
- trips to London
- cookery experiences
- Harry Potter studios

The right to hope, identity and positive futures

9.35 Independent Visitor relationships supported children to build confidence, develop aspirations and strengthen their sense of identity.

9.36 Examples during the year included children:

- joining cadets
- developing new hobbies
- exploring future careers

- building confidence in social settings
- becoming more independent

9.37 Taken together, these findings demonstrate that the Independent Visitor Service helps children build trusted relationships, access opportunities, develop confidence and experience childhood in ways that support their wellbeing and long-term outcomes. The service continues to make an important contribution to Dorset Council's Corporate Parenting responsibilities and the Dorset Promise.

Examples of impact through the IV service

9.38 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):

Jess – Rebuilding Confidence Following Family Difficulties

Issue: Jess was finding family contact arrangements difficult and felt conflicted about reducing contact with her mum. She was experiencing feelings of guilt and uncertainty about the decisions she was making.

Independent Visitor support: Jess's Independent Visitor provided a safe and trusted space to talk through her feelings, helping her explore her options without pressure or judgement.

Outcome/impact: Jess reported feeling listened to and supported. The relationship helped her make decisions with greater confidence and reduced feelings of guilt and responsibility for circumstances beyond her control.

Josh – Stability Through Change

Issue: Josh experienced significant changes and uncertainty in his life and benefited from consistent support during periods of disruption.

Independent Visitor support: Through regular activities and visits, Josh's Independent Visitor remained a reliable and consistent adult presence.

Outcome/impact: Josh reported feeling safe and valued within the relationship and enjoyed opportunities to access activities and experiences alongside a trusted adult. One volunteer reflected that Josh "appreciated the opportunity to be himself and felt safe".

Ryan – Building Confidence and Future Aspirations

Issue: Ryan lacked confidence and was uncertain about future goals and aspirations.

Independent Visitor support: Ryan's Independent Visitor encouraged participation in activities, celebrated achievements and supported Ryan to explore new opportunities, including involvement with RAF cadets.

Outcome/impact: Ryan received an award through RAF cadets, developed a wider friendship group and increased confidence. Ryan subsequently identified a future ambition to join the RAF as an apprentice. A volunteer reflected that Ryan was "flourishing" and that their confidence had grown significantly.

Kai – Developing Skills, Confidence and Independence

Issue: Kai benefited from opportunities to build confidence, learn new skills and develop interests outside of everyday routines.

Independent Visitor support: Through regular fishing trips and shared activities, Kai and his Independent Visitor developed a strong relationship centred on encouragement, learning and enjoyment.

Outcome/impact: Kai's confidence and skill levels increased over time. His Independent Visitor noted that Kai was increasingly confident in demonstrating his knowledge, seeking guidance and trying new approaches. He looked forward to future activities and continued developing a positive sense of achievement and self-confidence.

9.39 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 and strengthening Dorset's Advocacy and IV services

Continuous Improvement During 2025/26

10.1 Advocacy and Independent Visitor services continue to deliver positive outcomes for children and young people across Dorset. Alongside direct service delivery, Dorset Council and NYAS have continued to work in partnership throughout 2025/26 to strengthen quality, increase impact and improve children's experiences of both services.

10.2 During the year, development activity focused on the following key areas:

Quality and Practice Improvement

10.3 During 2025/26, Dorset Council and NYAS strengthened quality assurance arrangements, including thematic reviews and reflective feedback processes. This approach has helped identify strengths in practice, share learning across the team and support continuous improvement in relation to:

- rights-based practice
- participation and influence
- recording outcomes
- use of direct work tools
- advocacy planning and review processes

10.4 For Independent Visitor services, Annual Reviews, volunteer feedback and children's feedback continue to inform service development and quality improvement activity.

Workforce Development

10.5 The service has continued to invest in workforce development across both advocacy and Independent Visitor services. During the year this included:

- best practice meetings
- reflective learning opportunities
- volunteer development activity
- safeguarding updates
- practice discussions informed by children's feedback
- strengthening understanding of trauma-informed and relationship-based approaches

10.6 The publication of the refreshed National Standards for the Provision of Children's Advocacy Services in October 2026 provides a further opportunity to strengthen practice and quality assurance arrangements moving forward.

Partnership working

10.7 Dorset Council and NYAS have continued to strengthen partnership working throughout the year. Examples include:

- engagement through Thinking Thursday sessions
- collaboration with Independent Reviewing Officers and QAROs
- connections with Youth Voice activity
- links with safeguarding partners
- promotion of advocacy and Independent Visitor services across the wider children's workforce

10.8 These activities have helped improve awareness of services, strengthen referral pathways and support greater understanding of the role of advocacy and Independent Visitors in promoting children's rights and participation.

Priorities from 2024/25

10.9 Last year's report identified five key priorities for our Advocacy and IV Services. Progress during the year demonstrates how both Dorset Council and NYAS have continued to strengthen advocacy and Independent Visitor provision for children and young people.

Expanding the reach and uptake of Advocacy and Independent Visitors

10.10 Advocacy demand remained strong throughout the year, with 613 referrals received and 3,719 advocacy hours delivered, exceeding the contracted annual target.

10.11 Independent Visitor provision also continued to grow, increasing from 24 active matches at the start of the year to 34 by year-end. Whilst demand continues to exceed capacity, the growth in matches demonstrates continued progress in extending access to children and young people.

Continuing to embed children's voice in service delivery, governance and evaluation

10.12 Children's feedback has remained central to service development throughout the year.

10.13 Advocacy outcomes monitoring, feedback surveys, Annual Reviews within the Independent Visitor Service, case audit activity and case studies have all strengthened understanding of children's experiences and the impact of services.

10.14 Both services continue to demonstrate a clear commitment to ensuring children's voices shape planning, review and service improvement activity.

Broadening the use of direct work tools and relational approaches in advocacy practice

10.15 We have worked collaboratively across teams and services, with an increased emphasis on relational advocacy practice throughout the year. Quarterly reports demonstrated growing use of direct work approaches, improved recording of outcomes and increased focus on supporting children to understand their rights and participate meaningfully in decision-making processes.

Supporting transitions for care leavers and strengthening lifelong relationships

10.16 Transitions remained a significant theme throughout the year.

10.17 Advocacy supported young people with accommodation, housing, education, care leaver entitlements and pathway planning.

10.18 Within the Independent Visitor Service, children and young people continued to benefit from trusted long-term relationships which provided stability and continuity during periods of transition and change.

Growing a diverse and sustainable volunteer base

10.19 Volunteer recruitment remained a significant focus throughout the year, with 36 applications received and 16 new matches established. Whilst demand continues to exceed available capacity, recruitment activity enabled the service to reach full contractual capacity and support more children and young people than at any previous point during the current contract.

11. Forward Focus: Priorities for year 3 (2026/27)

11.1 Whilst significant progress has been achieved, both Dorset Council and NYAS remain committed to continuous improvement.

11.2 Key priorities for 2026/27 include:

- implementing and embedding learning from the refreshed National Standards for the Provision of Children's Advocacy Services, published in October 2026.
- further embedding children's voice and lived experience within service development, quality assurance and evaluation processes
- supporting continued growth within the Independent Visitor Service through volunteer recruitment, development and retention activity
- reducing waiting times for children and young people seeking access to an Independent Visitor wherever possible

- strengthening connections with Dorset Council's wider participation, lifelong relationships and preparation for adulthood agendas

Looking ahead

11.3 Advocacy and Independent Visitor services enter 2026/27 from a strong position. Performance data, children's feedback, outcomes measures and case studies throughout this report demonstrate that both services continue to make a meaningful contribution to the lives of Dorset's children and young people.

11.4 Demand remains high, outcomes remain strong, and both services continue to play an important role in promoting children's rights, participation, trusted relationships and positive futures.

11.5 Throughout this report, children consistently describe feeling listened to, supported and understood. The outcomes demonstrated through advocacy and Independent Visitor services closely reflect the commitments contained within Dorset's Promise, particularly around listening to children, supporting positive futures, providing opportunities and ensuring children experience trusted and stable relationships.

11.6 Dorset Council and NYAS remain committed to building on this progress and ensuring children and young people continue to receive high-quality, rights-based and relationship-centred support.

12. Alternative options considered

N/A

13. Legal considerations

N/A

14. Financial implications

14.1 Whilst services continue to operate within the agreed contractual budget, performance data indicates that demand for both advocacy and Independent Visitor services exceeds the level of provision currently commissioned

14.2 Advocacy activity exceeded contracted annual hours, whilst the Independent Visitor service reached full capacity and maintained a significant waiting list throughout the year.

14.3 Dorset Council will be reviewing IV and advocacy sufficiency when making decisions leading up to the first optional extension in July 2027. Further

increases to contract capacity will be dependent on available budget and spend approval processes.

15. Natural environment, climate & ecology implications

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

16. Well-being and health implications

16.1 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.

17. Other implications

10.1 The refreshed National Standards for the Provision of Children's Advocacy Services were published in October 2026 and will inform future service development and quality assurance activity.

18. Risk implications

18.1 The risks are assessed as ‘low’.

19. Equalities

19.1 This report does not require a decision, therefore an Equalities Impact Assessment is not required.

20. Appendices – None.

21. Background papers

CPB Advocacy and Independent Visitors report 2025

22. Report sign-off

22.1 This report has been through the internal report clearance process and has been signed off by the Director for Assurance & Governance (Monitoring Officer), the Director for Resources (Section 151 Officer) and the appropriate Cabinet Member(s)