

Practice

Guidance

Manchester

Independent

Visitor Scheme

- All Local Authorities have a statutory obligation to provide Independent Visitors under the Children Act 1989 and the Children and Young person Act 2008.

What is an Independent Visitor?

In general independent visitors are lay people recruited from the community

The purpose of the independent visitor role is:

- to contribute to the welfare of the child by visiting, advising and befriending the child in order to:
- Promoting the child's developmental, social, emotional, educational, religious and cultural needs
- Encourage the child to exercise his/her rights to participate in decisions which will affect him/her
- Support the care plan for the child and his/her carers
- Aim, as far as possible to compliment the activities of carers

When to appointment an Independent Visitor.

Children's Services have a responsibility to assess whether it would be appropriate to appoint an independent visitor for a child they are looking after if the following criteria are satisfied:

- The child is accommodated by the local authority and there are no current plans for them to return to live with family
- It appears that communication between the child and a parent or any person who is not a parent but has PR for the child is infrequent; or
- The child has not been visited (or has not lived with) a parent or any person who is not the child's parent but who has PR for the child, during the preceding 12 months

In addition an independent visitor should be considered when it appears to be in the best interests of the child to do so. In doing so the local authority should consider the following:

- Is the child placed at a distance from home, particularly when placed out-of-authority.
- Whether the child is able to go out independently or whether s/he experiences difficulties in communicating or building positive relationships
- Whether the child is likely to engage in behaviour which will put him/her at risk as a result of peer pressure or forming inappropriate relationships with people who are significantly older
- Whether a child placed in a residential setting would benefit from a more individualised relationship: and
- Whether it would make a positive contribution to promoting the child's educations and health

Duties of Independent Visitor

- Volunteers must be Independent of the care system as defined by the Acts.
- The Acts define the role as to 'visit, advise and befriend' children and young people in the care system that would benefit from having an Independent Visitor.
- The independent visitor should undertake regular visits to the child and maintain other contact, by telephone and letter as appropriate.
- It may also require them to encourage the child to exercise their rights and to participate in decisions which will affect them.
- Independent Visitors have a safeguarding function.
- The role involves contributing to the emotional, physical, spiritual, cultural and social needs of the young person.
- Provides a long term consistent relationship regardless of placement, Social Worker and Educational changes.
- Works in partnership with the network of adults in the young person's life and complements existing provision.
- Young person led with no imposed targets and goals. They are not to be anything other than child-focused, however sympathetic they may be to other points of view. They are not expected to accept unquestioningly what those responsible for the child tell them is in the child's interests, but should remain open-minded and even sceptical.

Visits

- The frequency and length of such visits will depend on the circumstances of each situation and may change in the course of the relationship between the child and independent visitor.
- How the independent visitor pursues his/her role in terms of a plan and timetable of more specific activities will vary depending on the circumstances. He/she will need to form own judgements about how best to proceed. Taking into account the local authority's view of the child's needs, the child's wishes and the developing relationship with the child, the independent visitor must reach their own conclusions as to how, in this particular situation, their activities might best be focused.
- This may include (unless it is felt that there is clear evidence to act differently) supporting the care plan for the child and their Carers, such as residential workers who have day to day care of the child.

- The independent visitor will need to make arrangements in advance about visiting the child's Carers as well as with the child him/herself.
- As the relationship develops it may well be appropriate for the independent visitor and child to go out somewhere. Such outings can afford privacy, ease communication and develop the relationship between independent visitor and child through a shared activity
- Independent visitor should not provide compensating leisure experiences, which ought more appropriately be the responsibility of the child's Carers.
- There may be activities, which the Carers cannot provide, perhaps for example connected to the cultural background or religion of the child
- In exceptional circumstances it may be appropriate if the relationship with the child has developed, for the independent visitor to invite the child to their own home. Again, such a step must be seen within the overall care plans for the child

Advising

- It is not intended that the independent visitor should engage the child in intensive counselling. Independent visitors need to recognise that it is not their role to counsel or advise the child in complex situations.
- They should rather encourage and support the child to seek and accept help from their Social Worker in the first instance.

Meetings with the Local Authority or Other Agencies

- The possible involvement of the independent visitor in meetings or consultation processes arises in some circumstances as a legal requirement and in others is on a discretionary basis.
- The independent visitor will have the opportunity to provide contributions to the review of a child's case either in writing or at meetings where the child's case is to be discussed and to which they have been invited because they have something relevant to contribute or because the child has requested that the visitor attend with him/her.

- The independent visitor may wish to put views to the meeting as a friend of the child. The independent visitor will have to take care to distinguish between repeating what the child has asked them to say on their behalf, interpreting such information and offering their own view as to what is best for the child.
- The Children Act also offers the opportunity for an independent visitor to contribute views outside the formal review arrangements. The child may be involved in family proceedings where the Court has requested a welfare report (Section 7). Another possibility in relation to Court proceedings is that a guardian ad litem has been appointed (Section 41). The views of the independent visitor about the child may well be of relevance to such proceedings and the independent visitor may need to take the initiative in seeking out the relevant person in order to convey their views. He/she will wish to consult with the child before taking such action.

When a Child Ceases to be Looked After

The need for an independent visitor to continue their relationship with a young person once he/she ceases to be Looked After by the local authority, where the young person seeks this, should not be overlooked. Such continuing arrangements would be on an informal basis but the local authority should consider whether it would be appropriate to continue to meet the cost of reasonable expenses associated with this continued role until such time as its own after-care responsibilities expire.