

**Independent Visitors Handbook**

**April 2019**

**Definition of an Independent Visitor**

A responsible authority looking after a child has a duty to appoint a person to be a child’s independent visitor where it appears to them to be in the child’s interest to do so **[section 23ZB(1)(b)]** **Children Act 1989**. The appointment should be considered as part of the development of the care plan for the child or as part of a review of the child’s case.

Any decision not to appoint an independent visitor should be kept under review to make sure that the opportunity to appoint such a person is considered if the child’s circumstances change. The child’s wishes and feelings should be ascertained and the responsible authority may not appoint an independent visitor if the child objects and the authority are satisfied that the child has sufficient understanding to make an informed decision **[under section 23ZB(6)(a)]**.

Being ‘independent’ means that an independent visitor must not be connected with the local authority as a result of: being an elected or co-opted member of the responsible authority; being an officer of the responsible authority who is employed in relation to functions referred in section 18 of the 2004 Act; or being the spouse or civil partner or other person (whether of the same or a different sex) living in the same household as the person who is such a member or an officer of the responsible authority.

The independent visitor’s functions are to visit, advise and befriend the child. The way these functions are carried out will vary according to the needs and wishes of the individual child.

The purpose of the independent visitor role is to contribute to the welfare of the child. As such s/he should:

* promote the child’s developmental, social, emotional, educational, religious and

cultural needs;

* encourage the child to exercise his/her rights and to participate in decisions which will affect him/her;
* support the care plan for the child and his/her carers; and
* aim, as far as possible, to complement the activities of carers.

A responsible authority should assess whether it would be appropriate to appoint an independent visitor for a child they are looking after if either of the following criteria is satisfied:

* it appears that communication between the child and a parent or any person who is not a parent but has parental responsibility for the child has been 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 parental responsibility for the child, during the preceding 12 months.

**Referral process**

Any child or young person under the age of 18 can be referred for an Independent Visitor (IV). Referrals for children where there is little or no quality contact with birth parents, or person with parental responsibility will be prioritised. Referrals should be made using the below link [Referral form](http://www3.northamptonshire.gov.uk/councilservices/children-families-education/help-and-protection-for-children/protecting-children-information-for-professionals/Pages/childrens_rights_information_professionals.aspx).

**Recruitment**

Potential volunteers can request an application form through childrensrights@northamptonshire.gov.uk. The applicant will receive a job description and person specification as well as the [Volunteers Policy](http://sharepoint.lgss.local/Pages/Volunteers.aspx) and information about the role.

Once an application is received an interview will be arranged and consideration about suitability will be given at this stage. Following a successful interview, an Enhanced DBS & Barring check and two references will be requested. Referees will be contacted by telephone to confirm the reference. One reference needs to be supplied from a professional/employer/colleague/teacher/lecturer.

Checks will also be made in relation to Social Care’s data base system, and whilst previous involvement may not necessarily rule out the candidate it will be taken into consideration.

Medical clearance may be required if the applicant declares a medical issue that could impact on matching.

Driving licence and insurance (including business insurance) and current MOT will be gathered and will be required to be updated on a yearly basis. Proof of eligibly to work in the UK will be required – see [Volunteers Policy](http://sharepoint.lgss.local/Pages/Volunteers.aspx).

**Training**

Following successful appointment Independent Visitors will be given core training which will give the basic knowledge in order to undertake the role. The core training is facilitated quarterly and takes place over a day and half. The council will provide any reasonable training required for the role, including health and safety training. The Independent Visitor Co-ordinator will send the IV the link to the county council’s online and face to face training, if the IV wishes to participate in any they should contact the IV Co-ordinator. Drugs and Alcohol training will be provided for IV’s.

**Matching**

The IV Co-ordinator will meet the child/young person following a referral and engage with the young person to ascertain their hobbies and interests as well as their consent. The IV Co-ordinator stays in touch with the young person until a match has been found. IV Co-ordinator contacts the IV to make the suggested match. There is then a three way meeting with the IV, child/young person and the IV Co-ordinator to ensure that the initial meeting is successful. If the IV Co-ordinator sees that the initial meeting is going well they will withdraw so that child/young person and IV are engaging. The child/young person then has 24 hours to consider if they wish to be matched with the IV. The child/young person and IV are then contacted and if this is agreed then the match is ratified. From this point onwards the IV will make contact arrangements themselves with the carers for the young person. IV’s could, if it was deemed appropriate be matched with more than one young person but they would be expected to visit the individuals separately.

**Expenses/Mileage**

Each IV will be given a monthly payment to cover mileage and expenses that are incurred when visiting and supporting the young person. An initial payment will be given to cover the costs of a pay as you go mobile phone, further ‘top ups’ will need to be taken from the monthly payment. This monthly payment has also been calculated to include a small amount that can be used to buy the child/young person a birthday and or Christmas present.

**Supervision and support**

Once matched, IV’s will be provided with supervision. Support will be provided around the matching process. Formal group supervision takes place every 12 weeks. Following the match being approved an individual supervision session, over the telephone is arranged at approximately six weeks. Informal supervision will be given at any time the IV requires this. The expectation is that the IV will commit to attending 3 formal supervisions per year for the match to continue to be approved.

**Expectations and boundaries**

1. **Commitment to the child/young person**

The expectation is that the IV will commit to no less than two years support for the child/young person. The IV should see the child/young person fortnightly where possible but no less than monthly. Visits should be approximately two hours.

1. **Social Networking sites**

The IV should not contact or ‘befriend’ the young person through any social media site.

1. **Photographs**

Photographs of the child/young person can be taken, but cannot be shared through any social media site. They should only be shared through a device or printed off and given to the child/young person or their carer.

1. **Family/Friends**

The child/young person should not be purposefully introduced to partners, family or friends of the IV. This is because they will not have been subject to the same clearances as the IV. The child/young person should not be taken to the IV’s home or any household belonging to a friend or family member of the IV.

1. **Drugs and Alcohol**

The IV should not be under the influence of drugs or alcohol immediately prior to or during the visit. Visit activities should not include consuming drugs or alcohol. Although we acknowledge that young people aged 18 years or over are legally able to consume alcohol, this should not be encouraged. Drug use is not permitted.

1. **Pets**

You may wish to take your dog out when seeing a young person or visits to horses that you own. Whilst this may be really positive for the young person caution will need to be taken with pets. Some children have inherent fears of animals and any introductions needs to be child lead. Given the risks that animals pose, any introduction needs to be discussed with the IV Co-ordinator initially and a risk assessment will need to be undertaken. If this is a horse then insurances and agreement from the child’s social worker would have to be gained before the child/young person was able to ride the horse. An agreement with the IV would also be completed to ensure that the child/young person was not left alone with the horse at any point. In respect of dogs – a [dog risk assessment](http://www.northamptonshirescb.org.uk/assets/legacy/getasset?id=fAAyADcAMAB8AHwAVAByAHUAZQB8AHwAMAB8AA2) would need to be completed before the dog could be brought on any visit with the child. Any other pets will be ‘risk assessed’ prior to decisions being made about this.

1. **Mobile phones**

IV’s will be provided with a pay as you go mobile phone (if they wish to have one). This will give the IV choice to keep their personal mobile number private and be able to communicate directly with older young people to make arrangements.

1. **Medication**

IV’s are not insured to give medication for children/young people. If a child/young person needs medication, they need to either be returned to their placement for this to be given or they need to be old enough to manage their own medication.

1. **Special Occasions**

You may wish to take the young person out for the whole day as a one off which we would advise that you arrange in advance with the carers and consider the above.

1. **Visit Record**

A brief record should be provided about the visit, the child’s name should not be identified within this as this record will not be stored on the child’s file and if e-mailed will not be secure. Therefore, the IV should put their own name as the identifying detail.

1. **Safeguarding**

The IV may encounter a situation where the child/young person either discloses something that has happened or there is a significant incident during the visit. If the child/young person discloses physical, sexual or emotional abuse or neglect this needs to be reported. It cannot be kept a secret and the child/young person needs to be made aware of this. If the child/young person makes a disclosure about their carers, Out of Hours must be contacted and advice sought prior to returning the child/young person to their carers. If the child/young person does not tell you who the abuser is you need to establish whether it is safe for them to return to the placement. If there is a significant incident whilst on a visit you may not need to inform Out of Hours but you should inform the carers so that they can support the child/young person following this.

1. **Looked After Children (LAC) reviews**

The child/young person can request that the IV attends their LAC review, they should only attend with the young person’s consent. The IV should agree with the child/young person what they will share prior to the review.

1. **Confidentiality**

Volunteers may become aware of confidential information about the child/young person they are matched with and other children/young people. Volunteers should not disclose this information or use it for their own or another benefit without the consent of the party concerned.

1. **Change of circumstances for IV**

IV’s should inform the IV Co-ordinator if there are any changes to their circumstances that would impact on their suitability for the role. Changes of address and contact details/car/next of kin should also be shared with the Co-ordinator asap

**Health and Safety**

Considerations are made during the matching process around any risks that the child/young person or others may pose. IV’s will be informed prior to matching of any known areas or persons that may cause a risk. The risk assessment checklist will be completed with the IV prior to matching. IV’s will be given the Out of Hours telephone number 01604 626938. IV’s are given a card with essential telephone’s numbers and a photo identification card. IV’s should tell the carer where they are going to and what time to expect their return. The IV Co-ordinator will get next of kin details for the IV and with consent this will be shared with the Out of Hours team so that if in the event of an emergency next of kin can be contacted.

**Age limits**

Referrals will be accepted for any child/young person where it deemed appropriate under the age of 18. This is to encourage a long lasting relationship. Matches will continue to be approved up to age of 21 years, as there is an acknowledgement that between 18 and 21 is a vulnerable period for care leavers.

**Review**

All matches will be reviewed. This will initially take place after the first visit informally and then formally take place after six weeks and then every six months. Formal reviews will include a visit or telephone call to the child/young person (depending on age and communication needs) to ensure they are satisfied with the match and complete feedback. Feedback forms will be sent to the carer, IV, Social Worker & child/young person. The information will be collated and if the child/young person and the IV continue to be satisfied with the match, this will continue to be supported.

**Endings**

All formal arrangements will cease following the young person’s 21st birthday. If the IV and young person wish to remain in touch they can do this as an informal adult friendship but this will not be formally supported. Matches that continue post 18 will be supported and advice will be given around boundaries and expectations as the young person is moving into adulthood. If the IV is not adhering to the boundaries and expectations set out above we have the right to formally end the match. This will take place with a conversation with the child/young person and the IV and then a formal letter will be sent out to all involved.

It is expected that an IV who ends a match due to unforeseen personal circumstances does so with great sensitivity to their child/young person. The ideal ending would be to arrange a final ‘goodbye’ visit where the positive aspects of the relationship are re-visited and highlighted. It is imperative that no young person is left feeling that this relationship ended because of them.

If a visit is not possible a card or postcard sent to the IV Co-ordinator to hand over or addressed to the child/ carer would be another way to end on a positive note.