The Independent Visitor

Service Policy and Procedures

**Version FINAL Approved by:**

**Tom Stevenson**

**Date: June 2024**

# About this document

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#### Intended Audience

This document has been issued to the following people for Review (R) Information (I) and Review and Sign off (S). The Child in Need procedure is mandatory and must be shared with all staff and partners working with Children in Need and their families.

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| --- | --- | --- |
| **Name** | **Position** | **S/R/I** |
| The Independent Visitor Service | The Service | S/R/I |
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| Directors |  | I |
| Assistant Directors / Service Managers |  | I |
| All staff |  | I |

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## Introduction

This document outlines the policies and procedures for Independent Visitors at Surrey County Council. This resource is designed to be a one-stop guide for Independent Visitors, outlining all the policies and procedures applicable to their role, the rules, and regulations they are bound by and what they can expect from Surrey County Council. This policy is designed to be easy to navigate with all circumstances accounted for.

Independent Visitors are volunteers who do not work for Surrey County Council. Independent Visitors are there to visit, befriend and advise a looked after child or young person. The Independent Visitor Service is there to recruit, support and monitor volunteers to advise, befriend and visit children in care in Surrey. Independent Visitors will remain child focussed at all times and will endeavour to become a consistent adult figure in the child or young person’s life. In most cases a child or young person’s Independent Visitor will not change if the child or young person moves to a new home or their social worker changes. However, a child or young person’s Independent Visitor may change if either the child or young person, or the Independent Visitor moves, and the distance now makes the journey untenable.

## Legal background:

It is written into the Children Act 1989 that any responsible authority looking after a child or young person has a duty to appoint a person to be a child or young person’s Independent Visitor when it appears to them to be in the child or young person’s best interest [section 23ZB(1)(b)]. It is the child or young person’s choice whether they have an Independent Visitor, if the local authority is satisfied that the child or young person has sufficient understanding to make an informed decision [section 23ZB(6)(b)]. However, any decision not to appoint an Independent Visitor must be kept under review to ensure the opportunity to appoint an Independent Visitor is reconsidered if the child or young person’s circumstances change, or they no longer wish to have an Independent Visitor.

Additionally, children or young people’s views and opinions should be listened to and used to influence and improve the Independent Visitor Service.

### Identifying when an Independent Visitor should be appointed:

Surrey County Council will use the following criteria to decide if it is in the child or young person’s best interests for them to have an Independent Visitor:

* Whether the child or young person is placed at a distance from home, particularly where the placement is out-of-authority, which makes it difficult to maintain sufficient contact with friends.
* Whether the child or young person is unable to go out independently or whether they experience difficulties in communicating or building positive relationships.
* Whether the child or young person is likely to engage in behaviour which will put them at risk because of peer pressure or forming inappropriate relationships with people who are significantly older.
* Whether a child or young person placed in a residential setting would benefit from a more individualised relationship; and
* Whether it would make a positive contribution to promoting the child or young person’s education and health.

## Meet the Independent Visitor Service:

**Veronica McKee** is the Independent Visitor Service Coordinator and is responsible for delivering the Independent Visitor Service.

**Sandy Colman** is the Independent Visitor Service Social Worker and is responsible for assisting Veronica in delivering the Independent Visitor Service.

**Linde Webber** is the Service Manager for the Independent Visitor Service who has overall Service responsibility for the Independent Visitor Service.

Veronica and Sandy are the first points of contact for the Independent Visitor Service.

## Emergency Contact numbers:

As an Independent Visitor you will be assigned a lead person from the Independent Visitor Service who will be your main point of contact for any queries or concerns. This is usually the person who introduces you to the child to provide consistency for the child.

You can contact your lead person using the contact number provided in the first meeting, when you are introduced to the child you are visiting. However, in the rare occurrence that your lead person (or their stand in if they are away) cannot be reached via telephone please email the Independent Visitor Service: independentvisitors@surreycc.gov.uk. This inbox is monitored during standard working hours (Monday-Friday 9am-5pm).

In the case of an emergency Surrey Children’s Services have an Emergency Duty Team that provides an emergency social work service for urgent situations which arise out of normal working hours, and which cannot be left until the next working day.

The Emergency Duty Team operates outside of normal office hours:

Monday to Friday 5pm to 9am.

Weekends- 24 hours a day.

All bank holiday periods.

Please call: 01483 517898.

SMS number: 07800000388 (for deaf and hard of hearing callers online)

To make a call via text direct, please dial: 18001 01483517898.

Email: edt.ssd@surreycc.gov.uk

## Eligibility criteria for Independent Visitors:

Independent Visitors are volunteers from any background who may have qualities, skills, experiences, or qualifications that they believe make them suitable to undertake the Independent Visitor volunteer role.

Independent Visitors must:

1. Be over the age of 21 and at least 7 years older than the child or young person they are matched with.
2. Be able to commit to visiting a child or young person at least once a month for a minimum of two years.
3. Be independent- being ‘independent’ means that an Independent Visitor must not be connected with the responsible authority (Surrey County Council) as the result of:
	1. Being an elected or co-opted member of the responsible authority.
	2. Being an officer of the responsible authority who is employed in relation to functions referred to in section 18 of the 2004 Children’s Act.
	3. Being a spouse or civil partner or other person living in the same household as the person who is such a member or an officer of the responsible authority.

In rare circumstances it may be decided that a relative of the child or young person would be appropriate to fulfil the role of an Independent Visitor and it is the child or young person’s preferred option. The Independent Visitor Service will decide if this is suitable on a case-by-case basis.

### 5.1. Equal Opportunities:

Surrey County Council recognises the value of a diverse team of volunteers and endeavours to create and maintain positive, inclusive workplaces in which everyone is valued and respected. Appendix A contains the Volunteers across Surrey County Council toolkit which details Surrey’s commitment to be a best practice employer for all staff and anyone working on a voluntary basis for Surrey County Council.

Additionally, it is the duty of everyone who works or volunteers for Surrey County Council to be aware of equality issues in their daily activities. You must not treat a person less favourably because of their race, colour, nationality, gender, age, disability, sexual orientation, religion and belief, marital status, and caring responsibilities.

## 6. Appointment:

The Independent Visitor Service has a robust training and induction programme which covers not only the formal aspects of the Independent Visitor role and functions but also the duties and procedures of the local authority and the relevant aspects of the legislation. When a person expresses an interest to become an Independent Visitor they are invited to an open evening. At the open evening potential interested parties are provided with an overview of the Independent Visitor role and have a chance to meet the team and ask any questions. At the end of the evening attendees will be asked to complete a feedback form and indicate if they are interested in pursuing a voluntary position as an Independent Visitor.

Any interested parties are then sent application forms. This form requests information that will allow the Independent Visitor Service to carry out safeguarding checks. Upon submission of the form successful potential volunteers are invited to training. The training process is two days long and attendance is mandatory. At the end of the training attendees must indicate that they are happy to proceed.

At this stage the Independent Visitor Service will complete their assessments, which includes checking personal and (where applicable) employer references, local authority checks, an enhanced DBS check, and driving license and car insurance checks. The volunteer is then invited to attend a multi-disciplinary panel to discuss their application and the Independent Visitor Service Assessment. The panel makes the final decision about the suitability of the applicant to the Independent Visitor role. If successful, the new Independent Visitor must sign the Independent Visitor Service Volunteer and Service Agreement Form before the matching process can commence.

## At the conclusion of the appointment process new Independent Visitors are invited to complete an Independent Visitor profile- providing an overview of who they are and their interests which can be shared with a child or young person prior to the matching process.

## 7. Training:

During training applicants will be provided with a more detailed overview of the Independent Visitor Service, the Independent Visitor role and given information about the lived experiences of children looked after. At this training applicants will be made aware of their responsibilities regarding safeguarding, safe care practices and equality.

In addition, Independent Visitors have access to monthly support groups where guest speakers and training topics are delivered.

## 8. Making a match:

As an Independent Visitor you will be provided with enough information to enable you to make an informed decision whether to accept a match with a child or young person. This level of knowledge sharing is based on the ‘need to know’ principle. The assigned lead person of the Independent Visitor Service will talk you through any potential matches. They will take into consideration geographical factors, common interests, backgrounds, and other relevant factors when assisting with the match making process. As an Independent Visitor you are not under any obligation to accept a match with a child or young person. If you agree to be matched with a child or young person, they will be provided with your profile and they decide if they wish to accept you as their Independent Visitor. Please note although as an Independent Visitor you are appointed by Surrey County Council, you have no legal right to inspect the case file of any child or young person.

When a match is made in principle a meeting occurs between the Independent Visitor Service, the Independent Visitor, the child or young person and any other person the child or young person wants to be part of the meeting (i.e., social worker, carer or support worker). At this meeting the child or young person is given the opportunity to express their views and discuss what they would like to do during the visits. At this meeting if all parties agree then the first three visits are organised and contact details are shared between all parties. After the initial meeting it is your responsibility as an Independent Visitor to plan visits with the child or young person and / or their carer.

In exceptional circumstances Independent Visitors may be matched with more than one child or young person, but they would be expected to visit the individuals separately. In this situation Independent Visitors will be reminded of confidentiality with respect to each child or young person who may or may not know each other.

## 9. Oversight and support:

The Independent Visitor Service oversees the matches of all Independent Visitors. They are responsible for matching Independent Visitors with a child or young person, providing advice, identifying training opportunities, facilitating monthly support groups, and ensuring expenses are paid.

As an Independent Visitor you can contact the Independent Visitor Service at any time to discuss any concerns. Upon successful appointment you will be assigned a lead person from the Independent Visitor Service who will facilitate the matching process and contact you after your first ever visit, or your first visit with a new child or young person to see how the visit went. Additionally, the lead person will check in with you after the third visit and annually thereafter. At the time of the annual review the lead person will ask for feedback about visits from you, the child or young person, and representatives from the child or young person’s professional network.

The Independent Visitor Service facilitates a monthly support group offering access to peer support and information that will help Independent Visitors develop in their roles. As an Independent Visitor you are expected to attend a support group or have a meaningful discussion with your lead person from the Independent Visitor Service at least twice a year concerning the role and your relationship with the child and their network.

On a 3-yearly basis local authority checks, an enhanced DBS check, and driving license and car insurance checks will take place to review your circumstances to ensure that you are still able to fulfil your responsibilities as an Independent Visitor. The lead person from the Independent Visitor Service will ask for feedback about the visits from you, the child or young person, and representatives from the child or young person’s professional network. On completion of this review, you will be asked to re-sign the Independent Visitor Service Volunteer and Service Agreement form.

## 10. A child’s legal status:

It is useful to know a child or young person’s legal status and who holds parental responsibility in case of an emergency.

Most children or young people who have an Independent Visitor will be cared for by the local authority under an Interim Care Order or Care Order. This means that Surrey County Council are the corporate parents and as such hold parental responsibility for the child or young person, shared with their birth or adoptive parents (if the adoption has broken down and the child is back on an Interim Care Order or Care Order). Therefore, in most cases a parent or other adult has no legal right to approach a child or young person during a visit and ask to remove them from your care. If such an incident occurs, the carer or the Independent Visitor Service / Emergency Duty Team should be contacted as soon as possible.

One notable exception is children or young people cared for under a section 20 order such as unaccompanied asylum-seeking children or young people. If you are matched with a child or young person who is in this circumstance your lead person from the Independent Visitor Service will ensure you are aware of the individual circumstances / risks, and what to do if someone approaches wishing to remove the child or young person from your care.

## 11. Information we hold:

Surrey County Council has a duty to retain and store the following information in a secure manner:

* The application form and references.
* A copy of the Independent Visitor Service Volunteer and Service Agreement form.
* Records of approval and termination.
* Review documents.
* Copies of your monthly report of visits with a young person and copies of expenses. forms. (Please note- copies of the monthly report are also saved to the child or young person’s social care record).
* Records of the Independent Visitor Service contact with you.
* Your training records.
* A DBS (Disclosure and Barring Service) check every three years.

Surrey County Council is obliged to handle and manage the information it uses in accordance with certain information legislation such as the Data Protection Act and the Freedom of Information Act (see Appendix A).

Surrey County Council is fully compliant with GDPR and as such as an Independent Visitor you retain the legal right to ask to view any information the Independent Visitor Service stores about you. In the first instance you should approach your lead person who can advise you further.

## 12. The function and purpose of the Independent Visitor:

### 12.1 Function:

The function of an Independent Visitor is to visit, advise, and befriend a child or young person. The relationship is child or young person led and as such how these functions are carried out will vary according to the needs and wishes of the child or young person.

#### 12.1.1. Visiting

As an Independent Visitor you should be available to visit the child or young person at least once a month for a period of two years. The visits should be child or young person led and as such the child or young person should be asked what they would like to do during your visits. However, children or young people can sometimes find it difficult to make decisions and so in such instances the Independent Visitor will need to make decisions about activities undertaken, but always after consultation with the child or young person.

#### 12.1.2. Advise

There will be a range of issues about which you might offer the child or young person advice. These will often be quite straightforward such as where to find or who to ask for information. Additionally, you will be provided with training on how best to address topics children or young people may ask for advice for. However, if in doubt please contact the Independent Visitor Service. Independent Visitors are not advocates and you are not expected to provide advice on topics such as suitability of care arrangements (see 12.2.2. skilled advocate section for further information)

#### 12.1.3. Befriending

An important function of the Independent Visitor role is for you to try to establish a trusting relationship with a child or young person. However, it is important to note that for some children or young people relationships with adults in the past may have ended in disappointment or have been traumatic. Therefore, you must be prepared that establishing trust will often be a slow process possibly with setbacks. However, advice on building trusting relationships is included in the training programme and your lead person or the support group can offer advice throughout the duration of the match.

#### 12.1.4 Visits

As an Independent Visitor you must tell the carer where you are going on your visits and what time to expect your return. You must also ensure that contact details remain up to date. Your visit with a child or young person must not be overnight.

#### 12.1.5. Access to the child

Contact with people who are important to the child or young person should not be stopped because of upset caused by the child or young person’s behaviour. If a carer suggests that you do not visit the child or young person as a punishment, please speak to your lead person in the Independent Visitor Service as soon as possible.

#### 12.1.6. Expenses

The Independent Visitor is entitled to be reimbursed by the Independent Visitor Service any reasonable expenses incurred in visiting, advising, and befriending the child. However, permission must be sought from the Independent Visitor Service before an expensive activity (over £100) takes place, and there will be an annual budget limit set for each Independent Visitor dependent on the child’s individual circumstances. The term ‘expenses’ is intended to cover the Independent Visitor’s travel and out-of-pocket payments but is not intended to equate to a regular payment or salary for undertaking the role. Expenses should be claimed in arrears monthly. The Independent Visitor Service expenses form must be completed with receipts attached. Also, notification of any gift / expenses for the child or young person, whether or not they are claimed for reimbursement must be included on the form. Mileage or any other form of transport costs can also be claimed for using this form and will be paid at the council’s set rates. Expenses will be paid using bank transfer. Independent Visitors can choose not to claim expenses, but an expenses form must still be completed using the label ‘not claiming’ for any expenses the Independent Visitor does not wish to claim for.

#### 12.1.7. Meetings:

In some cases, as an Independent Visitor you might be included in meetings or consultation processes as a courtesy or as part of legal proceedings. For instance, if Surrey County Council intends to make an application to court to keep the child or young person in secure accommodation, they are legally bound to inform a range of persons including the child or young person’s Independent Visitor.

#### 12.1.8. A special case for looked after child reviews:

As an Independent Visitor you may provide contributions to a looked after child review either in writing or at the review if the child or young person has requested your attendance. You should agree with the child or young person what information you will share prior to the review. As an Independent Visitor you contribute to the meeting in the position of ‘a friend of the child or young person’.

#### 12.1.9. Visits with a young person over the age of 18:

While at the age of 18 the young person becomes an adult, as an Independent Visitor you are still bound by the same policies and procedures regardless of the young person’s age. Hence, as an Independent Visitor who remains supported by the Independent Visitor Service you must endeavour to meet the Service expectations.

The statutory duty for Local Authorities to provide Independent Visitors ends following the young person’s 18th birthday. However, the Independent Visitor Service will as good practice continue to support the relationship (including financial numeration) if all parties agree, up until the young person is 21 (and on a case-by-case basis potentially up until 25, but this is based on a young person’s individual need). Once it is agreed a match has formally ended and the young person is aged over 18, if the young person and their Independent Visitor wish to continue to meet, arrangements are deemed as private relationships between adult friends, they are no longer bound by Service expectations and operate outside of the Independent Visitor Service.

### 12.2. Purpose:

The purpose of an Independent Visitor is to contribute to the welfare and wellbeing of the child or young person. Therefore, as an Independent Visitor you should:

* Promote the child or young person’s developmental, social, emotional, education, religious, and cultural needs.
* Encourage the child or young person to exercise their rights and to participate in decisions that will affect them.
* Encourage the child or young person to participate and be actively involved in the development of the Independent Visitor Service.
* Support the care plan for the child or young person and their carers.
* Aim to complement the activities of carers- do not actively undermine the carer.

#### 12.2.1. Boundaries

The Independent Visitor role and functions can also be described in terms of boundaries of what the Independent Visitor is **not** intended to do:

* Not to be anything other than child or young person focused, however sympathetic to other points of view.
* Not to be a substitute parent or carer.
* Not to allow personal prejudices to determine actions.
* Not to accept unquestioningly what those responsible for the child or young person tell them, but to remain open minded and questioning.
* Not to engage in intensive counselling of the child or young person.
* Not to take on the role of a skilled advocate in complex situations.

#### 12.2.2. Skilled advocates

In some cases, the child or young person may have a need for skilled advocacy. For instance, the child or young person may be dissatisfied with their current care arrangement, they may not be making any progress in achieving their plans, or they feel like their views are not being sought or accounted for.

As an Independent Visitor you are **not** expected to fulfil this role. Rather, you are expected to be able to recognise the needs of the child or young person in such situations and support them through the next steps. The next steps, in agreement with the child or young person, is to inform a member of the Independent Visitor Service who will ensure that the child or young person has access to skilled advocacy. As Independent Visitors you can independently refer a child to Reconstruct, but please endeavour to discuss any referrals with the Independent Visitor Service first.

Reconstruct is the provider of Surrey’s independent advocacy service and will provide support to children or young people in care, care leavers or those subject to a child protection plan. Reconstruct’s role is to:

* Empower a child or young person to speak up for themselves, ensuring their views, feelings and wishes are listened to and respected.
* Explain to a child or young person the decision-making process and help them to navigate through this.
* Support a child or young person to receive independent information and advice and signpost them to specialist support.
* Resolve any issues or complaints, working alongside a child or young person to challenge any decisions they want changed, started, or stopped.

Reconstruct can be contacted via:

Phone: 0800 389 1571 or Email: advocacy.surrey@reconstruct.co.uk

## 13. Mutual Expectations:

### 13.1. What can Independent Visitors expect from Surrey County Council?

* You will be viewed and accepted as a valuable and important member of the Independent Visitor Service community.
* You will be treated fairly and with respect.
* You will have access to basic training and further training.
* You will have access to an independent complaint procedure.
* You will have access to up-to-date policies and procedures.
* Surrey County Council will provide adequate insurance cover for your role.
* You will be paid expenses promptly and correctly.
* You will be provided with appropriate information about the child or young person you are visiting to establish a trustworthy and safe relationship.

### 13.2. What the Independent Visitor Service expects from independent visitors:

* To be available to visit the child or young person at least once a month for two years.
* Submission of a monthly written report of contact and an expense claim.
* Attendance or contributions to meetings if requested by the child or young person.
* Respect confidentiality- except for any safeguarding concerns.
* Compliance with department policies and procedures as detailed in this document.
* Respect a child or young person’s religious, linguistic, and cultural heritage.
* Respect the child or young person’s identity.
* To offer the same level of protection / care to a child or young person as you would for a child or young person in your personal network.
* To attend a support group or meet with your lead person at least twice a year.

## 14. Specific Expectations:

### 14.1 Commitment to the child or young person:

The expectation is that as an Independent Visitor you should commit to visiting the child or young person you are matched with at least once a month (or as and when agreed with the Independent Visitor Service) for two years. The visits must not be overnight, must not take place at the Independent Visitors home, and the Independent Visitor or child / young person must not bring anyone else on the visit. All the visits must be formally arranged with the child or young person and their carer.

### 14.2. Written Reports:

As an Independent Visitor you must submit a written report monthly detailing what you did on your visits, the duration of your visits with a child or young person, and if you have any concerns that you would like the Independent Visitor Service to contact you about. Prolonged failure to submit written reports will raise concerns with the Independent Visitor Service who will contact you. If the failure to submit written reports continues the Independent Visitor Service reserves the right to pause any visits pending further enquiries during the period of investigating any concerns. If concerns are prolonged the Independent Visitor Service reserves the right to terminate the Independent Visitor’s role.

### 14.3. Confidentiality:

As an Independent Visitor you may be told confidential information about the child or young person you are matched with. Information is provided to help you assess whether you feel able to meet the child or young person’s needs and can respond to them accordingly. Any information provided about a child or young person must be treated in the strictest confidence and not disclosed to any other party without prior consent. Confidentiality will be covered in the training programme.

To ensure confidentiality Independent Visitors must use the secure email system Egress when submitting their monthly reports (unless another secure method of sending documents has already been agreed by the Independent Visitor Service). Guidance on using Egress will be provided during training and induction and your lead person from the Independent Visitor Service can also provide further guidance if required. Any information you hold about a child should be destroyed when your appointment as an Independent Visitor ends.

### 14.4. Be a good listener:

Independent Visitors should be good listeners and follow the active listening principles:

* Listen to what is said and give the child or young person your full attention.
* Do not anticipate what the child or young person is about to say; rather wait and listen.
* Assess your immediate response, try not to jump to premature conclusions.

### 14.5. Safeguarding:

As an Independent Visitor you may experience a child or young person disclosing something that has happened to them in the past or currently. If the child or young person discloses physical, sexual, emotional, or psychological abuse or neglect this **must** be reported. The Independent Visitor Service uses the Government’s Working Together to Safeguard Children framework (Appendix A). Please familiarise yourself with this document and the key information below.

**Be alert:** Independent Visitors need to be alert to signs of abuse. The following information is also included in the Independent Visitors training manual and signs of abuse are discussed in the training sessions for Independent Visitors.

**Question behaviours:** if something seems unusual, ask the child or young person, if appropriate, to seek further information. If a child or young person discloses abuse or neglect, listen to them, reassure them that action will be taken to keep them safe. You will need to decide the most appropriate action to take, depending on the child or young person’s circumstances and the seriousness of the child or young person’s disclosure.

**Refer:** You might refer directly to the Emergency Duty Team and / or the police, or if it can wait until the next working day, discuss your concerns with the Independent Visitor Service and ask for advice and support. At all times, you should explain to the child or young person the action that you are taking. It is important to maintain confidentiality, but you should not promise that you will not tell anyone, as you may need to do so to protect the child or young person.

If any information needs to be shared with the Independent Visitor Service, please follow this guidance below:

* Tell the child or young person: explain the reasons why you must pass the information on, what you will do and how you will do it.
* Be honest: tell the child or young person that you cannot keep what they disclosed a secret.
* If you are concerned about returning a child or young person to their carer, contact the Independent Visitor Service, if during normal working hours (Monday- Friday 9am-5pm), if outside of these hours (evening, weekends, or Bank holidays) contact the Emergency Duty Team for advice.
* Make and keep an accurate record of the conversation and share this with the Independent Visitor Service or the child or young person’s social worker.

### 14.6. Missing from care protocol:

If the child or young person you visit goes missing in your care, it is your duty to take appropriate action and inform the child or young person’s carer. In some cases, children or young people absent themselves for short periods and then return as a way of testing boundaries. Do not chase them. However, as a rule if you are unable to locate the child or young person within a few minutes you should notify the child or young person’s carer. They will work with you and support you in ensuring that appropriate action is taken.

If going missing is a known risk for the child or young person you are matched with, this will be discussed with you before any visits take place and in some circumstances a risk assessment will be completed. The risk assessment will advise you on what action to take for this child or young person. For instance, if there are concerns about a child or young person’s welfare and they are particularly vulnerable it may be appropriate to notify the police straight away if they go missing.

If for any reason you are unable to contact the child or young person’s carer you should contact the Independent Visitor Service / Emergency Duty Team or the child or young person’s social worker.

### 14.7. Photographs:

Photographs of the child or young person can be taken with their consent but cannot be posted or uploaded to any social media platform (including pixilated or from the back). In addition, a child or young person’s photo should not be shared with anyone else. The only exception to this rule is that the Independent Visitor Service encourages Independent Visitors to send photographs in with the monthly report so they can be included in the child or young person’s records. Independent Visitors are also allowed to collate photographs in a photo book or memory book to share with the child or young person as mementos of their visits together. But please note if the child or young person does not want their photo taken for the sake of keeping memories then this must be respected.

Due to the ease of technology to allow photographs and videos to be taken and shared by children or young people the Independent Visitor Service encourages Independent Visitors to discuss with the child or young person their own boundaries regarding if they are happy for the child or young person to take and share their photograph or record them. If an Independent Visitor feels that a child or young person has taken / shared photographs or videos without their consent, please contact the Independent Visitor Service to discuss this further.

### 14.8. Social media:

As an Independent Visitor you must not contact or ‘befriend’ the child or young person through any social media platform. The Independent Visitor Service recommends that Independent Visitors regularly review their privacy settings on all social media platforms to ensure only the people you want have sight / access to your content. Please note the default settings for most social media platforms are set to open which means anyone (including the child or young person you match with) can see your content regardless of if they are your ‘friend’ on such platforms.

Additionally, Independent Visitors should not post content related to Surrey’s Children’s Services, the Independent Visitor Service, or the child or young person they are matched with on any social media platform.

Texting and contacting via WhatsApp or SMS messaging is permitted for the purpose of arranging visits. Any indication that the child or young person or their family is being contacted by their Independent Visitor via any social media platform will result in immediate suspension of the visits pending further inquiries.

To maintain appropriate boundaries Independent Visitor Service staff will not be ‘friends’ with an Independent Visitor on any social media platforms.

### 14.9. Family / Friends:

The child or young person you visit should not be purposely introduced to your partner, or your family or friends as they will not have been subject to the same clearances as yourself. The child or young person should not be taken to your home, or any household belonging to a friend or family member.

### 14.10. Pets:

Caution should be taken around introducing a child or young person to any pets you have i.e., dogs or horses. While you may see this as a positive activity, some children or young people have an inherent fear of animals and as such any introductions need to be child or young person led. Before any introductions can take place, you must discuss this with your lead person from the Independent Visitor Service who will conduct a risk assessment.

### 14.11. Use of your car:

The Independent Visitor Service has a duty of care to ensure that every Independent Visitor has the correct car insurance, a valid driving licence and an MOT certificate (where applicable) in place. Please note you must notify your insurance company that you are volunteering and will be using your car as part of your voluntary role. In addition, please familiarise yourself with the Surrey County Council Transporting Children and Young People Guidance 2022 (Appendix A) which includes details on fitness to drive and car seats.

### 14.12. Alcohol and drugs:

As an Independent Visitor you should not consume alcohol or illegal drugs at any time whilst in the company of a child or young person or be under the influence of illegal drugs or alcohol. You should also actively discourage children or young people from such use. For instance, you should not buy alcohol for a child or young person even if it is with a meal.

You must not offer to buy, give, or lend cigarettes, tobacco, lighters, cigarette papers, or any equipment related to vaping to a child or young person. Additionally, as an Independent Visitor you should refrain from smoking or vaping in front of the child or young person.

### 14.13. Medication:

Independent Visitors are not insured to give any medication to a child or young person. Therefore, if a child or young person needs medication, they must be either returned to their carer so the medication can be administered, or the child or young person can self-medicate if they are old enough.

If the child or young person in your care has an accident, please ensure the information is recorded and passed onto the carer. If the accident is serious, you must seek immediate medical attention via 999 and contact the child or young person’s carer, the Independent Visitor Service, the Emergency Duty Team (if out of hours) or the child or young person’s social worker as soon as possible.

### 14.14. Gifts:

Over time, Independent Visitors build up close and trusting relationships with children or young people. However, it is still important to remember that the child or young person you are matched with remains vulnerable. Therefore, care should be taken in the giving of gifts or money, and it is advised to ask for the opinion of the child or young person’s carer or your lead person from the Independent Visitor Service, if you are unsure. As a rule, gifts should be reserved for special occasions such as birthdays, graduations, or religious festivals / celebrations. However, you should be mindful of any cultural or religious observances of the child or young person, that would mean gift giving would be deemed as inappropriate. Any gifts whether to be reimbursed or not, should be listed on the monthly expenses claim form.

### 14.15. Change in circumstances:

You must inform your lead person from the Independent Visitor Service if there are any changes in your circumstances that may impact on your ability to perform your role. The following have been provided as examples of circumstances that may impact on your role as an Independent Visitor and as such the Independent Visitor Service should be informed:

* If you are planning to relocate- which may impact on your availability.
* Personal circumstances i.e., death of a close family member or friend, severe relationship difficulties, or serious health concerns of yourself or a close family member or friend.

The Independent Visitor Service must be informed:

* If you have any criminal convictions, cautions, reprimands, or final warnings (including any points obtained on your driving licence).

### 14.16. Allegations:

Unfortunately, although rare, Independent Visitors may find themselves subject to allegations. An investigation will follow Surrey Safeguarding Children’s Partnership and LADO Procedures (Appendix A) as necessary, and the police may be informed. All allegations made by children and young people will be taken seriously, and the decisions of Surrey County Council regarding continuation of visits, or the appointment of an Independent Visitor are final and made in the best interests of the child or young person.

#### 14.16.1. LADO procedures:

LADO stands for Local Authority Designated Officer. The LADO Service manages allegations against individuals who work or volunteer with children for Surrey County Council. The statutory guidance directs that LADO procedures should be applied when there is an allegation that any person who works in regulated activities with children, in connection with their employment or voluntary activity has:

* Behaved in a way that has harmed a child or young person or may have harmed a child or young person.
* Possibly committed a criminal offence against or related to a child or young person.
* Behaved towards children or young people in a way that indicates they may pose a risk of harm to children or young people.
* Behaved or may have behaved in a way that indicates they may not be suitable to work with children or young people.

Allegations can be made in relation to restrictive physical interventions and restraint but can also relate to inappropriate relationships between members of staff or volunteers and children or young people, for example:

* Having a sexual relationship with a child or young person under 18 if in a position of trust in respect of that child or young person, even if consensual (see ss16-19 Sexual Offences Act 2003- Appendix A).
* 'Grooming', i.e., meeting a child or young person under 16 with intent to commit a relevant offence (see s15 Sexual Offences Act 2003).
* Other '[grooming](https://surreyscb.procedures.org.uk/page/glossary?term=Grooming&g=3kjN#gl31)' behaviour giving rise to concerns of a broader child protection nature e.g. inappropriate text / e-mail messages or images, gifts, socializing etc.
* Possession of indecent images / pseudo-photographs of children or young people.

In addition, these procedures should be applied when there is an allegation that any person who works with children or young people:

* Has behaved in a way in their personal life that raises safeguarding concerns. These concerns do not have to directly relate to a child or young person but could, for example, include arrest for possession of a weapon or indecent images of children or young people. As a parent or carer, your own child or young person becomes subject to child protection procedures and / or you and your family become involved with social services for safeguarding reasons.
* Is closely associated with someone in their personal lives (e.g., partner, member of the immediate family or other household member) who may present a risk of harm to the child or young person for whom the member of staff is responsible in their employment / volunteering.

Finally, these procedures should be followed where a person’s employment is covered by the Childcare Act 2006 (Appendix A) and:

* Is living in the same household where another person who is disqualified lives or is employed - a person is disqualified if they are ‘found to have committed’ an offence which is included in the 2009 Regulations updated July 2018 (a ‘relevant offence’). (See Working Together to Safeguard Children 2018 and statutory guidance ‘Disqualification under the Childcare Act 2006’).
* Whilst not specifically covered by statutory guidance, the risks associated with the wider family and close associates of the member of staff or volunteers may also need to be considered even if their work with children or young people does not fall within the remit of the statutory guidance in section 1.2.4.

The procedures for dealing with allegations will be applied with common sense and judgement. Many cases may well either not meet the criteria set out above or may do so without warranting consideration of either a police investigation or Section 47 child protection enquiries by Surrey County Council. In these cases, the Independent Visitor Service will follow their safeguarding and other relevant procedures to resolve cases without delay.

#### 14.16.2. Potential reasons for allegations:

A child or young person may make an allegation for various reasons such as:

* The child or young person may be angry about something that an Independent Visitor has done that is not harmful but has annoyed them- e.g., challenge them on an aspect of their behaviour that was putting them in danger.
* A child or young person may misinterpret an innocent action- such as putting an arm around them to offer comfort.
* It is a way of them having an element of control in their lives.
* Something that happens triggers a memory of an event that took place before they were matched with the Independent Visitor.

Please note any allegations made by a child or young person will be taken seriously as it is the Independent Visitor Service’s stance to believe what a child or young person is saying. Hence, all allegations will be investigated, and the Independent Visitor Service will follow their safeguarding and other relevant procedures to resolve cases without delay.

In addition, there may be exceptional circumstances where the behaviour of the Independent Visitor, while falling short of criminal activity, is deemed inappropriate and is a risk to the child or young person’s welfare. In such cases the Independent Visitor Service will make an assessment to decide if it is appropriate for the Independent Visitor to continue in their role. All decisions made by the Independent Visitor Service are final.

### 14.17. Safe Care rules:

To prevent accusations being made by a child or young person all Independent Visitors are trained on safe caring practices that they are expected to implement in every visit with a child or young person. Such practices include:

* No touch rule- no one touches another person’s body without their permission.
* Keep the Independent Visitor Service informed of any concerns related to the child or young person or your visits with the child or young person.
* Comply with any Risk Assessments provided.

### 14.18. Endings:

The statutory duty for Local Authorities to provide Independent Visitors ends following the young person’s 18th birthday. However, the Independent Visitor Service will as good practice continue to support the relationship (including financial numeration) if the young adult and Independent Visitor wish to continue to see each other up until the young person is 21 (and on a case-by-case basis potentially up until 25, but this is based on a young person’s individual need). Once it is agreed a match has formally ended and the young person is aged over 18, if the young person and their Independent Visitor wish to continue to meet, arrangements are deemed as private relationships between adult friends, are no longer bound by Service expectations and operate outside of the Independent Visitor Service.

It is important that Independent Visitors are reliable and consistent, but the Independent Visitor Service also acknowledge that and Independent Visitor’s life and circumstances may change, and they may no longer be able to continue in the befriending relationship. It is important in these situations that Independent Visitors are open and honest and inform the Independent Visitor Service as soon as possible, so the child or young person can be informed, and any ‘goodbye’ visits or arrangements can be carried out. It is important the relationships have proper ‘endings’ for all parties involved.

In the circumstance of an unplanned ending the child or young person will be given the choice if they wish to say a final goodbye and the carer and the child or young person’s social worker are responsible for ensuring the child or young person is supported through this process. The Independent Visitor Service will be available to support any Independent Visitors through the ending of befriending relationships.

### 14.19. Withdrawal:

#### 14.19.1. Child or young person indicated:

The local authority has a duty to ensure they ask the child or young person’s opinion about their Independent Visitor visits. If the child or young person indicates that they would no longer like the visits to continue, and they have sufficient understanding to make an informed decision, the Independent Visitor Service will end the match. Support will be available to the Independent Visitor from the Independent Visitor Service and the child or young person will be offered support from the most relevant adult in their network. The Independent Visitor Service will also have a discussion with the Independent Visitor regarding a new match.

#### 14.19.2. Independent Visitor Indicated:

If you no longer wish to continue as an Independent Visitor, you must give notice in writing that states that you either wish to end a match with a specific child or young person or that you do not wish to be appointed for any other child or young person going forward.

#### 14.18.3. Local authority indicated:

The Independent Visitor Service reserves the right to immediately suspend any visits between an Independent Visitor and a child or young person if they have any concerns. The Independent Visitor Service will launch a full investigation and evidence their concerns in writing. The result of the investigation could be that visits resume, visits remain suspended until further investigation or intervention occurs, or the most serious cases may result in termination of the Independent Visitor’s appointment.

### 14.20. Complaints:

If an Independent Visitor disagrees with the termination process, or any other aspect of the Independent Visitor Service they are entitled to make a formal complaint.

Additionally, a child or young person may deem their Independent Visitor as the best person to make a complaint on their behalf. Independent Visitors have a right to do this, and the Independent Visitor Service must respond to your complaint on behalf of a child or young person.

Complaints are managed by the Children and Education Customer Relations Team. [Click here to access the complaints webpage](https://www.surreycc.gov.uk/council-and-democracy/contact-us/complaints-comments-and-compliments/children-and-education-send) which provides further information on how to submit a complaint form.

## 15. Frequently Asked Questions:

### 15.1. What happens if the child or young person I visit has a change in status and they are no longer a looked after child?

A child or young person cannot have an Independent Visitor if they are no longer looked after, but the individual circumstances of each child or young person would need to be considered. The Local Authority has a duty to listen to the child or young person’s wishes if they do not wish for their visits with an Independent Visitor to stop even if they are no longer deemed as a Looked After Child. In such cases the Independent Visitor Service will liaise with the Children’s team, and relevant parties who hold Parental Responsibility who would need to agree to any potential continuation of arrangements between an Independent Visitor and a child or young person, but it is likely that any continuation would reduce over an agreed period, and it would no longer be an Independent Visitor arrangement. If such discussions are not possible, for whatever reason, it would not be possible for the Independent Visitor Service to continue to support the match between the Independent Visitor and the child or young person.

### 15.2. Can I be an Independent Visitor in a different local authority from the one I work for?

Yes, you can be an Independent Visitor in a different local authority from the one you work in. For instance, you can become an Independent Visitor for Surrey County Council if you work for Hampshire County Council. Being independent means that you must not be connected to Surrey County Council as a result of:

1. Being an elected or co-opted member of the responsible authority.
2. Being an officer of the responsible authority who is employed in relation to functions referred to in section 18 of the 2004 Children’s Act.
3. Being a spouse or civil partner or other person living in the same household as the person who is such a member or an officer of the responsible authority.

### 15.3. What is the minimum age of a child / young person to have an independent visitor?

While there is no minimum age standard set for a child or young person to have an Independent Visitor, they must be of an age to be able to make an informed decision regarding their desire to have an independent visitor. The Independent Visitor Service is child or young person led.

### 15.4 Will I ever be matched with siblings?

The Independent Visitor Service will endeavour to ensure that siblings are matched at the same time if both / all siblings want an Independent Visitor and are living at the same address. However, siblings will never be matched with the same Independent Visitor. This is to ensure that each child or young person can establish a strong relationship with their Independent Visitor as they know that they are speaking to an impartial adult who has not got an established relationship with their sibling(s).

### 15.5. My partner and I both wish to become Independent Visitors, can we both become Independent Visitors for the same child or young person?

While the Independent Visitor Service welcomes any interested parties to apply to become Independent Visitors, it should be noted that regardless of relationships each Independent Visitor will conduct visits on a one-to-one basis. The Independent Visitor Service is designed to allow a child or young person to establish a one-to-one relationship with a consistent adult figure. Independent Visitors are also trusted to ensure that information the child or young person tells them remains confidential unless there are safeguarding concerns.

### 15.6. What do I do if the child or young person displays behaviour that is challenging during a visit?

During the training programme Independent Visitors will be taught about how best to manage challenging behaviours and how to de-escalate concerning behaviour. However, the child or young person you visit may act in a manner to try and test boundaries, so such situations require patience and remaining calm, not rising to their behaviour. Additionally, if a child or young person runs off do not chase them; wait a few minutes to see if they return and if not contact the child or young person’s carer and / or the Independent Visitor Service / Emergency Duty Team.

### 15.7. As an Independent Visitor am I covered by Surrey County Council’s insurance policy?

Surrey County Council’s insurance policy specifically covers individuals who assist Surrey County Council on a voluntary basis. The policy provides volunteers with Public Liability Insurance and personal accident cover. Public liability insurance covers claims against Surrey County Council for personal injury or damage to property suffered by third parties that arise because of the negligence of Surrey County Council or individual volunteers. In addition, as noted in section 14.11. Independent Visitors must have sufficient motor insurance and you must notify your insurance company that you are volunteering and will be using your car as part of your voluntary role.

## Appendix A: Policies and procedures:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Policy / information / document | Link |
| **Surrey County Council** |
| Data Governance Policy | [Data governance policy (sharepoint.com)](https://orbispartnerships.sharepoint.com/sites/organisational_info/SitePages/data-governance-policy.aspx) |
| Records Management Policy | [Records management policy (sharepoint.com)](https://orbispartnerships.sharepoint.com/sites/organisational_info/SitePages/records-management-policy.aspx) |
| Retention Schedule | [Our retention schedule](https://www.surreycc.gov.uk/council-and-democracy/your-privacy/our-retention-schedule)  |
| Data Protection Act | [Data protection](https://www.surreycc.gov.uk/council-and-democracy/your-privacy/data-protection)  |
| Freedom of Information | [Freedom of information](https://www.surreycc.gov.uk/council-and-democracy/your-privacy/freedom-of-information)  |
| Volunteers across Surrey County Council policy | [Volunteers across SCC.pdf](https://orbispartnerships.sharepoint.com/sites/our_surrey/Assets/Forms/AllItems.aspx?id=%2Fsites%2Four%5Fsurrey%2FAssets%2FFiles%2Forganisational%2Dinfo%2Fcouncil%2Dwide%2Dprojects%2FVolunteers%2Dacross%2DSCC%2Epdf&parent=%2Fsites%2Four%5Fsurrey%2FAssets%2FFiles%2Forganisational%2Dinfo%2Fcouncil%2Dwide%2Dprojects)  |
| Transporting children and young people guidance | [Transporting Children and Young People Guidance 2022.docx](https://orbispartnerships.sharepoint.com/%3Aw%3A/r/sites/cfll_hub/_layouts/15/Doc.aspx?sourcedoc=%7B6284D0DC-39A7-4DED-AFF8-62BEF661D044%7D&file=Transporting%20Children%20and%20Young%20People%20Guidance%202022.docx&action=default&mobileredirect=true&DefaultItemOpen=1&wdLOR=cAC34C8F7-8DB4-4B3A-B541-1D8F1E92D39C&cid=1f6f8be3-218b-499a-94d1-171d7f04570e)  |
| Surrey Safeguarding Children Partnership Procedures Manual | [Surrey Safeguarding Children Partnership Procedures Manual.](https://surreyscb.procedures.org.uk/)  |
| LADO Procedures | [LADO Procedures| Surrey Safeguarding Children Partnership](https://surreyscb.procedures.org.uk/qkyqql/safer-workforce-and-managing-allegations-against-staff-carers-and-volunteers/managing-allegations-against-people-that-work-or-volunteer-with-children) |
| National  |
| Children Act 1989 | [Children Act 1989 (legislation.gov.uk)](https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1989/41/contents) |
| Working Together to Safeguard Children | [Working Together to Safeguard Children 2023 (publishing.service.gov.uk)](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/65cb4349a7ded0000c79e4e1/Working_together_to_safeguard_children_2023_-_statutory_guidance.pdf) |
| Sexual Offences Act 2003 | [Sexual Offences Act 2003 (legislation.gov.uk)](https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2003/42/contents) |
| Childcare Act 2006 | [Childcare Act 2006 (legislation.gov.uk)](https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2006/21/contents) |
| The Children Act 1989 Guidance and Regulations | [The Children Act 1989 guidance and regulations Volume 2: care planning, placement and case review (publishing.service.gov.uk)](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1000549/The_Children_Act_1989_guidance_and_regulations_Volume_2_care_planning__placement_and_case_review.pdf) |