



# Surrey Independent Visitor Service Annual Report

April 2023 - March 2024



**SURREY**  
COUNTY COUNCIL

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## Overview

The role of the volunteer Independent Visitor (IV) was established as a statutory service for children in care, in the Children Act 1989, and the functions and requirements set out in *'The Children Act 1989 guidance and regulations Volume 2: care planning, placement and case review'*, are to *'visit, advise and befriend the child'* (Department for Education 2021).

Surrey Independent Visitor Service (IVS) recruits, monitors, and supports volunteer Independent Visitors to visit, advise and befriend children in care. Independent Visitors are almost always only matched with one child or young person, and we ask for a minimum commitment of 2 years once matched with a child, and to visit a child once a month.

Independent Visitors occupy a unique space within the lives of children and young people who are in care. The whole experience can be one of empowerment; they are in control of whether they have an IV, whether they go on a visit, what information they share about their life, the activities they choose, and often, when the relationship ends. Building a trusting relationship over time, that isn't time-bound, allows children and young people to have at least 'one positive adult' who listens, has no agenda, keeps turning up, transcends changes in social worker and where children live, and has the potential to be not only the longest-standing adult relationship outside of their family, but a life-long relationship as they move into adulthood and independence.

As described in "Mission 1" of the Independent Review of Children's Social Care, *"No young person should leave care without at least two loving relationships"* (MacAlister, 2022). An Independent Visitor has the potential to be one of those relationships. The review goes on to state, *"Studies have shown safe, stable, and nurturing relationships can serve as a buffer to adversity and can also play a key role in building resilience that supports children to develop the skills to cope with future adversity in an adaptive and healthy manner (Garner and Yogman, 2021). Having a trusted adult during childhood can positively influence long term physical and mental health (Crouch et al, 2019), and can mean children are less likely to experience "toxic stress" or develop unhealthy coping strategies (Cheong et al., 2017). The likelihood of depression amongst adults with adverse childhood experiences was reduced by up to 92% when they received social and emotional support (Brinker and Cheruvu, 2017)"* (MacAlister, 2022). In this regard, Independent Visitors could be an important mitigating relationship for children and young people in care, and care leavers.

Care leavers have described not being able to trust or rely on the professionals helping them to transition to adulthood, that they feel alone and isolated, do not know where to get help for their mental health or wellbeing, have no one to talk to about how they are feeling and do not know who would look out for them (Ofsted, 2022). The Independent Review of Children's Social Care states *"the cliff edge of support at 18 makes it harder to engage older teenagers (The independent review of children's social care, 2022c). Exploitation and extra familial harm does not stop at 18 so this drop off of support can be a particular risk point (Firmin et al., 2019)"*(MacAlister 2022). Due to these additional vulnerabilities for young people leaving care, since 2016 Surrey IVS continues to support matches beyond 18, extending the service to all care leavers until 21 where parties agree to this, and potentially up to 25, assessed on an individual basis. The Children Act Guidance and Regulations state, *"The need for an independent visitor to*

*continue his/her relationship with a young person once they cease 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 times as its own after-care responsibilities expire.”* We continue to monitor and support the match, complete DBS checks, and reimburse expenses.

## **Key highlights for 2023/24**

Surrey IVS currently has capacity for 80 IVs/matches, this spans children in care and care leavers.

- On 31<sup>st</sup> March 2024:
  - 68 children in care/care leavers were matched with an Independent Visitor.
  - 23 (34%) matches are between Care Leavers post-18 and Independent Visitors continue to be supported by Surrey IVS.
  - 58 children were waiting for an Independent Visitor, 53% of these were living outside of Surrey.
  - Over 68% (46/68) of matches were over two years in duration, and 22% (15/68) of matches were over 5 years in duration. Each of these matches represents a stable and consistent relationship for a child in care, or care leaver. The longest match is 14 years.
  - Between April 2023 and March 2024, 13 matches ended, and 10 matches began. Out of the 13 matches that ended, 7 IVs left the service, and 6 requested another match.
  - There were 77 approved Independent Visitors.
  - 10 Independent Visitors were awaiting a match, or in the process of being matched.
  - 75% of Independent Visitors had been volunteering with the Service for over 2 years, and 12% of Independent Visitors for over 10 years. 2 Independent visitors have been volunteering with us for 16 years.
  - 13 IVs were recruited during the 2023/24 recruitment cycle.

## **Views from children and young people**

Here are some of the things children and young people have told us about having Independent Visitor:

*“If I want to go get [my baby] weighed – she’s down. If I want to go to baby group – she’s down. She suggests things. I didn’t want to go [to a baby group] on my own – every baby group I’ve been to I’ve been the youngest with the youngest baby. She came with me so I wasn’t on my own.”* **Care Leaver aged 20, matched 7 years**

When asked what they have enjoyed about the visits, one young person shared the following:

*“Seeing her, and talking to her, and going out to places. We chat about life. [If I couldn’t see her] I would be really upset.”* **Care Leaver aged 22, matched 5 years**

*A care leaver shared, “it feels like a good friendship....It has been lovely from the start, from the first day. We have been doing lovely stuff together....For me it is a good chance, not only to do different activities, but to make a connection with a different person, someone who isn’t my carer.....“Even though at the start we barely knew each other, she was there for me at a really difficult time...I had a family member pass away very suddenly and she was there for me and supported me.”* **Care Leaver aged 20, matched 6 years**

When asked what they have enjoyed about the visits with their IV, a young person shared, *“I have experienced things that I haven’t done before and I really enjoyed them and that we get on well and chat a lot and have a lot of things in common”* **Young person, aged 14, matched 1 year**

When this young person was asked what the visits with their IV meant to them, they responded, *“A lot. I have become attached – healthy attached. I have known her since I was 12 turning 13. She’s like family. I’m attached to her like you would be your family. The only other person I’m attached to is my mum and we are not that attached. I don’t attach to many people.”* **Care Leaver, aged 18, matched 4 years**

## **View from a care-experienced adult**

In June 2023, Surrey IVS met with a care-experienced adult to gain a sense of the impact the IV role had on their life. They were matched with their IV for 6 years until they were 21, but the friendship has continued long after Surrey IVS involvement, and continues to be an important relationship for them. The IV reports that this continues into 2024. Here are some of the things they shared with us.

### **About life before turning 18.**

*“Sometimes it was hard. I wasn’t used to professionals, it was like everyone has an expectation of you, things to complete and things to get done, so it was good to have someone there that wanted to do what you wanted to do – especially when you live in a group home, where you always had to do things together, it was nice to have someone who wanted to do the things that you wanted to do. It was really empowering and helpful to have someone asking what you wanted to do.”*

### **Would things be different if you had not had an IV? How might it have been had you not had an IV?**

*“I think it was really helpful to have someone to help you and build a relationship, and count on. It was really nice, most people, like social workers, once their job is finished they can’t keep in touch with you, but to have someone to build a relationship with, knowing someone is still going to be there is very helpful. Also, I don’t have much family here so to know that someone is there is for me and my children, because even though I don’t have my parents around me, I know that they have that kind of relationship with her. I know that it is a service that is provided, but it goes beyond a service, it is a relationship, and is important for people in my situation. People in care can feel abandoned by their family and it is so important to have someone, for mental health, to be there with, to have that bond with, it is really special.*

“Because of the kind of person I am it was difficult for me to go out and do things by myself – it built my self-confidence. I wouldn’t have been able to go swimming on my own, but to be able to go with her, it boosted my self-confidence and self-esteem; it helped me to learn how to go swimming with my children, how to get changed with the children. It helped my mental health as well, at that difficult time I was able to go out and leave my life behind, and just be a child actually, because at that time I was having to grow up really quickly.”

“I think it would have been difficult, now I can go out with my children in the park, without having to worry about the people around. Because most of my anxiety was around having people around me. I wasn’t used to people. So it has been really helpful. I think it would have been much more difficult not having her around, it isn’t just me that has benefitted – but my children love having her around. They all give her hugs. The children call her grandma. I am really grateful, I am just very grateful to have her. I don’t think I can thank her enough for everything she has done for me. It is not easy to take time out of her life and help another person. I am grateful she has done that I don’t know how I can explain it in words. She has been a blessing.”

## **Long-standing Independent Visitors**

Surrey IVS has several long-standing IVs who share, during monthly support groups, that they are still in contact with the now care-experienced adults whom they used to be matched with as children. They continue to stay in regular contact, meeting up as adults, now outside of Surrey IVS involvement. We have IVs who have been invited to important milestones such as weddings, and who continue to be a source of support and advice for care-experienced adults. Surrey IVS hopes to be able to meet with other care-experienced adults who are still in contact with past IVs who still volunteer with us.

### **1. Surrey Independent Visitor Service: a statutory duty**

Section 23ZB of the Children’s Act 1989 as amended by Children and Young Persons Act 2008 states *“(1) A local authority looking after a child must appoint an independent person to be the child’s visitor if – (a) the child falls within a description prescribed in regulations made by the appropriate national authority; or (b) in any other case, it appears to them that it would be in the child’s interests to do so. (2) A person appointed under this section must visit, befriend, and advise the child.”* The Surrey IV Service enables Surrey County Council to meet this statutory duty for children and young people in care.

#### **1.1 The Team**

Surrey IVS is supported by a team comprising an Independent Visitor Coordinator and an Independent Visitor Social Worker. Funding for a further IV Social Worker post has been agreed and recruited to with a new colleague due to start in July 2024. All posts require a qualified and registered Social Worker, and all are full time. 5 hours per month of administrative business support is bought in from another part of the Service.

Surrey IVS is placed within the Quality Practice, Relationships and Support Division (previously Quality and Performance) to maintain a nature of independence from the

children's social work teams and is overseen by the Service Manager of the Quality Assurance.

Surrey IVS is an active member of the National Independent Visitor Network (NIVN), sitting both on their steering group and participating in the South East Regional Independent Visitor Services good practice group (SERIVS). As such Surrey IVS has signed up to the NIVN (2016) National Standards for the Provision of Independent Visitor Services and subsequent Training Principles (2022). Surrey IVS is committed to delivering a high-quality service to our volunteer independent visitors (IVs) who support and befriend Surrey's looked after children, and of course, to the children and young people themselves.

## **1.2 Capacity and increasing capacity**

Current capacity within the team has been capped at 80 *units*. A *unit* is either:

- a match between an Independent Visitor and a child;
- or an unmatched Independent Visitor in the process of either being matched, a match ending or an IV leaving the service.

Surrey IVS capacity on 31<sup>st</sup> March 2024 was 78 units of work out of 80.

A business case was put forward to increase the Service's capacity in 2023, and although not successful in what was initially requested, funding was agreed for an additional IV Social Worker post later in the year. This post has been recruited to and the new IV Social Worker is due to start in the team in July 2024. It will take time to increase the number of matches to reach new capacity, so within this 'space' whilst numbers are increased, it is hoped that some much-needed Service development can be undertaken. Once the new IV Social Worker is in post, capacity is expected to be capped at 110 (this allows for a reduction in the IV Coordinators allocation of IVs/matches, to enable management of another Social Worker, and lead on Service Development work). It is hoped that Surrey IVS could reach this capacity following recruitment cycle 2025/2026.

## **1.3 Achievements and aspirations**

The work around service development that we have undertaken this year aligns strongly with *The Surrey Way* and the guiding mission of '*No one left behind.*'

We understand the need to build strong relationships with community and faith groups within Surrey to ensure we are recruiting a diverse population of IVs. Our IV population should mirror the diverse backgrounds of the children we support and bring diversity of thought and experience to our IV peer community. We have begun project work in this area, working closely with Surrey's Equality Diversity and Inclusion Project Officer who has supported introductions to Shah Jahan Mosque in Woking, Surrey Pride, the Surrey branch of the National Autistic Society (Surrey NAS) and Surrey Minority Ethnic Forum (SMEF). It is hoped that strengthening collaboration with communities, groups, and organisations such as these will support our aspiration to increase diversity with the IV population and elevate our profile in the local community. Building relationships takes time and effort and this has been recognised when considering the Service's capacity.

We have made links with the Children with Disabilities and the Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children's social work teams to better understand and meet the needs of these children and hope to take forward project work in this area from Summer 2024 onwards.

In the annual report 2022/2023 we spoke of record lows in volunteering nationally (Department for Culture, Media, and Sport 2023). This decline has continued (NCVO 2023) but is not something that has been seen in the numbers we recruited up to 31/03/2024. But we are not complacent around this and in the coming months and years, we will need to be increasingly creative in our recruitment processes, reaching out to local communities, businesses, and organisations to invigorate potential volunteers and review how we recruit so we can not only maintain, but also diversify and expand volunteer numbers. But we will also need to ensure that we do not over commit ourselves, as it is the support that our IVs receive that helps maintain their commitment to Surrey IV service, and therefore maintains individual matches for children in a safe, consistent, and stable way.

We have worked to elevate the profile of Surrey IVS within CFLL, and wider SCC, to ensure colleagues, teams and Services are aware of what we do which will support them to truly value and appreciate the significance of the relationships between IVs and the children and young people they are matched with. But we are honest in recognising that we still have further work to do here.

We have worked closely with the National Independent Visitor Network and research group Praxis Collab to be one of 4 Local Authorities included in the first national level research into Independent Visitors. This project is still ongoing, but the final report should be published in the Spring of 2025.

We aspire to undertake other project work around ongoing relationships between care-experienced adults and their previous IVs beyond Surrey IVS involvement to gain anecdotal information about impact; and working with the children and young people within the Service to redesign and co-produce our documentation so that it is child-focused and friendly and asks the right questions to help us develop the service.

In the future we want to be able to have IVs who we can potentially 'sell' to other Local Authority IV Services who have children placed out of county within Surrey via spot purchase arrangements, which in turn would enable us to 'purchase' IV services in other Local Authorities for our children placed out of county, who currently, we find it takes longer to match. In 2023/2024 the Department for Education, in response to the independent review of children's social care report (McAllister 2022) and subsequent Government response (2023), had begun consulting IV Services nationwide regarding (of which we were one) publishing statutory standards which would make this process easier, but Surrey IVS have been advised that although this work had begun it is no longer being prioritised. To do this now, we would need to be able to work closely with both the National IV Network, and neighbouring Local Authorities to ensure recruitment and assessment processes meet the same high standards that we hold to ensure our children and young people are happy and safe when matched with volunteers recruited by other service and living out of county.



## 2. Children matched, children waiting and IV length of service

### 2.1 Children and matches

The number of children matched at the end of the data period was 68.

	2023-2024	2022-2023	2021-2022	2020
<b>No. of children matched at 31.03.2023</b>	68	68	71	67

Table 1

Table 2 – Length of matches - 68% our matches have been ongoing for 2 years or more. This represents stability and consistency for children and young people.

Length of match	2023-2024	2022-2023	2021-2022	2020
<b>Over 2 years</b>	46	51	36	37
<b>Over 5 years</b>	15	19	16	14
<b>Over 10 years</b>	3	2	1	1

Table 2

### 2.2 Children waiting for an Independent Visitor

There were 54 children waiting for a match as of 31<sup>st</sup> March 2024, 31 of which are living outside of Surrey. The children who wait the longest are living out of Surrey.

End of year	2023-2024	2022-2023	2021-2022	2020
<b>Waiting list in county</b>	23	21	34	19
<b>Waiting list, out of county</b>	31	23	31	44*

Table 3

End of year	2023-2024	2022-2023	2021-2022	2020
<b>Children removed from waiting list through data cleanse or never matched</b>	10	36	29	N/A
<b>Total number of children waiting for an IV at end of period</b>	54	44	65	63

Table 4

During the data period, 10 children came off the waiting list unmatched:

- 7 young people turned 18 whilst waiting for a match.
- 3 no longer wanted an IV when approached about a match.

## 2.3 Length of time Independent Visitors have been volunteering with Surrey IVS

Out of 77 IVs, on 31<sup>st</sup> March 2023:

Length of time volunteering	Number or % of IV	Number of IVs
Over 2 years	57 (74%)	65
Over 5 years	29 (38%)	28
Over 10 years	9 (12%)	11

We have two IVs who have been with the Service for over 16 years.

## 3. Lifelong relationships for children and young people in and leaving care

Social work discourse often describes the importance of consistent, committed and life-long relationship for children in care. But practically, this is a challenge for the professional network, with changes of social workers, placements, schools, and all the networks associated with them, which can make it almost impossible for children and young people to maintain and sustain relationships with peers and adults alike.

The number of times children move whilst in care, the number of social workers and other professionals children have during their time in care, and the way in which those numbers reduce significantly at 18 would point towards the need for children and young people in care to have a consistent and committed adult who keeps showing up, and this is what IVs do, again and again.

Many of our IVs maintain friendships with our young people, long past the point of Surrey IVS involvement. This anecdotal information shared with Surrey IVS demonstrates the value of investing in the IV relationship and that this can truly be a lifelong relationship for care experienced children and adults, which other parts of the network surrounding a child in care, may fail to achieve.

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