

Advocate and Independent Visitors

Procedure for staff in Children and Families

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1. Introduction

- 1.1 This procedure applies to all children in need and children looked after who wish to have an independent advocate or an independent visitor.
- 1.2 The advocacy service for children in need and children looked after in Warwickshire is provided by Barnardo's Coventry and Warwickshire Children's Rights Service an organisation delivering services to children and young people who receive a service from local authorities.
- 1.3 This procedure must be read in conjunction with:
 - [Corporate Parenting Policy and Strategy 2014-17](#)
 - [Children Looked After Placements Commissioning and Sufficiency Strategy](#)
 - [Care Planning and Decision Making Guidance](#)

2. Advocates

- 2.1 Advocacy is about making sure that the wishes, views and feelings of children are clearly articulated and are heard by those adults and professionals involved with the child, especially at times of key decision making in relation to planning service delivery. Advocacy is about empowering children and young people to make sure that their rights are respected and their views and wishes are heard at all times. Advocacy is about enabling children to participate in decision making and to be able to influence decisions that affect their lives.
- 2.2 A request for an advocate for a child in need and a child looked after is appropriate where a child wishes to:
 - be represented or supported at a decision making meeting, for example a Looked After Review, a discussion about a Personal Education Plan, a child protection conference or a family group conference;
 - talk through whether or not to make a complaint against the local authority;
 - make a complaint;
 - raise an issue with the local authority, an independent fostering agency, residential care provider or Care Quality Commission;
 - raise an individual matter of concern such as placement choice or level of school provision;
 - speak to an advocate without a specified reason i.e. the referral is appropriate regardless of whether the child or young person shares any reason for the referral;

2.3 Eligibility

2.3.1 The service will be provided for children and young people who are receiving a service from WCC and wish to have the support of an advocate. This includes children and young people who are:

- aged 4 to 18 and looked after or 25 if they have special educational needs and/or disability or are a care leaver;
- Subject of a family group conference or a child protection conference
- aged 16/17 and presenting as homeless to WCC;
- considering or wishing to make a complaint or representation about the service they receive from WCC

The service includes children and young people looked after by WCC but who live outside the boundaries of WCC.

2.3.2 Referrals can come direct from the child/young person or from a professional or carer. The child/young person should give their agreement to a referral being made for an advocate. An advocate providing advice and information only is not legally obliged to inform parents, carers or any Warwickshire County Council staff of their involvement. Barnardo's will inform parents for children in need unless the child is 13 years or older, or if it would not be in the child's interest for us to seek agreement.

2.3.3 Information must be provided to all children looked after about how they can gain access to an independent advocate by providing them with the details for [Barnardo's Coventry and Warwickshire Children's Rights Service](#). This information must be included in the information pack provided to every child who becomes looked after.

2.3.4 Key points at which information about the [Barnardo's Coventry and Warwickshire Children's Rights Service](#) should be shared with children and young people include:

- when they become a child looked after by the local authority;
- when meetings, conferences and reviews about them are convened;
- when they are voicing doubts, concerns or complaints;
- when they are at risk of exclusion.

2.3.5 If there is any doubt about the age at which it is appropriate for a child to have an advocate, the choice should be given to the child, and not made by the social worker.

2.4 Referral notice periods

2.4.1 Referrals for Children looked after – there is no minimum referral period. If the referral is for support with a meeting the date of the meeting should be shared with the service.

- 2.4.1 Referrals for support with child protection and Family Group Conferences – there is a minimum notice period of 5 working days before the date of the conference in order to allocate an advocate and for the advocate to meet with the child or young person to ascertain their views prior to the conference. The date of the conference must be shared with the service at the time of the referral.

3. Independent Visitors

- 3.1 Independent Visitors (IV's) are volunteers fully trained by Barnardos's to work with children who are looked after by the local authority. IV's are matched to a child or young person with similar interests and will take them out once a month. These visits give the child or young person an opportunity to talk to someone, be listened to, and build a trusting, supportive and stable relationship.

3.2 When to request an Independent Visitor

- 3.2.1 An IV will be provided for children and young people who wish to have an IV and:
- are a child looked after by WCC under the Children Act 1989;
 - it appears to the local authority that it would be in the child's interests to do so.
- 3.2.2 Referrers may take into account factors such as distance placed from home, whether the child is placed in a residential setting, whether a child has communication or relationship difficulties, whether a child is likely to engage in risky behaviours, or whether it would contribute to promoting a child's education and wellbeing.
- 3.2.3 The service includes children and young people looked after by WCC but who live outside the boundaries of WCC.
- 3.2.2 Service leaflets and further information is available from [Barnardo's Coventry & Warwickshire Children's Rights Service](#)
- 3.2.3 The service will notify the social worker when an IV has been allocated. The views of the IV can be sought by the local authority before each Looked After Review and the IV can be invited if the child requests it.
- 3.2.4 The child will be consulted about the identity of the proposed IV and if they object, the match should not be made.

3.3 Role of Independent Visitor

- 3.3.1 The Independent Visitor is expected to make visits to the child at regular agreed intervals, sometimes monthly or every other month, and maintain other contact, by telephone and letter as appropriate.
- 3.3.2 The main purpose of the visits and contacts will be to build a long term (minimum of 2 years) trusting and reliable relationship with the young person through regular monthly visits.

3.4 Review of appointment

- 3.4.1 The need to continue the relationship should be considered at the child's Looked After Reviews, and the child's wishes and feelings will be the main consideration in deciding the need for continuation.
- 3.4.2 If there is any change of plan, such as a change of placement or re-introduction home, Barnardo's must be notified immediately.
- 3.4.3 The service regularly reviews matches with evaluations completed by the child and/or carer, the IV, and their allocated social worker.
- 3.4.4 The service will continue to monitor and support matches between the young person and Independent Visitor up to the young person is 18 years old or until the input is no longer required by the young person.

4. Contact information

[Barnardo's Coventry & Warwickshire Children's Rights Service](#)

Telephone: 024 7637 2596

E-mail: coventry&warwickshirecrs@barnardos.org.uk

5. Further information

[Looked after children – policies, values and procedures](#)