



# Advocacy and Independent Visitor Report

January 2017 – December 2017

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## WHAT DO WE DO – ADVOCACY?

The Children's Society delivers the Children's Rights and Advocacy Service for Cheshire East. This report seeks to provide an overview of the work undertaken from January to December 2017. We are in the 4<sup>th</sup> year of delivery and have continued to develop and grow the service over the term of the contract to respond to the changing needs of Children & Young People and the Local Authority.

## ISSUE BASED ADVOCACY

Criteria:

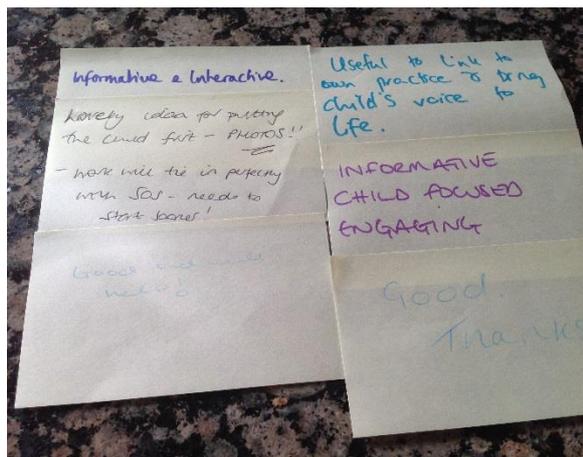
- Children and young people in care  
0 -21 years inclusive
- Children moving on from care to adult life and who are entitled to a service under Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000
- Children and young people subject to a child protection plan
- Young homeless people aged 16/17
- Children and young people making a complaint about a social work service
- Disabled children and young people 0 -18 years irrespective of whether they have a current service plan
- Disabled young people after their 18th birthday receiving transition services
- Children and young people seeking asylum

## CHILD PROTECTION ADVOCACY

Between October and December 2017 automatic referrals for Child Protection stopped being made. This was part of a clearly articulated plan by the LSCB and CEC to place greater emphasis on Social Workers providing that advocacy and support for young people. The introduction of Signs of Safety supported this decision and brought it all together. There are still some CP cases referred where it isn't appropriate for Social Workers to do the advocacy themselves but these are reduced in number due to the positive impact of Signs of Safety and other training delivered to Social Workers by The Children's Society.

There has been a decrease in referrals for Issue Based Advocacy compared with the previous 12 months. Work will begin to undertake a deep dive exercise in collaboration with Cheshire East Council to understand why.

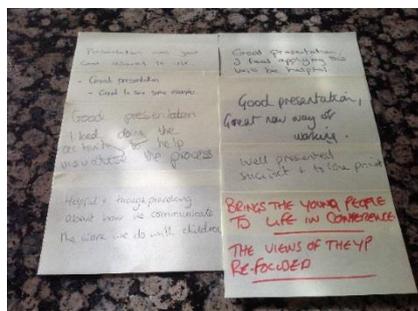
The Children's Society Advocates use innovative and creative ways of illustrating the child or young person's wishes and feelings during Child Protection Conferences, they do this with visual representations in the form of Story Boards. This gives all concerned a better understanding of the experiences, wishes and feelings of the individual child.



### SHARING WHAT WE KNOW WORKS

As part of the planned withdrawal from the CP Advocacy contract and the introduction of Signs of Safety it became ever more important for Social Workers to play a more active role in advocating for Children and Young People in Child Protection proceedings. The Children's Society's Service Manager and Advocates were asked to share their learning with Social Workers in Macclesfield and Crewe. Social Workers and Advocates use the Story Boards as an effective way of demonstrating the wishes and feelings of a child.

The training for Social Workers was very well received and positive feedback given to The Children's Society Team. They will



continue to provide support for Social Workers as this way of working gets embedded.

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### WHAT DO OTHER PEOPLE SAY ABOUT US?

"In March 2017 an audit was carried out by Cheshire East which suggested that the advocacy service is effective in ensuring the voice of the child is represented within conference. The ability of the advocates to do this relates to their independence; they are more likely to be trusted by children and by parents who then consciously or unconsciously give their child permission to speak. It is also connected to how the child's views and lived experience are presented within the conference by the advocate

Pictorial representations were felt by the auditors to be the most powerful and effective way that advocates shared the views of the child, more effective at times than the child attending conference did."

*Susanne Leece March 2017*

*The CP IRO Chairs have been very positive about the involvement of the Advocates in the Child Protection Process and they consider the Advocates are getting increasingly skilled in the role. (Shirley Jordan CP IRO Chair)*

*It was useful to link my own practice to the visual representation work and bring the child's voice to life!*

## CHILD PROTECTION ANIMATION

In 2017 The Children's Society supported Cheshire East Council in the creation of a short film to explain to Children & Young People what happens in Child Protection Conferences. The Children's Society's Advocates supported the Children and Young People to participate in the creation of the film. The film is now available on the Cheshire East Website to help support Children and Young People in understanding what happens at these often very formal and sometimes frightening meetings.

I really enjoyed being involved in this process. I felt that the Cheshire East staff really listened to what the young people were saying to them and really tried hard to make it a positive experience.

Christine Holt, Advocate



The video can be found on YouTube by following this link:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q1Lgh2n11Gk>

## HOW DO OUR ADVOCATES WORK?

The advocates use a "toolkit" of equipment when working with children and young people in order to represent their views. Work is always child and young person led. Where a child or young person had disabilities or specific needs in relation to communication, the advocate works to enable the child's wishes and feelings to be represented.

## OUR ADVOCACY NUMBERS

### Child Protection Advocacy Referrals

Number of CP Advocacy Referrals	<b>54</b>
Number of individual children	<b>105</b>
Neglect	<b>58</b>
Emotional Abuse	<b>24</b>
Physical Abuse	<b>15</b>
Sexual Abuse	<b>6</b>
CSE Plans	<b>2</b>

### Issues Based Advocacy Referrals

Number of Issues Based Advocacy Referrals	<b>60</b>
Children in Care	<b>34</b>
Disabilities	<b>13</b>
Care Leavers	<b>13</b>
Private Foster Care	<b>0</b>

## WHAT DO OUR NUMBERS TELL US?

The number of CP Advocacy referrals has inevitably reduced throughout the year as the plan to withdraw from this service and empower Social Workers to advocate for young people themselves became a reality. It is reassuring to see that some referrals for CP Advocacy work have continued albeit greatly reduced. This can give us confidence that Social Workers are clear about when a child or young person may need the independence of an advocate and are making appropriate referrals. It also tells us that IRO's, Social Workers, Children and Families value the service offered by The Children's Society and through good collaborative working we have arrived at a position where the roles are clearly defined and everyone knows what to expect.

We have had a steady decrease in the number of Issue Based Advocacy Referrals during the last 12 months and we are yet to understand why. The Team have done a great deal to raise awareness and encourage referrals. The Children's Society will work with Cheshire East Council to undertake a deep dive exercise to try to understand this change which bucks the national trend.

Our Independent Visitor Service continues to offer great opportunities to volunteers and children placed in care alike. It is a constant challenge to recruit the right types of volunteers to meet a young person's needs but this is something we dedicate a lot of time and energy to. We do at times have a waiting list of either volunteers or children however, we now collaborate with our

colleagues in Lancashire to broaden our scope where possible.

## WHAT DO YOUNG PEOPLE SAY TO US?

*M asked advocate "Where is my sister living, "I'm worried she has nowhere to live and scared if she was homeless."*

Hani has multiple disabilities. His mum tells us Hani often says his Advocate is his 'superhero'!

*"You are my voice in meetings, you make sure that my opinions are listened to, I trust you!"*

*"Thank you so much, you have been brilliant. I don't know what we would have done without you"*

*'Jamie spoke about some confusion and said he would benefit from some life story work and that he would most like for you to do this'*

## THE MAC PROJECT



The MAC Project focuses on the rights of women and girls who are or have been in the care system themselves and who are now pregnant or have children.

TCS advocates in Cheshire did some legal training with this project in the summer of 2017.

The training and support we received has been invaluable in supporting Cheshire East Care leavers who are at risk of having their children removed.

We use a legal rights based approach to ensure that these young woman get the best possible chance at parenting their own children with all the support that is available to them.

We are currently supporting two Cheshire East care leavers in this position. Both of which are currently engaged in care proceedings in relation to their own children. Both continue to be supported by our specially trained Advocates to ensure their voices are heard in relation to the outcome. This is understandably protracted as legal cases can take many months to conclude. Advocates have supported young women to attend court.



## INDEPENDENT VISITOR SERVICE

*The Children Act 1989 (schedule 2, paragraph 17) places a duty on 'the Council' to appoint an independent visitor in respect of any Cared for Children if:*

- Communication between the child and parent or any person who is not a parent but has parental responsibility has been infrequent
- The child has not been visited (or has not lived with) a parent, or any person with PR for the child during the preceding 12 months.
- The child or young person agrees to an Independent Visitor being appointed.
- Where it appears to be in the child's best interests to do so.

Independent Visitors are volunteers, independent of the care system, and their role is to visit, support and befriend young people allocated to them and to take a long-term interest in their welfare and development.

The Children's Society played an important role in the development of the National Independent Visitor Standards. Locally we work hard to embed the standards into our delivery of the IV service and to encourage the Local Authorities we work with to fully understand and adopt the standards also.

The IV standards have now been developed by children and young people into a more user friendly format.

Every effort is made to match young people to an Independent Visitor as soon as possible and certainly within a month to six weeks. However on occasions where we do not have a suitable

Volunteer available the wait will be longer while we use targeted recruitment methods to attract someone suitable.

Targeted recruitment may include advertising in the local press, contacting local interest groups or support groups where a child with a disability would like a positive role model – deaf child may prefer a deaf IV.

Whilst it is always good to match a volunteer and child quickly, the most important thing is to create successful matches which will be sustainable for two to three years and it can take time to do that effectively. Throughout the process the child or young person is kept fully informed of the progress.

Independent Visitors are trained in Safeguarding, Health & Safety and Equality & Diversity. They receive monthly supervision and the relationship is closely monitored by our Volunteer Coordinators.

Significant improvements have been made to the IV service over the last 18 months, which has been both a collaborative effort with Cheshire East Council and bringing the service in line with others we run elsewhere in the North Region.

Children and Young people tell us they value the IV service greatly and the interactions are very much young person led.

### Our Independent Visitor Service Numbers

<b>Total Number of IV Referrals 2017</b>	<b>6</b>
Boys	<b>3</b>
Girls	<b>3</b>
CYP with Disabilities	<b>3</b>
Out of Borough	<b>0</b>
Placed in Foster Care	<b>4</b>
Placed in Residential Homes	<b>2</b>
Those on care orders but residing with family/parents	<b>0</b>



## WHAT DO CHILDREN & YOUNG PEOPLE TELL US

*"I like living here because I have my own room"*

*A and his volunteer have shared great times together going to the cinema, visiting the Science and Industry Museum, bowling and eating out. They laugh a lot and A is starting to trust the volunteer.*

*"I love playing football with P, he is really good and we went to a proper football club to see the pitch it was exciting"*

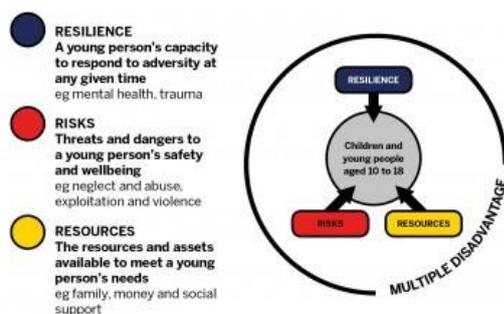
## WHAT DO WE PLAN TO DO IN 2018

- Continue to grow and develop the Advocacy and Independent Visitor Service responding to emerging Best Practice, the requirements of Cheshire East Council and The Children's Society.
- Continue to listen to children and young people and share their views and advocate where needed.
- Promote the Independent Visitor Standards with colleagues, children and young people.
- Continue to work hard to recruit appropriate volunteers for the Independent Visitor Service.
- Prepare for the re-commissioning of the Service, working with Children & Young People to develop a coproduced design for our bid.
- Integrate our new Health & Wellbeing Worker to Cheshire, she will deliver Mental Health First Aid Training to children, young people and volunteers who engage with children and will carry a small early action caseload – this post has been funded through monies raised and is not a commissioned service.

## NATIONAL ACTIVITY

The Children's Society is a leading Children's Charity with a national reputation for delivering services for Children & Young People and for policy and campaigns work which focusses on highlighting the issues which face children and young people in today's society and lobbying Government locally and nationally to create better life chances.

The strategy focusses around three main strands Risk, Resilience and Resources.



During 2017, The Children's Society has worked on campaigns including:

- Adolescent Neglect
- Seriously Awkward – Crumbling Futures
- Council Tax Campaign – Council Tax Relief for Care Leavers

The Children's Society operations in Cheshire are part of the Lancashire, Cheshire and Merseyside area. Other services delivered within the area include:

- Missing from Home – Return Home Interviews
- Street Safe – CSE Project

- Children's Rights and Advocacy (Lancashire)
- Safer Families – Refugees, Asylum Seeker and Migrant Project in Lancashire
- Mental Health & Well-Being Programme – Pan Cheshire. This project will start in early 2018.

In addition to the projects outlined there are also development plans to develop work around disrupting exploitation which, subject to funding, we hope to bring online during 2018 this work will initially focus on Lancashire but if sufficient evidence can be identified to support a roll out into Cheshire then plans for upscaling the programme are in place in phase 2.

## CONTACT DETAILS

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