

Children's Rights Annual Report

April 2020 to March
2021



Contents

Introduction Page	3
Corporate Parenting Principles	4
Advocacy Referrals	6
Reason for Advocacy referrals	7
Advocacy case study	8
Independent Visitor referrals & matches	10
Independent Visitor Case Study	13
My Time with The Children's Society	15
Training and raising Awareness	16
Covid 19	17
Developments in 2020	20
Developments for the future	23

Introduction

What do we do?

The Children's Society delivers the Children's Rights Advocacy and Independent Visiting Service for Cheshire East. This report provides an overview of the work undertaken from 1st April 2020 to 31st March 2021.

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 people who are homeless and aged 16/17 years
- Children and young people making a complaint about a social work service
- Children and young people with a disability 0-18 years, irrespective of whether they have a current service plan
- Young people with a disability following their 18th birthday who are receiving transition services
- Children and young people seeking asylum
- Children and young people subject to a Private Fostering Arrangement

Corporate Parenting Principles



The criteria for our Children's Rights service supports many children and young people and we fully believe in and promote all of the Corporate Parenting Principles, especially:

- *Act in the best interests, and promote the physical and mental health and well-being of children in care and care leavers*

We act as a good advocate to the LA ensuring they are promoting the well-being of all children in care and care leavers.

- *Encourage those children and young people to express their views, wishes and feelings*

We always try to encourage children and young people to self-advocate. We listen to the children and young people and help them to express their views to adults in their lives. We empower them to understand their rights as a child and help them to feel listened to.

- *Take into account the views, wishes and feelings of those children and young people*

This is our main driver as an advocacy service. We work for the child or young person and provide a service to them which is focused on what they want and need.

- *Help those children and young people gain access to, and make best use of, services provided by the local authority and its relevant partners*

We are always ensuring children and young people know what they can access and have a right to. We help children and young people to attend their meetings and to request the services and support they are entitled to.

- *Promote high aspirations, and seek to secure the best outcomes for those children and young people*

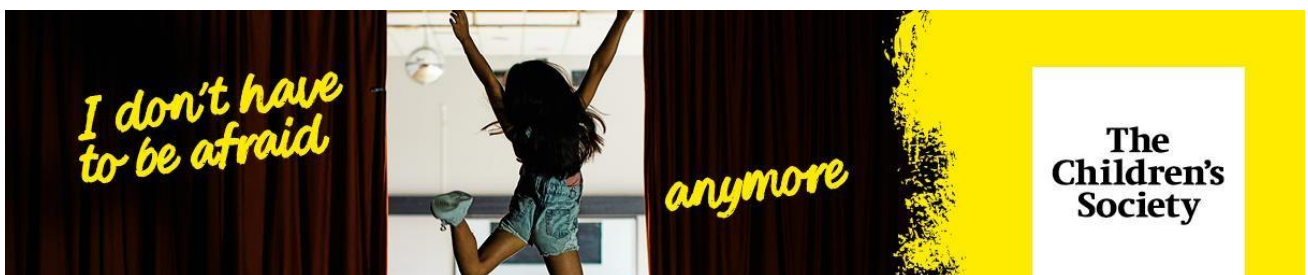
Our Independent Visitors are great role models and are always promoting children to try new activities and develop.

- *Be safe, have stability in their home lives, relationships and education or work*

Our advocates build trust with children and young people and we are independent so children can share their concerns or worries especially in terms of feeling safe.

- *Prepare those children and young people for adulthood and independent living*

All of our Independent Visitors support young people's independence skills and will prepare them for adulthood.



Advocacy Referrals

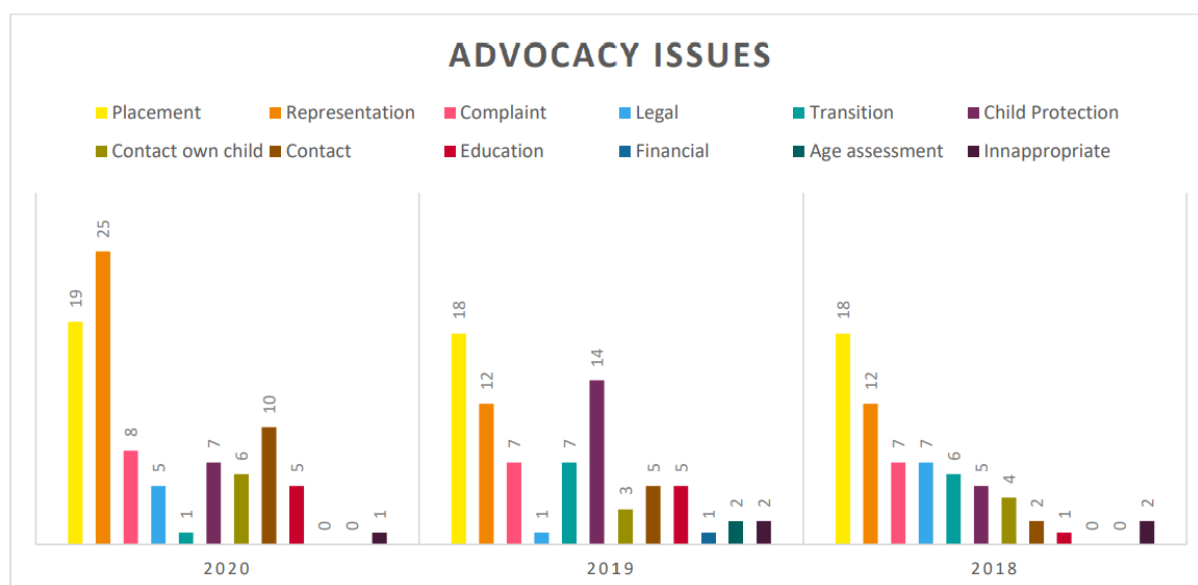
Number of eligible children and young people accessing advocacy services

Child Status	April 2020 – March 2021	April 2019 – March 2020	April 2018 – March 2019
Cared for child	59	36	39
Care Leaver	11	8	10
Child with a disability	7	12	7
Child on CP Plan	8	14	5
Asylum Seeking child	2	4	2
Child or young person making a complaint	1	1	0
Homeless 16/17-year-old	1	0	0
Child or young person in a Private Fostering arrangement	0	0	0
Inappropriate referral	0	2	1
Total	89	77	64

“Best advocate ever to have existed and hardworking and honest and will do anything for you if she can. In my eyes she is special fantastic and amazing and lovely lady and has helped me and supported with everything. I said I couldn’t ask for anybody better and needs to be treated well”

Reason for advocacy referrals

From the 89 referrals we received these were the issues at referral stage



Deep Dive into advocacy cases open for over 6 months

In early 2020 it was decided it would be useful to do a deep dive on advocacy cases open for over six months. This was to check if there was any drift and to look at the reason for remaining open. Reasons can be varied and can include a delay in delivering our service; an issue with the LA or delay, or it could be needs led for that particular young person.

Advocacy Case Study

Reason for referral: Issue Based Advocacy

Young person was referred for advocacy by his parent under the disability criteria. He was not in education and only receiving medical needs tuition. He wanted to be in a school but due to his emotional and developmental needs, he was struggling to access any educational provider.

He has a very strong relationship with his mum and had numerous professionals involved. He needed support to access an education provider that was suitable for his needs.

Advocacy support given

He is extremely anxious and struggles with meeting new people. Advocate spoke with mum at length to gather lots of information about her son to help think of ways she could engage with him. Mum told advocate that he loves dogs and has pet assisted therapy, which works really well. He unfortunately cannot have his own dog, but this is something he would love to do.

Advocate asked mum what she would think about bringing advocate's small family dog on a visit and they could go for a walk in the park.

This was risk assessed and agreed to as a method for engaging with him. The dog walks were a big success and it really helped to build a good relationship with him, he was able to talk to the advocate about what he wanted and how he was feeling. This enabled the advocate to attend his meetings on his behalf and to ensure that professionals knew what he wanted for his education and his future.

Towards the end of the advocate's involvement, he was able to talk on the telephone to his advocate what he wanted to say to professionals. This was huge progress for him as he wouldn't have been able to speak via telephone earlier in our work together.

Outcome:

All felt the dog walks were really positive for the young person, he was happy that he could tell his advocate what he wanted and that his advocate was in his meetings passing this on for him. He still doesn't feel confident enough to be in the meetings but appreciated having an advocate there to be his voice.

Towards the end of the advocate's involvement, he was able to talk on the telephone to his advocate what he wanted to say to professionals. This was huge progress for him as he wouldn't have been able to speak via telephone earlier on in the advocacy relationship.

Thinking creatively for visits with young people can have very positive outcomes. All children and young people are different and using a variety approaches to aid communication is very useful.

Taken from Satisfaction survey

Thank you for helping me I believe that you are a really good listener, and you made my voice be heard. It was really nice to meet you I hope you know how much you helped me.

I don't think I got the chance to say but thanks so much for this. Really shows that people actually care and my life can actually be a bit better.

Independent Visiting Referrals

Number of eligible children and young people accessing the Independent Visiting Service

During April 2020 – March 2021, we had 13 new referrals for an Independent Visitor.

Year	April 2020 – March 2021	April 2019 – March 2020	April 2018 – March 2019
New referrals	13	10	7
<i>Below shows more details</i>			
Lives in Foster care	11	9	5
Lives in Residential	2	1	2
Out of Borough	7	4	2
Has a disability/learning need	4	3	4

We recruit volunteers via The Children's Society website as well as Cheshire East CVS and will do targeted recruiting for those who are out of borough children and young people.

Independent Visitor Matches

From April 2020 to March 2021, we matched 24 volunteers with young people. We trained, inducted and continued to support the matches and see a consistently high retention rate for positive successful matches.

Independent Visitor matches	April 20 – March 21	April 19 – March 20	April 18 – March 19
New matches	12	8	4
Re matches	7	1	2
Continued matches	5	7	10
Total	24	16	16

We did have more re-matches in this year. Many were Covid related; for example, volunteers no longer able to volunteer as they were vulnerable, some had decided to move closer to family during Covid-19, some their jobs got busier, again due to Covid-19, and they felt unable to commit to volunteering; additionally, one young person moved placement and so required a different geographical match and two of our volunteers experienced significant change in their own family circumstances.

We ask our volunteers to commit to two years as a volunteer. Our longest Independent Visitor match is over five years which is fantastic. All of our volunteers receive a certificate after one year and two years of volunteering, they can also take part in other areas of volunteering within the organisation, as in one volunteer is keen to be a volunteer speaker, speaking in churches and school assemblies.

Review of independent visitor match meeting, I asked how it was going with his Independent Visitor, he said:

I'm doing good with my volunteer we do funny talks and I think you are doing a good job and volunteer is doing well.

One young person who was recently matched with an Independent Visitor said:

I'm glad you've taken the time to get the right person for me.

We have had matches end due to volunteers moving areas or getting a job. We have also had matches end as the young person has moved placement and we have not been able to continue the match and we have had some re-matches.



Independent Visitor Case Study



Reason for referral: Independent Visitor

A referral came in for an Independent Visitor in July 2020 for a child living with foster carers. This was during the restrictions and the foster carer explained that he does not like virtual support so we agreed to wait until we could visit face to face before introducing him to the service.

Support given

The Volunteer Coordinator met with young person in October 2020 outside Costa near to his home as both he and his carer felt comfortable there (due to Covid-19). He filled in his *all about me* sheet and the Volunteer Coordinator posted a Volunteer Profile out as he prefers more visual things, rather than screens. A match meeting was held in November 2020 with the Volunteer Coordinator, young person and the volunteer, which was a walk to Costa for a hot chocolate through the park. Both carer and young person felt comfortable with this as they were both anxious about Covid-19. Going on a walk with the young person and the volunteer allowed the Volunteer Coordinator to demonstrate how to interact with young person and to put boundaries in place, where needed. The volunteer commented that they found this helpful.

Outcome

The volunteer met the young person the following week and went for a walk and lunch, the volunteer had another contact with young person on Teams where they did an escape room activity. The carer had said that he would only manage 20 minutes but "He was completely engaged and thoroughly interested in a whole hour! The Independent Visitor has been brilliant at engaging with the young person, especially online given he does not like this!"

The Children's Society

We needed to be creative during the restrictions in adapting how we work, by looking at having walks with young people and adapting how we do things to accommodate children and their individual needs. We accommodated the carers concerns about Covid-19 whilst ensuring that the young person continued to be supported.

In the future we can learn to adapt how we do things and perhaps suggest changing how we complete match meetings (potentially taking them outside the home to help that initial relationship start to build).

On another note, the Independent Visitor has genuinely enjoyed the visits with the young person, which shows the impact that children can have on others.



We have many volunteers who are keen to share their story, here is William's:

My time with The Children's Society

I remember well how I first heard about The Children's Society. Two young volunteers were standing in the middle of a busy shopping mall with a stall advertising the society's work. Then a few years later, I went on their website to see how I could be of practical service, having not long ago retired from teaching. The post of Independent Visitor intrigued me; this involved visiting children in care who were either in children's homes or with foster parents. The idea was to give them an independent and sympathetic ear, and to take the child assigned to you out once a month, somewhere the child enjoyed and was fun. In this way, it is hoped that the child will grow to trust the visitor and maybe confide any worries or fears, or anxieties that they had.

I was interviewed and trained, and the training was really interesting and motivating. A long time passed before I was 'matched' with a child; this is because great care is taken by the service to match the Independent Visitor (the IV) with the right boy or girl who would benefit most from the relationship. Moreover, the child's own wishes and preferences are taken into account, interests and leisure time hobbies etc. If a child wants to go rambling and play golf on his outings, the service doesn't assign him someone who loves sitting in libraries or feeding ducks in the park.

I was assigned my first child, a 13-year-old boy living in a children's home. He is a boy who enjoys ice-skating, swimming, eating in McDonalds and browsing round big stores like Pound Stretcher, Toys R Us and charity shops. I have to say that my skating skills have gone off over the years, but this did not take away from his own enjoyment.

Since the lockdown in late March, visits were suspended for the safety of both of us for a while. Nevertheless, I made weekly telephone calls to him and just lately video calls so that at last we can see each other again!

Lastly, I realise that this particular match won't last forever, there has to be a phased and sensitive ending some time, possibly after two years. I look forward then to working with someone new!

Volunteer Independent Visitors Training

All our volunteers are trained and inducted before they can start volunteering. The training covers; safeguarding, confidentiality, the role of an Independent Visitor, the Care System and relationship building. All our volunteers also take part in group support meetings and supervision.

Two Personal Advisors from the Care Leavers' Service facilitated a session about their role and what a child can expect as they move into becoming a care leaver. The feedback from our volunteers was that they really found the session extremely useful.

Volunteer feedback via email on the Independent Visitor training:

"I do want to take a minute to thank you. Your energy, commitment and passion for supporting children is so apparent and infectious."

"Given some of the content in course it is really heart-warming to know there are people like you (and everyone in TCS) doing their bit to make a difference."

Covid-19



- Children and young people have been given different options on how to communicate with their advocate during the lockdown period. Advocates have used telephone, WhatsApp, Microsoft Teams, text, Skype.
- Advocates have tried to accommodate the children and young people's preferred method of communication where possible.
- The use of video calling has worked really well for some children and young people who have found this a better way of expressing their views.
- In March 2020 when we were in lockdown due to Covid-19, there was a pause on all volunteer recruitment whilst the organisation looked into safe practice during lockdown. Eventually we were able to recruit and process volunteers via skype interviews and video calling to view documents as well as online training.
- All our volunteers during the restrictions had supervision with the Volunteer Coordinator to discuss Covid 19 and risk assessments, and to get an understanding and their wish or not to return to face-to-face visits.
- Service Manager attended virtual training on Thriving Virtually for Managers in order to ensure she was looking after her own wellbeing and that of the staff and volunteers during Covid-19 and the lockdown restrictions.
- In early 2021 we were busy getting back to doing more face-to-face visits for advocacy and Independent Visiting, completing Covid-19 risk assessments and supporting volunteers to ensure they follow the guidance and keep children and young people safe.
- During the restrictions we sent flower seeds to the young people and their Independent Visitors encouraged them to grow them.

We had a lovely positive phone call with a foster carer about the positives for her foster child during lockdown:

She said: He is really doing well at present, as you know my house can be very busy with my own grandchildren visiting, however all is quiet now and we have been working on some self-help skills with him, like bringing his washing down to be washed and supporting him to get dressed himself.

All this has become more easier to do as he is not in school the house is quiet and we have more time for him. So, he is developing really well. He loves buildings and places, and you can show him a photograph and he will know where and what it is, and he use to enjoy doing these activities with his Independent Visitor when they use to go to the library. Thank you so much for calling and asking about us all.

Wellbeing during Covid-19

Since Covid-19 our organisation has been promoting a good deal of wellbeing resources which all staff have access to and can sign post to any children and young people.

Inside the Mind

This is a national resource that The Children's Society have developed, which we have shared with colleagues to pass on to any child or young person they feel would benefit from.

<https://www.childrenssociety.org.uk/information/young-people/wellbeing/resources>

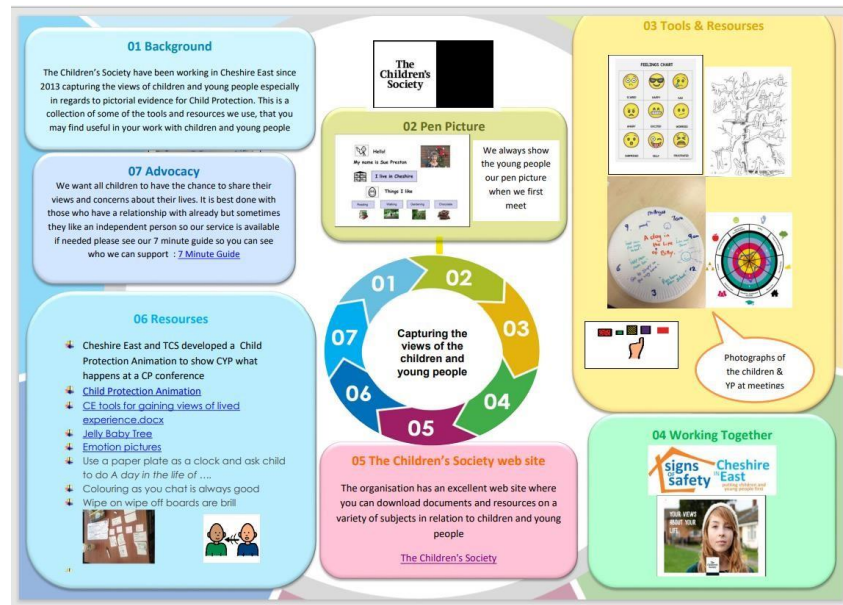




Developments in 2020

- One young person who is matched with an Independent Visitor was interested in supporting our work and either being on interview panels or helping with training. This young person was supported via a training and discussion session. She did a session on the Independent Visitor Training in June 2020. She completed her own PowerPoint for the session and the Independent Visitors really enjoyed this part of the training. The young person was given a shopping voucher as a thank you.
- She then became involved in our "Team Gold" project which is our national project and involves children and young people deciding where pots of funding are allocated. Other children and young people ask for funding to set up groups or to improve their buildings.
- We attended Local Authority meetings throughout the year to raise awareness about the service and we shared tools and resources on capturing the voice of the child with colleagues.
- We recruited a volunteer advocate ambassador in 2020 who took on some low-level advocacy referrals.
- As part of Refugee Week in June 2020 The Children's Society were campaigning for all unaccompanied asylum seekers to be appointed a Guardian to support them when they arrive in the UK. This information and link was sent to colleagues in the local authority Guardians.

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- We worked with Local Authority colleagues to ensure that any homeless 16- or 17-year-old was made aware of our advocacy service if they needed to access an advocate
- We worked with Local Authority colleagues to ensure that any child in a Private Fostering arrangement was aware of our service if they needed to access an advocate
- In September 2020 we shared with colleagues our national Good Childhood Report



The Good Childhood Report 2020

Youth Summary

The Children's Society

What did we find?

What we found is worrying. UK children have the lowest levels of wellbeing and the lowest sense of hope compared to 24 other European countries. The UK has also seen the largest increase in relative child poverty. And while strong friendships are identified as a key ingredient of children's well-being, the report found that children in the UK increasingly feel they have no close friends they could talk to if they are in trouble.

The Children's Society

- In November 2020 we took part in November Children's Rights Month our Volunteer Coordinator sent out Christmas activity packs to our children and young people, Service Manager did Random Act of Kindness.



Activity packs were sent out to our young people who are matched with an Independent visitor with letters asking them how they were and asking them to make cards for whoever they wanted to. These were posted to the young people with an office address, and we would post them if they wanted to send this to their Independent Visitor.

- We took on a Social Work student in early 2021 from Salford University who took on some advocacy cases.
- In February 2021 we set up a Task and Finish group alongside Cheshire East colleagues to look at how we communicate and raise awareness about the service as well as look at training and development.

Developments for the future

Take on Social work students to support the Advocacy and Independent Visitor Service as well as offering them the skills and experience to become a great Social Worker.

Work with Cheshire East colleagues to ensure partnership working and better communication, develop more webinars to share with colleagues.

Develop a blended approach to the work ensuring all children and young people have the choice to how they would like the service to work for them.

Promote the service with colleagues and ensure all aware of who they can refer especially children in a Private Fostering arrangement or homeless 16- and 17-year olds.

Promote the Independent Visiting service to ensure all those children and young people who want an Independent Visitor are offered one.

Continue to share our national resources with colleagues in the local authority and other services who work with children and young people.

Sue Preston Service Manager, The Children's Society