

# Children's Rights Annual Report

## Cheshire East

### April 2021 to March 2022



Cheshire Children's Rights Annual report April 2021 – March 2022 Sue Preston Service Manager

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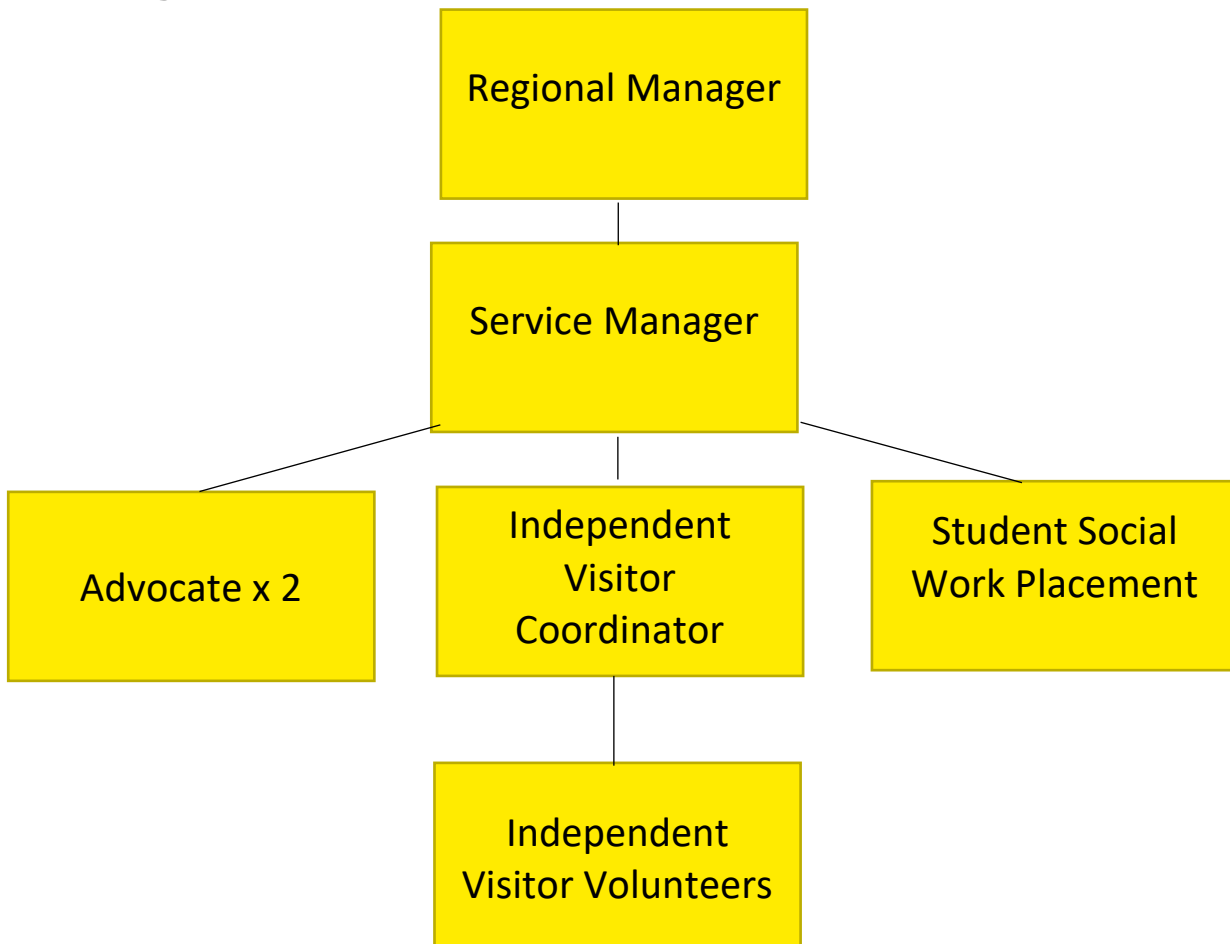
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## Introduction:

The Children's Society is commissioned to deliver the Children's Rights Advocacy and Independent Visiting Service for Cheshire East Local Authority. The Children's Society have held the contract since November 2014 and were re-commissioned in October 2019 for 5 years.

This annual report provides an overview of the work undertaken between 1<sup>st</sup> April 2021 until 31<sup>st</sup> March 2022.

### Staffing Structure:



## Our Achievements last year

### What we said we would develop last year

Host student Social Work placement to support the advocacy and IV service as well as offering them the skills and experience to become a great Social Worker. The team hosted 2 Social Work (MA) students last year, with both Salford and Chester University both praising the service on how much a student can learn from the placement.

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Work collaboratively with Cheshire East colleagues to ensure partnership working and better communication, develop more webinars about the service and support offer to share with colleagues. The team developed a webinar to share with colleagues in Social Care and in Schools, to raise awareness of the service and to demonstrate how the teams can work in partnership, this was shared at the Virtual School training day in June 2021 for Designated teachers and shared with Stephen Pepper a Service Manager in Social care and Jenny Brown a Child Protection Independent Reviewing Officer to share with social care. A Power Point presentation was also sent in to be used at the Taboo Conference and was sent to new staff as part of their induction

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Develop a blended approach to the support offer, ensuring all children and young people have the choice to how they would like the service to work for them. At the start of the work the team asked the children and young people how they would like the service to work for them with many happy to continue virtual contact as well as engaged in face-to-face visits in café's, parks, wherever the young person feels the most comfortable.

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Promote the service with colleagues and ensure all are aware of who they can refer, especially children in a Private Fostering arrangement or homeless 16- and 17-year-olds. The team promoted the service at Children's Trust, CPOG, cared for team meeting and Preparation for adulthood meetings which resulted in 5 referrals for children subject to a Private Fostering arrangement and one for 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. The team promoted the Independent Visiting service at various meetings the Service Manager attended within the LA which resulted in 11 referrals into the service.

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Continue to share our national resources with colleagues in the local authority and other services who work with children and young people. The team shared various resources with our colleagues either at team meetings or sending the links to the resources via email the resources include the Good Childhood report 2021, First Port of Call The role of GPs in young people's mental health, as our service and many others were hearing more and more young people being affected by mental health

## Our achievements internally:

- The Service Manager was part of a Task and Finish group within The Children's Society to develop a definition and guide for **what Advocacy is in the Children's Society**, this was developed and all workers within The Children's Society have this as a framework

The framework listed three types of advocacy within The Children's Society:

- **Self-Advocacy** - should be a goal for all services. Service users who are informed, skilled and empowered to be able to advocate for themselves have, inevitably, increased protective factors and resilience.
- **Individual Advocacy** – where practitioners provide advocacy support to an individual to ensure their rights are secured and/or their views/voices are heard in decision making.
- **Systems Advocacy** – where practitioners and programmes seek to use the views of those with lived experience to impact on wider systems and structures – within TCS Systems Advocacy is clearly linked to the organisation's Systems Change work.
- The Children's Society have a Growing Together campaign, which the organisation does monthly and one of our advocates did a 'Day in the Life of...' Spotlight in February 2022 These are interactive sessions offering a personal perspective of colleagues working and volunteering in The Children's Society and is aimed at all our work force not only those in youth impact but in retail and policy.

## Practice Standards

- In February 2022, the organisation finalised a set of Practice Standards which set out our commitment, to children and young people regardless of who they are, what service they might access, where in the country they live so that they all should expect and receive the same basic approach from The Children's Society
- These standards have relevance across all domains in the organisation they help guide our engagement with young people, whether that's direct contact, what we write about them and how we represent their views and experiences.
- The standards fit firmly within a rights-based approach, so link directly with the United Nations Convention on the Right of the Child, and the experience and knowledge of years of our work with children and young people.

**The service work to the following Practice Standards.** There are 10 standards in all which cover a young person's engagement with us from the beginning to the end.

### Practice Standards

Young people choose to work with us	Young people's view of their experiences is central
Young people are valued and treated with respect	Young people are supported to develop their understanding skills and expectations
Young people are supported to develop stronger relationships	Young people are supported to have a strong and positive sense of their own identity
Young people are supported to express their views and opinions and have them listened to	Young people's lived experiences contribute to wider systems change
Young people are safeguarded and supported to have risk reduced in their lives	Young people are supported towards positive endings

## What is advocacy

Advocacy is offering support and information to children and young people, empowering them to ensure their rights are respected, their views and wishes heard and reflected in decision-making about their lives. Ideally the best person to advocate for a child or young person could be their carer, Social Worker, Teacher, Personal Adviser but sometimes an independent person is needed.

The team offer Independent Issue Based Advocacy ensuring there are effective pathways to hear their voice and resolve issues at the earliest stage.

Our criteria of children and young people include the following:

Cared for by Local Authority (0-17)

Care Leavers (18-25)

Have a disability (0-18 and up to 25 if in transition to adult services)

Homeless 16–17-year-old

In a Private Fostering Arrangement

Asylum seekers or refugees

Subject to a Child Protection Plan

Those wanting to make a complaint against a social care service



Advocates usually meet young people at home or at school, but will always ask young people where they would feel most comfortable talking. Sometimes advocates will go for a coffee or a walk with a young person if this is what they would prefer to do.'



## Advocacy Referrals

From 1<sup>st</sup> April 2021 – 31<sup>st</sup> March 2022 we had 87 referrals for advocacy:

Number of eligible children and young people who were referred to the Advocacy Service

Child Status	April 2021 – March 2022	April 2020 – March 2021	April 2019 – March 2020
Cared for child (including 6 placed with parents under an Interim Care Order)	45	59	36
Care Leaver	9	11	8
Child with a disability	9	7	12
Child on Child Protection (CP) Plan & Child in Need (CIN) (6 CP & 2 CIN)	8	8	14
Asylum Seeking child	9	2	4
Child or young person making a complaint	0	1	1
Homeless 16/17-year-old	1	1	0
Child or young person in a Private Fostering arrangement	5	0	0
Inappropriate referral	1	0	2
<b>Total</b>	<b>87</b>	<b>89</b>	<b>77</b>

Of the 87 referrals, 20 of them were re referrals back into the service for another issue, which included 4 young people self-referring into the service. This shows a positive indication that the young people felt happy to ask for advocacy support again with a new issue. Several of the re referrals are where a young person has wanted an advocate to represent them at their care planning meeting only and then we have closed the work and re-opened for the next care planning meeting

During the same period in **Cheshire West & Chester** we received 70 Advocacy referrals plus 22 open cases which were transferred when we took on the contract in April 21.



## Deep Dive of Advocacy referrals

Of the referrals these were the following issues that the advocates worked on with the children and young people:

<b>Issue:</b>	<b>Quantity:</b>	<b>Examples include:</b>
Representation	21	Issue with Social Worker, Feel not being listened to
Placement	11	Including placement moves
Contact issues	11	Young people wanting more contact
Parent & Baby	10	Ensuring the parents are listened to and supported
Representation at meetings	9	Cared for meetings, PEP meetings
Child Protection Representation	6	Representation at CP conference reviews
Complaint	5	See breakdown below
Legal	5	Age assessment, Change of name, Asylum claim
Transition	4	Support from children's care to adult social care
Education Placement	3	Young people wanting a different school
Access to records	1	Young person wanting to see their
Inappropriate referral	1	Child in Need
<b>Total</b>	<b>87</b>	

4 issues were classified as complaints. The issues highlighted in complaints and the outcomes were as follows:

Letter box contact: the young person now has letter box contact, which is more personal, see Advocacy case study

A young person in placement who submitted a complaint regarding another young person being placed in the foster home as well. She decided to put the complaint on hold as she was busy with studies and the other young person was no longer living there.

A child who felt unfairly treated compared to her peers' protective factors that had been put in place. Some were justified, but some the young person felt were not needed. A complaint was sent in and the opportunity to meet with the team manager. The issues were rectified, and her voice was heard, and young person was happy with the outcome

One young person wanted to make a complaint against her former Foster Carers This did not progress to a complaint when the team spoke to her, and she decided she no longer wanted advocacy

## Independent Visiting

The concept “Independent Visitors” (IV) originated from government reports into safeguards for vulnerable children living away from home, which stressed the importance of providing **an ongoing relationship with an adult who was independent from the Local Authority**. The role of the IV was introduced as a **statutory service for looked after children** in the Children Act 1989.

**An Independent Visitor is a volunteer who is matched with a child in care** aged between 8 – 18 years of age. They are a trained volunteer, who is uniquely placed to provide care-experienced children and young people with emotional support and stability. Independent Visitors offer the chance for children in care to build a “trusting, positive relationship with a trained volunteer. We ask volunteers to commit to 2 years. The service has a KPI target of 20 matches at any one time.

All the volunteers are trained and inducted before they start volunteering with the service. The training covers; safeguarding, confidentiality, the role of an Independent Visitor, the Care System and relationship building. All volunteers are required to engage in group support meetings and supervision. The service offers group support meetings and one to one session for all volunteers and very often speakers are invited in to share information or deliver a training session with volunteers to continue their professional development.

This year the service facilitated Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE) training to the volunteers by making use of a skilled wider team within The Children's Society.

- **The team kept in touch with those children and young people on the waiting list for an Independent Visitor**, and at any one time we could have between 4 – 8 young people on the waiting list. There has been regular communication via phone calls to the children and young people to them, **making sure they do not feel forgotten**. The team have also sent activities in the post to keep them engaged. The regular phone calls also present as an opportunity for the young person to highlight any pressing issues which they may be worried about so if we need to consider a specialist volunteer this can be considered.



## Independent Visitor referrals

**From April 2021 to March 2022, the service received 11 referrals for an Independent Visitor:**

Year	April 2021 – March 2022	April 2020 – March 2021	April 2020 – March 2021
Referrals	11	13	10

During the same period in **Cheshire West & Chester** we received 21 Independent Visitor referrals plus 21 cases which were transferred when we took on the contract in April 21.

Of those 11 referrals:

- 9 were new young people into the service and 2 were re-matches, so young people who had an IV but the match ended and so were re referred for another IV
- 9 children and young people have a disability or specific need as in emotional need, self-esteem, or low confidence,
- 7 children and young people were out of Borough in the following areas: Bury, Walsall, Stoke on Trent, Hyde, Ipstones, Manchester and Newcastle
- 7 lived in Foster Care, 1 in residential, 1 in supported living, 1 in residential/hospital and 1 with parents.

**During April 21 to March 2022, we supported 21 matches and the relationships have spanned anything from 1 to 6 years.** We are proud of this statistic as it shows the longevity of support provided, as well as suggesting that the **children/young people value the relationship** and want to continue to see their IV long-term.

However, although this is positive for those young people who have an Independent Visitor, our resources and capacity would be stretched if we were also able to match all those on the waiting list as well. We have discussed this with our commissioners and are in discussions, looking at possible extra funding, checking if those on the waiting list anything has changed and do the young people still require an IV, and looking at exit strategies for some young people if appropriate.

## Independent Visitor case study

The young person was referred to the service for an Independent Visitor. They had an Education, Health, Care Plan for social and emotional difficulties and wanted an IV to support them to engage in some different activities and to provide them with someone (apart from school and carers / social worker) to talk to.

The young person was matched with an Independent Visitor in 2020 during Lock down, so they only met virtually for a few months, but this allowed for them to build a relationship, until they could meet face to face. The relationship grew and the young person began trusting the IV and their conversations became more meaningful, the young person would talk about a few of their worries with the volunteer.

In November 2021, when the young person reached 18 years, we were asked by their Social worker, foster carer if the match could continue (Independent Visiting generally ends at 18) we felt it was important for the match to continue as it would benefit the young person as they transitioned into adulthood. We contacted our commissioners, and it was agreed the match could continue and we would review it in 6 months.

An Independent Visitor is very important and a valuable person in children and young people's lives the young person and their volunteer have continued to develop a good relationship where there is trust. The young person speaks with the IV about different things in their life. This relationship demonstrates how effective the service can be when everything is in place and shows a value that is far beyond money.

When a young person in care finds an adult who they can trust as they are not connected to any of the professional bodies, it is special and to be promoted as a good reason why the service is delivered.

- Nationally discussions are taking place with other Independent Visitor services about **the need for IV services to support more 18's and overs**. As one young person said *I did not need an IV at 12 but now I am 18 and living independently I could do with an independent person for support*

Further demonstrating the **consistency of IV support**, during Covid restrictions we **developed novel ways to continue engaging with children/young people**. For example, volunteers took part in virtual escape room activities, cooking activities or book clubs with their young people. The outcome was that **all our matches were maintained**, which was testament to volunteer commitment and meant that those we support **did not miss out** on this valuable service.



## **Advocacy Case study**

The service received a referral from a Social Worker regarding a young person in Foster Care, whose siblings had been adopted, and who was unhappy with the letterbox contact that he had with them. The Social Worker had already made enquiries to the letterbox agency and had not heard back, so felt an independent voice might be more effective.

The Advocate visited the young person to gain an understanding of their issue and find out what it was they wanted help with. The young person told them that he felt he had been promised letterbox contact with his siblings, but believed the letters were being written by the adoptive parents instead. He felt the letters he received were very impersonal, and frequently arrived late. This was extremely upsetting to him, as he put a lot of time and thought into the letters he wrote to them, often including photos, and was worried that his siblings would forget him.

The Advocate decided to submit a Stage 1 Complaint to the Local Authority, writing a letter that expressed the young person's feelings about the letterbox contact and his wish that the adoptive parents could support his siblings to write themselves so he could have more meaningful contact with them, as he felt had been agreed.

The Local Authority replied that they understood how he was feeling and that they were sorry he was unhappy. They explained that according to the letterbox agency, the adoptive parents were responsible for making these decisions until the siblings were 18, so there was no obligation that the letters come directly from his siblings. They offered, however, to share a letter with the adoptive parents to see if a voluntary agreement could be found.

The service understood that the council was balancing competing priorities – they had a responsibility to respect the rights of the adoptive parents, as well as hear the views of the child.

While waiting for a response, the Advocate helped the young person to understand the Local Authority's limitations and that his request would require an agreement from the adoptive parents and reassured him that it was important he was using his voice to try to make something happen. They also informed him that his letters would go in his siblings' records, so they would be able to see them when they were older and would see his effort to contact them.

The outcome was a verbal agreement from the adoptive parents that they would include some photos of the siblings' artworks in the letters, and at the time the case was closed the young person had received a letter from the adoptive parents written in a more personal way, including the promised photos. The letterbox agency sent some further information to the young person about how the system works.

Also resulting from this piece of advocacy work, the council made changes to the way it explains letterbox contact to young people, making it clearer that the nature of contact is dependent on adoptive parents' decisions and there is no guarantee of direct contact, to ensure young people do not have false expectations in future.



## Partnership working:

The team attend various meetings to continue to raise awareness of the service, share information as well as acting as a critical friend to the Local Authority.

The service is a regular member of The Children's Trust Board and the Corporate Parenting Board which ensures we can keep up to date with the Local Authority as is a good networking opportunity

Partnership working is paramount to what we do. **Working well with other organisations means we can provide the best quality and most streamlined & effective support for the children & young people we serve.**

For example, the service **work closely with Pure Insight** (care-leavers support) as some of the care-leavers are supported by both organisations at the same time. Ensuring the team communicate well and support each other enables the team to deliver the best care possible to young people whilst maximising the impact of their own voice.

As a service it is especially **important to have good relations with professionals** such as Social Workers, Independent Reviewing Officers, and Personal Advisors, to do our absolute best for the children and young people. Fostering good relations is especially valuable if the team need to challenge the Local Authority: since we are independent of the Authority, the team are best placed to make such challenges, which can be a positive support to the Social Worker or Independent Reviewing Officer who are politically less able to make direct challenges due to their position.

In March 2022 the service sent information on some children's training being delivered by Article 39 which is a national children's Rights organisation to the Participation Team to encourage any young people to attend the **Children's Rights Training for under 18's**. One young person from the Youth Council attended the training, which was very positive.

The Children's Society's partnership with commissioners the Local Authorities are extremely important. Whilst taking our role in representing the voice of the young person very seriously, the team recognise **the benefits of effective relationships with the Local Authority** in securing positive change for young people. The team are careful to exercise tact and diplomacy when voicing the desires of the young person to the authority: The Children's Society find that exploring collaboratively *how* we can make something happen, as opposed to bulldozing in with inflexible demands, is much more effective in achieving the desired results, the team work hard to make good relationships up with colleagues and to express to colleagues especially in terms of when we are supporting a child with a complaint that we are there to express the young person's voice and it is not us that are making the complaint so we ensure our written wording in complaint s is shown as the voice of the child or young person.

## Challenges and Developments

- From listening to children and young people and their carers whilst delivering the work, the team **have adapted how and where they meet with young people**, supporting them to feel comfortable in control of their care. For instance:
  - Meeting a young person on the farm where they tend to horses, as the child feels **more relaxed and able to share their views** with the advocate whilst brushing the horse.
  - For one child, the advocate has taken their small friendly dog on the visit as we found out the child already has animal therapy, finds having a dog present **comforting and is able to talk more** as a result.
- During Covid restrictions, the team developed enhanced ways to engage with children and young people virtually, taking advantage of video calling, emails, and messaging. Some children/young people have told their worker that they prefer virtual contact, so this has continued, and the service offer a blended approach whereby the child/young person has a **choice of face-to-face or remote contact**.
- Staff have been hearing from children/young people that they are **feeling overwhelmed with education and being in care**. Some young people have feelings of hopelessness, and emotional stability, as well as concerns for their parents' mental health. We have subsequently been working on how we can better support individuals in such cases:
  - The service shared this with the Local Authority and sought to **explore collectively** how we can tweak our practice to better manage such concerns.
  - As a team, we are making sure we have an **appropriate and comprehensive range of information to share** with the young people when they hear this, so they can support and signpost them to other services that will be best placed to help them.
  - Another benefit of developing the service's practice in this area is that, by being efficient in their ability to refer/signpost, they **free up more time** to listen to the child or young person.
- The quote below illustrates **an example of a young person progressing to self-advocacy**:

An advocate asked the young person, "Do you feel you still need advocacy?"

They replied: "No, I feel people are listening to me now, thank you so much for your support, I really appreciate it. I think my voice has been heard, I cannot thank you enough, you have been a massive help as you understood how anxious I get with everything. I think you have done your job and feel ok to end it."



## Impact and challenge

In addition to the service's impact highlighted, through listening to children and young people and working collaboratively with the Local Authority, the service has been **instrumental in bringing about changes in the system to benefit children & young people**, their rights, and experiences. For example:

The service supported a young person who was having long delays in having access to specialist equipment: the child now has the equipment he needs, and the Local Authority changed the way they process specialist equipment requests so that there are not lengthy delays for children and young people

- A young person experienced troubling experience regarding **'Letter Box Contact'** with their birth siblings who had been adopted: he had been promised Letter Box contact, but on receiving the letters, it seemed that they had been written by the adoptive parents and not his siblings. The service has subsequently **influenced changes in how this is managed by the Local Authority**, who have agreed that they need to be **more effective in the way they talk to young people about Letterbox Contact**, ensuring they explain the process properly and not set unrealistic/unachievable expectations. The service also worked with the young person and local authority to make indirect contact with the adoptive parents, resulting in a more personal style of letter and inclusion of photographs of the siblings' artwork.
- As a service, we know we are having an impact on children and young people, especially in terms of them **feeling listened to** and eventually **feeling more confident to advocate for themselves as a result of our participation work and engagement approaches**. An example of how this is measured is when young people decide to attend their cared-for meetings after being supported by their advocate, which they hadn't done previously.

At the end of the work, we do a **satisfaction survey** with children and young people, however the response rate is very low, so we are looking at other ways to capture feedback from children and young people.

## Tools used to capture the voice of the child:



Our advocates use a 'Jelly Baby Tree' and ask child or young person where they see themselves on the tree. This aims to allow the child to think about how they are feeling a child or young person can change through-out the day or week



My Wheel  
Advocates use the My Wheel tool to gain a rounded understanding of the young person's life and encourage them to think about changes they would like to see



The team uses feelings charts which is a visual representation and especially good when the team need to complete non instructed advocacy with children and young people.

- To help children and young people get to know the team and feel comfortable with their advocate or Independent Visitor Coordinator, the service provides a 'pen picture', which is essentially an 'all about me' card. It explains, in a child-friendly format, who the advocate or worker is, what they do, and some information about their likes and dislikes to help build a human connection, see example pen picture



## Future Actions/ Next Steps:

- **The service's aim is to empower children and young people to self-advocate**, using their own voice assertively to influence decisions made about their lives. The service want's children and young people to feel confident to talk to their Social Worker, carer and/or other professionals to share their views and have their say in what happens in their lives – and, if needed, to feel able to refer into our advocacy service if needed. **Ways the team will work towards achieving this** is by supporting children and young people in meetings to enable them to gain confidence in speaking at their meetings, to give them tools like writing down their questions before they meet with their social worker or Independent Reviewing Officer.
- The service aim for **all children and young people in the area to know where to seek advocacy/IV** support if they need it. When children access this service, the aim is for them to feel **listened-to and supported**, and to represent their views purely and effectively. **Ways the team will work towards achieving this** is to ensure our information is on the appropriate websites and up to date, professionals in their lives know how to sign post young people to the service.
- The service wants to **develop excellent volunteers** who are trained and supported as Independent Visitors that have **the skills and resources** to support children especially in terms of their mental health and can be alerted to any signs of exploitation. **Ways the team will work towards achieving this** is by offering all our volunteers more training on mental health, and CSE and to discuss in supervisions with the volunteers any concerns they have in terms of mental health, CSE and on-line safety.
- We aim to help develop **good Social Workers for the future**: **Ways the team will work towards achieving this** is by offering Social Work students' placements, giving them an understanding of **Children's Rights and the importance of listening to children & young people**. We will also share good practice around the use of supportive, respectful language, based on what we have heard from children & young people themselves. For example, not talking about 'placement' but 'their home', Through leading by example, we hope to influence and enhance other professionals' use of positive, supportive language

# The Children's Society

- The service will play our part in **supporting children and young people's mental health: Ways the team will work towards achieving this** is by seeking out **appropriate and comprehensive range of information** to share with children and young people regarding their mental health and using the National resources we have on offer like Human Connection cards.
- The service will continue to work in partnership with Cheshire East colleagues to ensure **good partnership working** and better communication and to develop more webinars to share with colleagues to ensure they are kept up to date and are appropriately informed to refer into the service. As well as continue to share national Children's Society resources with colleagues in the local authority and other services who work with children and young people.

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