

Cheshire East Advocacy and Independent Visitor Service – The Children's Society

Annual Report

October 2022 - September 2023

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The Children's Society Vision

The Children's Society is commissioned to deliver the Children's Rights Advocacy and Independent Visiting Service for Cheshire East Council. The Children's Society has held the contract since November 2014 and was recommissioned on 1st October 2019 for 5 years.

This annual report provides an overview of the work undertaken between **1st October 2022 – 30th September 2023**.

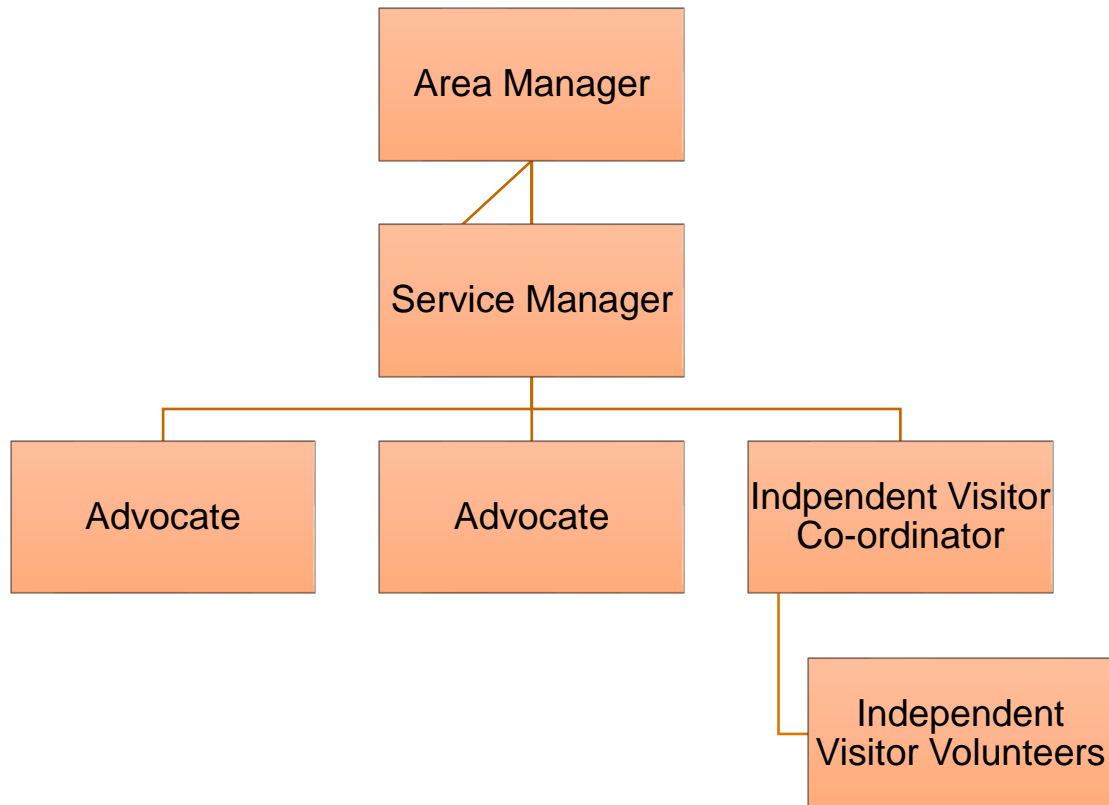
The Children's Society's Vision - *A society built for all children.*

Our vision is the world we seek to create. And we won't rest until we've achieved our vision. Where together with young people and our supporters, we've created a society built for all children. Where hope is alive in every child.

The Children's Society's Goal - *By 2030 we will have overturned the damaging decline in children's well-being, setting a path for long lasting growth.*

In the decade ahead we are determined to make sure this generation of children have a better childhood. So we will set out to build a happier, safer society for young people to grow up in, where they can look forward to their futures with more hope.

Team Structure



We have previously facilitated social work student placements, and the last student on placement finished February 2023. We are due to host another student placement in January 2024.

Advocacy

Advocacy in Cheshire East

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.

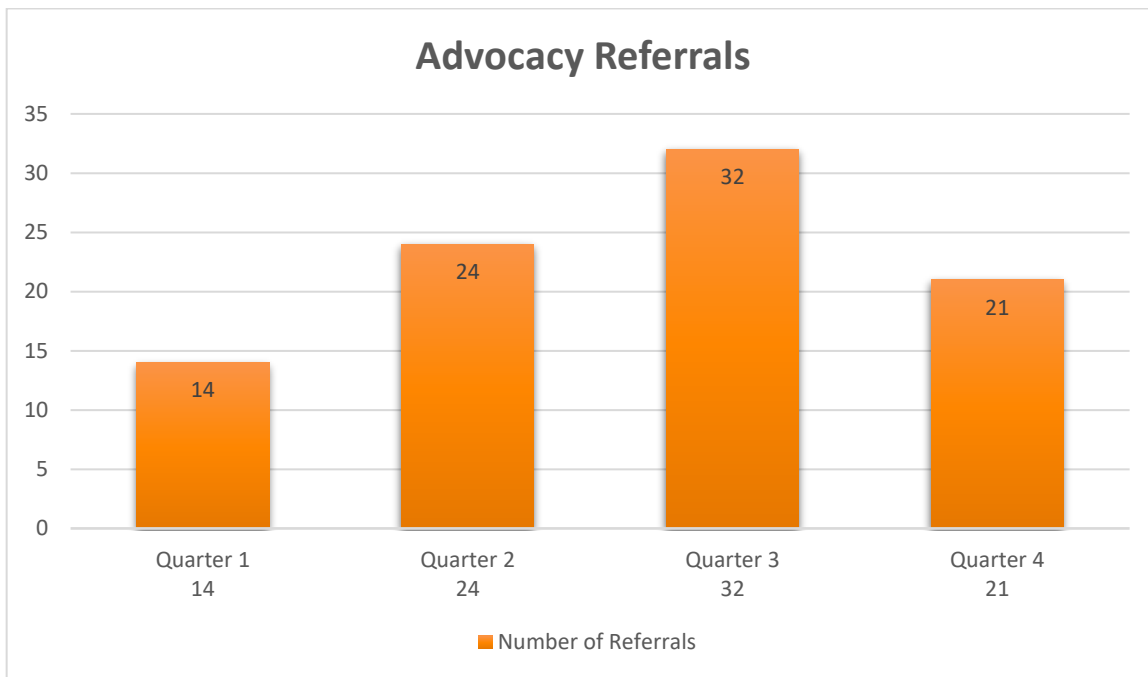
We offer independent children's advocacy for children and young people who fit the following criteria:

- 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-olds
- Private Fostering
- Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children and young people
- Subject to a Child Protection Plan
- Children and young people making a complaint against a social care service

Referrals

Number of eligible children and young people accessing advocacy services:

We received 91 referrals from 1st October 2022 to September 2023. In the previous year, over the same period, we received 99 referrals.



Children and Young People's Eligibility Status

Eligibility Status	Quarter 1	Quarter 2	Quarter 3	Quarter 4
Cared for child	9	8	12	11
Care Leaver	3	7	6	0
Child or young person with a disability	2	8	4	4
Child or young person on a Child Protection Plan	0	0	5	1
Asylum Seeking Child or Young Person	0	1	5	5
Homeless 16/17 year olds	0	0	0	0
Total	14	24	32	21

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During each quarter, we report on the number of children and young people who have received advocacy support. This includes new referrals and those already open from the previous quarter. The length of the advocacy relationship varies depending on the issue that is being supported. Some young people are open to the service for less than a week and some for a significant length of time. (For example, where there are court proceedings ongoing).

Quarter	Number of Children and Young People Accessing Advocacy
Q1 October – December	39
Q2 January – March	37
Q3 April – June	46
Q4 July – September	30

Themes and Trends

We continue to deliver advocacy support to young parents who are either cared for or are care leavers. These young people have access to someone independent, who can work together with legal professionals to ensure that they are able to understand what is happening and why.

We have supported six young people who have had an issue with their placement. Three of these were out of borough and they wanted to remain out of borough. This is difficult as housing is not straightforward for young people who are care leavers outside of their home authority.

There has been a significant increase in unaccompanied asylum-seeking children and young people. The work that has been carried out has mainly been supporting these young people at their age assessments. We have a skilled and knowledgeable advocate who is working closely with the social work teams.

We have not received any referrals for 16/17 year old homeless young people this year and low numbers of children subject to Child Protection plans.

There has been an increase in referrals for care leaver parents whose children

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are subject to child protection plans. We have provided support to them to attend the conferences and then any ongoing support through proceedings.

We have received 6 self-referrals over the year, where the young person makes direct contact with us to ask for our support. 18 referrals were re-referrals where the child or young person has received advocacy before and has asked to engage with the service again. We see this as very positive that children and young people come back to us when they have an issue to resolve.

Achievements

We have created child and young person friendly reporting material, which is shared with My Voice (Children in Care Council) and any children and young people who are interested in our service. We encouraged feedback from My Voice members and children accessing the advocacy service and implemented their suggestions. For example, the word 'referrals' was changed to 'requests' as that made more sense for children and young people.

One of our advocates has extensive experience with working with unaccompanied asylum seeking and refugee children and young people. He has worked together with social care colleagues to ensure there is a specialist advocacy offer for these children and young people. This has been very successful, and 10 young people have been supported through their age assessments. This support was deemed extremely necessary, and we have been awarded funding for a two-day post to concentrate on this work. We are excited about what we can achieve over the next year of our contract.

Challenges

During this year we have had a change of service manager. This is the first time since the beginning of delivering the Children's Rights contract in Cheshire East that this has changed. Due to long-term sickness and the recruitment of a new manager, there were challenges in allocating all referrals within 3 days. This year has been the first time we have held a waiting list, which we are proud about. We have received a large number of referrals with increasing complexities, meaning children and young people are open to us for longer periods of time. These complexities include young people who are parents and require support navigating legal processes for their children, non-

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instructed advocacy (for both children and young people with significant disabilities and very young children), age assessments and challenges with language barriers.

Across the authority and country, we have seen a large increase in unaccompanied asylum-seeking young people requiring social care support. This has been reflected in an increase in advocacy referrals, which has added to our workload. We have responded quickly to referrals which were time sensitive, such as age assessments. When a referral for an age assessment was received, we acted quickly and attended the arranged dates to prevent delay for the authority. Earlier in the year, age assessments would take between 6-12 hours and now more recently can last between 12-30 hours. This is a significant amount of advocacy time as the advocate meets with the young person prior to the assessment to explain the process and to ensure the young person feels supported by an independent person.

Independent Visitor Service

Independent Visiting in Cheshire East

The role of the Independent Visitor (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.

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 (Key Performance Indicator) target of 20 matches at any one time.

All our independent visitor volunteers are fully trained in their role, including training in a comprehensive safeguarding program. They are recruited by safer recruitment trained volunteer managers and are DBS/reference checked.

All volunteers are required to engage in group support meetings and supervision every 3 months.

Referrals

Quarter 1 – 0 new referrals / 1 new match

Quarter 2 – 3 new referrals / 0 new matches

Quarter 3 – 2 new referrals / 2 new matches

Quarter 4 – 2 new referrals / 2 new matches

We have supported 18 children and young people this year in matches with an independent visitor. At the end of the year we had 14 children matched with an independent visitor.

We have many consistent matches and the top lengths of our matched children and young people are:

Over 4 Years: 1 young person

Over 3 Years: 1 young person

Over 2 Years: 4 young people

Over 1 Year: 3 young people

All other matches commenced within the last 12 months.

Achievements

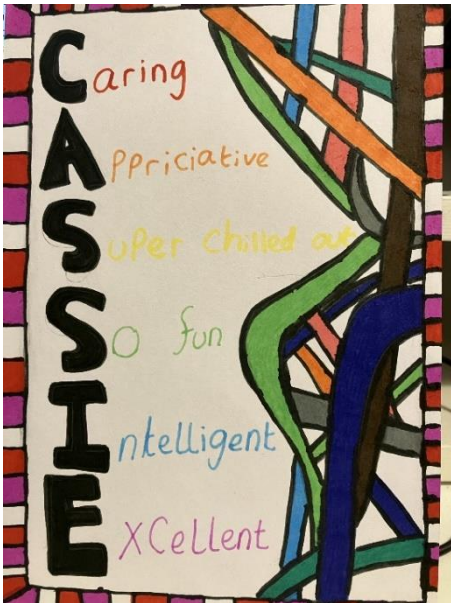
During volunteer week, one of our Cheshire East Independent Visitors worked with our storytelling team to create a case study about what it is like being an IV. 'Jack' said: *"One of the lovely things about being an Independent Visitor is knowing that something you're doing is having a huge positive impact on someone else's life."*

The full case study can be found here: [Becoming an independent visitor | The Children's Society \(childrenssociety.org.uk\)](https://www.childrenssociety.org.uk)

Prior to Volunteers Week, we sent craft packs out to all our matched children and asked them to create a postcard which represented what they thought about having an Independent Visitor. We got some lovely responses to share with the volunteers, including these;



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The Independent visitor service has implemented a feedback loop with the child's Social Worker. Following the child or young person's 3-monthly review, the IV coordinator contacts the Social Worker to give them an update of how the match is going and any positive information / concerns are shared. (consent is gained from the child or young person first). This is a new way of working and improved communication has been beneficial to the children and the service.

Our volunteer retention is very good, and we have volunteers in place with us who have been volunteering for 2/3 years. They are provided with an extensive package of support, including 3-monthly supervision, bi-monthly group supervision and one-to-one ongoing support from the volunteer coordinator.

This year we received our first referral for an unaccompanied asylum-seeking young person, and this is proving to be very successful.

Challenges

Post Covid-19 lockdowns and the increased cost of living have caused a downturn in the number of people coming forward to volunteer their time. This is a national picture, but we are working hard to find new ways of attracting volunteers to become independent visitors by working closely with our

colleagues in the volunteering services, attending volunteers fairs and creating volunteer case studies to share with prospective volunteers.

We have children and young people on the waiting list who are living out of area. This creates challenges in recruiting volunteers where we need to find a volunteer to suit the need of the children out of the local authority area. We engage with the local volunteering services to try and promote the opportunity within their area and are looking into the use of social media to attract volunteers out of area.

Service Audit

The Children's Rights Service was subject to a routine audit by our commissioners in January 2023. The audit inspected the service as a whole and the journey that children and young people take from initial contact to the end of the relationship.

For the audit, we created nine case studies of randomly chosen children and young people to demonstrate the work that was carried out and the outcomes that were achieved. The auditor also accessed children's files to ensure a full audit of the work we did. We were proud to show the hard work that our team have put into the service and show the journey that children and young people took with us.

The audit was a lengthy and time-consuming process; however, it was a valuable experience for us to reflect, improve and develop our service.

Feedback we received from the auditor:

It is clear the Children's Society continues to work to achieve the best outcomes for the children and young people and the service. They have made positive changes to their processes to undertake the recommendations made during the audit.

Comment from the contract manager Victoria Davies:

I would like to add, since contract inception, The Children's Society have continued to deliver a high-quality offer through a changing landscape - i.e.

Covid, increase in out of borough casework, age assessments and social care restructures/relationship building. The expertise and pragmatic approach of The Children's Society staff has ensured the service remains current, forward thinking and truly valued.

Our Aims and Progress for 2022-2023

Our aims we set out last year and the progress we have made:

- 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.

We are encouraging children and young people to express their wishes and views themselves where possible. Our advocates upskill the children and young people by giving them time to discuss their issues and supporting them to have all the information they need. Advocates share the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child where appropriate, in child-friendly language.

- The service aims 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.

We continue to promote the service via social work teams, education providers and networking at events. Advocates have visited the My Voice to discuss the service. We visit children's homes and residential placements and share information with young people and staff.

- 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.

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We have developed our volunteer training following an internal audit. Volunteers access online courses and then attend face to face training, where they develop their learning in safeguarding and how to support children and young people as an independent visitor. Volunteers have supervision every 3 months. We have increased our group sessions to bi-monthly, where speakers are invited to increase the volunteers' knowledge and skills.

- 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 enjoy involving students within the service and believe that they bring something different every time. We last had a student on the team in March 2023 but are working with the Universities to host a placement in January 2024

- The service will play our part in supporting children and young people's mental health

We have been working closely with the Cheshire Facilitators to support our young people with mental health difficulties and where there is a diagnosis of ASD/ADHD. The advocates have supported the young people within hospital settings and at home and ensured that robust plans that are child-centered are in place and followed.

- 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.

We continue to build strong relationships with our social care, education and voluntary sector colleagues. We supported one young person to

access the Pure Insight mentoring service when they were referred late to have an independent visitor.

We are part of the National IV Network and attend their meetings and conferences to discuss the national challenges/successes of the IV service.

Due to holding the Children's Rights contract for a significant period of time, our social care colleagues know who to contact when they need to access an advocate for their child or young person.

Developments for 2023 - 2024

1. Our focus for the service for 2023 - 2024 is to ensure that children and young people's voices are an integral part of our service delivery. We plan to develop our participation work with children and young people who have accessed either advocacy or independent visiting services. This will enable us to be confident that we are delivering a service that is led by children and young people.
2. For the advocacy team to all be trained in Level 3 Advocating on Behalf of Children and Young People in November 2023. This will mean that the service manager and both advocates hold this qualification.
3. We aim for the service to share child-friendly annual and quarterly reports with My Voice and other interested children and young people. This will ensure that they are able to see how the service is performing, allow challenge and for them to ask questions of us and what we are delivering.
4. We will increase the number of Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking young people (UASC) that we support once we have recruited a UASC-specialist advocate.
5. We want to increase referrals for children and young people to access the independent visiting service. We are working hard to match the children on the waiting list and hope this will give social workers confidence to refer more children and young people to us.
6. We aim to attract more volunteers to the service. We will do this by improving our links in local areas with voluntary services, universities and local authorities.

7. We plan to continue to involve social care students to support the service and to ensure that children and young people receive a good quality and timely service.



Feedback Received

"H sends his thanks for all your help (as do we) and thinks your help has definitely had an impact on the local authority reversing their decision"

Parent shared their and their child's thanks for advocacy support around school placement.

"My advocate was nice and I could talk to her with ease, she helped me with my emotions"

Young person's feedback from satisfaction survey

"Thanks again for all your support with this, S feels more empowered to be able to express her wishes and feelings."

Email from foster carer after advocate supported YP with complaint.

Social worker commented that YP had shared info with advocate which they had not shared with social care previously, which shows YP was comfortable sharing their views.

In a Child Protection Conference, professionals cited the increased understanding of the young person's lived experience through advocacy as the major factor behind professionals' confidence in

"Thank you for helping me to express my thoughts and for always telling me the truth. Sometimes I didn't know what was going to happen and you always explained it to me"

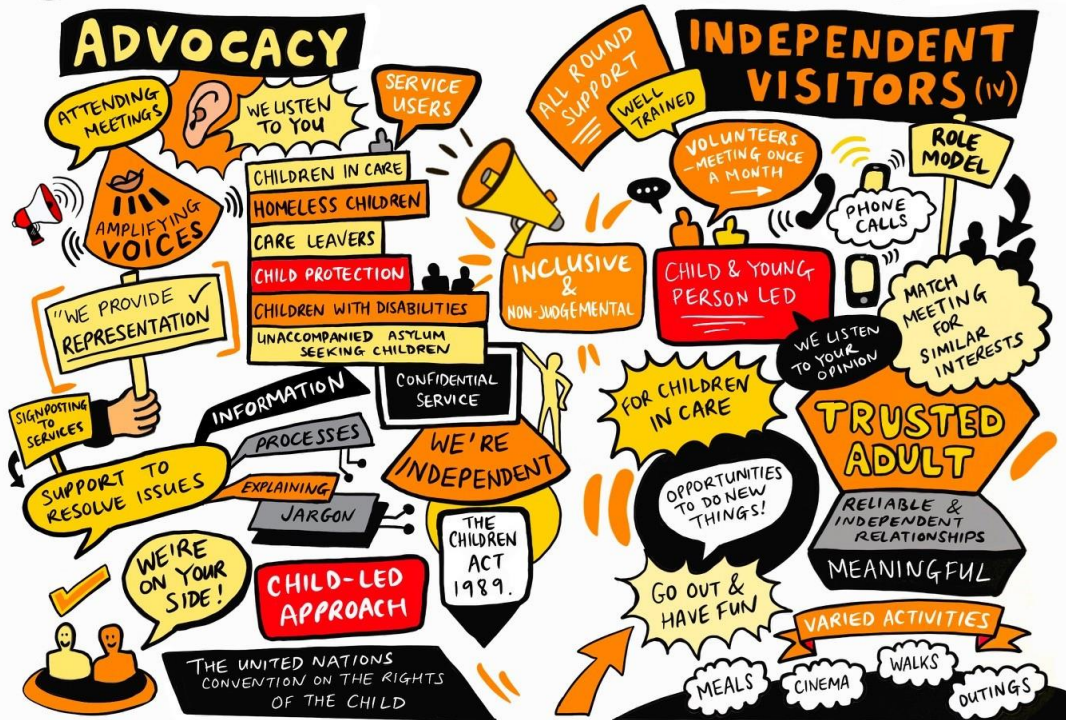
YP shared thanks during closing visit.

"My IV and I get on really well together they are fun to be with and easy to talk too, they make my day when they visit. After we have talked she makes me feel lighter and really happy"

Young person talking about their IV during review with IV co-ordinator

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