

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

Annual Report

October 2023 - September 2024

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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 2023 – 30th September 2024**.

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

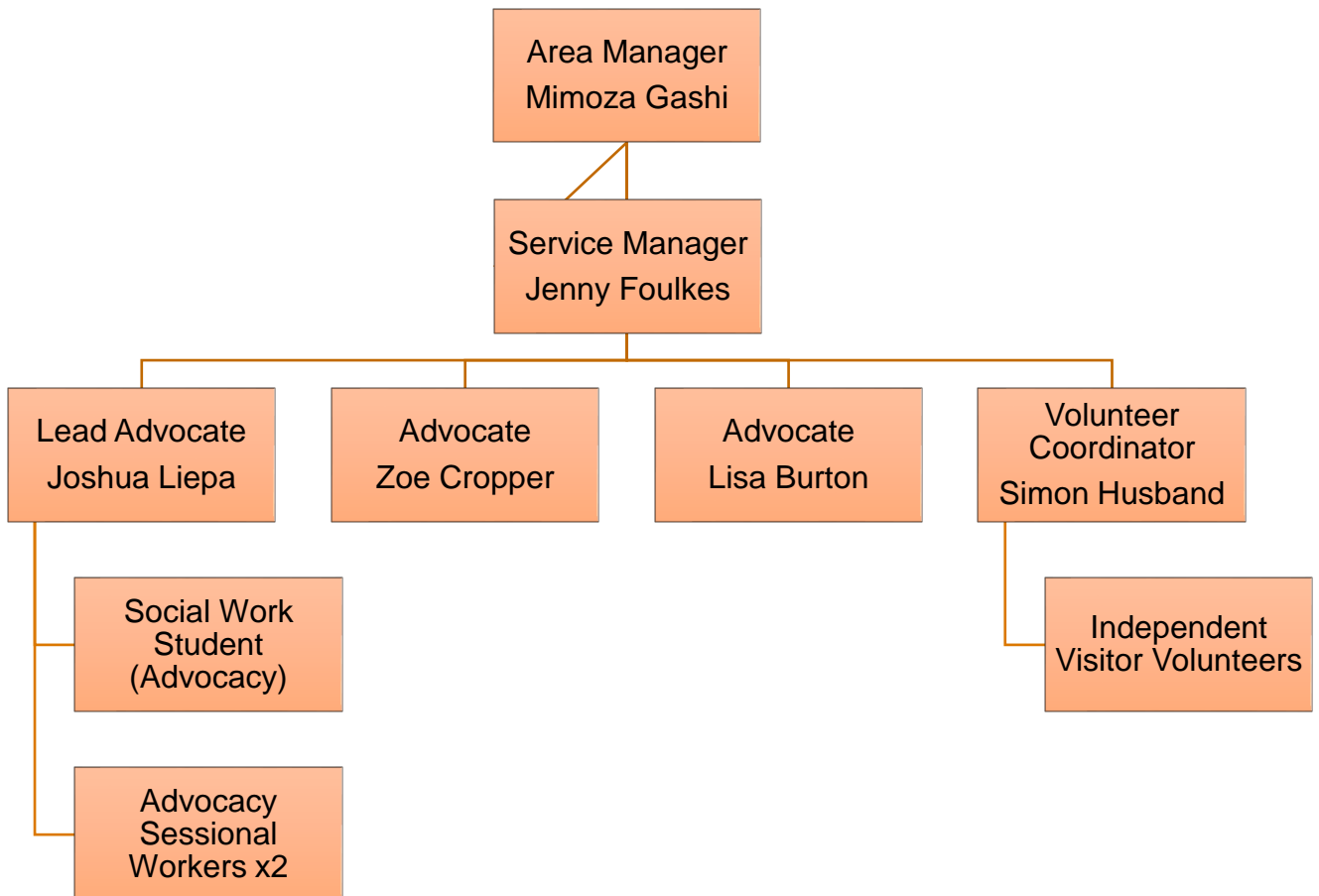
Our vision is the world we seek to create. And we won't rest until we've achieved our vision. Where together with young people and our supporters, we've created a society built for all children. Where hope is alive in every child.

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

The structure of the Cheshire Children's Rights team as of 1st October 2024



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.

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 young people
- Subject to a Child Protection Plan
- CYP making a complaint against a social care service

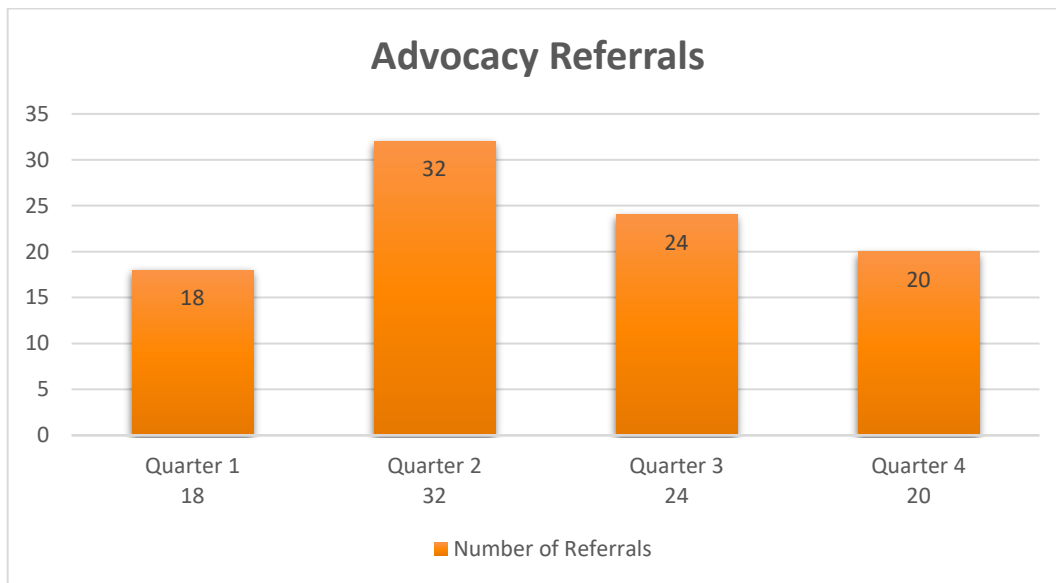


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Referrals

Number of eligible children and young people accessing advocacy services:

We received 94 referrals from 1st October 2023 to September 2024. In the previous year, over the same period, we received 91 referrals.



Children and Young People's Eligibility Status

Eligibility Status	Quarter 1	Quarter 2	Quarter 3	Quarter 4
Cared for child	4	11	12	10
Care Leaver	2	8	3	5
Child or young person with a disability	3	2	4	5
Child or young person on a Child Protection Plan	1	1	0	0
Asylum Seeking Child or Young Person	7	9	2	1
Homeless 16/17 year old	0	2	3	0
Private Fostering	1	0	0	0
Total	14	24	32	21

Themes and Trends

We continue to deliver high quality advocacy support to young parents who are either cared for or are care leavers. We continue to receive high numbers of referrals and this work is lengthy and time consuming due to the length of court proceedings. We have received positive feedback from the young parents who tell us that they would have struggled to understand what was happened if they didn't have an advocate to support them.

In response to the increase in referrals for unaccompanied asylum-seeking young people (UASC), Cheshire East provided temporary additional funding to increase advocacy capacity to support this work. We received high numbers of referrals and provided excellent support to these young people. This funding has stopped and we have since received a small number of referrals for UASC young people.

We have seen an increase in referrals for homeless 16-17 year old young people this year. It is useful in receiving these referrals early to ensure the young people understand their rights and any issues are addressed at the earliest stage. Some of the reasons for these referrals were;

- Support for another pregnancy
- Support to attend meetings and have their views shared
- Risk of placement breakdown
- Movement of residential placement
- Young person has become recently homeless
- To request care records
- To make a complaint to children's social care

We have received 9 self-referrals over the year, an increase of 6 from last year. where the young person makes direct contact with us to ask for our support. 33 referrals were re-referrals (18 last year) where the child or young person has received advocacy before and has asked to engage with the service again. The high increase of re-referrals could be seen as a positive for our service, but the concerns are that this is a large number of children and young people who have felt the need to come back to us because of an issue.

Achievements

We started the year with a waiting list for advocacy. We have recruited new advocates who are highly skilled and knowledgeable to support the team. We have been able to attract social work students to have placements with us and we were lucky to host two students in January, who worked extremely hard to support some of our young people with lower level advocacy issues. This freed up our advocate's time to support on more complex issues.

Two of our advocates completed their level 3 'Advocating for Children and Young People' qualification in February 2024. This was a great achievement and we have enrolled our third advocate on this course in December 2024.

The funding received from Cheshire East to deliver advocacy work specifically for unaccompanied asylum seeking young people enabled us to support 23 UASC young people with a range of issues that affected them (including being the appropriate adult in age assessments). Our advocate is highly trained in this area and was able to work closely with the social work teams, sharing his knowledge and providing advice and support.

Impacts on Delivery and Performance

- For the duration of 2023, we were holding a waiting list for advocacy, which has previously not happened before. Due to capacity and numbers being referred, we were unable to bring the number down significantly in 2023. We do not want any child or young person waiting for an advocate to be allocated, however we no longer have a waiting list.
- Recruitment has been a challenge, we had two separate recruitment rounds for advocates over 2023 and on the first occasion we had to go out for recruitment twice. It is important for us to ensure we recruit well experienced, compassionate, trauma informed and child-focused workers who can effectively advocate for children and young people in Cheshire West and Chester. Although this was a challenge, we have

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recruited excellent workers who are providing a consistent and high quality service.

- We are seeing increased complexity in the advocacy issues that children and young people that are being referred for. The more complex the issue, usually the longer the advocacy involved is for. For example, we regularly support young people who are pregnant and cared for, our advocates are experienced in supporting through legal processes and ensuring young people understand what is happening and why.

Advocacy Case Study

Summary of the case

The service received a referral from the young person's social worker, who was concerned about his well-being and wanted to ensure that his wishes and feelings were taken into consideration during fostering meetings. The social worker said that they found it challenging to gather information from the YP directly, as he was not very open with her. YP is a high school student without any additional needs, and was living in private fostering arrangement. The YP was unhappy with his current living situation and expressed a desire to move in with his aunt.

Initially placed with a family member, YP's needs were not being fully met, and he ended up living with a private foster carer who also happened to be a friend of the family.

The YP lives in private foster care in Wales, but he is allowed to visit his aunt in Crewe every Saturday. His aunt picks him up in the morning and drops him off in the evening, which is something he always looks forward to. This arrangement works well for W, his family, and the foster carer. He also gets to see his paternal grandparents when he visits Crewe.

The YP expressed some concerns to me that made me very worried. He complained that his bedroom was damp, and the house was sometimes cold because the house was in a farmland. Additionally, he mentioned being called offensive names by the carer's husband and son.

When the advocate visited him at school, he handed him a handwritten letter expressing his unhappiness with the way he was being treated by the carer's husband and son at home.

W expressed his desire to return to his family in Crewe or spend weekends there, and he needed reassurance about the possibility of this.

What you did that worked well

The advocate scheduled a visit to the school to meet the YP, introduce himself and to share what advocacy is and what support could be offered.

During the initial visit, the advocate conducted a worksheet activity with the YP, which allowed him to understand the YP's wishes and feelings. The advocate also took the opportunity to speak to the assistant headteacher to assess how the YP was coping at school.

By taking a holistic approach to working with the YP and gaining an understanding of the significant aspects of his life, the advocate created a comprehensive advocacy report based on his wishes, direct observations, and his relationships and presentations. The report was shared with his social worker, who then shared it with other professionals during the private fostering meeting. During the meeting, various aspects were discussed, and it was suggested that a risk assessment should be conducted to determine if the YP could spend weekends with his aunt.

Additionally, it was proposed that the aunt assist the YP in finding a basketball team in Crewe, as this is the sport he prefers over cricket, which his foster carer takes him to play. This gives the YP assurance that his voice is being heard.

What the impact was on the child/ young person / family

At the end of the advocacy support, the YP was still unhappy with his private fostering placement and he has asked if he can move back to Crewe and live with his aunt or spend the weekend at Crewe.

The advocate made the social worker aware of the YP's wishes and she has assured me that she would be visiting the aunty to make an assessment if it is safe for him start staying over for the weekend. The advocate explained what the social worker told him to the YP and until he moves back to Crewe he will continue to be unhappy.

The positive thing in his life at the moment is that the YP is passionate about basketball and by having an advocate who made sure his voice is heard. The YP has joined a basketball team in Crewe and he is very happy. He attends a training session every Saturday. Joining a basketball team has provided the YP with a sense of belonging and purpose. He now has a regular activity to look forward to and a supportive community of teammates. This not only improves his physical health through regular exercise, but also enhances his social skills and self-confidence, contributing to his overall happiness. This has had a positive impact on the YP, and he is now looking forward to finding out whether he will be allowed to spend the weekend in Crewe or move back in with his aunt.

Once a basketball team had been found for the YP, the advocate spoke with him about the sports kit he needed. The YP wanted to buy some basketball shoes, so they completed an application to Pot of Gold (an internal TCS fund that is run by young people, for young people) and the YP asked for money to buy specific shoes that he liked. The YP was successful with the fund because the young people felt that it was a really positive thing for him to be involved in. The advocate purchased these for the YP and gave them to him for his training.

What impact did the child / young person / family feel it had?

During the initial visit, the YP mentioned that he struggles to build relationships with professionals. However, the advocate worked hard to develop a good working relationship with him, and he was able to openly share his views. The advocate actively listened to him, showed genuine interest in whatever he tells him, and consistently supported and shared information from the fostering meetings with him. The YP stated, ***"He listens to me and also makes sure my voice is heard in meetings"***. He expressed satisfaction with the advocacy support and said, ***"Without advocacy, I would not have joined a basketball team because I have asked several times and have been ignored by my carer."***

Independent Visitor Service

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.

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 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.



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Referrals

Quarter 1 – 5 new referrals / 3 new matches

Quarter 2 – 1 new referral / 2 new matches

Quarter 3 – 1 new referrals / 3 new matches

Quarter 4 – 2 new referrals / 1 new match

Total – 9 new referrals / 9 new matches

Last year we received 7 referrals over the year and matched 5 children. We are encouraged by the increase in referrals and matches and plan to increase the number of matches next year.

At the end of September we had 17 children matched with an independent visitor, opposed to 14 at the same point last year.

Achievements

- Part of the Independent Volunteer (IV) role, we ask all volunteers, at point of application, to commit to a minimum of 2 years for this role to ensure longevity and consistency for the children and young people who are referred for an IV. Our longest Independent Visitor matches are over 3 years for 7 children and young people. This is extremely positive for these children as they have a consistent adult in their life to do fun activities with.
- The Children's Society recently commissioned SCIE (Social Care Institute for Excellence) to carry out an external audit to look at safeguarding within our volunteering services. The Cheshire Children's Rights Independent Visitor service was part of the audit and one young person met with the auditors to share their experiences of being matched with an Independent Visitor. Some of the feedback we have received was;

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- *Practice is exemplary*
- *There are comprehensive policies and procedures*
- *CYP's voice is very strong in case recording*
- *Risks are well considered*
- *Volunteers have as much training as staff, if not more in some circumstances*
- *Good combination between online and face to face training*
- *Volunteers know where to go if there is a safeguarding concern*
- *Not just safer recruitment, but safe recruitment, which is some of the best practice we have seen*
- *TCS stood out as being equally as strong in their commitment to adult safeguarding as children's*
- *Overall the safeguarding systems and practice are some of the best we have seen.*

3.1.25 The auditors recognise that whilst conducting this safeguarding audit, they saw a wealth of good practice which was fully compliant with statutory requirements regulated by the charity commission, and which frequently went beyond this with processes and practice matching or exceeding what one would have expected to see within the statutory sector. This was excellent to see and created many opportunities for positive safeguarding cultures to develop across the domain.

Analysis

6.1.48 It is apparent that the concept of safeguarding is not just understood within volunteering in Youth Impact Domain, it is integrated into every aspect of the domain, embodying a safe culture for both those delivering and receiving support.

- Our compliance with volunteer recruitment and supervision is extremely high and consistent. All volunteers have DBS checks and all are within three years. Any volunteers whose DBS checks are coming towards three years old, they are updated. Any volunteer who has a DBS check older than three years is not allowed to continue volunteering until this is renewed. All volunteers have two positive references and have participated in a package of training prior to volunteering. All volunteers take part in supervision every 3 months.
- Our children and young people and volunteers can apply for additional money from internal funds to improve children's wellbeing. One young person and their volunteer applied for horse riding lessons, they were successful and have had an extremely positive experience with this.

- Our volunteer co-ordinator has increased communication with social workers of children matched with volunteers. At the children and young people's reviews, consent is gained to share an update of the progress of the match. This has helped social workers to be more aware of what is happening for the child or young person and for us to be kept up to date about any significant changes happening.

Impacts on Delivery and Performance

- There remains a waiting list for the IV service. We have seen an increase on initial enquiries to volunteer, however it still remains a challenge to recruit, train and retain volunteers. We have a large number of young people who are placed in care out of area and referred for an IV. We have been proactive in trying to find volunteers in these areas, but we are not always successful.

Independent Visitor Case Study

Summary of the case

This young person has complex needs and is non-verbal. Our service has been providing him with an independent visitor since 2014. Over the 10 years there has been 6 different IVs. We have worked closely with the team who look after the YP so we can understand his needs and what he can do and what he is not able to do. Each time the IV made a visit to see the YP they have spent some time reading or singing to him or spending time out in the grounds.

What you did that worked well

The collaboration with the staff at the hospital placement and the Cheshire East Disability social work team in providing a suitable person who will be the IV has been successful. As the YP is in a specialist placement, it is not in the Cheshire East area. Therefore, recruiting the IV has proven to be a struggle, however, due to a change in circumstance of one of our more experienced IVs, they were able to take up this position most recently.

What the impact was on the child/ young person / family

The feedback we receive is how the YP seems happy when his IV visits and does not show any sign of concern or distress. On previous occasions we received reports on how the YP enjoyed the singing and the close contact from the IV who stroked his hair. He smiled and seemed relaxed. A more recent report stated how they had read to the YP who seemed to enjoy the book and was relaxed.

What impact did the child / young person / family feel it had?

The YP is non-verbal so it is difficult to measure the impact as we are not able to ask him. What we can do is report on how he reacts when he receives a visit by the IV and although the latest IV has only been visiting a few months, the YP has seemed happy and relaxed and enjoying the attention and the activity they do together.

What can we learn from this piece of work or how can we build on this to inform future practice?

This case has proven to be a challenge in providing the YP with a consistent IV. There are many reasons for this; including his complex care needs, the fact his placement is outside of the Cheshire East area and getting the right volunteer who is experienced and well trained. We have needed to work closely with the YP's carers and the social worker to understand his needs and

how we can provide the suitable volunteer and how we can provide the information they require in order to spend quality time with the YP. How they can read his behaviours rather than listen to his words. There are many different reasons as to why we have had so many IVs but none of the reason are because of the YP. We have also had some long breaks between IVs and the main reason for this is due to being out of area.

Volunteer Case Studies

A

A is one of our longest service volunteers and has been an Independent Visitor for over 5 years. Simon Husband refers to A as *'a bundle of joy'* as she brings such a wonderful energy to the role and to the group supervision sessions. A is always supportive of the other volunteers and goes out of her way to offer advice and share her experiences with her peers.

A has been matched with D for 5 years and has also been an IV to another YP, which has now come to an end. A is extremely child focused, and plans excellent activities with D. In a recent review, D said; *"I am happy with A, she makes me laugh and she is funny. A makes me smile all the time. I am happy with all that I have been doing with A and I don't want to change anything"*. In conversation with the carers at D's residential home, they said that A is a great role model for D and this has reflected in how well D is developing.

W

W is one of our longest-serving volunteers in Cheshire East. W was matched with C for 5 years and was a constant, reliable person in C's life. W supported C through two placement changes and was a strong advocate for C's wishes and feelings. W has ensured that people have listened to C and that his voice is heard by professionals. C has medical needs, which means there is always a support worker on the meetings. W became very knowledgeable about C's needs and was very supportive of him, often changing visit days when cancellations have had to happen last minute. C said at his most recent review; *"I like that he takes me places and we have a chat. W seems to understand me and what I like to do. I like that he takes me to have a look around the shops."* C has recently turned 18 and therefore the IV match came to an end. It was a planned and positive ending following an extremely successful match.

R

R has been a longstanding volunteer with the Independent Visitor service. R has always championed the IV role, often sharing her experiences within the university she studies at. R has been an IV to two young people and provided very positive experiences for them. One of the young people said that *“R is very nice, and we get on together. I am happy being with R because I have been out and I had fun. We went to the skate park, and this was my favourite activity.”*

R's circumstances changed and she had to move back to her hometown, which is a significant distance from Cheshire. As R is so invested in the service, she has stayed on as an active volunteer, providing support to Simon Husband, IV co-ordinator. R co-facilitates IV training, where she provides peer support and shares her experience and knowledge to new volunteers. R also supports promotional events, such as University volunteer fairs to talk to people who are interested in becoming an IV.

Our Aims for 2023-2024 and progress made

1. To ensure that children and young people's voices are an integral part of our service delivery.

This is still a development opportunity for our service. We are working with our internal youth voice team to look at developing our youth voice offer within the Cheshire Children's Rights service for 2024-25. Our priority has been on delivering high quality advocacy and independent visiting services, which has impeded on capacity for starting this work.

2. For the advocacy team to all be trained in Level 3 Advocating on Behalf of Children and Young People.

Two advocates now hold this qualification following completion in January 2024. Our third, and newest advocate will be starting the training in November. This means that the service manager and all advocates will hold this important qualification.

3. To create child and young person friendly reporting material to share with My Voice (CICC) and other interested CYP.

This has been completed and is ongoing. Each quarter, a child and young person-friendly report is created and shared with My Voice and social care colleagues. Annual reports are created in a CYP-friendly format and shared. This will continue for the remainder of the contract.

4. To increase the number of Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking young people (UASC) that we support once we have recruited a UASC-specialist advocate.

The service was awarded additional funding in September 2023 to deliver specialist advocacy to unaccompanied asylum seeking young people. We recruited an advocate to deliver this work, which was extremely successful and we supported 23 UASC young people. This funding has not been continued and this work ceased at the end of September 2024.

5. To increase referrals for children and young people to access the independent visiting service.

This year we have received 9 new referrals and completed 9 new matches. Last year we received 7 referrals over the year and matched 5 children. We intend to increase matches so that we are consistently at our target of 20 matches.

6. 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.

Our independent visitor service has gone from strength to strength this year. The IV coordinator has concentrated on promoting the service and bringing in new volunteers. We have seen a significant increase in interest in the role and we have been able to create many new matches over the year. (see data above).

- 7. 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.**

In quarter 2 (January-March 2024) we hosted two social work students on placement. This was a very positive placement and the students have been offered sessional posts within the Children's Society now their placements have come to an end. We are working with University of Chester and Salford University and hope to host students this year. The increase in cost of living is impacting on the number of students who have access to vehicle and we are unable to offer placements to non-drivers.

Developments for 2024 - 2025

- To promote the service to children and young people and their families who have Special Educational Needs / Disabilities**

We would like to ensure that children and young people and their families who are not already involved with children's social care are aware of the advocacy service and know how to access the support.

We will promote the service to schools and other agencies that support children with SEN and disabilities.

We want to increase the number of advocacy referrals where disability/SEN is the primary referral criteria.

- We plan to continue to involve social work students support the service to ensure that children and young people receive.**

We are working alongside Chester University and Salford University to offer student placements within the advocacy and IV services.

- To create a youth voice participation group, who will help us develop as a service and input their ideas.**

We plan to work closely with our internal youth voice team who will lead on this work and be supported by advocates within the team.

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- **To increase child protection advocacy referrals for children and young people who require an independent person to support them to share their wishes and feelings**

We will work with the child protection social work team and the child protection Independent Reviewing Officers to ensure that we receive appropriate advocacy referrals for children and young people going through the child protection process.

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

"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

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.

"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.

"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.

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



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