

Final Evaluation Report

National Independent Visitor Network

APRIL 2020 – JANUARY 2022



The Tudor Trust

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Executive summary

This report has been compiled to evaluate the work of the National Independent Visitor Network (NIVN) during the period April 2020 to January 2022. This report follows on from the interim report that covered the period from April 2020 to January 2021.

The NIVN was set up in 2014 with funding acquired by the children's charity Barnardo's, from the Tudor Trust. The purpose of the NIVN was to benefit those involved in the delivery of Independent Visitor (IV) services, as well as the young people who are recipients of the service. The role of the IV was originally established by the Children Act in 1989 as a statutory service for children who were 'looked after' by the local authority. Whilst the role of the IV has been enshrined in legislation for some time, the need for the NIVN was identified as a response to an inconsistency in the provision and availability of IV services. There was also recognition that there was a general lack of awareness of the IV role amongst key stakeholders. The overall aim of the NIVN was identified as: 'To raise awareness of the role of the Independent Visitor, within an agreed set of national standards'. The objectives relating to this aim are focused on increasing the numbers of young people who are matched with an IV, whilst also improving the quality of the service provision.

To date, the work of the NIVN has included the development and dissemination of National Standards for the Provision of Independent Visitor Services¹ as well as two Freedom of Information data requests to local authorities in order to identify the number of young people in receipt of IV services in England. The last data request, in 2019, highlighted that 3.5% of looked after children were matched with an IV.² The NIVN team are about to start work on the next Freedom of Information data request and the subsequent report is scheduled for May 2022.

The NIVN was awarded a further period of funding from the Tudor Trust with match funding from the host organisation, Barnardo's. This funding covers the period April 2020 to March 2022. The objectives that were set for this period were set prior to the outbreak of the pandemic. Much of the work carried out by the NIVN team and network members during the initial period of the pandemic was focused on responding to the issues thrown up by the lockdowns and restrictions. In many ways the strengths of the network and the value of it for network members really came to the fore during this time. The pandemic increased a sense of isolation for many as we

1 <https://ivnetwork.org.uk/national-standards/>

2 National Independent Visitor Network et al. (2019) The National Independent Visitor Data Report 2019.

were forced to withdraw from our communities. The NIVN is a community that managed to shapeshift during this time and offer peer support and a creative and adaptive response that was highly valued by network members. Whilst the interim report highlighted that some providers were still struggling to adapt, for this report all the regional groups had gone online and all those who wanted to are able to attend. Groups have met more frequently during the pandemic and generally attendance has risen as people have not been required to travel making the groups more accessible. There has also been a step change in use of Huddle.

Alongside the work in response to the pandemic, there has been significant progress against the original objectives set for this period of time. These included a focus on continuing the work in relation to raising the profile of the role of the IV and increasing access to IV services. The objective that is still considered the most important by network members, is the lobbying of key stakeholders at both a local and national level in order to gain the service the recognition it deserves. The NIVN team has responded to this in a number of ways. Concentrated work has been done with Ofsted that has culminated in the production of a webinar to be used in the

training of Ofsted Inspectors. The Right Friend Campaign was launched in 2021 with four key asks in relation to the provision of IV services for children and young people. One of the campaign asks, which the NIVN team has been advocating for some time, is for local authorities to provide enough resource for 10% of care experienced children and young people to have access to IV services. Alongside this campaign, the NIVN team has provided a comprehensive response to the Government's Independent Care Review, which was launched in March 2021. This has included organising three focus groups with the Independent Care Review team: one for young people, one for volunteers and one for professionals who were drawn from participants across the network.

A further objective for this period was to increase the voice and influence of young people in the work of the central team and there have been some notable successes, particularly where creative approaches to involving young people have been employed. This has resulted in two short films being made and a number of online workshops being run for young people. The NIVN team has also recruited three Youth IV Champions whose role is to support the work of the NIVN team in raising the profile of the benefits of the service.

The National Standards, which were due to be reviewed during this time, continue to remain relevant and a key document for many providers. Network members often cite the benchmarks contained in the standards and the information provided by the reports, following the freedom of information requests, as having been points of reference for lobbying at a local level with commissioners and/or managers. The standards have yet to achieve official endorsement despite ongoing attempts by the NIVN team to persuade the Department for Education (DfE) to take that step. Network members would like to see this outcome but it doesn't detract from the value for them of having the standards as a benchmark for good practice. To build on this, there is an increasing recognition that the work around measuring outcomes for IV relationships is an area of work that needs to be prioritised and progressed. An evidence base of the difference that IV relationships can make for young people is felt to be of intrinsic value in strengthening the case for investment in service provision.

A key achievement of this period has been securing the sustainability of the NIVN and the central team for a further three years. The NIVN Manager put concerted efforts into building the case to present to potential funders and both the Tudor Trust and the Barnardo's Foundation have provided the funding required to progress the ambitions of the NIVN team and the network as a whole.

Introduction

This report has been compiled to evaluate the work of the National Independent Visitor Network (NIVN) during the period April 2020 to January 2022. The NIVN was set up in 2014, with funding acquired by the children's charity Barnardo's from the Tudor Trust. Whilst the funding was granted to Barnardo's, it was agreed that the charity would host the NIVN but its work would be independent. This independence was felt to be important as many of those who provide IV services under contract, of which Barnardo's is one, are in competition with each other. The NIVN team were keen to ensure that their work was not overshadowed by a perception that the agenda was being set by Barnardo's.

The NIVN was established to benefit those involved in the delivery of Independent Visitor (IV) services, as well as the young people who are recipients of the service. The initial funding received from the Tudor Trust covered the period March 2014 to March 2017. The success of the NIVN in achieving its objectives and in highlighting the importance of the role of the IV during that period, led to a commitment from the Tudor Trust to a further three years of funding from April 2017 to March 2020. The work of the NIVN and its achievements during these two periods of funding has been

subject to previous evaluations.¹ From April 2020, the NIVN secured an additional two years of funding, to March 2022, which combines a contribution from the Tudor Trust and match funding from Barnardo's.

This report evaluates the work that has been done during this period against the objectives that were set for this current period of funding. This report also evaluates the work that was necessitated by the pandemic. At the time that the original objectives were set there was no anticipation of the seismic changes that would be experienced globally as the world responded, and continues to respond, to the impact of Covid-19. The pandemic and the restrictions imposed by the Government on local communities, as well as nationally, has necessitated significant adaptations from the NIVN team and from network members.

¹ Wellings, S. (2016) The National Independent Visitor Network Evaluation Report
Wellings, S. (2018) The National Independent Visitor Network Interim Evaluation Report
Wellings, S. (2019) The National Independent Visitor Network Evaluation Report

NIVN Aim and Objectives

When the NIVN was established in 2014, the overall aim of its work was identified as: *‘To raise awareness of the role of the Independent Visitor, within an agreed set of national standards’*.

The objectives set to achieve this aim are:

- » to improve consistency & standard of IV services
- » to increase awareness around the IV role
- » to increase numbers of children accessing IV services
- » to enable partnership working sharing best practice
- » to establish recommended level of provision

From 2014, the NIVN has set and achieved a number of key outputs that have been designed to work towards and achieve the overall aim and objectives. These have included:

- » Development of the national IV network through identification of those involved in IV service delivery across England and Wales
- » Introduction of an online communication channel, Huddle, for network members
- » Establishment of regional networking groups across England and Wales
- » Development, launch and endorsement of national standards for the provision of IV services
- » Conferences and workshops provided for

network members

- » Publication of findings from two Freedom of Information data requests on the provision of IV services within England²
- » Lobbying and working with key stakeholders including Ofsted, the DfE and the Children's Commissioner
- » Launch of the NIVN website
- » Production of short films designed to assist with promotion of the service
- » Development and dissemination of IV standards for young people
- » Profile raising through campaigning and press releases
- » Development and sharing of good practice and resources
- » Profile raising through campaigning and press releases
- » Development and sharing of good practice and resources
- » Lobbying local authorities who have no IV service provision to ensure that they meet their statutory responsibilities
- » Development of the NIVN website

² Gordon, A. & K. Graham (2016) The National Independent Visitor Data Report <https://ivnetwork.org.uk/national-data-report-2016/>; Jordan, R. & S. Walker (2019) The National Independent Visitor Data Report <https://ivnetwork.org.uk/national-independent-visitors-data-report-2019/>

Overview

The role of the IV was originally established via the 1989 Children Act as a statutory service for children who were ‘looked after’ by the local authority. The Act identifies that an IV is someone who has *“the duty of visiting, advising and befriending the child”*.¹ The legislation outlines that the role should be available for those who are having infrequent contact with family members and, if it was thought to be in their best interests. The 1989 Act was updated by the Children and Young Persons Act 2008, which repealed section 17 of the 1989 Act to replace it with reference to Section 23ZB:

*“A local authority looking after a child must appoint an independent person to be the child’s visitor if – (a) the child falls within a description prescribed in regulations made by the appropriate national authority; or (b) in any other case, it appears to them that it would be in the child’s interests to do so. (2) A person appointed under this section must visit, befriend and advise the child.”*²

Whilst the role of the IV has been enshrined in legislation for some time, the need for the NIVN was identified as a response to an inconsistency in the provision and availability of IV services. Some local authorities were not providing a

¹ The Children Act 1989

² The Children and Young Persons Act 2008

service, whilst others had very low numbers of young people who were matched with an IV. Alongside this, there was a lack of awareness of the IV role amongst key stakeholders including Social Workers, Foster Carers, Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs) and young people themselves. The paucity of provision and awareness had been highlighted in research by Ofsted's Children's Rights Director for England, published in 2012. Ofsted conducted a survey amongst children and young people which highlighted that, of those surveyed, 80% had not been offered an IV.³ This low level of provision has been further emphasised by two Freedom of Information (FOI) data requests carried out by the NIVN in partnership with Barnardo's. The FOI data requests ask local authorities to provide a range of responses relating to their IV service provision. In 2016, the report detailing the findings from the first FOI data request highlighted that 3.2% of care experienced young people were matched with an IV.⁴ A follow up FOI data request was made in 2019. The subsequent report highlighted that the figure of those matched had risen slightly to 3.5%.⁵ Both reports identified local authorities that had no service in place, despite it being a statutory requirement.

3 https://dera.ioe.ac.uk/15864/7/Independent%20visitors_Redacted.pdf

4 Gordon, A. & K. Graham (2016) The National Independent Visitor Data Report

5 Jordan, R. & S. Walker (2019) The National Independent Visitor Data Report

The NIVN has recommended that, as a minimum, local authorities should be aiming to have 10% of care experienced young people matched with an IV, or able to access one should they wish to.

Provision of IV Services

Across England and Wales there are two main forms of service provision. The service is either delivered in house by the local authority, or is contracted out to a voluntary or community sector provider. Within the voluntary sector there are a couple of larger charities, including Barnardo's and NYAS, who hold several contracts for the provision of services across England and Wales. The services that are contracted out are often subject to competitive tendering processes at the end of the contracted period. This can result in the service moving to an alternative provider after relatively short periods of time. Those involved in service delivery have fed back that this can make it difficult for a consistency of service provision to be maintained.

Service delivery generally consists of one or more IV Coordinators whose responsibility it is to recruit, screen, train and support a team of volunteers who take on the IV role.

The IV Coordinator is also responsible for promoting the service, responding to the referrals of young people as well as making and managing the matches with the young people. Many of the IV Coordinators work part time and some manage their IV Coordinator role alongside other responsibilities. The NIVN has recommended that staff should work an equivalent of one hour per match that they manage i.e. if they manage 20 matches, they should have 20 hours to dedicate to the service.

The IV role, as outlined in the legislation, is to *‘visit, befriend and advise’*. The relationships are informal and are generally focused on carrying out social activities together such as going to the cinema, visiting the local park, or doing hobbies. Most providers have a budget for the meetings, so that paid for activities can be carried out without the volunteer incurring expenses. The IV and young person meet together, usually on a monthly basis, and will decide between them how they want to spend their time. Outside of physical meetings, weekly telephone contact is commonly made. The value of the role stems from the relationship itself and the independence of the IV, who is not seen as being attached to the formal carers in the young person’s life.

Quotes and comments from young people as to the value of the IV role have been gathered by the NIVN team and are displayed on the NIVN website, these include:

“Sally wanted to get to know who I really was and how she could help me personally.....”

“My IV encourages me to do things I’m unsure about. He ‘talks me up’.”

“It’s great, he makes me feel comfortable, sometimes we talk about things that worry me, but most of the time we do fun things together and have a good laugh.”

Evaluation methodology

The evaluation has been conducted by an external evaluator who has been evaluating the work of the NIVN since its inception in 2014. It was agreed that for this period of funding, April 2020 – March 2022, there would be two reporting phases; an interim report in January 2021 and a final report in January 2022. The evaluation is designed to identify the achievements of the NIVN against the objectives and outputs for this period of funding. This report also evaluates the work done in responding to the impact of the pandemic.

The compilation of the report has incorporated primary and secondary data collection, collation and analysis. This has included the following:

- » Desk research has been conducted to review documents relating to the role of the IV as well as previous evaluation reports, resources on Huddle and emails from the NIVN team and network members
- » Telephone and online interviews have been conducted with thirty-eight IV Coordinators and Managers, three Regional Group Coordinators, two members of the steering group and NIVN staff

- » An online survey was conducted amongst network members which prompted responses from fifty network members including Coordinators and Service Managers
- » Data and evaluative feedback has been provided by the central NIVN team regarding delivery of and attendance at online events and the conference that was held in November 2021
- » The quantitative data from these sources has been collated and analysed in order to identify the main findings and recommendations for taking the work forward
- » The qualitative data from the interviews has been reviewed thematically

The NIVN – an overview

The current NIVN team have both been involved with the NIVN for some time. The NIVN Manager was originally seconded from Barnardo's into the Manager role. She was confirmed in post in June 2019. The Project Officer has been in post since November 2019, having previously been in the apprentice administrator post. The NIVN Manager oversees the work of the Project Officer and receives her own supervision and line management from an Assistant Director within Barnardo's London Children's Services. Prior to this there had been quite a lot of movement and change within the team. The stability within these posts, as well as the individuals occupying them, has been seen by network members as a significant benefit and strength.

The work of the NIVN is overseen by a steering group who are drawn from a range of different disciplines. These members sit alongside representatives from each of the regional network groups. Membership of the steering group has been reviewed on an ongoing basis, as there have been issues in establishing its role. Attendance of steering group members has previously been erratic which has meant that the purpose and composition of the group has been kept under review. The steering group meets on a quarterly basis to review the work of the NIVN and to agree priorities for the

work moving forward. Since the outbreak of the pandemic, the frequency of meetings has increased to bimonthly, and meetings have been held virtually.

Objectives and outputs

For this period of funding, the objectives and outputs detailed below were identified as the priority areas of work. As noted earlier, in March 2020 the country went into lockdown as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. This impacted significantly on the focus of the work of the NIVN team and this report evaluates all the work carried out between April 2020 to January 2022.

Objective 1

To raise the profile and reach of IV services in England by fostering effective, strategic relationships and a confident voice in befriending for care experienced children and young people.

Outputs

- » Identify and nurture relationships with national-level stakeholders e.g. Office of the Children's Commissioner, DfE, Safeguarding Boards, LGA, All Party Parliamentary Group on Care Experienced Children and Care Leavers
- » Develop and deliver influencing strategy with Ofsted to raise inspectors' awareness and understanding of IV and the National Standards and apply to inspections

- » Develop and roll-out training resource for Ofsted Inspectors to increase their capacity to effectively inspect IV service provision against the Standards
- » Local-level influencing strategy to increase access to and quality of IV services at local-authority level, is implemented across the network

Objective 2

To increase the voice and influence of care experienced young people, and care leavers within the NIVN network, to ensure the growth of effective IV Services.

Outputs

- » Service User Voice informs design and delivery across all network objectives
- » Effective Service User representation on Steering Group
- » Young Inspectors' awareness and understanding of IV Standards increases, through their attendance at IV training workshop
- » Care experienced children and young people are trained and supported to become Youth IV Champions across the regions

Objective 3

To improve the consistency, quality and reach of IV services to widen access to IV for care experienced children and young people.

Outputs

- » Regional peer-learning networks increase membership level, hold effective, solution-focused quarterly meetings and develop and share and good practice on Huddle and the NIVN Website
- » NIVN Learning Resource Working Group produces learning and training resources on reaching under-represented groups (children placed out of area, disabled children, Children at risk of Child Sexual Exploitation and Child Criminal Exploitation)
- » Good practice resources are produced and disseminated to 100% of IV Providers and Local Authorities nationally, to open access to under-represented groups
- » Good practice resource is produced and disseminated to open access to IV volunteers from male and BAME backgrounds
- » National IV Standards and self-assessment toolkit is reviewed and updated

- » Local Authority Commissioners receive Best Practice Guide in commissioning of IV Services
- » Young Inspectors' awareness and understanding of IV Standards increases, through their attendance at IV training workshop
- » Ofsted Inspectors increase their capacity to effectively inspect Children's Services against the National IV Standards, by attending training NIVN training on IV Standards and receiving Best Practice Guide
- » Good practice resources (policies, procedures, training materials) are disseminated on the NIVN Website

Objective 4

To conduct research and evaluation to evidence the impact of the IV relationship on care experienced children and care leavers.

Outputs

- » National and regional IV access rate is established through third Freedom of Information request conducted in 2021, to compare to 2019 access rate (3.5% nationally) and establish access rate in Wales
- » Youth IV Champions develop skills and knowledge in research and contribute to the production of an outcomes framework and toolkit

- » Outcomes framework to measure the impact of the IV relationship is piloted with four IV providers

Objective 5

One care leaver will strengthen their training, employment and professional development outcomes.

Output

- » One care leaver successfully completes NVQ Level 3 Business Administration apprenticeship

Objective 6

Work towards sustainability of the network by 2022.

Output

- » Develop and implement sustainability plan for NIVN

Findings

Objective 1

To raise the profile and reach of IV services in England by fostering effective, strategic relationships and a confident voice in befriending for care experienced children and young people.

Relationships with key stakeholders

During this period, there has been some concentrated work with key stakeholders including Ofsted, the Department for Education (DfE), the Office for the Children's Commissioner and professional bodies such as the National Independent Reviewing Officers Managers Partnership (NIROMP). In addition, since the delayed start of the Government's Independent Care Review in January 2021, the NIVN Manager has been working hard to have the voice of the NIVN heard within that consultation process. The purpose of this work has been to build and develop relationships with key stakeholders in order to raise the profile of the role of the IV and the work of the NIVN. This work includes raising awareness as to the value of the IV role for care experienced children and young people, as well as care leavers. The importance of the lobbying role that the NIVN can play, has come up as a priority area for future work in the two previous evaluation reports, and again in this one. Network members feel that the central

NIVN team have both the time and the credentials to lead on the campaigning and lobbying work. Alongside the national lobbying, local influencing is also seen as key. Network members consistently reference the high level of recognition for services such as advocacy, but the low level of recognition for Independent Visitor Services. The service has been referred to as *'the best kept secret'* and the *'Cinderella'* service due to how often it is overlooked:

"The IV service is so small that it's really far down the agenda of the local authority. Being linked in to a national body helps to push it back up their agenda."

"The service so often gets lumped in with advocacy. The work of the NIVN helps to raise the profile and make it more of a priority for local authorities."

From the interviews, one of the main frustrations expressed by interviewees was the lack of awareness of the IV service amongst those who should be making referrals such as Social Workers, Foster Carers and Independent Reviewing Officers. These relationships appeared to be easier to develop where the service is delivered in house, although this was not universally so. The majority of those interviewed talked about the difficulties experienced by the high turnover of

staff within their local authority that makes maintaining relationships and ensuring high levels of awareness of their service an ongoing challenge.

The Right Friend Campaign



As part of the work to raise the profile, the NIVN launched the Right Friend Campaign during Volunteer's Week – 1st – 6th June 2020. The campaign has the strapline: '*Championing every care-experienced child's right to an Independent Visitor*'.

The campaign highlights four main aims:

1. All local authorities in England that currently have no Independent Visitor Service must take immediate action to meet their legal obligations.

2. At least 10% of looked after children must be matched with an Independent Visitor by 2022.

3. Ofsted Inspectors must assess Independent Visitor Services against the National Standards, to ensure children and young people have access to consistently high quality Independent Visitors.

4. To make available to care leavers up to the age of 25 a statutory extension of Independent Visitor Services, to reduce social isolation and build a positive pathway to independent adulthood.

The logo for the campaign was developed by young people who were in receipt of IV services, as part of a logo design competition run by the NIVN. As part of the campaign, a short film was compiled which includes interviews with IVs and young people talking about their experiences. The campaign launch included briefings being sent and meetings organised with key stakeholders, including the Association of Directors of Children's Social Services and the British Association of Social Workers. A letter was sent to the Children's Commissioner by NYAS and the NIVN. The letter is from an IV who was brought up in care, without the benefit or awareness

of the IV service. The South West Regional Group compiled a letter to go to the Chair of the Corporate Parenting Panel in each local authority to make them aware of the campaign. There was also a social media campaign which network members were encouraged to participate in.

There was a high level of awareness of the Right Friend campaign amongst network members. 94% of respondents to the online survey stated that they were aware of the campaign and 55% said that they felt that the campaign had benefited their service. Comments from the interviews and the survey about the Right Friend Campaign included:

“We send the video out as a link to volunteers as part of their introduction to the service.”

“We have been able to share the video with volunteers for them to share with young people. We also use it as an introduction for young people as to the role of an IV.”

“It provided me with something tangible that could be used to demonstrate the service is national and a duty on LAs. I was able to highlight (in a small way) the value of the NIVN and the importance of our IV service.”

“It enhanced our business case for expanding our service through highlighting the importance of the IV role.”

“It’s a good, child friendly resource.”

Working with Ofsted

The NIVN team has previously worked closely with Ofsted to look at how greater understanding of the IV role could result in more attention being paid to IV services during Ofsted Inspections. The previous relationship building with Ofsted resulted in a change to Ofsted’s assessment framework to incorporate a specific reference to IV services. Ofsted paying attention to the provision of IV services can prompt local authorities to increase the resources available to services and could also result in a negative report where no service was found to be in place. This makes Ofsted a potential ally in the quest for improving the reach and quality of IV provision. However, network members and the NIVN team have found that the attention paid to IV services by Ofsted Inspectors is – at best – patchy. Only 20% of respondents to the survey said that that their service had been inspected by Ofsted. A comment by one Coordinator encapsulates the experience of many:

“It seems like they (Ofsted Inspectors) enquire as to whether the local authority has an IV service and if they do, then that is considered sufficient.”

In order to address this, the NIVN Manager has been working with the lead for care experienced children at Ofsted. As part of this work, a webinar has been developed by the NIVN Manager that will be used in the training of Ofsted Inspectors. This work was concluded in November 2021. It will take some time to assess as to whether this has made a difference and what difference it has made to the work of Inspectors and the attention paid to IV services within Ofsted Inspections. Network members expressed their appreciation of the work being done by the NIVN team with Ofsted. Their comments included:

“Hearing about the conversations that they (the NIVN team) are having with Ofsted and the DFE does give a boost to the work that we are doing.”

“They (the NIVN team) do great work with bodies such as Ofsted.”

“I think having the NIVN really does serve to amplify the voice of the child in care.”

“I think Ofsted and the DfE definitely have more awareness of IV services because of the work of the central team.”

The Independent Care Review

In their 2019 manifesto, the Conservative Party committed to undertaking a wholesale review of Children’s Social Care. Within the terms of reference for the review, it states that the review will be: *‘bold and broad – a once-in-a-generation opportunity to reform systems and services’*.¹ The terms of reference make specific mention of reviewing the needs of ‘looked after’ children and stipulate an expressed desire for children and young people’s voices to be heard, within the review process. NYAS’s policy lead, who sits on the steering group for the NIVN, acknowledged that the review represents the NIVN’s greatest opportunity for pushing the role of the IV into the spotlight.

The NIVN Manager has been proactive in responding to the review in as many ways as they are able to. This has included:

- » Lobbying of key stakeholders including the DfE and the Children’s Commissioner
- » Responding to the formal submissions for a call for evidence, a call for advice and a call for ideas

¹ Terms of reference for the independent children’s social care review (publishing.service.gov.uk)

- » Promoting the key asks as set out in the Right Friend Campaign
- » Building the relationship with the Care Review Team;
- » Organising three focus groups with the Care Review interviewers: one for professionals, one for IVs and one for young people

There was a mixed response from interviewees and survey respondents when asked about the Care Review, in terms of their awareness of it, their involvement, and their aspirations for the review. Some respondents are very aware of the Care Review whilst others admitted to not having paid much attention to it. The awareness of the work of the NIVN team in relation to the Care Review was high, with 88% of survey respondents and most interviewees saying that they were aware of the work being done by the NIVN team. Several interviewees commented that they had promoted the focus group opportunity to their volunteers and/or young people. One Coordinator said:

“One of my IVs attended the focus group. She really enjoyed it. I think it really opened her eyes to the the IV world and the statutory element of the role.”

The general consensus from those who have paid attention to the review, is that the best thing that could emerge is for role of the IV to be specifically recognised within any emerging recommendations. A comment from one Coordinator that typifies the general sentiment was:

“It would be really nice if it’s (the IV service) not mentioned alongside advocacy, in the usual way, but recognised as a stand-alone service.”

The Independent Care Review is due to publish its findings and conclusions in the spring of this year. Depending on what it has to say about the IV service, this could be a pivotal moment for the NIVN.

Objective 2

To increase the voice and influence of care experienced children and young people, and care leavers within the NIVN network, to ensure the growth of effective IV Services.

This objective has proved more challenging than first envisaged by the NIVN team. Despite this, there have been some unexpected successes and some key learning generated by the things that have worked and those that have been less successful. The principle of gaining more involvement from the beneficiaries of IV services is one that many of the network members strive to implement within their own service provision. The feedback from the interviews and survey respondents highlights that the involvement of children and young people ranges from involvement with volunteer/staff interviews; attendance and input at volunteer training and/or feeding back on service publications and resources. However, as one Coordinator put it:

“It’s great that they’re (the NIVN team) trying to involve young people, but it’s a challenge to do it locally, let alone nationally.”

To support the work at a local level, the NIVN team has developed and disseminated a good practice resource on the

principles of co-production and how to involve children and young people. The NIVN Manager and the Project Officer highlighted that where co-production has proved most effective in respect of their work has been with finite pieces of work. One noted success was the production of the campaign video – *‘Independent Visitors – our Legal Right’*. To produce the video, a series of six cartoon workshops were delivered by a professional cartoonist. The children and young people who were interested in being involved were asked to commit to all six of the workshops which were run online. Eighteen young people were involved in the production of the video.

Where the NIVN team has experienced greater challenges, has been in relation to the work carried out to recruit young people to become Youth IV Champions. The role of the Youth IV Champions was envisaged as beneficiaries of IV services who could act as representatives for IV services and in support of the work of the NIVN team. The initial approach to this was promotion of the opportunity amongst the network and the organising of virtual ‘hangouts’ for young people to attend, with a view to the group forming organically from those events. This approach did not prompt a significant level of interest. Despite this slow start, the NIVN team has now recruited three young people who have expressed an interest

in the role. Whilst the strategy around the approach to involving young people is being reviewed, there is still a desire to try to recruit more young people to the role. Alongside this, the NIVN team has also acknowledged that discrete pieces of work that inspire young people have worked particularly well, therefore this approach will continue to be incorporated.

Objective 3

To improve the consistency, quality and reach of IV services to widen access to IV for care experienced children and young people.

Coping with Covid

In March 2020, the country went into a nationwide lockdown as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Responding to this has been one of the most significant pieces of work carried out by the NIVN team during this period of funding. The impact of Covid-19 and the restrictions that the pandemic has imposed on people's lives and how services are delivered, are still present although significantly different from what was in place during the periods of lockdown. The peer support element of the network and the opportunities that it offers to learn from both the NIVN team and the network as a whole, were of central importance during this time. There was a noticeable difference in terms of practice and delivery when speaking to interviewees for the interim report in 2020 to speaking to them for the compilation of this report in 2021. At the interim stage, many of those within local authorities had been prevented from using online platforms due to concerns around security. This is no longer an issue

and all those interviewed were making regular use of online platforms for communication. Many of those interviewed reflected that it was as a result of them becoming aware of how others were coping and responding; as well as being able to feedback as to what others were doing to their Managers, that allowed them to move their own services forward and/or bring pressure to bear on their local authority:

“When it first happened, we didn’t really know what to do, I don’t think anyone did, so we ground to a bit of a halt. Hearing what others were doing really helped us to get things back up and running again.”

“During the first lockdown I felt really supported by being part of the network. It was excellent, helped me to feel like I wasn’t working in isolation.”

“Having the support of the network and the NIVN team was extremely helpful during the pandemic. People were sharing really useful resources such as risk assessments and creative ideas like sunflower growing competitions.”

To assist with some of the early concerns around online security and use of platforms, the NIVN team compiled and disseminated a resource on how to work safely online and how the different platforms operated.

Regional Groups

All the regional groups went online during the pandemic. For most this has resulted in a higher level of attendance. One of the biggest barriers to attendance, particularly for those working part time hours, that has been consistently highlighted by network members was the time that travelling to and attending a meeting took up. 93% of respondents to the survey said that the meetings moving online had made it easier for them to attend; 43% intend to keep their meetings online and 50% are going to do a hybrid of online and face to face moving forward. Moving the meetings online has also made it much more accessible for the NIVN Manager to attend each meeting; particularly given that in some regions they decided to meet more frequently in order to support each other during this period. The regional groups are generally highly valued by those who attend regularly and the attendance of the NIVN Manager at these meetings is also appreciated. 91% of survey respondents agreed or strongly agreed that sharing ideas about how to cope with the pandemic was part of what they had gained from attending the group, and 93% agreed or strongly agreed that a benefit of attending was keeping up to date with the work of the NIVN team. Interviewees also echoed these sentiments:

“The group has been so useful during this time for sharing resources relating to Covid and hearing about other people’s perspectives. It really helps to share practice and to talk about risk.”

“The group provides moral support and professional advice.”

Whilst the general consensus about the regional groups was positive, there were one or two dissenting voices who felt that due to the diversity of providers present there could be some significant differences in practice, which led to a sense of providers judging what others were doing.

The NIVN Manager has noted that the meetings tend to be more productive where there is an agenda in place and a structure to the meeting.

National Standards for the Provision of Independent Visitor Services

There is a strong consensus amongst network members about the ongoing importance of the National Standards for the Provision of Independent Visitor Services. The development of the standards was one of the first pieces of work that was picked up from the South East Regional Group and completed and disseminated by the NIVN team.

Interviewees commented as to how their conversations at both a service level and regionally retain the standards as the benchmark of good practice. One Manager said that they use them as a reference point '*for every team meeting*'. Those who were newer in post said that they had used the standards as the basis for establishing their service provision, with one referring to them as her '*Bible*'. 95% of respondents to the survey said that they have either fully implemented the standards or have implemented them '*as much as resources will allow*'. A common theme from both the NIVN team and several of those interviewed for this report, is the desire to have the standards officially endorsed. This has been part of the NIVN team's agenda from the introduction of the standards, however the DfE have not shifted from their position in terms of not viewing it as their role to endorse the standards. The NIVN Manager has emphasised that the NIVN will continue to hold this a priority outcome moving forward. The standards were due to be reviewed during this period of funding, however there is a strong sense that they remain fit for purpose, which has led to this piece of work not being prioritised.

Working Virtually – Children and Young People

The NIVN team has taken a proactive approach to supporting IV Coordinators to maintain their services during this challenging period and encouraging network members to share resources and creative ideas. Most of those interviewed talked about the challenge of maintaining their services during the periods of restrictions. Young people were fatigued with the amount of meetings that they had to do online and IVs were often struggling to engage them. In recognition of this, the NIVN team organised some online events that were open to all young people. These included ‘froglife’ workshops that were offered by the son of the one of the IV Coordinators, as well as the animation workshops. Comments from those who participated included:

“It was good to be able to have another activity when visits are so limited. We shall certainly have to keep our eyes open for reptiles and amphibians when we go out for walks.”

“I so appreciate you supplying us the context for us to base our catch up session around. It was really nice to have the pressure taken off from talking to each other to having something to focus on and watch / learn together.”

The NIVN Manager also mentioned how proactive IV Coordinators have been at sharing ideas as to how they have engaged young people online such as baking and/or art and craft activities.

Working Virtually – Volunteers

There has been a mixed response from IV Coordinators and Managers regarding the use of online platforms for the recruitment and training of volunteers for the IV role. Some have embraced this option fully and intend to continue to incorporate elements of this practice moving forward. Others feel that in-person training and interviews are preferable. There is a general reluctance to match an IV to a young person without there being at least one face-to-face meeting with the volunteer. The NIVN team responded to some of the early concerns about this way of working by offering a session on training delivery via virtual platforms. The session was attended by thirty-eight IV Coordinators and the evaluations and interviews of those who attended highlighted that the event had been really valued:

“This was a brilliant event and I really enjoyed sharing learning points. More of this around relevant themes please.”

“I think it all went really well apart from a few technical issues which you are always going to get, it was a great opportunity to share with and learn from each other.”

Moving forward, it will be interesting to see how many services continue to incorporate online ways of working into their practice.

Huddle

As noted at the interim stage, the pandemic has prompted a step change in the use of Huddle by network members. Previous evaluations highlighted that whilst IV Coordinators and Managers were aware of Huddle, they often didn't find the time nor were particularly motivated to access it. For this evaluation, interviewees have commented, unprompted, on how useful Huddle is:

“Huddle is really helpful for that wider support and learning from each other. We posted the other day about quite a serious issue that arose and it was really helpful to get other people's points of view and the peer support.”

“Huddle is great, useful things just pop up on there all the time.”

“If there's anything I need to check out then you can just put

a question on Huddle and lots of responses come back. It's also good for pinching other people's ideas."

Development of Learning Resources and Reaching Under-Represented Groups

The original vision for this piece of work was the development of a learning resources group who would take the lead on developing resources focused on issues that present challenges for network members. This includes how to reach under-represented groups such as those placed out of area, children and young people with disabilities and those at risk of exploitation. The NIVN Manager highlighted that it had been a challenge to bring a group together, and to make progress in relation to these issues in light of the many other demands on people's time. As a result, whilst some work has been done on this, it has not had the momentum originally intended.

Out of Area Matches

The issue of how to match young people who are placed outside of their local area has been an ongoing challenge for network members. 99% of survey respondents said that this is something that they would like the NIVN to support them to address. Currently, there are a number of ways that network

members approach this issue including:

- » Spot purchases – this is more common amongst local authority providers. Most IV Coordinators expressed resistance to this and concern about the cost and how to assess the quality of the provision offered.
- » Volunteers being willing to travel – several providers ask volunteers, at point of recruitment, as to whether they are willing to travel out of area to see young people. Some have been able to match all their young people via this option.
- » Local recruitment in the area where the young person is placed – the pandemic seems to have brought an increase in the use of this option as providers can now train and support the volunteer using online platforms.

The issue of reaching under-represented groups of young people was addressed via workshops at the conference but there is a recognition amongst providers that this, alongside recruiting diversity amongst volunteers, remains an area that they are keen for the NIVN team to offer further support with.

Where the learning resource group has had success is with the development of a set of training principles. There has long been recognition that across the network, the

range of training and the length of training that volunteers are asked to commit to, covers the spectrum from a few hours of training to several days. To address this, a group of practitioners, working with the NIVN Manager, have developed a set of training principles and accompanying self-assessment audit tool, that will allow providers to benchmark the content of their training. The NIVN Manager said that the aspiration is to attempt to create some consistency across training provision without blueprinting a training manual. This work has recently been completed as a first draft and will be disseminated to the wider network during the course of the year.

Conference

In November 2021, the NIVN team hosted the sixth NIVN conference in Birmingham. The event was scheduled to run in-person and promotion of the event was timed just prior to the outbreak of the Omicron variant. 90 delegates signed up to attend with 70 attending on the day. These events are incredibly popular each time they run. Those interviewed, who had attended, were really happy that they had been able to meet with others in person and very positive about the content of the day. They also commented on how much they

gain from being able to network with each other. The event was evaluated and comments from the evaluations include:

“I do think it’s really important for IVCOs to get together from all the different types of services as we can all learn from each other. NIVN’s work is important and I have been battling today with a Manager about allocating enough hours and using NIVN’s National Standards and Guidance...”

“It was so good to be able to meet people in person again after all the time and also to spend time with our local regional coordinators.”

“Networking generally was great. Learning from others and feeling part of a much bigger group of people with the same challenges.”

“It was fantastic to meet people from my region and from across the country, not least as I started in my role as Coordinator in February 2020 just before lockdown, so meeting people in person was really enriching and life-enhancing...”

A key theme in terms of any changes to the conference format was to consider trying to fit less in to the day, and to allow more time for certain topics.

Objective 4

To conduct research and evaluation to evidence the impact of the IV relationship on care experienced children and young people and care leavers.

Progressing this objective has presented a challenge for the NIVN team and there has been a recognition that what was originally envisaged is not the best approach to the work. The NIVN Manager said that the original outcomes framework that was developed previously will be completely reviewed. As a first step in progressing this work a survey has recently been conducted amongst network members who were asked to provide information on what they are currently doing to measure outcomes. This has prompted fifty-two responses and a lot of *'rich data'* for taking this work forward. Amongst interviewees, there is an increasing recognition of the importance of being able to evidence outcomes. Comments from interviewees that typified this response were:

“I think it would be useful to have more evidence about the value of IV matches to young people as that would help with commissioners and key bodies such as Ofsted.”

“Having an evidence base could assist with the role being taken more seriously.”

“More information around how to measure outcomes, how to show what you’re achieving and whether it’s good value would be really helpful.”

The NIVN Manager detailed that the next step is to come up with some tools for providers to use to measure outcomes. More extensive work around this objective and seeking external support with it has been written into the plan for the next three years.

The third Freedom of Information data request that forms a central part of this objective was intentionally delayed due to Covid and the impact that would have had on the numbers of young people being referred. The NIVN Manager felt that this would have *‘skewed the data’* in such a way that it would not have provided a useful comparison to the two previous reports.

Objective 5

One care leaver will strengthen their training, employment and professional development outcomes.

Due to the complications of recruitment and induction within the constraints of Covid, it was decided that it was not in the best interests of the work of the NIVN team to progress this objective. The NIVN Manager highlighted that it would have been too complex to try to ensure that the young person received the support that they would need in order to feel effective in their role. She felt that trying to provide sufficient support would have detracted significantly from the time that she would have had available to support network members and meet the service objectives.

Objective 6

Work towards sustainability of the network by 2022.

This objective has been achieved. In December 2021, the NIVN team were informed that they had received further funding from the Tudor Trust, as well as the funding requested from the Barnardo's Foundation. This has secured the future of the NIVN team and its central and, as seen by network members, essential role for the next three years. Comments from network members about the value of the role of the NIVN team highlight how important they consider the support to be:

“It (the network) has always been so helpful to me. It helps me to feel less like an island in my local authority and members are so generous in sharing best practice. I don't know what I would do without it.”

“I think the network provides a really good support structure, particularly for those who are new into the role. It's a way of ensuring the quality of what we all do and helps us to challenge local authorities around what they should be doing.”

“I think the team are of great value. I don’t think I would still be in the role without the support of the team and the wider network when I first took on my role and had to set up the service in our area.”

“I have found the support from the NIVN invaluable... particularly as all the services are managed and run completely different to each other. The NIVN facilitate a central forum to have these discussions to enable us to develop our services and share best practice.”

Interviewees gave particular praise to the NIVN team and the amount that is achieved with the small resource available. A comment from one Coordinator captured the essence of this feedback:

“The team are great. They are really passionate about the work that they do and always willing to help and support.”

Conclusion

At the interim stage of the evaluation the main theme was the pandemic and how network members and the NIVN team had responded to the challenges presented by the restrictions and the virus. It was apparent at that time, that network members were still navigating their way through in terms of their service delivery. The NIVN team were incredibly responsive to this need and aware of the issues being experienced by service providers. The NIVN team worked hard to support these challenges by coming up with creative responses and reaching out to network members to offer advice, guidance and support. As the pandemic and the restrictions have continued but changed, it has been equally evident at this stage, that the responses of providers and how they are managing has progressed significantly. At the interim stage, a number of local authorities were not allowing staff to use online platforms due to security concerns, this is no longer the case. There are some significant benefits to emerge from this shift to the use of online platforms, not least for the regional groups in terms of opening up the potential for attendance by network members and the NIVN Manager. In many ways the period of restrictions has served to highlight the strengths of the network that were part of the reason for its conception. Staff involved in delivering IV

services often work in isolation and within a service that many feel lacks recognition. The network shines a spotlight on their work and allows them to benefit from the peer support of others in the same position. Covid-19 had the potential to increase that sense of isolation as it pulled people back from their communities. Having the regional groups online, access to Huddle, virtual events and the NIVN team in regular contact, sharing ideas and appearing at regional meetings allowed network members to continue to reach out, support, lean on and learn from each other.

Alongside the work prompted by the pandemic, the NIVN team has made significant progress against the identified objectives for this period of funding. The launching of the Right Friend campaign has proved popular with network members and provided an opportunity for lobbying of key stakeholders and raising the profile of the IV and the NIVN. The work done with Ofsted, and the development of training for Inspectors will take some time to evidence in terms of impact at a local level but the support from the lead within Ofsted is important and valued by network members. In terms of the lobbying work, the comprehensive response made by the NIVN team to the Independent Care Review had good reach across the network and provided important

opportunities for young people, volunteers and professionals to have a voice in the review. It will be interesting to see whether the current emphasis being placed on the importance of relationships by the care review team, materialises into something solid for the providers of IV services.

There has been a noticeable shift in the involvement of children and young people in the work of the NIVN team. Whilst this has not been entirely what was originally envisaged, the animation workshops, virtual events and focus group with the care review team, as well as the logo for the Right Friend campaign have all had the involvement of children and young people at their core.

The National Standards continue to remain a key document for many providers. Network members often cite the benchmarks contained in the standards and the information provided by the reports, following the freedom of information requests, as having been points of reference for lobbying at a local level with commissioners and/or managers. The key number in the pending freedom of information request will be the percentage of children and young people who are in receipt of IV services. The main aim of the NIVN has been to raise the profile and increase the numbers of children and

young people who are being referred. The latter continues to prove elusive. It may be that developing the evidence base, in terms of measuring outcomes, which is being built into future planning for the work of NIVN team could be significant in supporting that shift.

A key objective that was not only achieved but surpassed is the sustainability of the network. Towards the end of each funding period there is a degree of nervousness about securing funds and what could be sustained were the NIVN team not to gain future funding. The NIVN Manager, with the support of her Manager within Barnardo's, worked hard to develop the case for future funding. The Tudor Trust, whose consistent support has been incredibly valuable from the outset, and the Barnardo's Foundation, have recognised the importance of the work done by the NIVN team and network members in securing better outcomes and brighter futures for care experienced children and young people.

Recommendations

The NIVN team, through the work needed to secure future funding, has scoped out the work that will be prioritised over the next three years. As such, the recommendations for future work have been kept relatively brief and have emerged from comments from network members.

1. Local level influencing – it is recommended that the NIVN consider what more could be done to influence referrals at a local level. Network members have suggested that it could be helpful for information about the role of the IV to form part of training for Social Workers, Foster Carers and Independent Reviewing Officers. This could be approached in a similar way to the work that has been completed for Ofsted Inspectors. It would also be useful to ensure that IV services are part of the induction of new staff to the local authority. The NIVN team could develop a resource designed to assist new IV Coordinators with ideas about how they can lobby locally.

2. Celebrity Ambassador – several members talked about national campaigns and the use of national media, which can be very hard to engage. A couple mentioned a celebrity Ambassador which could be worth pursuing now that an additional three years of funding has been secured. It is recommended that the NIVN consider make approaches to high profile care experienced celebrities.

3. Independent Care Review – if the outcome of the care review is favourable, this will be a prime opportunity to seize the momentum and highlight any positive references to the IV role to raise the profile. The findings and recommendations from the care review can be profiled locally by providers and nationally by the NIVN team. It is recommended that the NIVN team prepare providers for the outcome of the review, once the likely date is known, and make a specific ask of each local provider in terms of lobbying their local authority, alongside promotion of the outcome at a national level.

4. Ofsted Inspections – it would be useful for the NIVN team to consider a way to gather data on the number of Ofsted Inspections which include an inspection of the local IV service. Network members could be asked to provide detail as to what the inspection consisted of and, on an annual basis, this could be feedback to the lead for care experienced children at Ofsted to see if there is a year-on-year increase and change in the attention paid to IV provision.

5. Regional Groups – several of the regional groups have been proactive in developing specific pieces of work such as the letter to the Corporate Parenting Panel. It would seem a good way forward to task each regional group with specific pieces

of work such as gathering information on how each of their members approaches Out of Area matches. The findings from this could be used to compile a resource for IV services. This could be done for each of the issues that present a challenge, such as recruiting diversity amongst volunteers. This would help to draw on existing good practice and the findings could be collated into a useful and accessible resource centrally.

6. Voice and Influence – The Youth Champions role is good in theory but has proved difficult to fully realise. It is recommended that the NIVN team continue to move forward with the areas that have been successful and offer care experienced children and young people opportunities that they might not otherwise have, which are aligned to discrete pieces of work, such as the animation project. Retaining the premise of involving beneficiaries is a key one and there are likely to be a range of opportunities for them to be inspired to be involved in the wider work moving forward.

7. Annual Survey – for the last 8 years a survey has been conducted amongst network members every 2-3 years by the external evaluator. The response to this has generally been good with around one third of network members responding. It is recommended that the NIVN team introduce an annual

survey to gain direct feedback from members about their service delivery, challenges they are facing and their views about the support of the NIVN team. This would allow the NIVN team to start to develop some baseline data from amongst the membership.

8. Measuring Outcomes – there are a number of accessible tools that are widely used in the sector such as the Outcomes Star (www.outcomesstar.org.uk) that could be incorporated and recommended to service providers. IV Coordinators would need to understand how to use any tools that were profiled as they are only as good as those working with them. A standardised tool would then allow for standardised evidence and a body of data to be collated. The Manager from NYAS spoke about how all their services input data onto a shared database which then provides NYAS with a centralised data set. Showcasing current practice to existing providers is a useful way of allowing them to learn from each other and of making this area of work seem more accessible. Alongside any quantitative measures, the importance of qualitative feedback in the form of case studies and interviews with young people needs to remain at the forefront as the relational aspect of the role of the IV is the key to why it works.

9. Training manual – the training principles that have recently been completed are likely to be a really useful piece of work for network members and will provide a benchmark for training provision. Alongside these, it is recommended that regional groups are tasked with making contributions to what a training manual could contain i.e. some examples of sessions to be completed with volunteers. Some Coordinators come into post with no previous experience of working with volunteers or in an IV service. Having a sample manual available as a resource could save people having to reinvent the wheel each time and would provide a much needed starting point.

Report design by Adam Walton

