A Friend Indeed:

the importance of Independent Visitors to children and young people in care

NiVN
A friend for children in care

PraxisCollab

NIVN

The National Independent Visitor Network (NIVN) is a platform for Independent Visitor (IV) services, children and young people in care and IV volunteers. NIVN launched in 2014 to address low levels of access to IVs and inconsistent quality of provision. Through influencing and good practice work, we aim to ensure more children and young people can experience a stable, positive relationship with a trusted Independent Visitor befriender. NIVN was hosted by Barnardo's from 2014 – 2024 with funding from the Tudor Trust and Barnardo's. From 2025 NIVN will continue as an independent network.

PraxisCollab

PraxisCollab CIC

PraxisCollab is a not-for-profit team of researchers, academics and practitioners with extensive experience and expertise working alongside organisations and with communities in collaborative learning partnerships. We specialise in social research, evaluation and learning partnerships that support and strengthen organisations to generate and use evidence, shape and deliver quality services, and achieve their operational and strategic goals. www.praxiscollab.com

Contents

Acknowledgements

Executive summary

Introduction

Independent Visitors (IV) are trained volunteers who befriend looked-after children and young people with the aim of supporting and guiding them through a positive, long-term relationship beyond the care system. Despite the role being established in the Children Act (1998), the vast majority of children and young people in and leaving care still don't have access to a volunteer Independent Visitor. Over 25 years later, a stubbornly low 3% of children and young people in care across England and Wales have access to an IV friendship.

This research was commissioned by the National Independent Visitor Network (NIVN) to generate evidence, directly from children and young people themselves, on the value of IV friendships as they see them, and the changes in their lives that IV friendships had made possible. To deepen an understanding of 'what works' and to consider how the 3% rate of IV friendships can be grown, the research explored systemic barriers and enablers, and undertook preliminary research into data and outcomes capture in IV services, to propose an approach to monitoring and evaluation for building a more robust and cohesive data set across England and Wales.

This research indicates that IV friendships offer children and young people the opportunity to develop consistent, positive and loving relationships, a frequent need and gap in their lives that has long been recognised as of vital importance. And in so doing, IV friendships offer children and young people in and leaving care a wealth of value and of critical importance to them: opportunity for personal growth, and opportunity to develop personal agency.

IV friendships offer space for personal growth emanating from the security and emotional connection of the long term, supportive friendship, and the safety and freedom of a friendship that is outside the children's social care system. The opportunity for children and young people to develop personal agency stems firstly from the more equal IV relationship, developed outside the care system, that encourages choice, negotiation and self-advocacy, and secondly through exposure to activities, ideas and experiences that expand thinking and horizons.

Methods

Four learning questions shaped the research reported here. They are:

1. **What does 'good' look like for children and young people in their friendships with IVs?**

2. **What outcomes and impact do IV friendships enable?**

3. **What are the systemic barriers and enabling factors that affect IV friendships?**

4. **What would appropriate monitoring and evaluation look like for IV services?**

Throughout the findings, evidence from children and young people formed the basis of analysis, and was then triangulated with the perspectives of stakeholders including IV volunteers, IV coordinators, social workers and senior leaders working in children's social care.

Findings

1. What works? What children and young people find most valuable about IV friendships

Children and young people in and leaving care described the five features of IV friendships they found to be of most value to them. The findings section of this report details their perspectives, through rich and detailed quotes from children and young people, followed by stakeholders. The five most valuable factors across all interview groups are:

a) genuine friendship with an emotional connection

b) friendship with no agenda

c) a non-hierarchical relationship

d) time spent voluntarily

e) long term, consistent friendship.

2. The outcomes and impact of IV friendships

Children and young people described changes in five areas of their lives that they felt were attributable to, or connected to, their IV friendship. IVs, IV Coordinators and social workers also reported witnessing change in the following five areas:

a) Emotional security

b) Increased confidence

c) Improved wellbeing

d) Development of life skills

e) Expanded horizons and widened experiences.

3. Systemic factors, barriers and enablers affecting IV friendships

Stakeholders identified five **enabling factors** for successful long term IV friendships:

a) Volunteers well-suited to the role

b) Placement stability

c) IV champions in various parts of the children's social care system

d) The work of IV Coordinators in support of the first three factors

e) NIVN's work to support IV Coordinators, produce resources and encourage best practice.

Stakeholders described the following five barriers that serve to slow or disrupt children and young people's access to the support of an IV. Many of these challenges are persistent (see literature review section of this report) and reflect persistent systemic and wider contextual constraints and challenges for children's social care:

a) Children and young people's placements

b) Volunteer recruitment

c) Commissioning of IV services

d) Local authority under-investment, and

e) Stakeholder skepticism.

4. A suitable monitoring and evaluation framework

Evidence on the outcomes achieved for children and young people, and the long-term impact of IV friendships is currently very limited. This hinders efforts to build a strong case for greater access to IV's for children and young people.

Current approaches to monitoring and outcome capture for IV services were explored in order to propose ideas for building a robust data set. that would be accessible. Currently, there is no common system for data recording (such as IV access rates or length of matches), or outcome/impact capture, across England and Wales. Existing data capture tools such as IV logs, feedback forms for children and young people, IVs, and referrers, and annual reviews gather subjective feedback. Little to no objective, outcome-oriented data is gathered.

To build an evidence base about the outcomes and impact IV friendships

achieve, objective questions about individual children and young people's progress/change must be sought, documented and collated. This could happen through the introduction of a standard set of 'what has changed?' style questions into every method of feedback capture listed and the introduction of a standardised/validated measure to consistently ask outcome questions.

The research team surveyed 34 scales, narrowing these to 10, to identify a measure with strong international consistency that best matched the outcomes identified in the research, while being relatively quick, simple and cheap to administer. While no single scale presented a perfect fit with identified outcomes, the Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing scale covered four of the five outcomes well, with the exception of the life skills outcome. Appendix 3 illustrates the analysis of the final 10 scales.

The following actions will enable development of a robust data set capturing the outcomes and impact of IV friendships, with NIVN taking a lead role to secure agreements through a pilot group of local areas testing the ideas:

• **introduce outcome-oriented questions to monthly IV contact logs**

• **add the Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing scale for young people to complete**

• **account for the Warwick's life-skills outcome measurement gap through a specific set question or short set of questions.**

Discussion

Personal growth and personal agency

IV friendships offer children and young people in care an opportunity to experience the consistent, positive, and loving relationships that are often unavailable to them due to systemic challenges such as frequent placement breakdowns and high social worker turnover. These relationships address a critical gap in their emotional support, as the most prominent adults in their lives are otherwise paid professionals, whose duties and safeguards can serve to limit the depth of connection.

This research highlights the transformative impact of IV relationships for the children and young people matched. These friendships, characterised by authenticity, honesty, trust, acceptance, and emotional support, foster a connection through which feelings of safety and self-value develop in children and young people. Beyond improved individual well-being, IV friendships can be seen as replicating the stability and unconditional support of family relationships, offering a "levelling" effect that narrows the gap between children in care and their peers. This foundation not only enhances real-time happiness and security but also improves their long-term life chances and outcomes.

The IV model, rooted in independence, equality, volunteerism, and stability, provides children and young people in and leaving care with a unique pathway to develop personal agency. IV friendships foster relationships that enable self-discovery, skill-building, and expanded life opportunities, offering the transformative opportunity to develop life skills and develop border horizons within a secure relationship. Children gain experience in negotiation, problem-solving and building independence. They learn to articulate their preferences, explore opportunities and interests, and make decisions alongside a role model outside the care system. IV friendships. These interactions expand their worldview, nurture ambition, and help them identify strengths and talents essential for adulthood. IV friendships empower children and young people in care to become active participants in shaping their own life paths, helping them transition more confidently into adulthood.

Recommendations

Given the perennially low access rate to IV friendships for children and young people in care, we recommend the following actions at national, local authority and service levels:

National actions

- All local authorities should be required to allocate ring-fenced funding for IV services, defining what appropriate service must entail

- Strengthen the Children and Young Persons Act 2008, to create an absolute, automatic opt-out right to an IV for all children and young people in and leaving care

- Add an opt-out right to an IV to the Children Leaving Care Act 2000, to entitle all young people to an IV up to and including the age of 21

- Set an ambitious national target for the percentage of children and young people in care with an IV

- Ofsted inspection of local authorities children's services should include a requirement to inspect the level and quality of independent visiting services

- Provide ongoing, secure funding for the National Independent Visitor Network to continue its valuable work.

Local authority-level actions

- Cultivate an IV champion group, recruiting champions across all levels of the authority, including at the most senior levels

- Set clear, ambitious targets on expected level of Independent Visitor take up which are regularly reported against and sufficiently commissioned. Build targets into commissioning arrangements where relevant

- Ensure the right to IV is actively promoted within the day to day working culture and practices of the children's social care service

NIVN-led service-level actions

- Develop a local authority influencing toolkit including the development of a theory of change for local authorities with the end goal of increasing support and funding for IV services

- Facilitate a national commitment across England and Wales on collecting outcome and impact data to record the changes that IV friendships enable for children and young people

- Agree a suite of outcome and impact-oriented questions and measures to be introduced across all local authority areas

- Strengthen current feedback collection to ensure the inclusion of outcome and impact-oriented questions.

Introduction

When you're with someone, like, all that time, you know, like months, like you see them once a month for that consistent time. I feel like trust is just bound to happen. It's just natural to trust that person. And especially for them to be in your life for that long. It just becomes natural, you know. (CYP4)

Independent Visitors are trained volunteers who visit, advise and befriend children and young people with the aim of supporting them through a positive, long-term relationship beyond the care system. This research project sought to contribute to existing knowledge of Independent Visitor (IV) friendships by generating evidence that prioritised the voices of children and young people in and leaving care. First-person qualitative evidence from children and young people is presented here, and triangulated with the views and perspectives of stakeholders including IVs, IV coordinators, social workers and senior leaders working in children's social care.

The research first focuses on establishing the value of IV friendships as children and young people in and leaving care see it - what works for them, how and why. Secondly, the research focuses on outcomes and impact - the change made possible for children and young people, as they describe it, through their relationship with their IV. Rich and comprehensive data was gathered through dyad interviews between children and young people and their IV, and built on with the views of other stakeholders, providing multiple perspectives on the experience and significance of IV friendships.

The research also explores systemic barriers and enabling factors, to better understand the challenges inherent in creating and sustaining these important IV friendships. One important barrier is the lack of robust evidence about the impact of IV friendships for children and young people in and leaving care. To this end, we propose some initial thinking on how a more consistent, objective evidence base can be built.

Finally, recommendations are made for policy, action and evidence development, including campaigning and influencing work at local authority and national levels in England and Wales.

A review of the literature

Introduction

It is long established that children and young people face numerous challenges whilst in care and when they become 'care leavers'. They often have significantly worse life experiences and are disproportionately disadvantaged in life, especially regarding educational attainment, employment, low income, limited access to services and suffering with mental and physical ill health (Social Exclusion Unit, 2001; Kersley et al., 2014; MacAlister, 2022). They are more likely to experience higher levels of homelessness, offending behaviour, substance misuse and teenage pregnancy than those in the non-care population (DfES, 2007; Yahed & Harker, 2015). The care system, lack of permanence and being 'let down' or abandoned by parents and other adults can impact their ability to form healthy, appropriate attachments (Kersley et al, 2014; Brady et al., 2019).

To combat this, there has long been policy recognition of the importance of consistent trusting adult relationships in the lives of children in care (Towler, 2016; see Appendix 1). The IV role was introduced by the Children Act 1989 to help children and young people to build supportive networks beyond the care system. Now, every child in care is entitled to an IV if deemed 'in their best interests' (DfE, 2015).

This review highlights the role of the 'Independent Visitor' in academic and grey literature provided by Barnardo's National Independent Visitor Network. Various phrases are used across the literature to refer to IVs, such as 'mentor', 'befriender', 'visitor' and 'ally'. The term 'independent visitor' will be used unless related to another specific evaluation or intervention. A forthcoming systematic review of befriending and mentoring explores existing models for children and young people who are care experienced, at risk of being placed in care, or at risk of poor developmental outcomes (Jones et al., forthcoming).

What is an Independent Visitor?

An Independent Visitor (IV) is an independent unpaid volunteer who does not work for social care services. Their role is to befriend, advise and build a long term, supportive relationship with a child or young person in foster or residential care. Every looked-after child and young person in England and Wales up to the age of 18 has the right to be offered an IV (Children Act, 1989). Some local authorities extend this offer to care leavers and financially support matches post-18th birthday. Children and young people are given a choice as to whether they have an IV or not, and some areas with sufficient volunteers may offer a choice between potential IVs. IV services aim to cultivate a longer-term commitment from volunteers, with matches to last at least one to two years. Ideally, matches should last as long as possible beyond this, to provide stability and continuity for the child (Barnardos, 2015; Hardy, 2007). Research into longer-term IV relationships (i.e. matches that have lasted 5+ years) would be beneficial (Clancy, 2017) but does not currently exist.

IV schemes are run in-house by the local authority (LA) or by voluntary sector organisations commissioned by the LA (Gordon & Graham, 2016). Children and

young people are referred to the scheme by their social worker or independent reviewing officer (Kersley et al., 2014). The age at which IV support ends depends on the individual scheme but usually occurs when a child or young person officially leaves care, at the age of 18. However, this relationship usually continues (Hardy, 2007; Ofsted, 2012) independently of the local authority. Leaving care can be exceptionally difficult for young people to navigate, and, without a significant trusted adult, can be lonely and isolating (Barnardo's, 2022; Kersley et al., 2014; Hurst & Peel, 2013). Barnardo's (2022) recommends the extension to the IV scheme up to at least age 25 for all care leavers. Whilst there is little coverage of intersectionality and diversity in the IV literature, two further groups of children and young people were identified as needing additional support: those who are disabled and those who are Unaccompanied Asylum-Seekers (Knight, 1998; Barnardo's, 2022).

IVs receive role-specific induction training and ongoing support to provide the skills and knowledge to confidently fulfil their role (Barnardo's, 2016). An IV aims to provide consistent support, routine, and security for children and young people in care, who experience considerable instability in the care system (such as changing placements or social workers) (Kersley et al., 2014; Barnardo's, 2016), and indeed who may have experienced considerable instability prior to entering care. IVs are encouraged to be child-focused and contribute to a child's welfare by promoting their social, emotional, educational, religious and cultural development beyond the care system (Dept of Health, 1991; Hurst & Peel, 2013; Barnardo's, 2016).

IVs support children and young people in a variety of ways: providing advice, supporting participation in new activities, sharing new experiences and interests away from placements, and encouraging them to exercise their rights and contribute to decision-making about their life (DfES, 2007; Barnardo's, 2016; DfES, 2006). IV's and children and young people meet regularly (studies indicate this varies from weekly to monthly), with the usual expectation for monthly meetings set by the local authority. Planned activities are a key part of their relationship (Jones & Westlake, 2021; Kersley et al., 2014; Barnardo's, 2022) and will vary depending on the interests and preferences of the child, e.g., visiting a café, cinema, museum or park.

The importance of participation in activities has been identified as a key source of resilience for children and young people (Quarmby et al., 2019) and can help to maintain relationships, and support the sharing of common interests etc. (Barnardo's, 2022; Jones & Westlake, 2021). Most IV schemes provide a small budget to fund such activities (Kersley et al., 2014).

One of the biggest challenges within the care system is achieving continuity and permanence (NEF, 2014). The continuity of IV relationships has been found to be particularly important during adolescence and at key transition points for children and young people, such as when moving placement, relationship breakdowns, school transitions or changes of social workers (Clancy, 2017; Hardy, 2007; Knight, 1998; Oakley & Masson, 2000; MacAlister, 2022). It provides a sense of continuity in a context of frequent change (Hardy, 2007; Clancy, 2016; MacAlister, 2022; Hurst & Peel, 2013).

The value of IV friendships

The positive impact of IVs for looked-after children and young people is clear across the literature. A consistent finding is that strong, informal supportive relationships, based on mutual caring and trust, can make a difference to a child or young person's life, care experience and life outcomes post-care (Barnardo's, 2022, Clancy, 2017; Ofsted, 2012). Children and young people view their IVs as friends, sources of emotional support, encouragement and practical advice (e.g. budgeting), offering a consistent adult presence (Hurst & Peel, 2013).

Children and young people with IVs benefit from an increased sense of confidence and belonging through consistent support from someone who cheers them on, actively listens, guides, and acts in a flexible, authentic and non-judgmental way (Barnardo's, 2022; Hardy, 2007). Few disadvantages are identified, for example an IV friendship that ends prematurely or abruptly due to unexpected circumstances for the IV. This was reported very rarely (Ofsted, 2012; Clancy, 2017).

The table on page 6 below summarises evidence detailing the positive experience of mentoring and befriending relationships for children and young people in and leaving care. It includes the limited literature available specifically about IV friendships (e.g., Clancy, 2017; Knight, 1998). Though we endeavoured to separate these outcomes, they are interconnected and overlapping. Studies were not always specific to the IV role, given the lack of up to date research undertaken, in comparison to the wider literature on children in care and mentoring and befriending schemes. However, they provide a useful starting point to consider the potential impact of IV support. There have also been policy and practice changes since key studies into IV support were undertaken (e.g., Knight, 1998).

Some might argue that these benefits or outcomes can be delivered by social workers or foster carers, but the evidence is clear that the support and duties provided through these roles are insufficient, inadequate or undesirable to enable delivery of these benefits. The importance of having an informal independent relationship is repeatedly emphasised (Hurst & Peel, 2013; MacAlister, 2022; Hardy, 2007). The strength of an IV is in its unpaid, flexible and voluntary nature (Barnardo's 2022; Kersley et al., 2014; Hardy, 2007). According to a review of IV research studies, the IV role is also regarded as more child-centred than those of paid professionals and foster carers, offering friendship, choice, autonomy, empowerment, voice and control by design (Hurst & Peel, 2013). These features of the IV relationship are not akin to a professional relationship (Barnardo's 2022; Hardy, 2007; Kersley et al., 2014). IVs are provided solely for the children and young people, not linked to statutory bodies. They provide a distinctly different, independent type of support.

Benefits are also reported for the IVs themselves (Ofsted, 2012, Kersley et al., 2014; Barnardo's 2022):

i) fulfilling a motivation to 'give back';

ii) learning from children and young people e.g. greater awareness of issues, knowledge, understanding or cultures;

iii) confronting their preconceptions and expectations about care-experienced people;

iv) having new experiences and networks outside the professional realm.

Table 1: Benefits to mentoring and befriending support: examples and outcomes

	Examples	Outcomes
Consistent support	Provide stable and continuous (and unthreatening) relationships for CYP in care Facilitate social connections and reduce isolation Making time for the child or young person Offer emotional support Practical advice & support Enjoyment, having fun, trying new things	Feeling cared for as the main or sole purpose Feelings of attachment Reduced social isolation Feeling listened to Sense of being liked and cared for as a person Having someone to be 'normal' with – not feeling judged
Support relationships with others	Learning about relationships Respect for oneself and others Builds social and conversation skills Help in resolving immediate issues/concerns Encourage and support friendships Support professionals to understand CYP's needs	Role model for relationships and social interaction Reduced social isolation Better able to form and maintain relationships with peers and new contacts Feelings of belonging, being included Expanded network of support; improved social interaction, skills and behaviours
Support learning and engagement	Encouragement and support for educational engagement Development of interests/ skills outside formal learning Developing life skills, independence and preparation for leaving care Attendance at PEP reviews Advocate for expectations of CYP Informal learning, purposeful, fun and recreation	Personal; educational; developing existing skills New knowledge, skills and experiences Plans and decisions are more child-centred Improved voice of the CYP

	Examples	**Outcomes**
Support wellbeing	Helping them have their voice heard/ become more assertive Help facilitate social connections Decrease social isolation Develop and maintain positive outlook and approaches to solving problems Helping the CYP know what they want to do Helping to develop coping mechanisms	Reduced stress Impact on healthy eating Experience of consistency and constancy Improved confidence; self-esteem; trust; resilience; able to ask for help Improved emotional literacy Meet emotional and psychological needs Greater self-acceptance
Reduce vulnerabilities and unwanted behaviours	Learning how to respond to and handle situations, thinking before taking action, recognising triggers Reducing unwanted behaviour such as criminal activity, truanting or drug abuse Helping with anger management Practical skills & problem-solving	Reduced truancy and school exclusion Reduced risk of becoming NEET Reduced risk of youth and adult offending Reduced risk of addiction Reduced risk of mental ill-health

(See: Clancy, 2017; Hardy, 2007; Knight, 1998; Kersley et al., 2014; Barnardo's, 2016; DfE, 2015; Munro, 2011; Holland, 2010; MacAlister, 2022; Brady et al., 2019; Quarmby et al., 2019).

The gap between policy and current practice

Evidence consistently indicates that IV support largely remains unavailable to the majority of children in care, despite its statutory requirement (Ofsted, 2012; Clancy, 2017; Gordon & Graham, 2016; Towler, 2016; Jordan & Walker, 2019; Walker & Jordan, 2022). Only 3.5% (approximately 2,653) of looked-after children and young people in England were matched with an IV in 2019 (Jordan & Walker, 2019). This represents an increase of 0.3% from 2016 - the previous report (Gordon & Graham, 2016) identified that 3.2% of looked after children were matched with an IV. Provision between LAs is inconsistent, and children and young people are rarely asked if they would like an IV (Towler, 2016; Jones & Westlake, 2021).

Multiple reasons are identified for this persistently low IV access rate (see Hudson et al. 2019; Hardy 2007; Clancy, 2017; Kersley et al., 2014; Hurst & Peel, 2013; Barnardo's, 2016; MacAlister, 2022; Towler, 2016; Pellicano et al., 2014; Ofsted, 2012; MacAlister, 2022) and can be summarised as follows:

• Gaps between policy and practice

• Systemic obstacles to the notion of friendships between adults and children

• Low awareness of the IV role amongst children and young people in care

• Insecure funding

• Challenges with demonstrating impact

• Lack of understanding or suspicion by foster carers or professionals

• IV schemes are insufficiently promoted to professionals, potential volunteers and poor understanding of referral criteria.

The National Independent Visitor Network (NIVN), a project hosted by children's charity Barnardo's, began in 2014 and operates across England and Wales. Its aim is to ensure children and young people can access their legal right to an IV. It launched the 'Right Friend Campaign' in 2020, calling for a minimum of 10% of children and young people in care to receive IV support by 2022 and for this to be extended to all care leavers. The Independent Review of Children's Social Care for England (MacAlister, 2022) confirms that care-experienced children and young people remain badly served by the system and proposes five 'missions', including the recommendation that no child or young person leaves care without at least two loving relationships (MacAlister, 2022).

Evidence gathering

NIVN has sought to measure IV access rates and draw on best practice learning (2022, 2019, 2016), with the aim of better understanding, improving and sustaining the reach, consistency and quality of IV services. Barnardo's (2022) recommends the large-scale (co-produced) establishment of best practices and standards for community-based support for care experienced children and young people.

A review of IV research studies (Hurst & Peel, 2013) found that the specifics of the scope, criteria, standards, training and role of the IV were undefined at a national

level which creates difficulties in evidence beyond the local level. The National Independent Visitor Network, established in 2014, has addressed many of these gaps. A network of IV service providers, volunteers and care-experienced children and young people, NIVN aims to increase access to consistently high-quality IV provision across England and Wales and raise the profile and understanding of the value of IV. NIVN has co-produced national standards for the provision of IV Services, developed training guidance for prospective IV volunteers, published three national data reports establishing IV access rates across England and Wales, and launched the Right Friend Campaign that provided the foundation to their influencing work on the former Conservative UK government's independent review of children's social care in 2021/22.

A consistent challenge for IV schemes is in establishing robust indicator data to assess impact and outcomes (Kersley et al., 2014). Whilst robust evidence would highlight value and advocate for additional investment (Kersley et al., 2014), there is considerable complexity in evaluating IV relationships due to their unique nature and the individual needs of children and young people (Barnardo's, 2022; Hurst & Peel, 2013). This creates difficulties in establishing a clear set of criteria. Barnardo's (2022) strongly discourages using any clearly defined 'hard' outcomes and rather, promotes the introduction of slow, ongoing/longitudinal and continuous qualitative exploration (see Kersley et al., 2014).

Summary

Independent Visitors are trained volunteers who visit, advise and befriend children and young people with the aim of supporting them through a positive, long-term relationship beyond the care system. However, very few children and young people are matched with an IV in order to receive that support. Levels of understanding and awareness of the role are low, among both children and young people in care and the professionals and carers who work and live with them. More recent studies highlight that further research is needed into the systemic obstacles to service access and under-provision of IV services (see Clancy, 2016). There is also a need to understand the current context and how we might demonstrate the impact of IV friendships in order to address such barriers and under-utilisation. Future research could explore the barriers and enablers to accessing IV support and identify where opportunity to address challenges and strengthen the IV model may lie.

Key points emerging from this review regarding the IV relationship are as follows:

- Children and young people need positive relationships with at least one trusted adult, who can be relied upon to provide practical and emotional support

- IVs need to be reliable to enable a trusting, positive relationship that is consistent over time

- The length of the match provides consistency and makes children and young people feel valued

- The strength of the IV role is in its unpaid, flexible and voluntary nature

- There is insufficient focus on the role that this support could play beyond 18 years of age, and there is no equivalent statutory service offered.

- More recent up-to-date evidence directly from children and young people is needed specifically concerning their experience of IV support to develop an evidence-based model of impact assessment.

More nuanced understanding of IV friendships might help to reduce some of the barriers identified between policy and practice. Finally, improved monitoring and evaluation might assist more successful adoption of IV schemes but there is currently no framework available to support this.

This project has sought to build on existing research and gaps in the current evidence base on IV friendships through:

- generation of evidence directly from children and young people about what is most valuable to them about their IV friendships;

- identification of outcomes and impact for children and young people as a result of their IV friendships, again directly from children and young people themselves;

- triangulation of evidence from children and young people with that of other stakeholders, namely IVs, IV coordinators, social workers and senior leaders in children's social care; and

- Exploration of potential components of a monitoring and evaluation framework.

Methods

Introduction

This research project focused on generating evidence directly from children and young people about their experience of having an IV friendship. We asked young interviewees to reflect on 'what works' for them, and to consider what, if anything, has changed for them, or they have learned, as a result of that friendship. Children and young people's perspectives were then triangulated with those of other stakeholders such as IVs, IV Coordinators, social workers and senior leaders in children's social care to develop themes and identify outcomes.

Originally, a learning partnership element of this project was designed to support NIVNs campaigning and influencing work. A series of theories of change and an action learning process for the NIVN team to support and iterate their work on campaigning and influencing were planned. Only the first stage of this work was able to be carried out, and a multi-agency theory of change workshop took place. Given that this process was truncated, it is not reported on extensively, but rather used to inform the report where useful.

Finally, this project undertook some initial light-touch research into potential approaches to monitoring and evaluation of IV provision, in order to begin consideration of how best to build a consistent body of evidence about the value of IV friendships for children and young people in and leaving care.

Learning questions

1. What does 'good' look like for children and young people in their friendships with Independent Visitors?

This 'what works?' style question sought to explore what children and young people in care value most about their IV friendships, and what, if anything, is unique about IV friendship, in comparison to other relationships with adults. Other stakeholders such as IVs, IV Coordinators, social workers and senior children's social care leaders were asked similar questions to triangulate the views of children and young people.

2. What outcomes and impact do IV friendships enable?

This question sought to explore the change that has occurred for children and young people in care, in their own eyes, as the result of their IV friendship. As with question 1, wider stakeholders were asked for their observations on what changes for children and young people.

3. What are the systemic barriers and enabling factors that affect IV friendships?

This question sought to identify current systemic factors that hinder IV friendships forming, and the enabling factors that support successful IV friendships and continue to make them possible.

4. What would appropriate monitoring and evaluation look like for IV services?

This question involved an exploratory process to identify potential options for a monitoring and evaluation framework that

is simple and clear, makes the most of existing information gathering approaches, and is straightforward for IV Coordinators to administer and NIVN to introduce, gather data on and monitor how it is used.

5. **Which aspects of the NIVNs work are most impactful for local, regional and national efforts to increase children and young people's access to a high quality IV? How might NIVNs impact be increased further?**

This aspect of the project, involving a learning partnership, was not able to be conducted in full. A draft theory of change was produced via a workshop, early on in the project. This is included in Appendix 2.

Approach to research

Given the limited evidence about IV friendships directly from children and young people, particularly recent evidence, this research focused on generation of qualitative information through interviews and focus groups with young interviewees.

Initially, to maximise the active participation of children and young people in the research, a peer research project was planned. It was hoped that children and young people could be recruited to participate via 3-4 local authorities; being trained and supported to undertake research with children and young people in their local area. Developing agreements with three local areas proved difficult to achieve within the relatively short time frame required ahead of beginning the research. As a result, agreements to undertake dyad interviews with children and young people and their IV, were

developed with three local authorities. Additionally, a focus group of young people involved with Become (the charity for children and young people in care and young care leavers) was agreed.

Through NIVN, the opportunity for children and young people to take part in an interview with their IV was promoted amongst network members. This resulted in ten online dyad interviews taking place. Five online focus groups, arranged by NIVN and consisting of their members (IV Coordinators and managers of IV services n=32) took place. The IV lived experience panel (a group of IV volunteers who advise NIVN) were interviewed online as a focus group (n=5).

Two local authority areas agreed to interviews with social workers and senior leaders. A total of seven online 1:1 interviews took place with senior leaders across the two areas, and one face to face focus group occurred (n=14).

Data collection and analysis

All participants were asked to provide informed consent ahead of interviews and focus groups. Consent was checked at the start of each interview and focus group before proceeding. All interviews and focus groups took place in spring of 2024.

All interviews and focus groups discussions were audio recorded, transcribed, and pseudonymised. Researchers regularly held check-ins to capture their reflections. These reflections acted as the first step in analysis, and subsequent readings of the data incorporated these within the analytic process. Transcriptions were analysed

using Reflexive Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021) using NVivo14 to code and label the data. Our analysis was theoretically informed by a child-focused lens, which sensitised particular issues of children's rights, power, inclusion, and dynamics related to age (Lundy, 2014). The subjective understanding of children and young people's experiences was prioritised to develop key themes. Data gathered from adult participants was then triangulated with the data from children and young people.

Ethics

Ethical approval was provided by Barnardo's. Informed consent was secured from all participants who were provided with age-appropriate detailed information sheets. It was made clear to participants that all data would be pseudonymised. Participants were offered the opportunity to withdraw from the discussion at any

time or to have any of their contributions to discussion removed up to two weeks after each interview or focus group was conducted.

A key concern was that participating children and young people were potentially a vulnerable group, given that many had been through difficult experiences. Children and young people were interviewed together with their IVs so that they would feel supported. The focus remained firmly on what works, and children and young people were invited to share positive experiences rather than being asked to disclose potentially sensitive information. In the focus group with young people, participants were asked to talk about their ideas in relation to IV friendship rather than sharing individual experiences. All participants were informed about limits to confidentiality in the event that any safeguarding concerts were disclosed.

Findings

Introduction

Findings are presented in four sections:

1) 'What works' for children and young people about IV friendships

2) Outcomes and impact of IV friendships for children and young people

3) Systemic factors, barriers and enablers

The proposed approach to monitoring and evaluation for IV services is detailed in a separate section.

This evidence about what works, and outcomes and impact, is grounded in the reflections of children and young people with experience of IV friendships. The cohort of children and young people interviewed clearly articulated messages about why they valued their IV friendship so greatly. Thoughts from other interviewees such as IVs, IV Coordinators, social workers and senior leaders within children's social care serve to triangulate the perspectives of children and young people.

In comparing responses across participants, considerable synergy was found. Inevitably children and young people often did not use the same terminology as adult participants, but similar meaning was evidently expressed.

1. What works for children and young people about IV friendships

Dyad conversations with children and young people and their IV, alongside a small focus group of young people,

consistently named the following five features of IV friendships as most valuable to them:

a) A genuine friendship with an emotional connection

b) Friendship with no agenda

c) A non-hierarchical relationship

d) Time spent voluntarily

e) Long term, consistent friendship.

Below, each 'what works' feature is described and illustrated, firstly with quotes from children and young people, and secondly is then triangulated with the perspectives of other stakeholders interviewed.

A genuine friendship with an emotional connection

The most significant theme to emerge through the 'what works' research with children and young people was their sense of an authentic and real friendship they experienced with their IV. Interviewees described their relationship with their IV using terms and features common to friendship such as feelings of relaxation, enjoying activities together, experiencing trust and acceptance:

They help, like, for you to open up, and they'll help, like, be in there like as your friend and take you places to go to to hang out. So it's like a buddy. (CYP7)

I mean, human friendly, like, with some adults, it's more like, ...like, you know, tough to deal with. With [my IV]... she's a bit more like, like a friend. (CYP10)

Young people's thoughts about their IV also reflected a deeper sense of significance for the friendship. They described genuine, supportive connections with their IVs and in doing so, revealed the important place the friendship holds in their context of their wider relationships:

And just chill, [a] really good friend... But I feel like this is one of the most genuine friendships that I've ever had, I must say. (CYP6)

Well, just someone to really talk to really. I don't really have to hold anything back. I just kind of need to... just someone to actually listen to what I'm saying. (CYP9)

Words such as 'genuine', 'connection' and 'actually listen' reveal a depth of feeling on the part of young interviewees, and communicate how the friendship with their IV is distinct from most of their other relationships.

IV interviewees also referred, in various ways, to common features of friendship when describing their relationship with the child or young person they're matched with, such as time spent together on activities, a sense of companionship, and building trust. A singularity of focus on the part of the IV emerged here, reflecting the IV's role as 'purely' to develop a friendship with the child or young person, without the requirements expected from paid roles such as social workers:

You know, it's really a friend.. somebody to play with her, walk with her, talk with her, eat with her. (IV7)

From my perspective, it's about building a relationship with that young person, you know, a relationship with [her]...a trusting relationship. (IV3)

IV coordinators, social workers and senior local authority children's social care leaders interviewed focused on features of quality friendship, such as the trust and acceptance they saw as inherent to the IV friendship. Those interviewed also referred to important features of quality friendship, such as trust acceptance, as central to the IV relationship:

That is, the IV likes and accepts them as they are. I think that makes a big difference. (IVC26)

It's literally just purely about the friend and becoming a trusted adult in their life. (LA10)

Descriptions about IV friendships from across the interviewee cohorts referred to features or characteristics of 'regular', quality friendship while highlighting how these can be more difficult or inaccessible for children and young people in care to develop. Placement moves and the challenges of meeting and developing trust with new people, for example, present common barriers for children and young people in care when developing friendships. The importance of such friendships, and the genuine, accessible or relatable connection they afford children and young people in care, is also particularly important given the number of professional, paid adults in their lives.

Friendship with no agenda

For children and young people in care, one of the most valuable aspects of their IV friendship centres on the 'separateness' of the IV, and their relationship, from the children's social care system. Young interviewees repeatedly referred to this notion, in their own terms, as an absence of an agenda or freedom from the particular dynamic they had experienced in time spent with looked-after professionals:

I think it's really nice kind of, having conversations with people who don't talk like that, and just speak normally. And they aren't trying to do some kind of like, psychological analysis on you, but having real conversation. (CYP 13)

They didn't turn up with, like, a clipboard and a pen or a notepad. So they weren't ... taking notes ... which again, made it more personable, and more like they weren't going through a form and being like, 'so how's your how's your wellbeing this week'? (CYP 12)

Spending time with someone who is not in a professional role, who brings no specific agenda or objectives to meet as part of time spent together (such as preparing for a meeting, a report etc), was significant for children and young people. This reflects an important feature of the IV friendship model. IVs, while recruited and supported by local area coordinators who either work for, or are commissioned by, the local authority, agree to a voluntary role with no objective other than to form a friendship

with a child or young person in care, ideally of two or more years.

Three young people interviewed as a group spoke about their IV offering a connection without the usual stigma they associated with professionals working in the social care system. One explained:

Being unmarked, like, like not having, like, a notebook, a pen, lanyard and all that stuff... like completely plain. (CYP11)

IV volunteers interviewed also felt that the separate nature of the friendship from the looked-after system was important. IVs viewed this distinctness as enabling them to offer a type of 'free' or open friendship to the child or young person, and saw this as intrinsic to the value of their offer of friendship:

It's also really that exactly that positioning, right, because I'm not part of the social care system. It's not my job to make sure that [the young person] sticks to all the household rules, or whatever. (IV10)

The independent part is quite good. The fact that, you know, I didn't know anything about [the young person]. So everything I know about [him] is what he's told me. (IV4)

One IV interviewed reflected on the importance of spending time with their young person with no specific agenda as uniquely important in the life of a child who is looked after:

Sometimes I think I'm the only person actually that hasn't got a vested interest. (IV15)

IV coordinators and local authority interviewees also recognised the IVs' distinctness from the children's social care system and saw this as vitally important for children in care. They spoke of the IV friendship as offering a relationship that was relatively pure and simple. Most importantly, the IV friendship was seen as free from the objectives that others in their lives, such as foster carers and social workers, brought as part of their professional responsibilities:

No agenda other than to support that young person, whereas sort of a social worker or foster carer, they've all got their own reasons for doing [things]... But when it comes to IV arrangements, there is no agenda. They're literally there just to be there for them, to get to know them. (IVC27)

We're doing an assessment, that's the agenda, that's what we are trying to complete, isn't it? And building a relationship is part of doing that. But sometimes the kids can see, that's what your what your aim is...there's nothing like that with the IVs. (LA10)

It's just being somebody who is happy to do what they want to do, and spend time with them just for who they are, and not for anything else. (LA8)

A non-hierarchical relationship

Children and young people referred to a more equal and relaxed dynamic in their friendships with their IVs. This sense of a level playing field was described in different ways, in children and young people's own terms, as distinct from other relationships with adults in their lives, and was strongly welcomed:

And adults at school, they kind of, I don't know how to explain it, but they kind of talk in a professional way as if they're talking down to my age. But like when I'm hanging out with (my IV), it's like, we're on the same level, in a way, like, [I'm] not just a little child. It's like you're talking as equals. (CYP6)

[My IV] can hear me out. Yeah, and if I'm, if what I'm saying is actually really crazy. Then she would be like, 'Oh, I don't think that's a good idea'. But, like, other people, like, they'll just shut you down... And then like we can both decide easily on what we'll do next time. I can speak to her a bit more openly. And, like, I know if I ever have a problem, she'll give me good advice. (CYP10)

For young interviewees, alongside their reflections on equality and freedom in their IV friendships, were observations of the independence and neutrality of the IV. Distinct from the system, with little or no knowledge about the circumstances of being looked-after, children and young

people described friendships with IVs as an opportunity for a 'clean slate connection in which they could be whoever they wanted to be:

[They] didn't have any kind of prior knowledge about me and any assumptions of me. So I felt like… with them I could be very different… that was kind of like a massive motivator for me. So it was great. (CYP13)

I just wanted someone I could talk freely [to] without anyone getting worried or something. So I just needed, like, someone to talk to, and just have fun with. (CYP1)

The importance of this clean slate opportunity is clear. Children and young people in care are often very aware of their case file, and its documentation of their history, alongside safeguarding concerns and challenges. A friendship free of that history, with space to reinvent oneself or behave differently to expectation, offers a rare and valuable chance to explore one's identity.

Part of this sense of equality and freedom for children and young people, and its appeal, was its two-way nature. While paid professionals may often subdue their personality and focus on their professional duties when with a child or young person, IVs are arguably more able to be themselves:

Like I know, not everyone's gonna have purple hair, but like, when they were allowed to share their own personality. Like if they dressed like

how they wanted to, again, it just made them more human. (CYP11)

IV coordinators reflected a very similar notion of equality, and reciprocity, when describing the features of the IV relationship. A typical reflection is exemplified here:

I think the relationship is reciprocal, which is massive, really. So they both get something out of it…The volunteer doesn't know anything about the [young] person unless they need to. And the other person knows more about them. (IVC15)

Inherent in these reflections is a sense of space that children and young people in care feel to be themselves, in a relationship without the specific objectives or requirements they come to expect with adults in their lives. IVs similarly spoke about this, and their own sense of freedom and relaxedness in the friendship:

[It's] a lot more relaxed, because I don't really care too much. And he doesn't care too much. So the whole thing, I think, works from that point of view, there's neither of us having to worry about being judged by the other. (IV15)

I didn't really know what to expect. I just sort of went with it. And yeah, pushing my boundaries as well. Because I'm not around younger people that often. And I guess I felt a responsibility. And I'm like, 'I've got to look after someone', but it doesn't feel

like I'm looking after someone. I'm just hanging out with a friend. (IV6)

Some IVs interviewed spoke about the importance of equality specifically in connection to the issue of a child in care's voice and choice. They felt that as an independent person in the life of a child in care, they could do, or discuss, what the child wanted to. They saw their capacity to do this as different from most other adults in the life of their young friend:

She says that I listen to her and what she's thinking and saying and doing and wanting to do. I don't think she has a lot of experience of people listening to her. (IV12)

[She] didn't choose that. That's, that's the system, allocating her social worker. And those people often think they know what's best for the young person. It's that choice thing, that discussion about choice. We just had, you know, people making decisions for her and things like that. (IV3)

One Local Authority interviewee also referred to the lack of control and choice children in care can experience, and valued the more equal footing offered in the IV relationship:

It's quite a powerful power imbalance, I would say, between child and social worker. Because obviously, we're making life changing decisions for these kids. So I think for children

with IVs, they're independent, you know, they're volunteers... [Children] might feel more comfortable sharing information with the IV because they're not perhaps as anxious [about] what's going to be done with that information. So I think it reduces that barrier. (LA2)

This more equal, free relationship between a child in care and an independent person, is possible due to the externality and volunteerism of the IV. Free from any duties and requirements governing their friendship, the IV and their young friend can create their own connection, be themselves, and cultivate a more equal relationship based only on enjoying spending time together.

Time spent voluntarily

Some children and young people interviewed referred specifically to the IV as a volunteer, and felt this to be an important feature of the relationship. Time spent voluntarily with them was seen as an indication of genuineness on the part of the IV, and described in contrast to the other adults in their lives:

You don't get paid [as an IV]. It's not a job... some people have no one... it's really good to have another kind of adult, who isn't being paid...to be able to just come to take you out... there isn't any, like, incentive. It can be quite good to kind of [help] build on... other relationships. (CYP13)

They're volunteering, you know, so it isn't like [a] job. So it feels like a lot more…I didn't think [IV] had to put up with like, nine, eight years to be with me. Spending her time to be with me. If she didn't care or anything. So it does show a lot. **(CYP4)**

IVs interviewed also referred to their voluntary status as central to the value and longevity of their friendships:

It seems to me that everybody in his life, is either a social worker, a teacher, or foster carer, everybody in his life…is actually, at some point, paid to be there. **(IV15)**

A common theme when I've spoken to other like, young people…they often say the same thing. They'd be slightly different things but it's like, 'oh, there's a person who's kind of there just for me. And they're not getting paid. They're just there because they kind of, they care about me'. And young people pick up on that: "There's someone who's here as a volunteer, and I trust them, and they're reliable". **(IV8)**

An IV Coordinator interviewee reflected on the high value of a motivated volunteer in the life of a child in care, describing the commitment of the volunteer as unique in this context:

The volunteer just wants to be there… that is what they (children and young people) pick up on as the relationship

progresses. And as they think "oh right you're still here, six months in", and that's what I think is unique about it. That it's often times the only person in that young person's life that isn't paid to be there. **(IVC2)**

Long term, consistent friendship

Children and young people referred to the long-standing and consistent nature of their IV friendship, both directly and indirectly, as a critical feature of its importance in their lives. The young people quoted below had experienced a long-term friendship with their IV, and reflected on the value of that supportive and consistent relationship over time:

I feel like it's definitely been good. 'Cause [it] just gives you like another person who you can go to in your life, and I'm probably gonna keep a relationship with [my IV], like after I'm 18 as well. So it's definitely gonna go on as well. So I feel like it gives you like that other person, that support as well. **(CYP4)**

How she was always there for me. **(CYP7)**

These sentiments indicate the degree to which children and young people in care can lack, and have need for, reliable go-to people to lean on for support and connection.

One IV interviewed also referred to the consistency and long-term nature of the

friendship as central to its value, both for the young person, and the IV themselves:

We've been lucky that, you know, neither of us has moved house or anything. So we've been, you know, we've had all this time together. And it's sort of definitely something that you couldn't imagine then, not being friends, just because he's turned 18. So… it is basically a lifelong friendship. (IV4)

IV Coordinators also spoke about the value of a long-term, consistent friendship for children and young people in care. This was seen as particularly important in the context of a social care system in which frequent staffing turnover, placement moves and connected changes of school and friends are a significant challenge for children in care:

One of the long-standing matches that I have, she says to the volunteer, "Can you tell me what it was like when I went to see the first pantomime?" Or "Can you tell me what I was like when I was 10?" So she likes to know, because she hasn't got anybody else she can ask. (IVC31)

With one person, every single month, they went to the cinema. She picked her up, went to the cinema, and then was dropped off, every single month, for two years. But for that young person at that time, she had seven placement moves, and it's the only thing she could rely on. (IVC 15)

He sort of points out to me that his IV has now known him for half of his life and he's 14. In that time he's had… 4 placements? …a few different social workers and all the rest of it… that kind of speaks volumes, like, this becomes like a really significant person. (IVC8)

Social worker interviewees were acutely aware of the turnover amongst their profession and the adverse impact of this on children and young people in care. They repeatedly referenced the stable, long-term consistent relationship offered by IVs in this context:

We hear so often from children… they hate having that constant turnover of professionals in their lives, or changes in their social workers, or different placements and school moves. And…if they are matched with an independent visitor, who sticks with them through thick and thin. That is, for some of them…the longest standing relationship that they have in their lives. (LA8)

The kind of consistency when that often, there's a, you know, high turnover of workers. You know, the young man that I was talking about, I mean, he had, when I first met him, I think [he'd] had, you know, kind of three different social workers in the space of the year…[and] was really lacking somebody that kind of really knew him. (LA1)

Children and young people clearly articulated the five most important features of IV friendships for them. These five areas were also referenced by other stakeholders, creating a triangulated set of features that describe 'what works for children and young people about IV friendships'.

In the next section, findings on the impact of IV friendships for children and young people are explored. Young interviewees identify the most powerful effects of their genuine, supportive, long term friendships on their health, wellbeing, skills, and experiences.

2. The impact of IV friendships

Children and young people, IVs, IV Coordinators and social workers were asked to reflect on any changes they had experienced or witnessed that they felt were attributable to, or connected to, the IV friendship. Responses from children and young people were analysed first to generate an initial first-person set of impact themes, followed by analysis across the remaining interview cohorts to produce a set of five triangulated impact areas. The five impact areas are:

a) Emotional security

b) Increased confidence

c) Improved wellbeing

d) Development of life skills

e) Expanded horizons and widened experiences.

Emotional security

Children and young people described how their IV had, over time, become their go-to emotional support person, with whom they could share feelings and worries. Each of the young people quoted below spoke about their IV as being the person they most trust:

If I don't have [my IV], I don't know who I can say anything happened to, but I have [her] so I can say anything to her and then she'll help me...I don't want to speak to a lot of people...[She] is the only one I trust. (CYP5)

[An IV is] like a best friend that will help you and bring you places. And then they will even treat you better than a best friend and they'll listen to you. And all the problems you have [they] will never judge you...I don't really trust other people... I trust her more than other adults. (CYP7)

I don't think I probably would have survived the situation if there wasn't at least someone who I could go and vent to. (CYP11)

The young people quoted above emphasise the emotional security offered by their IV, and the need for a trusted, supportive person who is unconditionally present - a person with whom they can 'talk about anything' (CYP9). These young people, in the same sentence, refer to the difficulties they experience with developing trust for adults. Often, for children and young people in and leaving care, there aren't many, or any, others with whom they experience similar levels of trust and support.

Becoming able to develop a trusting relationship with their IV, and experience the feelings of emotional security and support that comes from this bond, represents a significant change in the personal wellbeing of these children and young people in and leaving care.

When describing the emotional support offered by their IV, one young person emphasised the IV's independence from the care system, and how this impartial

perspective had helped build trust and foster a sense of security:

I think it's really important to have someone who has no idea or has no connection to your local authority or provider or whatever else so they can be really impartial (CYP13)

IV interviewees also described the emotional security they were able to offer through the cultivation and maintenance of a solid friendship. They reflected on the central role of trust in these friendships, and their conscious efforts to build a secure emotional space in which children and young people felt secure enough to talk:

And just being there really, if she wanted to talk about anything, you know, if you wanted to share, making sure that she feels comfortable and in a safe environment or safe space to talk and be herself. (IV7)

I would like to think [she] knows that. She could, she can, tell me everything in confidence. And she knows that unless it, you know, something [like] safeguarding and that puts her at risk, then that would stay between me and her. (IV3)

One IV spoke of their conscious effort to be consistent and punctual to help create a secure connection built on trust and dependability:

Punctuality is absolutely key... Because I've heard from the young

person's foster carer that sometimes social workers don't turn up on time, or they miss appointments, or whatever. And it's so frustrating for the foster carer and for the young person. So I make a real sort of promise that I will be there on the dot when I've said I will be. (IV11)

Another IV, reflecting the thinking of interviewee CYP13 above, emphasised the security their neutrality and impartiality offers:

You're not given any prior information so that you don't come with any preconceptions, you just come with an open mind. And you're just there for your young person. Really, it's just that relationship between the two of you. (IV4)

IV Coordinator interviewees referenced the consistent, reliable behaviour of the IV as critical to the development of the secure, trusting relationship they aim to forge with children and young people:

Turning up, when you say you will, no matter what is up, goes a really long way. It can take a really long time still, you know, for our young people to trust, as we know. (IVC29)

It's not being let down. It's that consistency, saying they'll do something and it's done. (IVC4)

One experienced IV Coordinator believes that young people 'trust their IVs more than they trust the other people in their

lives, even their foster carers.' (IVC13). Others extended this notion, reflecting on feedback from children and young people with IVs that described the importance of their relationship with their IV in pseudo- or actual familial terms:

I can also think about a match where a young person, I think it's probably about eight years long now, where the young person very sadly, has just moved all around the [region] of England, for a variety of reasons, but their IV has stuck with them. So wherever that child has gone, he's made it his business to continue to see him. And I just think that's made a huge difference. And the young man does talk about the IV as being like his dad. And yeah, that's very sad. I think that's very important to him. (IVC26)

I know [of] matches where the young person doesn't speak about the family at all. But actually, through building a relationship, [they] want to introduce the IV to their mum because they see how important the IV is in their life. (IVC3)

A tragic reality in the lives of many children and young people in care is the lack of secure emotional connections with biological family members. The stable and supportive emotional connections children are able to build with IVs offer the opportunity for close, supportive relationships that are akin to family. Stakeholder interviewees recognised

this, emphasising how the stable and supportive connection offered through the IV relationship leads to children and young people feeling valued, heard and cared for:

Our young people don't have a social worker for more than a couple of months... and they feel maybe the social worker doesn't even know them...they say..."My IV really knows who I am. They get me, they listen to me" and so they feel valued. (IVC23)

It's not somebody who turns up with a lanyard around their neck, you know, during the school day. So it is something purely personal to them; a real one to one relationship based with somebody who cares for them. (LA8)

Increased confidence

When asked if anything had changed as a result of their friendship with their IV, children and young people interviewed described increased confidence most frequently. They described their growing confidence in both general terms, and specifically in reference to situations or challenges they'd previously experienced, such as dealing with disrespectful peers:

Since spending my time with [IV6], my self-confidence has gone up quite a bit... At school when they [peers] try to talk down to me as if I'm a child, I will actually stand up and say, Can you not talk down to me? ...Hanging out with [IV6] just kind of made me more

talkative about things that I enjoy and new things I've learned on trips... It's kind of made me, like, be more myself in the open and not, not really care what people think. I don't like to fit into the categories at school, like, be this or be that, or you get bullied. I don't like that at all. (CYP6)

It is life changing in a way. With me, I'm talking from experience. You build confidence, and you build trust with people.... meeting new people isn't as bad. (CYP3)

Children and young people in dyad interviews spoke about their confidence, developed over time, to share details with their IV about their history, their relationships, and other matters of importance to them. Some young people also reflected how their increased confidence had enabled them to do things they'd previously never imagined doing, such as joining group activities or sports, and public speaking, including promoting the IV service to others. One young person, who had been able to share their artwork publicly, linked this to the increased confidence they felt. Another reflected on the development of spoken language skills as a result of her friendship with her IV.

IV volunteers observed the growing confidence of their young friends as evidenced by their ability to say what they want and need, and advocate for themselves, both within and outside the IV friendship:

His confidence is growing...I think in the very beginning, he's right, just very sort of easy, slotted into what we were doing, and that was it. Whereas now, he's learning to speak up for himself more. And some of the things that we discuss and talk about... confidence is the biggest thing I've noticed [develop] since we first met. He's very quiet, quite shy. And now [it's] quite difficult to get a word in. (IV1)

But also encouraging the young person to get involved...to attend, you know, their own meetings. My young person actually went to court for a final hearing, and wanted to say something to the judge. And she said, 'I would never have done it if we hadn't talked about it before'... She went to court and she managed to say what she wanted to say. (IV12)

IV Coordinators described examples of increased confidence of children and young people in social situations. For example, some children who hadn't previously been able to eat in front of others were now enjoying going to restaurants and cafes with their IV. Others described how children and young people were able to make friends more easily, and had developed more friendships since being matched with their IV. For example, one IV coordinator recounted an IV's role in the gradual development of a young person's confidence to attend a youth club:

I know [my colleague] has supported a young person who is matched with an IV that now comes to our youth club sessions...a young person that wasn't really doing very much and really lacked the confidence to do things without his foster family or without his sister. But with the support of his IV, who...brought him here, settled him into sessions, and then backed off gradually, this young person comes to youth club sessions quite frequently now. (IVC3)

IV Coordinators also heard, via foster carers, of the increased confidence of children and young people in and around their home:

And quite often you get some really positive feedback from the carers as well, that kind of detail some of these things that they've improved on. So like their confidence and their ability to do more for themselves or things like that, or just their willingness to open up or talk to somebody or leave the house with another person... And I think sometimes the [foster carer] can gauge it really well as to the changes that they've seen, that they think is because of that relationship, rather than it isn't. (IVC11)

One IV service manager reflected on the link between increased confidence and self-assertion of rights for many young people they've worked with:

Quite often, when they've got an IV that [they] then go on and have an advocate because their IV is kind of like challenging a few things. And so you know, making them a little bit aware of their rights. So it's kind of like finding their voice speaking. (IVC20)

Volunteer and local authority interviewees described how the increased confidence of children and young people with IVs enabled their engagement in activities and community groups such as Scouts/Girlguiding, sports groups, choir, attending church together.

Older young people described beginning to volunteer in their community, for example becoming a Brownie guide leader, another was volunteering time cooking at a community centre.

Improved wellbeing

Children and young people described improved personal wellbeing in connection to their friendship with their IV. Wellbeing was referenced in numerous ways, with some children and young people describing feeling happier and calmer. Other interviewees specifically talked about their IV as someone with whom they could talk through their worries and their mental health difficulties:

I must say that my mental health has definitely gone better since hanging out with [IV6]. It's seeing shows [together] and just having...walking round town. It just definitely gets my

mind off things. I think it's pretty nice. (CYP6)

I suffer really bad with mental health. So obviously, ever since [IV9] has been in my life, my mental health is, like, slowly going up, obviously, depending on what's going on, but she makes me happier as a person. (CYP9)

IVs interviewed were conscious of the worries their young friends carried, and described their offer of emotional support as an important part of the friendship. They saw talking about feeling low, or upset, or anxious was an inherent part of their offer as an adult friend:

[The IV friendship is] an outlet for you to have somebody to talk to. If things are not going as you want, or if you're feeling a little bit low, it's somebody that you trust. (IV5)

So you know, I sometimes give advice on, like, exam technique, or just how you're going to relax and, you know, don't stress about stuff. I think we've been talking about careers recently, and, you know, offered some advice about things he might consider. So it's more of a, it's more of a supplementary benefit to like the wider picture of what he's already got, and the changes that he's already undergoing. (IV4)

IV Coordinators reflected on numerous examples of IVs supporting children and young people with worries associated with exams, and introducing them to particular calming and relaxation techniques they'd found helpful. One IV Coordinator interviewed reflected on feedback from children and young people received over time, and how frequently they referred to feeling calmer:

I think probably the key word, which comes up for us, is a young person would say they're much more calm. We just had a massive internal inspection. And so we've been... gathering information from lots of young people, with people doing videos, ... the word trust is absolutely massive, and calmness, "I'm much more calm". (IVC24)

And the competence a lot of our young people have [developed]... young people [who] didn't want to leave the foster carer's house and the volunteers worked to build that. (IVC13)

Local authority interviewees also referenced wellbeing-related benefits of IV friendships for children and young people in care. For example:

So I think, you know, there's, there's broad benefits...if children are feeling healthier, and happier, they're more likely to learn and achieve better outcomes, you know, and go on to live a better life. Its] what we're all aiming for in terms of better outcomes for children, in its broadest sense. (LA7)

Development of life skills

Life skill development was referenced across all interview cohorts as an important outcome developed through IV friendships. Children and young people described how newly developed skills enabled them to navigate certain everyday interpersonal situations. Through activities with their IV, children and young people had the opportunity to do, and in some cases practise over time, everyday skills such as using public transport, ordering food for themselves, paying for items at checkouts or cash desks, and asking for things from waiting staff. Some young people described cooking skills learned by preparing meals with their IV at community facilities or in their semi-independent accommodation. Other children and young people spoke about the development of communication skills through their friendship with their IV, including public speaking.

Some children and young people also became more involved in IV community activities, events or networks. They also helped with education and employment e.g. by helping others prepare for job interviews. One young person viewed her IV as a go-to person to help think through challenges as she entered adulthood, and recommended this to all young people in care:

I mean, if they have a nice relationship, they can definitely keep that [going] forward, and just keep them as a good friend, you know, and if they ever need, like, advice on something or help on something… I

could definitely always get to [my IV]. So I'm, like, stuck on some, like more grown up stuff that I'm not there yet. Like I don't really know how to do… So [my IV] can definitely help me, like, progress in future. (CYP4)

And it also helped, like, improve my social skills because I find it incredibly hard to make small talk surprisingly, and meet new friends. So it's been really helpful. (CYP2)

IVs reiterated changes they'd witnessed in development of skills for life in their young friends, both for the here and now, and for their future:

And also, you know, increased, like, competence in skills, kind of getting around places, knowing what's on around. Yeah, and knowing what she wants to do kind of longer term, you know, getting work, you know, when she had stopped going to college. And I was like, oh, talk to your PA, I'm sure there will be other places that can help you with finding work. And [she] said, "Well, I can do that myself". You know… quite independent. Yeah. Quite good skills in that way. (IV5)

One volunteer described how rewarding it was to support their young person with everyday activities:

The joy that you get from being able to help someone by just doing normal stuff, you know… it is just going out and having some fun and doing all

sorts of stuff...I can't recommend it enough to be honest. (IV1)

IV Coordinators spoke about instances of children and young people developing interests and skills in exciting and unexpected ways, through the support and role modelling inherent in their IV friendship:

We've got an IV who's a brownie leader and ... that relationship with a young person has built. [The young person] is now a young leader at Brownies so she's kind of followed that kind of like interest of the IV and been supported in that and her carers have said that it's made a massive difference ... she said she would never have done [it] before. (IVC17)

And as he was getting older, he was like 17, at the time, we had an opportunity to go for [a] grant of money. And we had to put a proposal together. And so we asked around for [IV] volunteers ... you know, if anyone would be interested, I had a couple of people in mind. And this particular match, said, Yeah, they'd love to do it and so they put a whole presentation together to get us this grant. And they came with us, the volunteer and the young person. And there were about eight or 10 different charities there.... And we got the money because they were just awesome. (IVC29)

One social worker interviewee directly attributed the IV relationship to 'personal development' (LA9) for children and young people in care. Care system challenges, particularly those that result in frequent changes in relationships with adults, can complicate the development of life skills for children and young people. Over time, as their friendships grow, IVs give children and young people in care the opportunity to undertake activities and practise everyday tasks or interactions in the context of a safe and supportive relationship.

Broadened horizons and experiences

Children and young people interviewed repeatedly talked about having experienced new and different activities, ideas or situations that they'd not previously been exposed to or had opportunity to take part in. They also described the jobs, choices and lifestyles their IV had, that were different or new, in comparison to other adults they knew. Interviewees described a wide variety of activities they'd participated in with their IV, such as time spent outdoors, attending museums, theatre or concerts, learning how to grow plants, knitting and craft activities, playing sports, and visits to cafes as opportunities they wouldn't normally have in their everyday lives:

There [were] a lot of things that I really wanted to do that, you know, I probably wouldn't have done because there are things that I like, that my foster sibling wouldn't like doing, because we are quite different

people... I get to do these things that I've always wanted to do, but not necessarily been able to do. (CYP2)

I've experienced a bit more things than I did before. And I have a better understanding. And, like, I also have had more people to talk to about how I feel and my understanding about stuff. (CYP10)

IV interviewees didn't reference ways in which they had supported children and young people to widen their experiences (perhaps not recognising the value of their own contribution), however IV Coordinators reflected upon numerous instances of volunteers supporting their young friend to undertake activities, such as supporting a young parent to attend a parent and baby group, taking a young person to college open days, driving a young person to an activity they weren't able to reach by public transport, and incorporating that into their time together:

When she turned 18, there were activities she wanted to take part in but couldn't get to, and [her] volunteer incorporated that into their meetings? So their meeting would be about taking the young people to the activity, which I think the young person really appreciated, because she had the opportunity to be able to be involved in that. (IVC13)

IV Coordinators interviewed reflected on the ways in which developing a friendship, and having to discuss and decide together what they want to do, also gives children

and young people opportunities to discover and test out their personal likes and dislikes and to develop new interests:

I have a young person matched with an IV, who, recently on one of their first sessions together, they went...to the museum...I thought 'Not sure how that will have gone down, she might have been bored'. But then when I caught up with the young person, she was like, 'Oh, it was fantastic. We never do stuff like that, or with my foster carer, it was brilliant'. And it's not because the foster carer doesn't want to do those things. She's very busy. (IVC2)

Social workers repeatedly observed that the IV relationship had 'expanded horizons' (LA5) for the children and young people they worked with.

One of my young people in particular, his IV has really allowed him to experience, you know, the kind of opportunities that he wouldn't have had otherwise. So she's taken a real interest in the things that he's interested in... she's planned her activities around those interests. And he's been to, you know, concerts, theatre... So I think it's really nice that, you know, she's afforded him the opportunity to experience different things, you know, social and cultural kinds of activities that you might not ordinarily have access to. (LA1)

Social work interviewees spoke about the IV relationship as one in which children and young people have the opportunity to learn about the lives and choices of a wider variety of people, discovering new histories, employment options, hobbies and interests. One interviewee reflected that IV friendships enable children and young people in care to have a supportive relationship and opportunities 'just like their peers who aren't looked after' (LA8). Another social worker identified that IVs provide a 'role model' for children and young people (LA9).

3. Systemic factors, barriers and enablers

Given the enduring low access rate of IV friendships for children and young people in care, it was important that this research explored barriers and enabling factors with stakeholders. As detailed in this report's literature review, further understanding of the systemic factors contributing to the persistently low rate of access was identified as needed. Additionally, this project's focus on 'what works' about IV friendships indicated a need to understand more about the systemic factors that support IV friendships.

IVs, IV Coordinators and local authority staff interviewees were asked about the systemic factors that can hinder or support the goal of long-term successful IV friendships. Dyad interviews with children

and young people and their IVs, and the focus group of care leavers, did not overtly address barriers and enablers, and rather explored the pair's personal experience of IV friendship.

Enabling factors

The following five factors were most commonly identified as enabling successful long term IV friendships:

a) Volunteers well-suited to the role

b) Placement stability

c) IV champions in various parts of the children's social care system

d) The work of IV Coordinators in support of the first three factors

e) NIVN's work to support IV Coordinators, produce resources and encourage best practice.

Volunteers well suited to the role

The individual personal strengths of IV volunteers emerged as an important factor enabling successful long-term IV friendships. IV Coordinators readily identified the characteristics of IVs whom they had observed as most suited to the role, and able to successfully build and sustain relationships with their young friends. Particularly, flexibility, creativity and child-centredness in IVs were named as facilitating longer-term matches. The ability to adapt activities or contact frequency in response to children and young people's changing needs was cited repeatedly:

It changes over time. First it's been about doing activities and establishing that relationship. And then I've noticed with the longer-term matches that we had one that went to independent living and the volunteer then changed to ... plan a meal list and go shopping to get the things and then they would go back and cook the meal together. But before it was about going out for meals together, or going bowling. (IVC13)

There's something around the flexibility of that relationship as well, because as young people get older, you know, they want to see their friends more. I've got some at the moment, [they've] got part time jobs at the weekend, you know, so we've got some IVs in there [with] young people who don't meet every month strictly anymore, you know...And it's just that flexibility and a recognition from the IV that yes, we're still friends, but it doesn't have to be as rigid as it was when we were first matched. (IVC21)

Given the relatively small budget IVs are given to pay for activities on each visit, creativity was seen as important to sustainable friendships:

There's also something about an IV who can be creative with a small budget. Yeah. Somebody who's willing not to just do the expensive, fun activities, but do the feeding the ducks and going for a bike ride. (IVC26)

The child-centredness of the IV was also repeatedly mentioned. This was observed in a number of ways, centring on the IV's thoughtfulness and responsiveness to the child's wants and needs:

I also think the IV being responsive to the child... remembering and noticing and listening. (IVC26)

The people that have lasted the longest you can see they're so thoughtful... the IVs - they're always thinking about the child... it's not about them. It's not what they are getting from this... Their whole focus is on the child... We could see they plan their visits around the child and what would the child's interests [be], you know, going to like an art do, doing spray painting, or going to like a wildlife exhibition, you know, that's what the young person's into. (IVC23)

The individual personal skills and strengths of IV volunteers, such as communication, are also evident in other enabling factors below.

Placement stability

Both IVs and IV Coordinators named placement stability as an important enabler of long-term IV friendships. For children and young people in stable placements, the IV friendship was possible to maintain over time, and could build on the solid foster care relationship:

I mean, [he's] got a really great placement, he's got a fantastic

relationship with his carer. And that stability I think, it just, in a way, it's almost more like, I feel like our relationship, our interaction, our friendship... is part of like the bigger picture of how [he] has developed. (IV4)

Consistency and stability, the fact that... if the young person is in a stable placement, then what ultimately the IV can help with that as well, just by being a consistent member of their support network, and I think their placement is relatively stable, then that arrangement can just keep, keep sort of going. We've had arrangements and they're sort of [matched] 12 years this year. And then because young people haven't, haven't had many moves and we're able to maintain that kind of consistent, stable visit with their IV. (IVC27)

Given IVs are usually recruited to match with children and young people in their local area, placement changes can lead to children moving far from the home they lived in at the time of the match. Living relatively locally was seen as helpful to enable IVs to offer consistent time to children and young people over the long term, and made practicalities such as transport simpler:

Some of my longest matches [are] where the volunteers haven't lived too far from the young person as well. And I think that makes a big difference in their flexibility. I was talking to one of my volunteers yesterday who was saying it's been such a benefit to her ... not to live too far away because she can just finish work, like nip over there, pick her up, take her out of an evening and have her back and it's not too late. Whereas if she lived further away she'd be limited to only being able to do visits at weekends. And that wouldn't work around everything else that she's got going on. (IVC13)

System champions

The support of people working in or close to the children's social care system was seen as very helpful, both to the profile of the IV service within a local authority, and the sustaining of individual matches. One IV Coordinator valued the support of a senior leader to help promote the importance of IV friendships:

The other thing is that that one of our directors... had an independent visitor themselves when they were young, and they were sharing their story to our lot of independent visitors that I manage and and he was saying how she [his IV] had such a positive influence on him that he is still in contact with that independent visitor even now.... And he's gone into this line of work because of basically him being supported by an independent visitor. (IVC5)

Foster carers were identified as particularly important allies for IV friendships. An IV interviewee reflected on the importance of support from their young person's foster carer, who was seen as trusting and relaxed:

What we do is, when we're out, we start discussing what we hope to do the next time. So then we know roughly how long that's going to take. And then when I get back, we go through the calendar and mark in our date at that point. So we know exactly where we're going. And I usually tell [the foster carer] what we're going to be doing. And then I've got to say they're pretty good. Actually, they trust me to take him off. And it's just 'text us when you're on your way home'. There's no set timings or anything like that. (IV1)

One IV coordinator spoke about the importance of foster carers and IVs building a relationship, to enable the building of trust. This was seen as important to cultivate from the very beginning of the match with a meeting:

You've got the foster carers in that sort of space as well, that in that first meeting, trying to understand who this person is because obviously it's corporate parents, there is that anxiety about 'who is this person that's going to be spending time with a child'... so it just gives [IV's] that platform to just kind of say a little bit about themselves just to break the ice with the foster carers and the child. (IVC16)

This communication, when carried on, ensures the foster carer is both consulted and well-informed about future meetings:

I've been fortunate enough with the young people I've had that the foster carers have been instrumental, and between us we've made it work... I agree [the meeting] with the foster carer upfront. I will arrange dates and times and everything with [her], because she knows CYP3's calendar. She knows when CYP3's exams are, you know, that sort of thing...I think the relationship between me and [the foster carer] and CYP3, it's worked, because [they] are very supportive of the IV concept. So I'm very lucky. (IV3)

The work of IV Coordinators

The work of IV Coordinators to match children and young people in care with IVs, alongside their work to promote the service and cultivate/influence internal stakeholders emerged as an essential enabling factor. Their thoughtful and evolving work, aimed at continually strengthening the likelihood of successful matches, was evident throughout the research.

Interviews revealed how IV coordinators had learned over time to increasingly effectively promote the IV volunteering opportunity, and to recruit, screen, train and support the IV volunteers most likely to succeed in the role:

And that was one of the reasons we made our recruitment process a little bit longer, because if you're not willing to commit to a process coming in, how can we trust them to commit to a young person? (IVC4)

IV Coordinators described their continually evolving work at each stage of the befriending process. They detailed their nuanced matching processes with examples such as the introduction of IV pen portraits to help children and young people feel more comfortable about meeting someone new. Support from IV Coordinators during the first 3-6 months of the match was seen as particularly important to increase the likelihood of a sustained friendship, to support the 'getting to know you' process and help smooth out any potential obstacles.

IVC Coordinators described the significant efforts invested in matched children and young people with IVs. While not always possible to identify common interests between the two to support the match, they worked to create personality matches:

It's not always the case but often, I think the relationship or bonding can happen through something in common, like a shared hobby, shared interest, shared culture, background, shared personality [traits], vibe, something they have in common. (IVC28)

The promotional and awareness raising work of IV Coordinators was also important to help cultivate a more consistent stream of referrals from social workers and Independent reviewing officers. They described their continual conversations, meetings, events and other promotional activity aimed at building firstly the awareness of, and secondly the trust of, referrers in the IV service.

The work of NIVN

IV Coordinators repeatedly referenced the value of the support, information and resources they accessed, and shared, through the NIVN to enable their work. They particularly spoke of the importance of coming together in regional or national groups, and at annual conferences, to share good practice, discuss challenges and decide the most important projects to work on within the network, such as the development of training resources or recruitment guidance.

IV Coordinators often work alone in local areas, or in very small teams, and placed a high value on the collegial support offered through their NIVN-supported groups.

Barriers

This research sought to explore and deepen understanding of systemic barriers to children and young people accessing the valuable support of an IV. Our research indicates that many of the challenges identified historically (detailed in this report's literature review) persist. IV Coordinators, social workers and senior leaders interviewed identified the following barriers:

a) Children and young people's placements

b) Volunteer recruitment

c) Commissioning of IV services

d) Local authority under-investment, and

e) Stakeholder skepticism.

Placement related barriers

IV Coordinators repeatedly referred to out-of-area placements and placement moves as both providing particular challenges for matching to occur, or for the maintenance of existing IV friendships. When a child or young person wanting an IV lives in an out of area placement, coordinators spoke about pursuing more complex options such as directly recruiting an IV living in the new placement locale, or seeking a budget to spot-purchase an IV local to the placement area from the relevant authority. Neither option was seen as particularly satisfactory, while being resource intensive both in terms of time and money.

When children and young people with an existing IV friendship experienced placement moves, IV Coordinators expressed their frustration that the IV friendship is not always considered as part of the decision-making process:

It's quite common...where young people are just moved. And that [IV] friendship is not taken into consideration, which is a huge part of a young person's life [and] is contributing to their success in the future, or it's not considered as being important. But it is. (IVC4)

While placement moves did not always mean the end of the IV friendship, especially when IVs have cars and are willing to travel further than anticipated, they did present challenges such as funding additional travel expenses. For IVs who do not drive, the move could mean the end of the friendship. This potentially abrupt ending creates further loss and inconsistency for the child or young person during an already significant period of change.

Volunteer recruitment challenges

Recruitment, I think, continues to be an uphill challenge. (IVC18)

Many IV Coordinators interviewed spoke about maintaining waiting lists of children and young people who were keen to be matched with an IV. Alongside them, some social workers referenced long waiting lists when referring the children and young people they worked with to the IV service. Numerous references were made to difficulties recruiting volunteers generally, exemplified here:

And as we all know, recruitment of volunteers is fairly challenging at the moment. I think we can all say that there's not massive uptake, and I'm trying to look at inventive ways of how we can do that. So we can match [those] young people. (IVC6)

Generally there was considered to be a lack of awareness of the IV role within mainstream public knowledge. Others had encountered IV recruitment barriers specific to rural areas:

I'll get loads of people apply [to be an IV] centrally, but then they have very specific expectations, like, some of them will be like, I can't drive, which makes it harder to match. Because it's quite a rural area, most of my referrals are out in rural areas, or they want to use public transport, which makes it harder because there's rubbish routing, or they don't want to travel very far. So it makes it a challenge. (IVC13)

One IV Coordinator spoke about challenges in recruiting male IVs, an issue mentioned on several occasions throughout the research:

Just in terms of getting males and I've got quite a few young boys... who are very clear that they do want to a male [IV] so ...they can be waiting for quite a while in order for us to kind of recruit and we have been doing recruitment to ...businesses where we know that maybe there are maybe more males employed or ...rugby and football clubs ...looking at those areas. (IVC17)

Commissioning related barriers

IV Coordinators working for charities that deliver commissioned IV services described significant challenges connected to local authority procurement processes, including at times recommissioning processes with greater delivery requirements and shrinking funding envelopes. IV Coordinators expressed concern about the impact on service quality if they were, for example, asked to deliver more matches for less money.

A central concern regarding recommissioning revolved around the impact on hard-won referral streams and the trusting relationships built over time at the heart of them:

You have an established service that's very successful, and then it loses the contracts. And you start again, as has happened to me quite a few times, it's really tough, because it's not down to the fact we weren't delivering a quality service. It's just down to the commissioning process. And then all of your publicity material that you've got put up in various locations has to be changed. And then you're having to build a profile up again. So that is definitely a challenge. (IVC18)

A big thing recently is we've just separated, we were working jointly with [the local authority]l. And we've separated out. So we've had a whole new management team put in place and we've had lots of changes in workers. So we'd built up quite a good knowledge about the service. And all workers have changed again, I feel like we're back to going out to meet [the] teams and letting them know who we are and stuff again. So yeah, that's been a challenge for us. (IVC13)

Under-investment by local authorities

Numerous IV Coordinators and other local authority interviewees referred to an excess of demand and insufficient supply of IV volunteers. Some IV Coordinators felt torn about advertising or promotion to recruit volunteers as they didn't have enough team support in the form of IV Coordinators to train and support those volunteers. One local authority leader spoke about the difficulty attracting additional internal investment for the IV service in a difficult climate:

It's a criticism of the [local] authority. I can't remember the exact number of [IV's] we have. But I know the provision doesn't match the demand. The funding for the supervision of the IVs, that becomes the issue because the IVs themselves only cost you their expenses. So that's not the… resource demand. It's, for every X amount of IVs, you need to have a supervisor. And that's what costs the money. So supervisors …will cost about £60,000. I do think the authority doesn't invest enough. I did put in a bid this year for an additional IV supervisor so that we get more IVs. When it does come up against that and a social worker, you've got a choice between the two. You know, I nearly always get pushed down the road. So it's always a hard decision, and it's not comfortable. (LA4)

Stakeholder scepticism

IV Coordinators spoke about the importance of others in the children's social care system supporting the child or young person to build and maintain their IV friendship. One coordinator expressed their frustration when foster carers or residential staff aren't supportive of (and sometimes actively disruptive of) the IV friendship:

Carers and resi[dential] staff are a big barrier if they don't get it right… they've [residential staff] forgotten the volunteer's coming in, and they say 'sorry, we didn't put it in the diary'. Or [it] was carers blocking visits or, you know, being really obtrusive, and not not being forthcoming in planning visits, you know. And we sometimes have to go back to supervising social workers to say 'give this carer a kick.' (IVC11)

One IV spoke about their awareness of this barrier, heard during an IV group discussion:

I know that in our group, we've got IVs that have got young people with foster carers that don't want them to be with the IV, and can be quite, you know, can be blockers. (IV3)

The reasons behind this apparent scepticism or suspicion were not clear. Coordinators shared a variety of possible reasons for this, including foster carers potentially finding the idea of an IV

threatening - 'they don't need you anymore'. Numerous IV Coordinators spoke about scepticism that had shifted with exposure - once a child or young person's carer had begun meeting with an IV, and the carer could see that it was a positive relationship that did not undermine the carer/child relationship, they began to behave more supportively.

A suitable monitoring and evaluation framework

Evidence on the outcomes achieved for children and young people, and the long-term impact of IV friendships is currently very limited. This hinders efforts to build a strong case for greater access to IV's for children and young people.

Following on from research findings about the value of IV friendships for children and young people, and the outcomes and impact those friendships enable, exploratory thinking regarding a suitable approach to monitoring and evaluation occurred. This was preliminary only, and the work achievable within this research project will require support and follow-up by NIVN members, local authority leaders and other stakeholders.

There is no unified system for data recording (such as IV access rates, relevant demographics and length of matches), or outcome/impact capture, across England and Wales. Currently, each IV service both decides which data to record, and how to record it, differently. Indeed, there are potentially significant challenges associated with proposing a unified approach, given the various commissioning arrangements, differing sizes of in-house

services, and performance indicators or service/contract outcome measures in use across England and Wales.

The intention for this aspect of the project was to consider current approaches and propose ideas that would be accessible and manageable for busy IV Coordinators to use. Bearing in mind NIVNs likely role in facilitating the introduction of any potential new approach, we aimed to develop options that would be relatively straightforward to introduce, gather data on and monitor use of centrally.

Priority factors in developing these ideas were as follows:

- the need to build an evidence base demonstrating outcomes and impact
- the potential for introducing measures that could be used consistently across local areas
- maintaining the uniqueness of the IV friendship, which has no set agenda or requirements imposed upon it
- making use of existing mechanisms of data where possible, such as monthly IV logs detailing their visit.

Existing approaches

The research team conducted a light-touch exploration of current tools and mechanisms commonly in use across IV services to gather feedback and information on outcomes and impact. Whilst this was not exhaustive, it revealed a variety of approaches, with some similarities across many services, including:

- IV logs: completed by IVs following their monthly visits with children and young

people, these usually ask for a brief description of the visit, activities, and for details on any safeguarding or other concerns

• Feedback forms for children and young people

• Feedback forms for IVs

• Feedback forms for referrers

• IV reviews: some services conduct annual reviews with IVs, exploring both the development of IV friendship and the IV's experience of befriending

• KPI data set by individual local authorities capturing information such as the number and length of IV friendships matches.

Analysis of the above mentioned approaches indicates that the majority of information gathered falls into the category of feedback. Feedback is highly valuable subjective information that details an individual's experience of an IV service and supports a local area's service development and improvement efforts such as recruitment training content or group support for IVs. We found far less information that could be considered to be outcomes or impact capture, which when gathered systematically, can build a clear and robust picture of the value of IV friendships in an area.

To build an evidence base about the outcomes and impact IV friendships achieve, information about what has changed for children and young people with IV friendships must be sought, documented and collated. More objective questions that explore individual progress will be necessary. This could happen

through two avenues:

• The introduction of a standard set of 'what has changed' style questions into every method of feedback capture listed above

• The introduction of a standardised/ validated measure to consistently ask outcome questions.

To be of the greatest value as evidence of what has changed, questions added to existing forms and processes will need to be objective and specifically explore individual progress of children and young people with IV friendships. The information can provide a local picture of outcomes achieved, and if all local areas are consistently asking the same questions, at the same time intervals, data can be generalised to provide a national picture of short to medium term impact, and illustrate long term change facilitated by IV friendships.

A standardised/ validated measure

The research team considered a variety of tools and measures such as self-reporting scales, monitoring tools used by other befriending programmes and standardised tools that have been found to effectively measure constructs relevant to the outcomes for children and young people found in the research.

To begin, 34 scales broadly relevant to the outcome measures identified in our research were considered. This was narrowed to ten measures that were most

relevant to outcomes. Each of the ten was examined in detail to consider:

- How closely it measures the identified outcomes

- The number of items/questions

- Administrative simplicity

- Ready availability and cost

- Evidence demonstrated consistency across the UK and abroad ideally.

No single scale presented a perfect fit with the outcomes identified in our research. However, the Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing scale covered four of the five outcomes well, with the exception of the life skills outcome. Appendix 3 illustrates the analysis of the final 10 scales.

A future monitoring and evaluation framework for IV friendships

In order to develop a robust data set that captures the outcomes and impact IV friendships achieve for children and young people in care across England and Wales, local areas should, at a minimum:

- introduce outcome-oriented questions to the monthly contact log completed by IV volunteers. Over time, these will create a picture on impact.

- add a validated measure (such as the Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing scale) to the information they gather with children and young people, and

- account for the life-skills outcome measurement gap in the Warwick through a specific set question or short set of questions that could be added to existing data gathering mechanisms with children and young people.

This exploratory element of the research requires further focused attention and a more comprehensive discussion with local areas, followed by an implementation and testing approach. During the course of this project, the research team shared this preliminary research with a group of IV Coordinators as a focus group to gauge initial responses, before presenting our work to a larger group from across England and Wales at the NIVN conference in September 2024. Mixed responses were received, ranging from encouraging to significantly sceptical. Discussions with IV Coordinators surfaced challenges connected to children and young people feeling 'over-surveyed' and concerns about the potential for intrusiveness with a validated measure on mental health and wellbeing.

One option is to potentially pilot a range of outcome and impact-oriented forms and a standardised measure in a few local authority areas, exploring and iterating the approach as it beds in. This presents an exciting prospective path forward.

Discussion

Introduction

Findings from this research provide important qualitative evidence directly from children and young people about the value and impact of their IV friendships, adding to the limited existing literature. Triangulated with the perspectives of stakeholders, the evidence indicates the vital importance of IV friendships for children and young people in and leaving care, and the ways in which the relationship contributes to their wellbeing and promotes their development in multiple aspects of their lives. These findings resonate with earlier studies (see, for example, Hardy, 2007; Hurst & Peel, 2013; Barnardo's, 2022) .

Our research focused on building an understanding of 'what works' for children and young people and, included in this, identifies the most important areas of impact of IV friendships ('what's changed') as voiced by children and young people in and leaving care. The identification of outcome and impact areas is an important development for IV research. To date, literature which focuses specifically on IV friendships (see Clancy, 2017; Knight, 1998), as opposed to broader consideration of children in care and associated provision, has been very limited. Our research suggests that IV friendships have the potential to deliver positive, supportive experiences in the short to medium term, alongside tangible longer-term outcomes.

Prompted by an identified gap in literature (see Clancy, 2016), our research also included an exploration of the systemic and contextual factors that enable, or create barriers to, IV friendships. Finally, potential monitoring and evaluation of IV friendships was explored by the research team, in an effort to support wider thinking about what will help shift the enduringly low access rate of children and young people in and leaving care to IV friendships.

Two distinct themes emerge from the interviews, centred on the personal development opportunities IV friendships present for children and young people. These are discussed in detail, followed by a section focused on 'shifting the 3%'. This latter section includes discussion of the systemic barriers to and enablers of IV friendships, the role of monitoring and evaluation in the development of a strong evidence base for IV friendships and the role of NIVN as a national platform for supporting good practice in IV provision and influencing both local and national governments to better fund and support - thereby increasing - children and young people's access to an IV friendship.

Personal growth and personal agency

Findings from this research project suggest two central themes that together illustrate the immense, and arguably essential, value of IV friendships for children and young people in and leaving care. These themes, emerging directly from conversations with children and young people themselves, and further built on with the perspectives contributed by IVs and those working in or with children's social care, offer a collective account of what makes IV friendships so important and powerful.

The two interconnected themes are:

a) IV friendships offer the opportunity for personal growth, emanating from

i) the security and emotional connection of a long term supportive friendship

ii) the safety and freedom of a friendship that is outside the children's social care system

b) IV friendships offer the opportunity for the development of personal agency, emanating from

i) the more equal IV relationship, developed outside the care system, that encourages choice, negotiation and self-advocacy

ii) exposure to activities, ideas and experiences that expand thinking and horizons.

The opportunity for personal growth

IV friendships offer children and young people the opportunity to develop the type of consistent, positive and loving relationship that has long been recognised as of vital importance, and is often not available to them. Circumstances common to the experience of growing up in the care system, such as placements that break down and social workers who leave or change roles, frequently result in a dearth of stable and supportive relationships for the very children and young people who need them most. Even for children and young people fortunate enough to experience a stable foster family placement and a long-term social worker, the reality

is that the most prominent adults in their lives are paid to fulfil specific duties. Young interviewees participating in this research were quite aware of this. Consequently, the relationships children develop with those adults are limited by the constraints that duties and safeguards require.

Findings from this research illustrate the immense personal growth enabled through the stable, supportive connection that develops between children and young people in care and their IV. Children and young people characterised their friendships with their IV by referring to concepts of authenticity, genuineness and honesty, alongside their references to positive relationship features such as trust, acceptance and emotional support. Through these friendships, it was possible for children and young people to develop feelings of safety and trust toward their IV, to feel cared for, supported and valued, and consequently be able to share thoughts, worries and concerns that they weren't always able to do with the other adults in their lives.

Children and young people interviewed described their IV as the person they trusted the most, who offers an unconditional supportive presence and, by virtue of IVs being unpaid and separate from the care system, could offer them a safe relationship and emotional connection within which to share problems, worries, thoughts and ideas. From the solid foundation of trust and long-term security, children and young people described their personal growth, most importantly their increased confidence and improved mental health and wellbeing.

The positive changes children and young people describe in their confidence and wellbeing, also observed by IVs, IV Coordinators, social workers and in some interviews noted from foster carers, are potentially very significant on two levels. First, the individual children and young people involved are happier and more secure, benefiting from a consistent relationship that helps them navigate the challenges inherent in adolescence and the transition into adulthood.

Secondly, the consistent loving relationship, akin to the stabilising family relationships that many children and young people in and leaving care lack, offers them the opportunity to experience someone firmly in their corner, and build a foundation that is significantly more solid than it would be otherwise, and nearer to the experience of those fortunate enough not to grow up in care. This second point illustrates the potential of IV friendships to create a 'levelling' opportunity for children and young people growing up in care, with the potential to improve their life chances and long term outcomes.

The opportunity to develop personal agency

The IV model, with its core features of independence, equality, volunteerism, and stability, offers a relationship that provides children and young people in and leaving care with a gateway to the development of personal agency. Two of the five impact areas identified in the research - the building of life skills, and broadened horizons and experiences - led to children and young people building experience of and capacity for thinking through

challenges, discussing and weighing up options, strengthening social skills, and developing independence, amongst other positive changes. Alongside this, children and young people spoke of benefiting from exposure to new experiences, new opportunities, and role models outside the care system.

In combination, new skills and broadened horizons offer children and young people the chance to grow ambition and develop strengths, talents and ideas they will need for adulthood. Children and young people interviewed spoke about the myriad ways they undertook and navigated new experiences alongside their IV, and in doing so were exposed to information, activities, options, ways of living and thinking they'd not been aware of before.

The equality inherent in IV friendships is a critical factor here. The volunteers independence, and their freedom from requirements and duties beyond developing a friendship, sets the scene for a relationship in which the child can strengthen or better use their voice and independent will, and exercise choice about how their time with their IV is spent. For children and young people in care, this may be a dynamic they have not experienced before, and offers an opportunity to exercise increased choice and control in the IV friendship, in comparison to all their other relationships with adults.

Children and young people develop skills and broaden their horizons within a secure relationship that has no agenda, and both the child and the IV are free to be themselves. The relationship develops

as the two find shared interests and sources of enjoyment, and the child is encouraged to say what they want and need, and is accepted for who they are (in a context where the IV has little to no prior knowledge of their history). The sense of equality and freedom repeatedly described by young interviewees provides them with a base from which to better understand who they are in the context of the (expanding) world around them.

The care-experienced children and young people interviewed for this project placed a high value on the lack of agenda in their friendship with their IV. This more equal relationship between a child or young person and an adult offers the child a space in which they can set the agenda - through encouragement to explore their interests, articulate what they like and want, and as they become older, consider what their future might feature. According to the psychologist Bandura (2006), setting the agenda for oneself is a critical component of personal agency:

To be an agent is to influence intentionally one's functioning and life circumstances... They are not simply onlookers of their behavior. They are contributors to their life circumstances, not just products of them. (Bandura, 2006: 164)

Young interviewees described their sense of having an agenda set for them by adults with duties and responsibilities to care for and protect them, and their frustrations with this.

The long-term IV relationship, in which children and young people in and leaving care have the opportunity to repeatedly explore ideas, decide what they think and make decisions which are then respected and upheld by the IV, is a space in which to form their intentions and set the agenda.

Shifting the 3%

Evidence from this research project clearly demonstrates the value of IV friendships for children and young people in and leaving care. The stable, supportive relationship enables the building of trust, confidence, and promotes their well being, alongside facilitating the building of life skills and broadening the horizons of children and young people in care.

The enduring low access rate for IV friendships - a very disappointing 3.5% - is highly unsatisfactory. Exploration of the barriers to IV friendships in this research project identified a number of the barriers highlighted in previous literature (see Hardy 2007; Ofsted, 2012; Hurst & Peel, 2013; Kersley et al., 2014; Pellicano et al., 2014; Barnardo's, 2016; Towler, 2016; Hudson et al. 2019; Clancy, 2017; MacAlister, 2022), particularly regarding commissioning and insecure funding related challenges, scepticism amongst stakeholders, and the continual challenge of promoting and raising awareness of the right to an IV amongst referrers and other stakeholders. This research also identified additional systemic barriers for IV friendships connected to placement moves and volunteer recruitment. Addressing these barriers to grow the percentage of children and young people in and leaving care to IV friendships will be essential to increase their access.

Encouragingly, this project also identified five enablers of IV friendships: volunteers well-suited to the role, placement stability, the presence of IV champions in various parts of the children's social care system, the work of IV Coordinators in support of the first three factors and finally, the work of NIVN in supporting IV Coordinators, developing resources and sharing good practice. These five enablers require support and investment in order for children and young people in and leaving care to continue to benefit from IV friendships.

The monitoring and evaluation research, a small-scale, exploratory aspect of the project, presents a first step toward gathering consistent outcomes oriented information about the impact of IV friendships for children and young people in and leaving care.

Summary

This research makes a valuable contribution to the limited existing IV literature centred on the voices of children and young people in care. Young interviewees clearly described the value of IV friendships for them, and the important ways in which IVs have supported and facilitated change in their lives. This project also contributes to analysis of systemic enabler and barrier factors in existing literature, offering an updated perspective on what must be addressed and invested in further, to support the growth of the perennially low access rate to IV friendships.

Finally, this project undertook exploratory research into a potential monitoring and evaluation framework that can enable the building of robust, consistent evidence on the outcomes of and impact achieved through IV friendships. The work of NIVN is critical here, in bringing together and supporting IV Coordinators in their work, developing guidance, resources and best practice, and will be essential to the future work of introducing more consistent measures to capture change. The campaigning and influencing work NIVN undertakes is more essential than ever, to draw attention to barriers, and continue to support enabling factors.

Recommendations

The numbers of children entering the care system in England and Wales over the last decade has increased significantly, with outcomes remaining steadfastly poor. Challenges for children and young people growing up in the care system are well documented, particularly regarding the need for stable, loving relationships with supportive adults. This research demonstrates that IV friendships offer the consistent emotional connection children and young people in and leaving care need, with the accompanying opportunity for personal growth, and also offer a second essential dimension: the opportunity to expand horizons and learn critically important life skills.

The impact areas children and young people named, triangulated with evidence from stakeholders, build a strong case for far more significant investment into IV services. Given the IV relationships are developed through volunteers, these high-quality, high-impact relationships come at relatively low cost.

This research found the work of IV Coordinators to be sophisticated relational work - building trust with referrers, problem-solving barriers, thoughtful and careful volunteer recruitment through multiple forms of screening. The arena of IV friendships is one in which stakeholders take human relationships seriously, and this bears fruit in the form of much-needed stable and supportive relationships for children and young people in care, with the friendship acting as a gateway through which they are helped in vitally important ways.

IV friendships do not materialise without lots of thought and effort. Those who drive IV friendships forward, mainly IV Coordinators and volunteer befrienders, can encounter multiple barriers. Important relational work such as this needs widespread and strengthened policy and financial support, both at local and national levels for England and Wales.

Given the perennially low access rate to IV friendships for children and young people in care, we recommend the following actions at national, local authority and service levels:

National actions

• All local authorities should be required to allocate ring-fenced funding for IV services, defining what appropriate service must entail. This could, for example, be connected to a target number/percentage of children and young people with an IV.

• Strengthen the Children and Young Persons Act 2008, to create an absolute, automatic opt-out right to an IV for all children and young people in and leaving care. The 2008 Act, which replaced the introduction of IVs in the Children Act 1989, requires local authorities to consider the appointment of an IV where it appears that it would be 'in the child's interests to do so'. Given what we know both about the failures of the care system, and the value of IV relationships, we believe every child and young person should be given, and encouraged to take up, the opportunity to develop a friendship with an IV.

- Add an opt-out right to an IV to the Children Leaving Care Act 2000, to entitle all young people to an IV up to and including the age of 21.

- Set an ambitious national target for the percentage of children and young people in care with an IV, and a incrementally higher requirement for local authorities to achieve this requirement within a certain number of years

- Ofsted inspection of local authorities children's services should include a requirement to inspect the level and quality of independent visiting services

- Provide ongoing, secure funding for the National Independent Visitor Network to continue its work in supporting IV Coordinators, developing resources, guidance and good practice, and championing the right to an Independent Visitor for children and young people in and leaving care.

Local authority-level actions

- Cultivate an IV champion group, recruiting champions across all levels of the authority, including at the most senior levels. With the support of IV services, champions should be encouraged to develop a detailed understanding of the benefits and impact of IV and promote these regularly.

- Set clear, ambitious targets on expected level of independent Visitor take up which are regularly reported against and sufficiently commissioned. Build targets into commissioning arrangements where relevant.

- Ensure the right to IV is actively promoted within the day to day working culture and practices of the children's social care service. This includes IV being discussed at meetings at all levels and by social workers, independent reviewing officers and senior leaders responsible for the wellbeing of children in care.

NIVN-led service-level actions

- Develop a local authority influencing toolkit. This process should include the development of a theory of change for local authorities with the end goal of increasing support and funding for IV services.

- Agree and make a national commitment across England and Wales, to the importance of collecting outcome and impact data on the changes that IV friendships enable for children and young people. This commitment is essential to the development of a robust body of evidence on the impact of IV for children and young people.

- Agree a suite of outcome and impact-oriented questions and measures to be introduced across all local authority areas. This could be piloted amongst a certain group of early adopter areas.

- Strengthen current feedback collection to ensure the inclusion of outcome and impact-oriented questions.

References

Bandura, A. (2006). Towards a psychology of human agency. Perspectives on Psychological Science, 1(2): 164-180. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1745-6916.2006.00011.x

Barnardo's (2016). National Standards for the Provision of Independent Visitor Services. UK: NIVN and Barnardo's.

Brady, B., Dolan, P., & McGregor, C. (2019). Mentoring for young people in care and leaving care: Theory, policy and practice. Routledge.

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2021). Can I use TA? Should I use TA? Should I not use TA? Comparing reflexive thematic analysis and other pattern-based qualitative analytic approaches. Counselling and psychotherapy research, 21(1), 37-47.

Clancy, D. (2017). Role, Relationship and Friend for Life: How Independent Visitors Promote the Learning and Wellbeing of Looked After Children (Doctoral dissertation, UCL (University College London).

Department for Education (2015) The Children Act 1989 Guidance and Regulations: Care Planning, Placement and Case Review. volume 2. London: Department for Education.

Department for Education and Skills (DfES) (2006). Care Matters: Transforming the lives of children and young people in care. Norwich: The Stationery Office.

Department for Education and Skills (DfES) (2007). Care Matters: Time for change. London: The Stationery Office.

Department of Health (1991). The Children Act 1989 – Guidance and Regulations. Vol. 3, Family Placements. London: HMSO.

Gordon, A. and Graham, K. (2016). The National Independent Visitor Data Report. UK: Barnardo's.

Green B. L., McAllister C. L., and Tarte J. M., (2004). The strengths-based practices inventory: A tool for measuring strengths-based service delivery in early childhood and family support programs. Families in Society: The Journal of Contemporary Social Services 85 (3), 326-335

Hardy, E. (2007). The Impact of Independent Visitors on the Lifestyle, Health and Social Well-being of Looked After Children. Unpublished (Reconstruct and the Mental Health Research and Development Unit, Avon & Wiltshire Mental Health Trust and University of Bath).

Holland, S. (2010). Looked after children and the ethic of care. British Journal of Social Work, 40(6), 1664-1680.

Hurst, C., & Peel, M. (2013). What does the Independent Visitor role offer looked after children?. Adoption & Fostering, 37(4), 368-379.

Jones, R. K., & Westlake, D. (2021). Independent visiting with children in care during the pandemic: Disruptions and discoveries. Qualitative Social Work, 20(1-2), 383-389.

Jordan, R., & Walker, S. (2019). The National Independent Visitor Data Report 2019. Barnado's. https://www.barnardos.org.uk/sites/default/files/2019-10/National%20Independent%20Visitor%20Data%20Report%202019.pdf

Kersley, H., Estep, B., & Leadley, J. (2014). Relationships for children in care: The value of mentoring and befriending. London: New Economics Foundation.

Knight, A. (1998). Valued or Forgotten? Independent Visitors and disabled young people. London: National Children's Bureau.

Lundy, L. (2014) "United Nations convention on the rights of the child and child well-being". Handbook of child well-being: Theories, methods and policies in global perspective, 2439-2462.

MacAlister, J. (2022). The independent review of children's social care. UK: UK Government.

Morgan, R. (2012). Independent Visitors: Children's and Young People's Views. Report to Ofsted: Rights4Me.

Munro, E. (2011). The Munro Review Final Report: A Child Centred System. DoE.

Oakley, M. and Masson, J. (2000). Official Friends and Friendly Officials – Support, advice and advocacy for children and young people in public care. London: NSPCC.

Ofsted (2012). Independent Visitors: Children and Young People's Views. Reported by the Children's Rights Director for England. UK: Ofsted.

Pellicano, E., Hill, V., Croydon, A., Greathead, S., Kenny, L., & Yates, R. (2014). My life at school: Understanding the experiences of children and young people with special educational needs in residential special schools. London, UK:

Office of the Children's Commissioner/ WAC Arts.

Quarmby, T., Sandford, R., & Pickering, K. (2019). Care-experienced youth and positive development: An exploratory study into the value and use of leisure-time activities. Leisure Studies, 38(1), 28-42.

Social Exclusion Unit (2001). Preventing Social Exclusion. Report. London: Cabinet Office.

Yahed, Y., & Harker, R. (2015). Children in care in England: Statistics, house of commons library briefing Paper No. 04470. Retrieved from http://researchbriefings. files.parliament.uk/documents/SN04470/ SN04470.pdf

Towler, K. (2016). Assessing the role of the Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) in undertaking child care cases and review and the role of Independent Visitors (IV) with Looked After Children and Young People. SSID (2015) 01 Welsh Government. 29th March 2016.
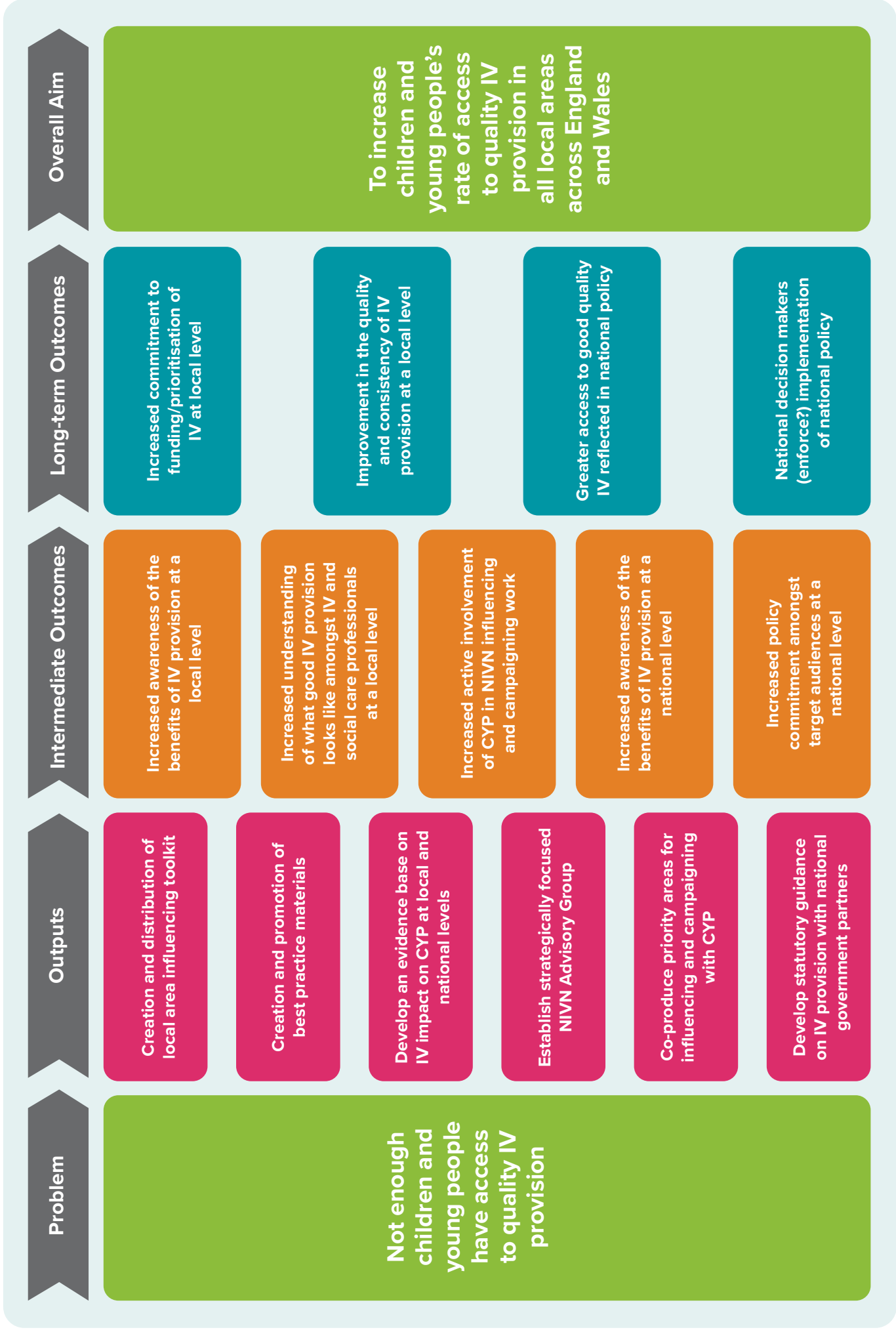
Walker, S. & Jordan, R. (2022). The National Independent Visitor Data Report 2022. UK: NIVN and Barnardo's.

Appendix 1

Background Policy

The Children Act 1989	The 1989 Children's Act introduced the role of 'independent visitors', who befriend and support a child in care (Section 23ZB) throughout their care journey, doing activities together based on shared interests. The key piece of legislation recognised the needs of looked after children and introduced important changes to improve outcomes for those who did not have much contact with their parents (Paragraph 17, Schedule 2 of the Children Act 1989), or if they have not been visited in the last year or are placed far from home. Introducing IVs was seen as one way of improving continuity and attachment in relationships with adults for young people in care (Department for Education and Skills, 2007; Department of Health, 2001).
Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000	Gaps in support for CYP leaving care have been identified in legislation such as Planning Transition to Adulthood for Care-Leavers guidance. This sets out the support that care-leavers should expect from local authorities under the Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000 which amended the Children Act 1989.
Children and Young Persons Act 2008	The Children Act 1989 was updated by the Children and Young Persons Act 2008, which repealed paragraph 17 of the 1989 Act to replace it with Section 23ZB. This amendment outlines that a local authority has to appoint someone as an independent visitor for any child they are looking after (with their consent) if the authority thinks it would be in the child's best interests (Section 16 of the Children and Young Persons Act 2008), thus opening up eligibility beyond children with infrequent contact with family members (Department for Education 2015).
Children Act 1989 guidance & regulations. Volume 2: care planning, placement and case review	Independent visitor services should follow the Department for Education's statutory guidance found in Volume 2 of the Children Act 1989 Guidance and Regulations. The guidance states that the Independent Visitor role requires the child's wishes and feelings should be ascertained in deciding whether or not an Independent Visitor should be appointed. It states that the appointment should be considered as part of the development of the child's care plan and looked after child review process. In this way, Independent Reviewing Officers play a critical role ensuring that the appointment of an IV is considered for all children who would benefit from one (Department for Education, 2021).
Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act 2014	The widening of eligibility criteria beyond children with infrequent contact with their family to best interests, was incorporated into the Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act 2014 and came into effect in April 2016. Section 98 (1) confirms the role of the IV as someone who must visit, befriend and advise the child and repeats the 'best interests' criteria that had been introduced in 2008. When a local authority determines that it is appropriate to appoint an IV for a child, it must explain the role of an IV to the child, in a way that is appropriate to the child's age and understanding. It should also ascertain the child's wishes and feelings and only proceed with the child's consent.

Appendix 2: Draft NIVN Theory of Change

Problem	Outputs	Intermediate Outcomes	Long-term Outcomes	Overall Aim
Not enough children and young people have access to quality IV provision	Creation and distribution of local area influencing toolkit	Increased awareness of the benefits of IV provision at a local level	Increased commitment to funding/prioritisation of IV at local level	To increase children and young people's rate of access to quality IV provision in all local areas across England and Wales
	Creation and promotion of best practice materials	Increased understanding of what good IV provision looks like amongst IV and social care professionals at a local level	Improvement in the quality and consistency of IV provision at a local level	
	Develop an evidence base on IV impact on CYP at local and national levels	Increased active involvement of CYP in NIVN influencing and campaigning work		
	Establish strategically focused NIVN Advisory Group	Increased awareness of the benefits of IV provision at a national level	Greater access to good quality IV reflected in national policy	
	Co-produce priority areas for influencing and campaigning with CYP	Increased policy commitment amongst target audiences at a national level	National decision makers (enforce?) implementation of national policy	
	Develop statutory guidance on IV provision with national government partners			

Appendix 3

Review of standardised tools to measure outcomes and impact of IV friendships

Measure	Trusted adult	Life skills	Improved wellbeing	Expanded horizons	Confidence	No questions	Ease of admin and scoring
Stirling Children's Wellbeing	Green	Red	Green	Red	Green	15	Fairly easy
Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale	Green	Red	Green	Green	Green	14	Simple
Short Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale	Green	Red	Green	Red	Red	7	Simple
Presence of Caring Scale	Green	Red	Red	Red	Red	7	Fairly easy
Generalised Self Efficacy Scale	Red	Green	Red	Red	Green	10	Simple
Huebner's Student Life Satisfaction Scale	Red	Red	Green	Red	Red	7	Moderate
The Good Childhood Index	Red	Red	Green	Red	Red	16	Unknown
Rosenberg Self Esteem Scale	Red	Red	Partly	Red	Green	10	Moderate to complex
Personal Wellbeing Index for school children (PWI-SC)	Red	Red	Red	Partly	Red	7	Simple
Paediatric Quality of Life Enjoyment & Satisfaction Qu'rre	Red	Red	Red	Red	Red	15	Simple

KEY
Green: tool adequately measures the outcome
Red: tool fails to adequately measure the outcome