

NIVN Policy Brief:

Expanding provision of independent visitors

What is an Independent Visitor?

Children and young people growing up in care have a legal entitlement to a relationship with a trusted adult. Independent Visitors, or IVs, are trained volunteers who visit and befriend children in care and build a “trusting, positive relationship with them over time”.¹ The role was introduced in the Children Act 1989. Thirty five years later, fewer than four in 100 children in care in England and fewer than one in 100 in Wales have an IV.²

What do Independent Visitors do?

IVs are matched with a young person in care who they meet regularly, usually once a month. Together, the young person and the IV agree on activities – anything from a game of football in the park to a trip to the movies or a visit to a place of local interest. Most IV relationships last at least two years but can often extend to ten years. For children experiencing disruptive moves to different foster families or care homes and a revolving door of social care professionals, their IV can often be the only source of continuity and stability in their lives. IVs are often the only adult that is not paid to be in these children’s lives.

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

“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.”

How effective are Independent Visitors?

The value of this overlooked legal entitlement is set out in new research commissioned by the National Independent Visitor Network (NIVN). ‘A Friend Indeed: the importance of Independent Visitors to children and young people in care’, produced by Praxis Collab CIC in 2024.

¹ National Independent Visitor Network (2016) National Standards for the Provision of Independent Visitor Services, p.3. Available online: [National Standards for the Provision of Independent Visitor Services - National Independent Visitor Network](#) ² National Independent Visitor Network et al. (2016). Available online: [National Independent Visitors Network Data Report 2016 - National Independent Visitor Network](#)

The report provides the first independent and robust evidence of the impact of IVs. Their report identifies five key areas where IVs make a distinctive contribution to the lives of children and young people in care. These are:

- emotional security.
- increased confidence.
- improved well-being.
- development of life skills.
- expanded horizons.

The report concludes that “*...strong, informal supportive relationships, based on mutual caring and trust, can make a difference to a child or young person’s care experience and life outcomes post-care*” and that investing in IVs is an effective and inexpensive way to improve the life chances of children in care.

What should be done next?

Drawing from the evidence produced in the Praxis Collab CIC report, NIVN is calling for for greater prioritisation and resourcing of IV programmes at local and national government level. Specifically, we would like to see:

1. Legislative reform to open up IV entitlement to all children and young people up to the age of 21. Currently the service only needs to be offered when it is “in the child’s interests to do so” up to the age of 18. This can be done via an amendment to The Children and Young Persons Act 2008 or introduced through the Children’s Wellbeing and Schools Bill).

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.”

Praxis Collab CIC, p8

2. All local authorities in England and Wales should be required to provide sufficient ring-fenced funding for the development of an Independent Visitor service and set clear, ambitious targets on levels of IV take up.

3. Local authorities should engage in practice development work to build more consistent, objective evidence about the impact of IV friendships for children and young people in and leaving care.

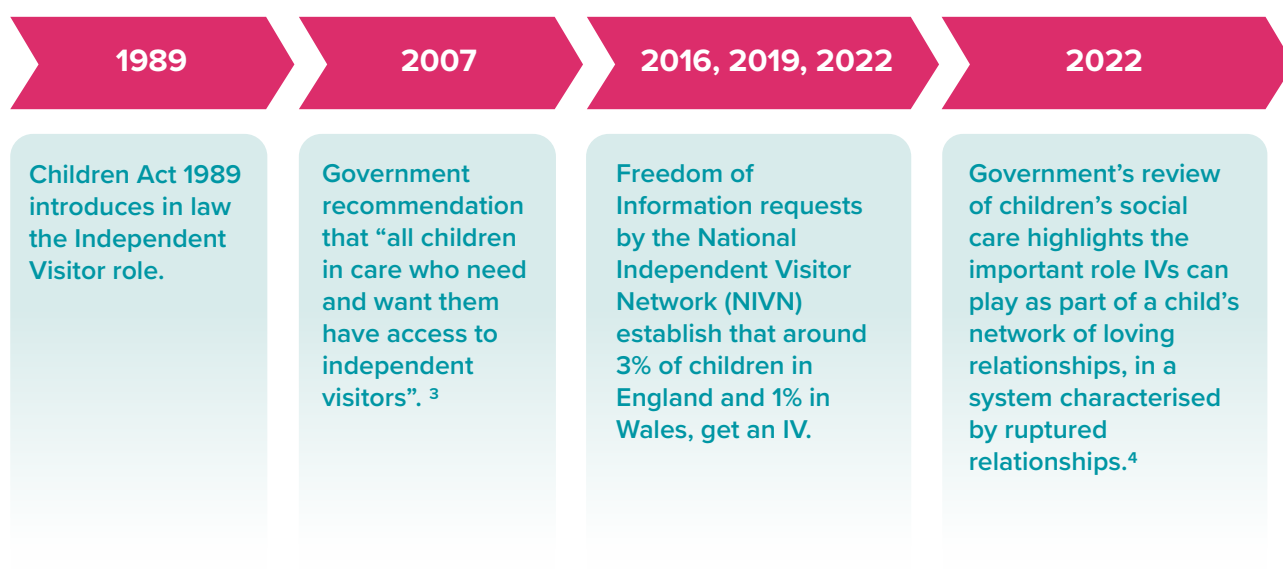
4. The Department for Education should work with the IV sector to produce National Standards and guidance on IV to strengthen the consistency and quality of provision. This work should build on the Government's prior commitment arising out of the children's social care review.

5. National Government to provide long-term funding for the National Independent Visitor Network with responsibility for developing resources and good practice in Independent Visitor services.

6. Ofsted full inspections of local authorities' children's services should inspect and report on the level and quality of Independent Visitor services.

The National Independent Visitors Network

The National Independent Visitor Network (NIVN) is a platform for Independent Visitor (IV) services, children and young people in care and IV volunteers. NIVN was 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. www.ivnetwork.org.uk



³ Department for Education and Skills (2007) *Care Matters: Time for Change*. HM Government, p.12.
Available online: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/care-matters-time-for-change>

⁴ Department for Education (2022): *Independent review of children's social care*