

Independent Visitors Handbook

We hope this guide will help you throughout your time as an Independent Visitor. We've tried to cover most of the situations you'll find yourself in and give you clear information about good practice.

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1) Being an Independent Visitor for Leicestershire

What is Independent Visiting?

Every year Leicestershire County Council looks after hundreds of children in foster care, residential homes, kinship care (this is when a child/ren lives with their extended family or somebody connected to them i.e. a pre-existing relationship such as teacher, friend, teacher or friend) or a young person who has left care and is living independently. Most return to their families within weeks or months, however, a few remain with us for years and many of these have little contact with parents or family.

These children need regular contact with someone who is independent of Social Services and not already involved in their care. It must be someone in whom they can trust and who they regard as *their* friend.

These people are volunteers known as Independent Visitors (IV). They can be men or women, younger or older and from a wide variety of backgrounds and cultures.

They meet up once or twice a month and spend time together. Independent Visitors make a long-term commitment to the children, often forming a long-lasting friendship.

Who will you work with?

The Independent Visitor Scheme Co-ordinator (IVC)

This is the person who co-ordinates the scheme, ensures that all volunteers are assessed, that the children are matched and that the scheme runs smoothly.

Team Manager

The Independent Visitor Coordinator reports to their Team Manager. This Team Manager oversees the IV scheme.

Service Manager

A service manager takes responsibility for the operation of the fostering service, which includes the Independent Visitor scheme.

Childcare Social Workers

Each child and young person have a social worker whose job is to make sure their best interests are always considered. They will be in touch with the child's family and consider what to do in the future. Through the child's social worker, you will receive information about the child or young person and you will also be told the name and contact details of the Independent Reviewing Officer. .

Independent Reviewing Officer

Independent Reviewing Officers (**IRO**) are social workers, who are also experienced social work managers whose duty is to ensure the care plans for children in care are legally compliant and, in the child's, best interest. All local authorities have a duty to appoint an **IRO** to every child in care.

Emergency Contact Numbers

First Response

Children & Family Services has an emergency team available during out of office hours, including weekends and bank holidays. The team covers the

whole of the county and its task is to deal with matters that cannot wait until the next working day.

The operator will take your number and the duty social worker will phone you back as soon as possible. If the crisis is urgent, please tell the operator – this will ensure you are moved to the top of the queue. In most cases, they must rely on the caller to provide any necessary information (for example, whether the child is subject to a Care Order or is accommodated under Section 20).

Call the First Response Team about any of the following (in consultation with the child's carer):

- Medical emergencies
- Child goes missing
- Serious problems with child's parents or other family members
- Child whose behaviour is putting themselves or others at risk
- Worrying injuries
- Advice on any major immediate concerns

THE FIRST RESPONSE TEAM CAN BE CONTACTED ON (0116) 305 0005

Out of hours help

In the event of an accident or medical emergency get medical help immediately. Tell the doctor the child/young person is looked after by the local authority or if they are a young person living independently and what your role is. If the child's life is in danger, the doctor or hospital will know what to do and you should be guided by them. It will also be important to let Out Of Hours Childrens Duty and the child's carer know.

2) Aims, Expectations and Procedures

Mutual Expectations

What can Independent Visitors expect from the Department?

- That the relevant regulations and practice instructions are followed by all our staff.
- Acceptance of you as a valuable and important member of a caring team.
- To be treated fairly and respected as a colleague.
- Access to training (including on line) relevant to your role / young person
- Access to the complaint procedure.
- Information about the complaint procedure.
- Information about departmental policies and procedures.
- A right to be paid expenses promptly and correctly up to the amount of £40 per visit in addition to travel expenses.
- To be provided with the information about the child you are visiting.

What we expect from Independent Visitors

- Commitment to the task.
- Attendance at meetings about children where relevant and practical for you.
- To respect confidentiality.
- That you keep to department policies and procedures.
- That you respect a child's religious, linguistic and cultural heritage.
- That you respect the identity of the young person
- To keep the Independent Visitor agreement.
- To offer the same level of protection and care to a child as you would your own child.
- To communicate effectively with the Independent Visitor Scheme Co-ordinator.
- To complete a log of your visit with the child or young person on each occasion.

This is the agreement we make with Independent Visitors when they are appointed, it lays out the Children & Family Services' expectations of Independent Visitors.

Appointment as an Independent Visitor

Your assessment as an Independent Visitor culminates in the approval by the Service Manager of the Fostering Service based on your application, interviews and reference check. The Service Manager will make this decision with a panel of other managers and will also consider the best age range of children that could be matched with you. Safer recruitment processes are followed throughout including confirming information with references and a visit from the independent visitor co-ordinator. This also gives you the chance to ask questions and for us to provide you with more detail about the scheme. Regulations are clear that applicants must submit detailed background information, provide the names of two personal references and relevant background check be completed.

The Regulations clearly state that a person is not to be regarded as independent if he/she is a member of the local authority or of its committees, sub-committees, or is an officer of the social services departments of the authority or is the spouse of any of these.

If you wish to stop being an Independent Visitor, you merely need to give notice in writing either stating you wish to end an appointment in relation to a specific child or that you do not wish to be appointed for any other children going forward.

If the service chooses to end your involvement with a child or as an Independent Visitor and you disagree, you may wish to make a formal complaint.

Supervision and Support

Independent Visitors are managed and supervised by an Independent Visitor co-ordinator, they will ensure that expenses are paid and sort out any difficulties that might occur, provide advice, identify informal and more formal training opportunities.

Following the match being approved an individual supervision session is arranged by the co-ordinator at approximately six weeks and six monthly formal group supervision is provided. Informal supervision will be given by the Independent Visitor Coordinator at any time the Independent Visitor requires supervision

All matches will be reviewed. This will initially take place after the first visit informally and then formally take place after six weeks and then every six months. Formal reviews will include a visit or telephone call to the child/young person (depending on age and communication needs) to ensure they are satisfied with the match and provide feedback. Feedback forms will be sent to the carer, Independent Visitor, Social Worker & the Independent Reviewing Officer. The information will be collated and if the child/young person and the Independent Visitor continue to be satisfied with the match, this will continue to be supported.

As well as reviewing the match, the provision of the Independent Visitor will be fully considered within the child's Review of Arrangements and any changes will be recorded on the child's plan.

Once a year the coordinator will arrange an informal review to look at how you are getting on and whether any changes need to be made.

Supervision will be recorded, and any issues will be raised with the co-ordinator's manager.

Any safeguarding concerns will immediately be raised with the Fostering Team Manager, Service Manager and the Safeguarding Team.

Training

The role of an Independent Visitor is to befriend and support young people. Independent Visitors are not expected to be counsellors or specialist workers, however, there may from time to time be training that may assist you in your role, or that is needed to enable you to communicate better with a child. Following successful appointment Independent Visitors will be provided with training to ensure they fully understand the role and understand the safeguarding requirement of Leicestershire County Council.

All Independent Visitors are expected to complete the following. -

Prior to matching-

LCC 40-minute online course called Essential awareness in Safeguarding for Children and Adults

Within 6 months of starting the role-

LCC 1-day Essential Awareness in Safeguarding for Children and Adults (this follows on from the online course)

All Independent visitors receive the Fostering Training Manual and dependent on their learning needs in relation to the young person they are matched with further training can be provided. For example, working with children with special needs.

3) Matching and Visiting Guidelines

Legal Position

It is useful to know the child's status in case of an emergency:

If the child is accommodated under **Section 20 (S.20)** then their parents, or one parent or another person who holds a **Child Arrangement or Special Guardian Order** holds parental responsibility for them.

If there is an **Interim Care Order** (ICO), or a **Care Order** (CO), then the Children & Family Services Department shares the parental responsibility.

If a parent (*Parent* includes any person who has parental responsibility for the child) asks for their child to be returned while in your care, you should contact the carer or social worker immediately (it should be noted that this seldom happens). Try to reason with the parent and explain that they should talk to the child's social worker. If this takes place out of hours concerns should be reported to either Childrens Duty or the Foster Care Support Line.

If the child is subject to S.20, there is no legal reason to prevent the parent or person with parental responsibility from taking the child; however, this is best done in partnership with the child's social worker.

If the child is subject to a Care Order, Interim Care Order or Emergency Protection Order, the parent has no right to take the child. If the child is taken, the police and carer/social worker should be informed immediately.

The principles of the Children Act

The law provides the framework within which the local authority works. The Children Act 1989 came into force in 1991. It was the most important reform of the law in recent times and covered all the law relating to the care and upbringing of children and the social services to be provided for them. Children who are looked after by local authorities come under this legislation.

One of the primary statements in the Act is that the welfare of the child is paramount. That means that children's needs and priorities come before those of other people.

Before Making a Match

You should always be given enough information to help you decide whether to accept any match and you are not under any obligation to accept a child. Your worker will work with you to look at potential matches with visiting children, having regard for common interests, backgrounds and other relevant factors.

Considerations are made during the matching process around any risks that the child/young person or others may pose. Independent Visitors will be informed prior to matching of any known areas or persons that may cause a risk. The risk assessment checklist will be completed with Independent Visitor prior to matching. Independent Visitor's will be given the Out of Hours/Foster Care Support Line telephone numbers. Independent Visitor's should tell the

carer where they are going to and what time to expect their return. A visit with a child or young person should not exceed 8 hours or be overnight. Either of these can only take place in exceptional circumstances and only with the agreement of the Assistant Director or nominated officer after considering the circumstances and the risk assessment.

Independent Visitor Coordinator will meet the child/young person following a referral and engage with the young person to ascertain their hobbies and interests as well as their consent for an independent visitor to be appointed. Once the relevant training has been completed a three-way meeting with the Independent Visitor, child/young person and the Independent Visitor Coordinator will take place. This will be an opportunity for the young person to express their views and discuss what they would like from the visitor. When it is identified from both the young person and the visitor that they wish to proceed then the match will be ratified. The details of what will be provided e.g. activities and how often will be recorded within the child's file and reflected within the Placement Plan.

From this point onwards, the Independent Visitor will make contact arrangements themselves with the carers for the young person. The detail of how often and the activities must be agreed via the person who has delegated authority for the child. E.g. the registered home manager or foster carer.

Independent Visitors could if it was deemed appropriate be matched with more than one young person, but they would be expected to visit the individuals separately. In this situation each young person's needs must be considered and the visitor reminded of confidentiality with respect to each young person.

The planned activities/interaction with the young person must all be risk assessed, a risk assessment completed for each activity, provided to the person who has delegated authority and be logged on the child's record. Where the activity is considered high risk, the activity will not take place.

a. Commitment to the child/young person

The expectation is that the Independent Visitor will commit to at least one-year support for the child/young person. The Independent Visitor should see the child/young person no less than monthly and visits should be approximately two/three hours. All visits must be formally arranged, and details of proposed venue also provided.

b. Social Networking sites

The Independent Visitor will not contact or 'befriend' the young person through any social media site including using texting or messaging. Any indication that this has taken place will be an immediate suspension pending further enquiries.

c. Photographs

Photographs of the child/young person can be taken with their consent but cannot be shared through any social media site or with any third party. They should only be shared with the young person or their carer through a device or printed off and given to the child/young person or their carer. Leicestershire hosts an online memory box for all children in care. The foster carer can arrange for the photo or memorabilia to be uploaded to this site.

d. Family/Friends

The child/young person should not be purposely introduced to partners, family or friends of the Independent Visitor. This is because they will not have been subject to the same clearances as the Independent Visitor. The child/young persons should not be taken to the Independent Visitor's home or any household belonging to a friend or family member of the Independent Visitor or other location to meet family/friends. If there are plans to incorporate a visit to the family home / introduce family members, this can only be undertaken with the consent of the Independent Visitor Co-ordinator / Child's social worker.

e. Pets

You may wish to take your dog out when seeing a young person or visits horses that you own. Whilst this may be positive for the young person caution will need to be taken with pets. Some children have inherent fears of animals and any introductions needs to be child lead. Given the risks that animals pose any introduction needs to be discussed with the Independent Visitor Coordinator initially and a risk assessment will need to be undertaken. In respect of dogs – a dog risk assessment would need to be completed before the dog could be brought on any visit with the child. Any other pets will be ‘risk assessed’ prior to decisions being made about this. The views of the young person should also be obtained as to whether they wish to meet the pet

f. Medication

Independent Visitors are not insured to give medication to children/young people. If a child/young person needs medication, they need to either be returned to their placement for this to be given or they need to be old enough to manage their own medication. If the child being visited has an accident, please ensure that this information is recorded on your log and passed on to their carer (older children and young people will be able to inform the carers themselves – be sensitive to their need for privacy and autonomy).

However, in a medical emergency the IV will seek immediate medical attention via 999

g. Special Occasions

You may wish to take the young person out for the whole day as a one off. (e.g. a trip to Alton Towers as a birthday treats) This must be arranged in advance with the carers / Child`s social worker and consider the above. Details of proposed activity and venue must be provided as well as likely timings.

h. Contact Record

A brief record should be provided about the visit, the child`s name should not be identified within this as this record will not be stored on the child`s file and if emailed will not be secure.

i. Safeguarding

The Independent Visitor may encounter a situation where the child/young person either discloses something that has happened or there is a significant incident during the visit. If the child/young person discloses physical, sexual or emotional abuse or neglect this needs to be reported. It cannot be kept a secret and the child/young person needs to be made aware of this. If the child/young person makes a disclosure about their carers, First Response Children's Duty Out of Hours service must be contacted, and advice sought prior to returning the child/young person to their carers. If the child/young person does not tell you who the abuser is, you need to establish whether it is safe for them to return to the placement. If there is a significant incident whilst on a visit you may not need to inform First Response Children's Duty Out of Hours service, but you should inform the carers so that they can support the child/young person.

j. Looked After Children (LAC) reviews

Each child will have a review at least every six months to look at their progress and plan for their future. The child/young person can request that the Independent Visitor attends their LAC review; they should only attend with the young person's consent. The Independent Visitor should agree with the child/young person what they will share prior to the review. The Independent Reviewing Officer is responsible for reviewing whether the Independent Visitor arrangements remain suitable. They may ask for input from the Independent Visitor for the Review.

k. Confidentiality

Independent Visitors may become aware of confidential information about the child/young person they are matched with and other children/young people. This information is given to you for two reasons:

- 1) To help you to assess whether you feel able to meet the needs of children.

- 2) To help you to understand the children you visit and respond to their needs.

Independent Visitors should not disclose this information or use it for their own or another benefit without the consent of the party concerned.

I. Change of circumstances for Independent Visitor

Independent Visitor's should inform the Independent Visitor Coordinator if there are any changes in their circumstances that would impact on their suitability for the role. For your guidance, listed below are examples of the sorts of changes we consider significant and need to know about.

- If you are planning to or do move to a new house.
- If anything happens that may temporarily or permanently affect your ability to offer support to your visiting child. For example, you should tell us if a close family member dies, if there are any severe relationship difficulties, including you or your partner leaving home (even temporarily), or a serious deterioration in your health or a close family members health.
- If you have a dog that becomes registered under the Dangerous Dogs Act that may be in contact with the visiting child.
- If a suggestion has been made for the child or young person to visit your home.
- If you have any criminal convictions, cautions, reprimands or final warnings
- Any other significant event which you think it is important to share.

j. Use of Your Car

Please ensure your car is safe for the child, has an up to date MOT, and is covered by tax and insurance and you have advised your insurance company you will be transporting Looked after Children. It goes without saying that an Independent Visitor should be a safe driver. We ask that you give the foster

carer or social worker in the children's home your car registration number and telephone number in case of an emergency.

k. Alcohol & Drugs

Independent Visitors should not consume alcohol or illegal drugs at any time whilst in the company of young people or be intoxicated in any way; they should also actively discourage children or young people from such use.

Independent Visitors must not offer to buy, give or lend cigarettes, tobacco, lighters or cigarette papers to young people at any time and Independent Visitors are asked not to smoke in front of the children/young people.

m. Money and gifts

Over time, you will build up a close and trusting relationship with a child or young person. It is still important that you remember that they remain vulnerable. As such, gifts or money should not be given directly and only in agreement with the carer and child's social worker. We advise that should you wish to do so, that gifts are given at key points in a child or young person's life like during the festive season, birthdays, graduation celebrations.

n. Referral to advocacy or children's rights services

Children's Rights Officers work for Leicestershire County Council and the child can ask them to:

- help them understand their rights and make sure they are being treated fairly
- give them information, help and advice
- attend meetings with them and speak on their behalf
- help them get legal advice
- advise them if they wish to make a complaint about the Children and Family Services or help them with something they are unhappy with
- help stop things that shouldn't be happening to them
- make sure they are listened to by their carers

Children won't get into trouble for contacting a Children's Rights Officer and they'll keep the information they give them private and confidential.

The child may ask you as their Independent Visitor to help them contact the Children's Rights Officer. You can do this by phoning 0116 305 6302 or by emailing childrensrights@leics.gov.uk.

Other considerations

Listening and Being Listened to

A good communicator should not lie or build up false hopes. They should be trustworthy, reliable and honest and most especially, a good listener.

Some simple listening rules:

- Listen to what is being said. Give the child your entire attention.
- Don't anticipate what will be said next. Wait and listen. That way you'll be sure.
- Keep your thoughts to yourself as to what is being said. Don't let your mind jump away from the topic.
- Pay attention to both what is being said and how it is being said.
- Asking questions can certainly help but they require careful handling and good timing.

Listening is as much an art as speaking, both require patience, both require attention.

A good listener will usually be listened to because they will have taken care to listen and will have thought about what they want to say.

If you feel you must pass on something you have been told (because of for example concerns regarding child protection issues):

- Tell the child, explaining the reasons WHY, what you will do and how you will do it
- Why you are taking that course of action
- When you will be doing so
- At all times help keep the child informed of what is happening
- Be honest
- Never make promises you can't keep

A child should know that the Independent Visitor is always open and honest with the social worker.

Discrimination

Children may respond to any form of discrimination by feeling ashamed, angry, rejected and it may lower their sense of self worth.

For them to feel comfortable, you need to feel comfortable too. Help them to understand the nature of prejudice and prepare to meet it and support them when they must cope with it. It is your duty to take positive action to combat discrimination on the grounds of race, religion or language.

Sexuality

Developing a sexual identity is an important part of who young people are. This can be a difficult time because they are faced with confusing and negative messages regarding sex and sexuality.

It is not envisaged that, as an Independent Visitor, you would be expected to initiate conversations in this area or be considered an expert counsellor. However; it would be helpful if the young person you are visiting raises the issue, if you have given some thought to how you might tackle the subject.

Children need to learn about the positive side of sex as well as being aware of the risks and dangers. Showing children that it's alright to talk about sex gives them a positive message.

Non-Physical Punishment

It would not normally be envisaged that an Independent Visitor would have to punish the child they visit. You might, however, must take some action to ensure that you retain a level of control and discipline to ensure safety, and stability of the relationship. If you feel that action is required, make sure it

follows directly from the misdemeanour so that he or she has the chance to learn the lesson you mean to teach. If a child rides a bike on a road you have forbidden them from cycling on, it is logical to take the bike away, or for an older child, decline to allow a ride on the next visit. This should be done, where possible, in co-operation with the carer.

Unacceptable Forms of Punishment

There are certain practices that must never be used as punishment. For example, eating and drinking are not only enjoyable but fundamental to a child's development. Food and drink should never be withheld, nor the quantities limited to show that you disapprove of certain behaviour. This does not mean of course that certain foods should not be limited for medical reasons.

Contact with people who are important to the child should not be stopped because you are upset with a child's behaviour. No-one should prevent your visit with the child due to his or her behaviour, although you might be asked to alter the activities that you plan on a occasion so that it is not seen as a treat. If a carer suggests that you do not visit as punishment, please speak to the scheme coordinator as soon as possible.

Neither should you yourself refuse a visit on behavioural grounds, but again you may consider altering the planned activity. Not using physical punishment such as smacking or other humiliating punishments is part of the agreement for all Independent Visitors.

Endings

All formal arrangements will cease following the young person's 21st birthday, unless agreed otherwise. If the Independent Visitor and young person wish to remain in touch they can do this as an informal adult friendship, but this will not be formally supported. Matches that continue post 18 will be supported and advice will be given around boundaries and expectations as the young

person is moving into adulthood. If the Independent Visitor is not adhering to the boundaries and expectations set out above, we have the right to immediately end the match. This will take place with a conversation with the child/young person and the Independent Visitor and then a formal letter will be sent out to all involved. This will also be reflected within the child's review of arrangements and any change to the plan will be recorded in the review by the IRO.

Planned Endings

The match might end due to, for example, you or the child moving away, or changes in personal circumstances that will prevent you from continuing your role.

Endings are always difficult, but there are things that you can do to finish on a positive note. You might want to celebrate the time together with an event such as a special meal or outing.

Some children find it difficult to know how to react when something good is coming to an end. Sometimes they might act out of character or in a destructive way and put the relationship that you have built up at risk. This is not unusual, and not meant as a personal slight. Reassure the child and give positive messages, maybe even a parting letter saying how much you have enjoyed your time together that they can look at later.

Unplanned Endings

In every situation the child or young person's experience remains the priority. Where unplanned endings allow, the Independent Visitor will be supported by the co-ordinator to have a goodbye or final communication with the child or young person. The child's wishes need to be considered i.e. if they do not wish to have a goodbye, this should be respected. The child's social worker is ultimately responsible for the child and should agree to the ending plan. Where the unplanned ending does not allow for a final visit or communication, the co-ordinator, the carer and child's social worker will agree how and when the child will be informed and ensure the child is appropriately supported.

4) Child Abuse/Safe Care

“Somebody may abuse or neglect a child by inflicting harm or by failing to act to prevent harm”

Children can experience abuse at home, in leisure activities, at school, in children’s homes – in fact anywhere.

The abuse is usually caused by someone the child knows and rarely by a stranger. It is also important to recognise that children can be abused by other children.

Categories:

- Physical injury
- Emotional abuse
- Neglect
- Sexual abuse

CHILD ABUSE HAS NO BOUNDARIES AND IS NOT AFFECTED BY CLASS, RACE, CULTURE, WEALTH OR INTELLIGENCE.

Children and young people may indicate to you in several different ways that they have been abused. For example, they might:

- Make a straightforward statement and describe what has happened.
- Talk about what has happened to other people.
- Make comments or ask you questions about abuse.
- Tell you in a non-verbal way e.g. through play, gestures or writing about it.
- Some young people may become angry or agitated for no apparent reason because they are frightened of saying anything. Many abusers will have used threats to make sure their abuse stays secret. Or the young person may have mixed loyalties and feel they are betraying their abuser. If you suspect this may be the case, give the child time and space and let them know you are willing to listen when they are ready to tell you.

- A child may make a partial disclosure of abuse and will need time and understanding to give a full account. React promptly but remain calm. Do not let the child or young person think you have ignored what has been said or that you are brushing aside their concerns.

DO

- Comfort the child – give a hug if they want this but be aware that this may not be appropriate.
- Show that you are taking what the child tells you seriously.
- Tell the child that you are there to help and they can trust you.
- Believe the child – in most cases children do not lie about sexual abuse.
- Give positive messages such as “*It is safe to tell me or I’m proud of you for telling*”.
- Explain to the child that they are not to be blamed for what happened.
- Listen to and answer the child’s questions honestly.
- You need to tell the child that although you respect their privacy, you must tell their social worker. Reassure the child that they are safe.
- Be responsible and report the incident as soon as you can to the child’s social worker and scheme coordinator.
- Record what the child has said in their own words. Note the behaviours that you have observed.
- Check out the words they use for the genital areas to ensure records are clear.
- Talk gently and slowly, making sure they have plenty of time to tell you what they want to say without any pressure from you to say anything more than they want to.

DON’T

- Attempt to question a young child or young person. You could use leading language that would mean evidence would be blurred in court.
- Make comments about a child’s disclosure to people who don’t need to know. Remember to respect their privacy.

- Pressure the child to talk or avoid talking about the abuse. Allow them to speak at their own pace. Forcing information can be harmful. Silencing the child will not help him or her to forget.
- Don't confront the accused in the child's presence
- ***DON'T BLAME THE CHILD – SEXUAL ABUSE IS NEVER THE CHILD'S FAULT.***

Helping children who have been sexually abused

Independent Visitors need to:

- Try to build a positive relationship with the child – remember the child has no reason to trust adults.
- Have good support from the scheme coordinator and the child's social worker.
- Have an awareness of your own feelings and discuss this with the scheme coordinator so you can get the support you need.
- Have good communication skills and sensitivity.
- Have listening skills – verbal and non-verbal.
- Remember that the child's experiences are like an iceberg and we only see below the water line when the child feels safe and has trust and confidence in you.
- Be aware that you could unconsciously do something which is a trigger for a child's abusive past.
- You need to know about where the child was abused so as not to unwittingly frighten the child.

The following is especially important:

- It must be remembered that physical contact may be the primary means of communication with a child with learning, physical or sensory disability.

- Where the child has been sexually abused, privacy and respect need to be carefully considered especially where children need a lot of physical care.
- Let the child choose what they want. That way they will begin to regain control over their own body and who touches it – a decision that has not previously been theirs.
- Remember – children have no choice when they are abused, so it remains vital that choices are provided within a safe environment as part of the recovery process.
- Talk to the child's social worker and your worker to ensure the best support is available for both the child and you.
- One of the most important issues for victims and survivors of abuse is feeling safe in all senses of the word. Help them to identify what that means for them.
- Remember that abuse can also have a huge impact on carers and supporters. **Don't forget to look after yourself too.**

Importantly, if you suspect that the child you are visiting or any other person (including adults) that you are in contact with might be the victim or perpetrator (or both) of sexual abuse, contact the scheme coordinator straight away to get support help.

Action can lead to abuse being prevented and children who are being abused receiving protection and help to recover. It can also lead to the abuser receiving effective help or treatment to stop abusing and to grow up as a safer member of our community. We need to get support for ourselves too. **Remember you are not alone.**

Complaints and Allegations

You might think this will never happen but the Fostering Network booklet, 'Safe Caring' states that one in six carers will have a complaint or allegation made against them during their fostering career. Independent Visitors may also find themselves subject to allegations and complaints. All allegations are treated seriously because some will have foundation.

The decision of Children & Family Services in all cases is made in the best interest of the child.

Independent Visitors must minimise the risk of unfounded allegations being made. You should try to build your own safety net in the following ways:

- Discuss with the scheme coordinator the best places to go with your visiting child. They will be able to advise on this with some knowledge of the child and his or her background.
- Record your visit on the paperwork provided for each visit
- Keep social workers informed of any concerns related to the child or your visits with him or her.
- When dealing with young people who are sexually aware avoid situations when you are left alone and vulnerable.
- Discuss safe caring with the scheme coordinator.
- Comply with any Safer Caring / Risk Assessments provided

A child might make an allegation against an Independent Visitor because:

- Something that has happened recently reminds the child of an event that took place before the child was with the Independent Visitor.
- It is a way of trying to regain control over their life.
- The child can misinterpret an innocent action such as putting an arm round them to offer comfort.
- The child may be angry about something and Independent Visitor has done that is not harmful but has annoyed them – e.g. challenge them about an aspect of their behaviour.
- The child may have experienced abuse in the placement.

What can Independent Visitors do to help prevent accusation being made against them?

‘Safer Caring’ recommends:

- Introduce a safe rule – no one touches another person’s body without their permission.
- Help children learn to say NO if they don’t want to be touched.
- Older children may need extra help to work out how to seek comfort from an adult without clinging to them.
- Avoid tickling and wrestling games.
- Avoid giving or receiving gifts unless this has been agreed for example a birthday or specific celebration

Allegations against Independent Visitors

Allegation of abuse can happen to anyone and they all need to be taken seriously but particularly allegations regarding any form of abuse.

- An investigation of an allegation will follow the Child Protection Procedures. The police may be involved.
- A child may misinterpret an action and make an allegation of sexual abuse, but research on sexual abuse shows that deliberate false accusations of it are rare.
- Often an allegation is unsubstantiated. Independent Visitors may continue to feel under suspicion and that they cannot clear their name.

There may be exceptional circumstances where the behaviour of the Independent Visitor, while falling short of criminal activity, is deemed inappropriate and constitutes a risk to a child’s welfare. The Regulations clearly set out that in any of these circumstances the local authority must review any other current and all previous appointments of that person as an Independent Visitor and carry out such investigations as are necessary, including consideration of use of safeguarding procedures.

5) Working Together

Written Information

It is not envisaged that Independent Visitors will have much paperwork to manage.

We do ask however that you keep a log of each visit which will be passed to the department with your expenses claim. This should note:

- Where you went.
- The times of the visit.
- Brief description of any activities (e.g. walking in Bradgate Park)
- Any issues of note or concern e.g. accidents, especially if marks or injuries were caused, allegations you may want to record, topics discussed e.g. “discussed racism” if it is an emotive topic, but not the detail unless you are concerned about a child protection issue. Remember this is a confidential meeting between you and your visiting child. You can discuss concerns in more detail with the co-ordinator if any arise.
- Personal records – you may also keep a personal record which remains your possession. This cannot be taken by the department and will give you valuable information in the future if you need it but please ensure these records are anonymous.

Expenses

Reasonable expenses will be paid to level agreed with the scheme coordinator which is usually £40 unless there is a specific planned activity i.e. going to see a show as a special treat. Prior agreement needs to be sought with the team before such an activity takes places that will be above the agreed payment. These should be claimed in arrears after each visit through the Independent Visitor Scheme using the expenses form provided and attaching receipts. Mileage will be claimed on the same form paid at the council’s casual user rate. Private vehicles must be suitably insured, a valid MOT be in place where relevant and seatbelts used Expenses will be paid by electronic bank transfer.

Information we keep on you

We keep the following information about you:

- 1) The application form, the assessment report, references and related papers.
- 2) The Independent Visitor agreement that you have signed to enter into a partnership with the department.
- 3) Record of approval and termination
- 4) Record of children visited.
- 5) Independent Visitor Reviews – the form which is completed by you and your worker when the review of your approval takes place.
- 6) Records of the scheme coordinators contact with you.
- 7) Records of training attended.
- 8) A DBS (Disclosure and Barring Service) check every 3 years.
- 9) Notes you have provided about visits completed.

Information is stored securely on the council's electronic MOSAIC system.

All information held by the department (apart from personal references) in relation to Independent Visitors is available to you under the terms of Access to Personal Files Regulations 1989. Please ask the scheme coordinator for further information.

Missing from Care Protocol

If the child you visit goes missing while in your care, it is your duty to inform the relevant people (see below).

Some young people absent themselves for a short period and then return. Depending upon the age and ability of the young people, they are not always considered at risk and often they are just testing boundaries. The critical test that will determine the nature of the response is the assessment of the risk to the young person or to others.

The scheme coordinator will draw up an agreement specific to the child visited, advising the appropriate course of action.

As a rule, you should notify the child's carer if you are unable to locate the child within a few minutes. They will be able to work with you and take responsibility for ensuring that the appropriate action is taken.

If there are concerns about a child's welfare, for example, on safety grounds if the child is particularly vulnerable, it might be appropriate to notify the police straight away. This will be agreed with you if relevant when you are matched with a child.

If, for any reason, you are unable to contact the child's carer, you should contact the child's social worker, the scheme coordinator or First Response out of hours on 0116 305 0005

Complaints Procedures

There may be times when you feel let down, frustrated or angry about how Leicestershire's Children & Family Service is responding to you or the child you visit.

Complaints on behalf of a child

Sometimes you may feel that matters have not been dealt with appropriately for a child you visit and that you are the best person to complain on the child's behalf. You have a right to do this and we must respond to your complaint. We would hope however that you will have already talked it through with the Independent Visitor Coordinator. A referral can be made to children's rights service to provide advocacy support.

Complaints about your own treatment or serious concerns about the service

Firstly, a member of the Independent Visitor Scheme is expected to be available to you, to try to resolve any problems. When this fails to satisfy you, you may raise this as a formal complaint. Anyone in Children & Family

Services can take details from you, so you don't have to do this through the Independent Visitor Scheme.

Independent Visitors can report issues of concern to:

Contact details

Name: Complaints

Phone: 0116 305 7422

[Email: complaints@leics.gov.uk](mailto:complaints@leics.gov.uk)

Address: Leicestershire County Council

County Hall

Glenfield

Leicester

LE3 8RB