**West Sussex – Practice Guidance**

IROs are qualified social workers with at least five years’ experience, and who have acquired the right skills to carry out this role.

**Advocacy and Independent Visitors**

**Children’s rights**

* The Quality Standards 2015 state that all children must have access to appropriate advocacy support, and where possible this should be provided by a person that the child chooses. Looked-after children are entitled to an independent advocate to advise them and ensure they have the support needed to express their views, wishes and feelings about their care and lives.
* There is a legal requirement for the Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) of a looked-after child to ensure that the child understands they have an entitlement to independent advocacy support arranged by the child’s local authority. Children’s home staff should complement any explanation given by the IRO by helping looked-after children to understand the role of an independent advocate and how they can access one. Staff should regularly remind children of their right to access an independent advocate, concerning any matter relevant to the child’s status as looked-after.
* Although there is not a legal requirement for non-looked-after children to have access to an independent advocate, homes caring for these children should ensure that children can access advocacy support and should also consider the use of an independent advocate where necessary.
* The registered person must ensure that the children in their care understand their rights as a looked-after child, or child living in a children’s home. Children must be informed of how to contact the Office of the Children’s Commissioner for advice and assistance about their rights and entitlements. For children with learning disabilities and associated cognitive delays, staff must evidence attempts to support children’s understanding of their looked after status; and accept that this may not be fully achieved.

**Why is advocacy important?**

* Advocacy can transform the lives of children and children; it can keep them safe, healthy, listened to, and respected. It allows them to live a life with hope, dignity and self-respect. Advocates support, enable and empower children to be heard.
* Independent advocates can support both the child and the home to seek redress of issues which affect them, such as lack of contact with their social worker, contact with family and leaving care grants, in addition to issues about their care within the home.

**Advocacy Support**

* We understand the importance and welcome the presence of independent advocates for children living in children’s homes. While we always listen to children and try to resolve any issues face to face, we know that some children find it easier to talk to someone who is not connected with the children’s home.
* For this reason, we ensure each child has access to an Independent Advocate through our in-house team; ‘West Sussex Advocacy Service’.
* Meetings with advocates are private and will not be supervised or attended by residential staff unless a child requests this. Children are encouraged to use this time to talk through things they want to raise, and ask any questions they have about being at a children’s home or other related issues.
* Children will decide whether they want their Advocate to attend important meetings with them, and how much information they want them to contribute on their behalf.
* Advocates have the same duty of care to pass on any concerns about the safety and wellbeing of a child, so will only share sensitive information with residential staff if they have safeguarding concerns.
* Keyworkers may be asked to be an advocate by the child; this is acceptable but the child must understand that their keyworker is not an independent person and will be bound by the expectations and code of conduct of West Sussex staff.

**How are Independent Visitors different to Advocates?**

* Independent Visitors are volunteers who befriend and spend time with a child or child within Local Authority care.  They are trained to know how to support and advocate for children in care.
* All local authorities have a statutory duty to provide an Independent Visitor’s service in accordance with the Children Act 1989 (Schedule 2 Paragraph 17) and the Children and Childs Act (2008).
* An Independent Visitor or IV is a reliable, consistent and independent friend who visits a looked after child who is isolated, and has limited, or no, family contact.  They provide a good, stable, adult role model for the child, befriending and listening to the child, on an open-ended basis for as long as both parties want it to continue.
* An IV and child may spend time in the community and undertake a variety of activities depending on their interests and the child’s risk assessment.
* IV’s can also attend the child’s Looked After Review as long as the child agrees with this.

**Contacting West Sussex Advocacy Service**

West Sussex Advocacy Service will be able to provide details of other advocacy services as needed.

**Tel no:** 033 022 28686

**Email:** AdvocacyService@westsussex.gov.uk

**Address:** Level 2, West Wing, Centenary House, Durrington Lane, Worthing, BN13 2QB

**Website:**

<https://www.westsussex.gov.uk/education-children-and-families/your-space/life/advocacy>

**To request an advocate:**

<https://www.westsussex.gov.uk/education-children-and-families/your-space/life/advocacy/advocacy-request-form/>

**Links to related resources:**

Complaints

Monitoring and Reviews

Children’s Consultation and Participation