

Independent visitors

Children and young people's views

Reported by the Children's Rights Director for England



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Introduction

Roger Morgan, Children's Rights Director for England



As Children's Rights Director for England, the law gives me the duty to ask children and young people in care for their views about their rights, their welfare, and how they are looked after in England. The law also gives me the duty to ask children getting any sort of help from council social care services, as well as care leavers and children and young people living away from home in any type of boarding school, residential special school or further education college.

As well as asking children and young people for their views and publishing what they tell us, with my team I also give advice on children's and young people's views and on children's rights and welfare to Her Majesty's Chief Inspector at Ofsted, and to the government. I have a duty to raise any issues I think are important about the rights and welfare of children or young people in care, getting children's social care support or living away from home. With my team, I do this both for individual young people and for whole groups of young people.

There are many different sorts of professionals working with children who are looked after by their local councils. We have written reports on children's views about most of them. But there is also a type of volunteer who by law councils have to provide for children who they think would benefit from them – independent visitors. This report is to give children's own views and experience of having an independent visitor – and their views about not being offered one.

I am sending this report to the government, to councils, to inspectors and to people making decisions now about whether children need to have independent visitors, for them to take the children's views into account in the decisions they are making.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Roger Morgan'.

Dr Roger Morgan OBE
Children's Rights Director for England



How we asked young people for their views

To find out children's and young people's views and experiences of independent visitors, we gave out questionnaires to the children and young people who came to all the consultation events we held about other things between November 2011 and March 2012.

Our questionnaire had two separate sections – one side had questions for people who had an independent visitor, and the other had questions for people who didn't have one. People could either hand their questionnaires in to a member of our team during the event or send it back to our office later.

As always, we asked for children's and young people's own views, rather than adults' views. We have reported what children wrote to us, not our own views. We have not added our comments. We have not left out any views we might disagree with, or which the government, councils, professionals or research people might disagree with. Many of our questions asked children to tell us their views or experiences without us giving them any choices or suggestions, and for those questions we have listed the most common answers they gave us.

As with all our reports of children's views, we have done our best to write this report so that it can be easily read by young people themselves, by professionals working with young people and by politicians.

You can find and download copies of all our children's views reports in the library section of our children's website: www.rights4me.org.

The young people who gave their views

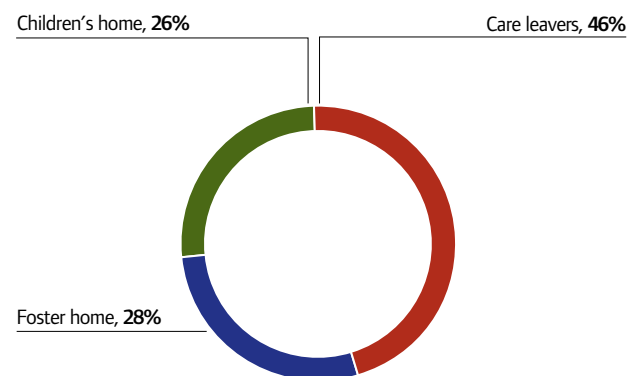
We had 361 completed survey questionnaires returned to us by children and young people. Of these, 193 (55%) were from girls and 156 (45%) were from boys (12 children didn't tell us their gender).

The middle of the age range of the children and young people who gave us their answers was 15. The youngest was a child of six, and the oldest was a care leaver of 24.

Altogether, 104 (29%) of the 361 children and young people told us they had an independent visitor. The other 257 (71%) said they didn't have one. There was no big difference in the number of boys and the number of girls who told us they had an independent visitor.

Figure 1 shows where the people filling in our survey were from: 46% of them were care leavers; around half of the others were from children's homes and the other half from foster homes.

Figure 1: Where the children and young people were from



Information from 343 children and young people.

Independent visitors

The law (the Children Act 1989) says that a local authority has to appoint someone as an independent visitor for any child they are looking after if the authority thinks it would be in the child's best interests. An independent visitor is a volunteer who doesn't work for social care services, and they are there to visit and to 'befriend and advise' the child. The child does have the right not to have a particular person as their independent visitor, or not to have anyone as their independent visitor if they don't want one at all.

Government guidelines say that a child should usually be offered an independent visitor if they don't have much contact with their parents, or if they haven't been visited in the last year. The guidelines also say that someone placed a long way from home might not have much contact with their family and friends, and so might need an independent visitor.



Children's views on having independent visitors

The children and young people who had independent visitors

Children answering our survey who were living in children's homes were more likely than the care leavers or foster children to have an independent visitor. Four out of 10 of the children from children's homes told us they had an independent visitor.

One in five (21%) of the care leavers told us they had an independent visitor. In fact, local authorities do not have to provide independent visitors for people who have left care, so we think either these care leavers were staying in touch with independent visitors they already had while they were in care, or some of the care leavers were calling other people (like Personal Advisers) their independent visitors. We do know from the care leavers who answered another question in our survey that some care leavers who had an independent visitor while they were in care were still in touch with their visitor even though they had left care.

We think we need to find out whether some care leavers are in fact not sure whether other people like Personal Advisers are actually their independent visitors. This matters, because independent visitors and Personal Advisers (and other workers) have very different jobs to do for young people, and we think it is important that young people know which job their visitor should be doing for them. We will be finding out more about this in our next *Children's care monitor* survey (where we find out each year about children's views and experiences of care in England).

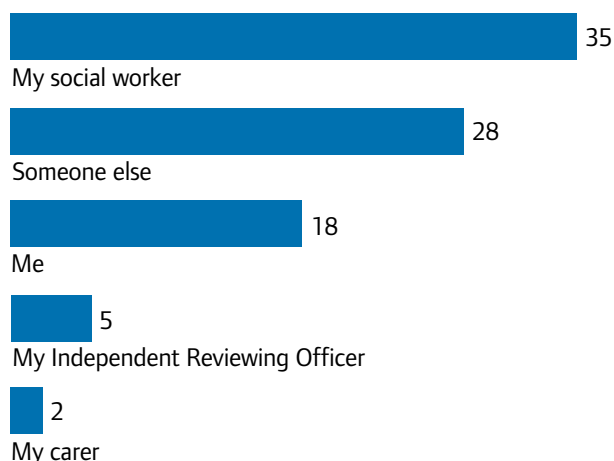
Just under a third (31%) of the children aged under 15 who answered our survey told us they had an independent visitor. A quarter (25%) of the young people aged 16-plus said they had an independent visitor. Only three of the 15 children aged under 12 who answered our survey told us they had independent visitors.

Choosing independent visitors

Out of the 104 children and young people who told us they had an independent visitor, 96 answered a question about whether they had been given a choice of whether or not to have an independent visitor. **Over three quarters said that they had been given a choice of whether or not to have an independent visitor.** Foster children were slightly more likely than others to say they had a choice about whether they wanted an independent visitor. There was no big difference between different age groups for this.

We asked children and young people who had chosen their visitor. Figure 2 gives the answers they chose from the ones we suggested for this question.

Figure 2: Who picked your independent visitor?



Numbers are numbers of children and young people giving each response. Information from 88 children and young people.

As Figure 2 shows, **many of the children who answered this question thought their social worker had chosen their independent visitor for them. One in five said that they had made the choice for themselves.** There were no big differences between different age groups in how many children said they had chosen their independent visitor. Boys were slightly more likely than girls to say they had chosen their independent visitor, and care leavers were slightly more likely to say this than others.



Why children were given independent visitors

We asked everyone who told us they had an independent visitor two questions about why they had one. First, we asked why they thought their council had offered them one, and then we asked what they themselves had wanted an independent visitor to do for them. We didn't suggest any answers to either of these questions, so we are reporting what the children and young people themselves had to say.

Altogether, 77 people told us **why they thought their council had offered them an independent visitor. The two most common answers by far were to give the child extra help and support (we heard this from 29 children) and to give the child someone they could talk to (19 children told us this).**

Examples, from children themselves, of how having an independent visitor was meant to give them extra help and support were: 'because I have special needs'; 'needed more support'; 'needed support with leaving care'; 'so I could have someone to help me with the issues I have'.

Needing someone to talk to was **often in order to have someone different from carers or social workers to talk things over with:** 'someone to discuss my problems with other than my carers'; 'for someone different to talk to, other than my social worker'.

'Someone to help me with the issues I have'

There were some other reasons for councils deciding a child needed an independent visitor, for example 'because I do not have a male that I can bond with like a dad'. Six children said they were given an independent visitor to be someone who could take them out, away from their placement.

Not many children told us they thought their council had given them an independent visitor for one of the reasons listed in the government guidance. **Only five out of 77 said they had been given an independent visitor because they didn't have much contact with their birth family, and only one said it was because they didn't have many friends.**

Boys were slightly more likely than girls to think they had been given an independent visitor to give them help and support, and young people aged over 16 were slightly more likely than younger children to say they had been given one to have someone to talk to. There were no big differences between foster children and children living in children's homes in the reasons they thought they had been given independent visitors.

Fifteen of the children and young people who answered this question didn't know why their council thought they had needed an independent visitor.

What children want independent visitors to do

Seventy-three children and young people answered our question on what they had wanted an independent visitor to do for them. Again, the two most common answers were to have help and support, and to have someone to talk to. Thirty-three out of the 73 who answered this question said they had wanted an independent visitor to give them help and support: 'help me out with things'; 'support me at times I felt down'; 'to help me with any problems that my carers can't help with'. Some had very particular sorts of help they wanted from their independent visitor – for example, 'help me to get a job', 'help me to calm down'. Twenty-four out of the



73 who answered the question said they had wanted one so they would have someone they could talk to. One person summed it up for many when they wrote, 'Listen to what I have to say, help me when I need it.'

There were some other reasons from some of those who answered this question. Twelve children and young people had wanted an independent visitor to act on their behalf, for example to 'raise my complaints'. Eight told us they wanted an independent visitor simply to be someone who spent time with them, and eight said they wanted one to take them out and do activities with them.

Boys were slightly more likely than girls to want an independent visitor as someone to talk to. Care leavers were slightly more likely than those still in care to want an independent visitor as someone who could help them with things. Young people aged 15 to 17 were more likely than either older or younger people to want an independent visitor as someone they could talk to.

Now we knew what children and young people wanted from their independent visitors, we went on to ask what their independent visitors actually did do for them.

'Listen to what I have to say, help me when I need it'

What do independent visitors do for children?

Out of the 104 children and young people who told us they had an independent visitor, 79 answered our question about what their independent visitor actually does for them. Again, we did not make any suggestions so these are entirely the children and young people's own answers.

These three answers stood out above all others.

- **Gives help and support**
34 children said this
- **Takes the child out for activities together**
24 children said this
- **Talks with the child**
20 children said this

Giving the child or young person help and support, and being someone they can talk to, are both in line with what children told us their councils had given them an independent visitor for. They are also in line with what children and young people said they had wanted from their independent visitor. The big finding here is that **as many as 24 out of 79 children told us that what their independent visitor does is take them out for activities together**. Only six children had said this is what they thought their council had given them an independent visitor for, and only eight children had said this is what they had wanted their independent visitor to do. Of course, a lot of independent visitors would have been talking with the child or young person they were visiting while they were out or doing activities with them.

Girls were slightly more likely than boys to say their independent visitors took them out or did activities with them. Those aged 12 to 14 were more likely to be taken out by their independent visitors than either older or younger children. Foster children were more likely than children from children's homes to be taken out by their independent visitors. Children from children's homes were less likely than others to say their independent visitors just talked with them.



Three children told us their independent visitors didn't do much for them: 'not a lot'; 'nothing'; 'never seen her'.

Here are some quotes from children describing what their independent visitors do for them.

'Helped me through some bad times'

'Visits and speaks to my carers'

'Sees how I am doing at school and at home'

'There when I need to talk with her'

'Takes me out, spends a lot of time with me'

'She made me forget about being in care and brought me up on my down days'

'She helped me be myself'





Working with independent visitors

What makes a good independent visitor?

We asked all those who had an independent visitor what they thought were the skills or qualities that a good independent visitor should have. Seventy-seven answered this question. We didn't suggest any answers, so again what we have reported here are the children's own views.

Here is the list of the skills and qualities that came up most often in the answers we had to this question.

- **A good listener** from 37 children
- **A good communicator** from 16 children
- **Helpful** from 14 children
- **Friendly and kind** from 12 children
- **Doesn't judge you** from 11 children
- **Able to advise** from 10 children

Other answers, from just one or two children each, were being trustworthy, being a good friend and (from just one child) being qualified for what they are doing.

Clearly **the top quality of a good independent visitor, by far, is to be a good listener to children and young people.**

Examples of what makes a good independent visitor, in the children's own words, are: 'to be a good listener and to be respectful of what my problem was'; 'communication skills; patience and empathy; outgoing and friendly; also give good advice'; 'just be friendly, listen to you and help whenever they could do'; 'I want a really happy person'; 'listener, be able to get to know each individual child'; 'good to talk to'.

Contacting your independent visitor

We asked all those who said they had an independent visitor whether they were able to contact their visitor if they wanted to. Out of 97 who answered this question, **80 (over eight out of 10) told us they could contact their independent visitor when they wanted to**, but 17 said they could not. Young people aged 15 to 17

were slightly less likely than younger or older ones to say they could contact their independent visitor.

We asked care leavers in our survey to tell us if they were still in touch with their independent visitor even though they had left care. **Thirty-five care leavers answered this question, and 16 (just under half) said they had kept in contact with the independent visitor they had while they were in care.**

Would you rather be visited by someone other than an independent visitor?

Local authorities provide children and young people in care with an independent visitor if they think they will benefit from having somebody like this to visit them, advise them and befriend them. We wanted to know, from the child's point of view, whether they were OK with this or would have preferred visits from somebody else instead of an independent visitor. In this question, we simply asked whether there was anyone the child or young person would rather see instead of an independent visitor, and we didn't make any suggestions about possible answers.

Out of 77 children and young people who answered this question, 47 (over six out of 10) said no, there was nobody they would prefer to be visited by than their independent visitor. **The majority of the children who had independent visitors were happier to have visits from them than from other people who might visit them.**

Nine out of the 77 said they would prefer visits from either their social worker or key worker, and seven would prefer visits from their carer. **Only six out of the 77 said they would have preferred visits from a member of their family instead of their independent visitor.** Boys were slightly more likely than girls to say they would have preferred someone other than their independent visitor to visit them.



Telling children about independent visitors

We asked children who have independent visitors what they thought were the best ways to tell children what independent visitors are and who can have one. Seventy children gave us their thoughts on this.

The three top ways children thought would be best to let children know about independent visitors were to write information in leaflets, newsletters or posters; for professionals like social workers to tell children about independent visitors; and to hold meetings with independent visitors themselves. Boys were slightly more likely to prefer meetings and girls to prefer hearing about independent visitors from their social workers or other professionals.

If you don't have an independent visitor, why might you want one?

We asked the 257 children and young people who didn't have an independent visitor what might be the good things about having one. Out of the 248 who answered this question, exactly half were care leavers, 30% were from foster homes and 20% from children's homes.

Here were the top four reasons why those who didn't have an independent visitor thought having one would be a good thing.

- **Having someone to talk to**
from 100 children
- **Having help and support**
from 63 children
- **Having someone to go to with confidence**
from 55 children
- **Having someone who listens**
from 28 children

The reasons people without an independent visitor think one would be good are very much the same as the reasons people with one had wanted them. **Although we know from other answers that many independent visitors take children out and take**

part in activities with them, nobody without one gave that as a reason for wanting one.

Although both girls and boys put having someone to talk to at the top of their list, more girls than boys said they thought an independent visitor would be someone to talk to. Forty-six per cent of girls said this, compared with 28% of boys.

Many children and young people wrote that **they would have liked an independent visitor so as to have someone to talk to who listens and helps, and who is not employed by the council.** Here are some quotes from what people wrote: 'being able to speak to someone who's not employed by the local authority'; 'chat in private about wishes and feelings'; 'help me more if I get angry and nasty'; 'someone who is always around when I need to talk about things'; 'I think it is good to have someone other than my social worker to talk to'; 'telling them things you can't tell other people'; 'listen to me and help me sort out things – worries and problems'; 'to know that there is someone else there for you'.

As well as reasons why people might want an independent visitor, we were also interested to know whether those who didn't have one thought there would be bad things about having one, too. We asked the 257 children and young people who didn't have an independent visitor, and 217 answered this question.

The most common answer of all was that there would be nothing bad about having an

'To know that there is someone else there for you'

independent visitor. There were no big differences in this between boys and girls, between different age groups, or between children and young people from different settings.

Forty-five children and young people (21%) said there would be nothing bad. **The two main things people thought might be on the bad side of having an independent visitor were problems in finding one that you got on well with (35 children, 16%, said this), or simply having yet another person involved in your life (22 children, 10%, said this).**

Here are some quotes from people who thought it might be difficult to find an independent visitor you got on with: ‘they might not understand your needs like a social worker or personal adviser’; ‘chances of getting on with them’; ‘it can take a long time to build up trust and confidence’; ‘might not get on well’; ‘they do not know me and I might not get on with them’.

Some people thought it would be a bad thing to have yet another person involved in their lives: ‘it is another person in your life that you have to attach to’; ‘more people knowing my private things’; ‘it’s more people sticking their nose in’; ‘asking me personal questions’. One young person thought this might be a problem, but not enough to reject the idea of an independent visitor altogether: ‘An extra person with all the other professionals in a young person’s life. However, on the whole I think it’s a good idea.’

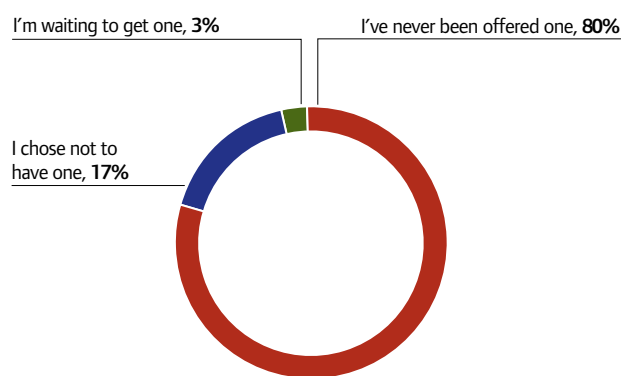
‘They do not know me and I might not get on with them’

Why people don’t have an independent visitor

We asked all those who didn’t have an independent visitor why they didn’t have one. Again, we didn’t suggest any answers to them. We had answers to this question from 235 children and young people.

Figure 3 gives people’s reasons for not having an independent visitor.

Figure 3: Reasons for not having an independent visitor



Information from 235 children and young people.

By far **the main reason for children or young people not having an independent visitor was that they had never been offered one.** Overall, 80% of the people who answered this question said this. Some wrote that they hadn’t heard of independent visitors before filling in our survey: ‘I have never been given the choice and never heard of them.’

Seventeen per cent of all those who didn’t have an independent visitor told us they had chosen not to have one. The offer had been made, but they had turned it down – as the law says they have the right to do. We asked those people to tell us their reasons for choosing not to have an independent visitor, and 35 gave us their reasons.

By far **the main reason was that the child or young person simply didn’t feel they needed an independent visitor.** Here are some examples of what people said: ‘because everything was sorted’; ‘because

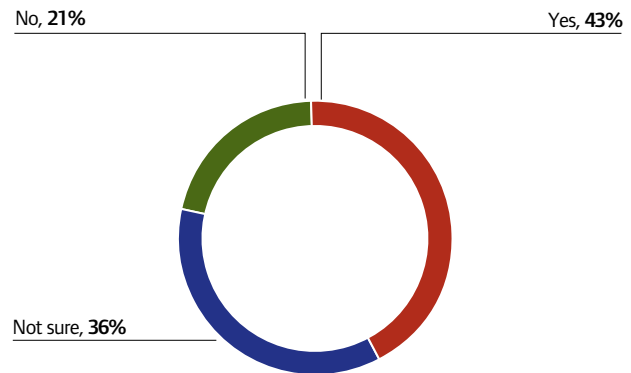
I have enough help already'; 'didn't want one as I had my support worker'; 'felt I could do it on my own'; 'I had a very settled life in care'; 'I'd rather go out with my friends'; 'I believe I have enough support within my residential unit and this is through staff and my social worker. I feel comfortable to talk to them and confide in them'.

Three children had refused an independent visitor because they thought it would take up their time, and another three because they worried that they might be controlled by one. We know that one in 10 children without an independent visitor thought that a bad thing about having one would be having yet another person involved in your life, and three people had refused the offer to have one for this reason. Two people had refused offers of independent visitors because they had already had one and did not get on with them.

How many people would take up the offer of an independent visitor?

With so many children and young people saying they had not been offered an independent visitor, but many saying they thought having one would be a good thing, we wanted to know how many people who hadn't already got one would say yes to having one if they were offered one. Figure 4 shows their answers.

Figure 4: Would you agree to have an independent visitor if you were offered one?



Information from 176 children.

Over four out of 10 children who didn't have an independent visitor said they would agree to have one if one was offered to them. **Only one in five said they wouldn't accept one if one was offered.** Over one in three of the children weren't sure whether or not they would accept an offer to have an independent visitor. Overall, 79% would either definitely accept one if offered, or weren't sure but might accept one.

There were no big differences on this between girls and boys, children of different age groups, care leavers and those still in care, or between those in children's homes and foster children.

'I have enough help already'

Conclusion

We had asked children and young people for their views and experiences about independent visitors when we met them to consult them on other subjects altogether. So we were not choosing people to ask who were likely to have, or not to have, an independent visitor, or to have either a positive or negative view about independent visitors. We think that makes the answers we were given likely to be a good all-round picture of children and young people's views about independent visitors.

Overall, 29% of the children in care who answered our survey had independent visitors. Children in children's homes were the most likely to have an independent visitor, though even then the majority of children living in children's homes did not have one.

One in five care leavers told us they had independent visitors, and half of those answering a question about this said that this was because they were still in touch with independent visitors they had when they were still in care. It looks as if independent visitors are as likely as not to stay in touch with children after they have left care, but that half of the care leavers who answered our questions might have been describing another sort of person (possibly a Personal Adviser) as an independent visitor too. We need to look more closely at this.

It looks as if children offered an independent visitor usually get a choice. Three quarters of children with an independent visitor told us they had been given a choice about whether they wanted one or not. Seventeen per cent of those without an independent visitor said this was because they had decided not to have one when this had been offered to them. One in five of those with an independent visitor said that they had been given a choice about the person they wanted to be their visitor. Even so, the most usual person to choose who was to be a child's visitor was their social worker.

However, by far the most usual reason for not having an independent visitor is that one was never offered. Only one in five of those without an independent visitor thought they would say no if they were offered one.

Although the law and guidance says that independent visitors are most likely to be needed by children who do not have much contact or many visits from their

families, few children who had an independent visitor either thought this is why they were offered one or said that this is why they had wanted a visitor. Those without a visitor did not say this is why they might want one either. Few children said that they would prefer to have visits from their families instead of their independent visitors. They did not appear to see an independent visitor as in any way linked to not having much family contact, or as making up for lack of family contact.

Children were clear that having an independent visitor is mainly to give you someone you can talk to and who listens to you, and who can give you help and support. Both those who had independent visitors and those who didn't saw these as the main good things about having an independent visitor.

Independent visitors clearly do give these things to children – they do listen, help and support. But in practice, many also do a lot of taking children out and doing activities with them. This is of course a way of keeping in touch and talking together, but being taken out and doing activities are not actually things that children especially wanted independent visitors for. It looks as if children who want independent visitors want them as listeners and helpers who are there for them, especially if they don't work for social care services, rather than as people to take them places.

Not surprisingly, the main quality of a good independent visitor, according to children, is to be a great listener.

However, there can be worries about being offered an independent visitor. The main ones are that they might not be someone the child gets on well with, and that having an independent person means having another person joining your life and knowing all about you. These weren't the main reasons for children turning down offers to have an independent visitor, though. The main reason was simply feeling that you didn't need one.

From what children have told us, independent visitors are wanted and valued by many children – but as independent people who listen and help, rather than as people to take them out for activities, and rather than as visitors to make up for any lack of family contact.

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