

**REPORT FOR THE  
INDEPENDENT VISITING SERVICE**

**October 2018- June 2019**

**Dawn Oldroyd and Eska Verleg**

**Regulation 44 Visitor**

## **Basis of report**

This report is being prepared in order to provide the Corporate Parenting Panel with an update of the work of the Independent Visitor.

## **Introduction**

Part six, regulation 43 of the Children's Home Regulation 2015 makes provision for the appointment of an Independent Visitor. There remains an expectation that the appointment of an Independent Visitor will continue to be the responsibility of the Local Authority, with clear guidance being offered as to the criteria which must be met in terms of ensuring the visitor's independence is clearly demonstrable. The visits continue to be required to be made on a monthly basis.

Within the regulations it is expected the Independent Visitor will report on the quality standards in specified areas. These can be summarised as follows:-

- (a) the quality and purpose of care standard (see regulation 6);
- (b) the children's views, wishes and feelings standard (see regulation 7);
- (c) the education standard (see regulation 8);
- (d) the enjoyment and achievement standard (see regulation 9);
- (e) the health and well-being standard (see regulation 10);
- (f) the positive relationships standard (see regulation 11);
- (g) the protection of children standard (see regulation 12);
- (h) the leadership and management standard (see regulation 13);
- (i) the care planning standard (see regulation 14).

The Independent Visitor continues to be expected to provide a report following each visit. Part six, regulation 44 of the Children's Homes Regulations provides for the reporting of the standards.

The Regulation 44 report maintained its format providing a succinct summary of the homes under the signs of safety headings. The recommendations following each visit are noted under two headings. Under the 'What needs to happen' the Visitor notes all the difficulties, shortfalls that have been observed during a particular visit. Some of these issues, the ones that may have potential significant impact on the young people or may represent a risk, are reiterated under the formal Recommendations section. Also issues that have been consistently raised under 'What needs to happen' but not acted upon by the homes may also become a Recommendation. The use of two tiers allows for an approach that signals any potential difficulties, including one-off matters in time for the home to consider and address timely, before it becomes a problem. The Recommendations therefore gain

more weight and represent the urgency and importance of it being acted on without delay.

### **The Independent Visitor**

Since October 2018 Regulation 44 visits have been undertaken by two Independent Reviewing Officers (Visitors) due to ongoing staff sickness. David Proudlove (Visitor) currently remains off sick and will continue to be so for the foreseeable future, his duties being picked up by Eska Verleg. Dawn Oldroyd and Eska Verleg continue to share the visiting duties to the 7 homes, by visiting 4 and 3 homes respectively for a consecutive 4-6 months, after which the two Visitors will change homes for a further 4-6 months period.

Ildiko Kiss, the previous Team Manager who oversaw the supervision and development of the Reg 44 visits went on maternity leave in June 2018 and due to return later this year. Until her return Paul Fisher undertakes the same duties.

Monthly visits have continued within timescales and Dawn and Eska maintain positive working relationships with care home managers, staff and young people. The consistency has enabled them to allay worries and concerns regarding the visiting process, working collaboratively to highlight what's working well and address issues within the homes that contribute to the effective care of the young people. The Visitors have continued to observe shift handovers, team meetings and key worker team discussions to gain further insight into practice within the homes. Weekend visits and conducting visits on different days and different times and around festive events have been beneficial in reflecting the home routines and dynamics.

Dawn and Eska have developed a positive working relationship with the new Registered Manager at Beacon since her appointment and have extended this practice to the new manager at Albion Street.

Visitor reports reflect the implementation of Signs of Safety across the authority, in the summary highlighting; what's working well, what we're worried about, what needs to happen (good practice suggestions, emerging issues, matters in progress). This ensures consistency of practice within a framework that all staff utilise within children's services. Recommendations from previous reports are reviewed to ensure that progress is being made within reasonable timescales, where issues remain outstanding Visitors continue to challenge Home Managers to ensure these are being addressed, additionally the Regulated Homes Service Manager has sight of all reports ensuring additional support can be given if required.

The dispute resolution procedure is now in place ensuring that any disagreements are resolved in a timely manner between the Independent Review service and senior managers for the care homes. The process enables the Visitor to retain independence as the process is overseen at an Assistant Director level. To date, this process has not needed to be initiated as all disagreements have been successfully resolved.

The Visitors have attended one Homes Manager Meeting and this was felt to be a positive contribution and the hope is to continue this on a more regular basis to promote the role of the Visitor and to discuss thematic issues arising amongst the homes countywide.

Visitors continue to be seen as a critical friend, gathering feedback from other stakeholders such as children, parents and professionals to improve the young person's overall experience and to provide a report that is reflective of the life of the home.

### **The voice of the child**

There has been a push within Beacon to become even better at capturing and recording the voice of the child of children with significant communication difficulties. They are promoting training for staff and have a clear plan in place to develop this skill and to ensure the child's voice is reflected in written documentation.

There have been lots of observations of excellent communication between staff and young people, particularly in Strut and Haven, using a variety of alternative and preferred methods such as makaton, PECS and iPads. The staff have taken time to instruct the Visitor on methods and simple sign language to enable them to communicate directly with the young person.

The voice of the child is extremely well represented in reports, particularly those prepared by Strut and Haven who are also routinely displaying quotes and photos of the young people.

Some homes have also been creative in developing spaces for children to reflect and talk to staff when necessary. Staff at Eastgate have promoted the use of the 'Thinking Swing' for young people to have a space to reflect and/or calm down. They also have access to the Theraplay space / quiet room for a breathing space.

Northolme are very strong on advocating for the young people, including one young person being supported to make a complaint to the police (the young person directly stated to the Visitor "I felt like I had a voice"); and staff advocating on behalf of another young person to access appropriate educational support.

Within the secure unit, the young people have been confident and vocal in sharing their views with the Visitor and this has been strongly supported by the staff members and responded to favourably by the management team. This has been in relation to whole group issues as well as individual issues and concerns. There was evidence of follow through of actions and the young people clearly felt listened to.

Albion Street have experienced a challenging period however there has been positive observations of the young person's voice being promoted, for example the

young people in placement at Xmas were enabled to timetable their perfect Christmas day which was then provided for them. The management are promoting the child's voice and nurturing practice within the home and are facilitating Restorative Practice training to achieve this. The staff are also facilitating a signs of safety reflection with the young people to reflect on their contribution to dynamics within the home and what they have learnt over recent months and how they want life within the home to be managed in the future.

Throughout the homes there is more evidence of "You said we did" boards and some of the outcomes are reflected within residents meetings. Some of the homes actively promote the compliments and complaints processes (raising day to day issues) and there is very good evidence of the process working and there being a timely response to the young person, particularly in the Secure Unit and Northolme.

Social Pedagogy is delivered and recorded at different levels in the homes across the county, with some homes being more embedded. Northolme is particularly good with SP work and Eastgate are also doing deep dive work to ensure recordings are of good quality and there is follow up work.

The Independent Advocacy service continue to attend all homes although there have been some delays in sharing reports at times due to staffing and capacity. The visits are however recorded in home files. The reports provided and feedback to management teams has been valuable.

Visitors have adopted a range of skills and activities to engage with the young people in the homes, including one to one discussions, group discussions, playing with young people and enjoying activities in order to gain their voice.

### **Quality of care**

The children within the homes continue to receive a good quality of care. There have been some significant challenges for some care homes regarding the recruitment of staff at a variety of levels, from RCO1 to Homes Manager, however it is positive that 2 permanent Registered Managers have been recruited. In some homes there is a bank of regular agency and relief workers who have had access to focussed training and support. This has enabled some homes to develop a consistent staff group where the young people have been able to form a rapport and the staff have had the opportunity to become well accustomed with the home routines.

Staff and managers have ensured that they have been flexible in covering staffing vacancies, going the extra mile to ensure that young people's daily activities and routines aren't compromised. It has been positive to see the involvement of all staff within the home taking part in the care of young people. Albion Street have been through a particularly challenging period due to the complex behaviours of some young people.

There is good quality training being delivered and also access to a range of courses to aid the ongoing development of staff including;

- recording skills training alongside staff from other children's home to develop skills in day to day recording requirements
- Therapeutic Crisis Intervention training is underway to ensure all staff are up to date with their training.
- Restorative Practice training is to be delivered in-house imminently.

There is also tailored training for specific homes such as healthy living or to meet an individual children's needs, such as a CAMHS Psychologist delivering training within a team meeting focusing on the impact of trauma on a child's development.

There has been positive use of Signs of Safety planned mapping exercises with staff members, some are routinely delivered within team meetings to reflect on individual young people's needs. Albion Street have planned one such session to be undertaken with independent facilitators to reflect on recent months and identify themes around what staff have managed well but to unpick the challenges and identify how to move practice forward and to offer a stable living environment;

All the homes are able to evidence multi-agency partnership working and there are routinely contributions from health, police, school, social care and other agencies, undertaken through scheduled monthly meetings and ad hoc communications. The Police and PCSO presence within the homes in a preventative manner is evident in the mainstream homes, building the trust between the young people and police and also the relationship with the staff and police. There is an openness to invite other professionals and agencies into the homes to meet the needs of the young people. Such examples are weekly meetings between Beacon and Sandon School; the introduction of a motorbike scheme at the secure unit with bikes donated by the police; Strut House providing a location for education to be delivered in a familiar space for one young person; the involvement of young inspectors.

Across the service the homes are very good at promoting communication between staff and young people and involving them at all stages. Haven have examples of one young person who has been placed on a full time basis short term and the staff have been encouraged to take photos of the young person signing as there are particular signs which the staff do not understand. Management have suggested the photos can then be shared with the school and parents in an attempt to interpret and understand what has been said. Strut and Haven have also promoted family Christmas experiences for young people placed with them for full time care, short term.

Home staff follow through with procedures and routinely contact 111, GP's, Pharmacies and specialist health providers where there have been health issues or concerns regarding medication. Medication discrepancies have been appropriately managed and used as an opportunity for effective individual and group learning to minimise the risk of reoccurrence. Young people are routinely taken to standard GP,

dentist and optician appointments as well as specialist consultant appointments. There has been a drive on general healthy living across the homes and Northolme has benefited from a new kitchen with Eastgate and Albion Street to undergo renovations.

There is evidence that staff are attending EPEPs, EHCP reviews, sports days and parents evenings, they routinely engage with teaching staff regarding individual young people to ensure that their educational needs are being met. There is also evidence of staff advocating for the young person when their educational needs are not being met. There have been examples of young people having additional support from Positive Futures and mainstream schools being creative in their delivery of education and promoting attendance. Staff members have planned ahead during holiday periods to promote the transition from primary schools to secondary, or from establishment to establishment.

At times transport appears to be a challenge due to the amount of time a young person spends travelling from the home to school; and some escorts not fully understanding the needs of the young person. In these instances the home staff have been proactive in advocating for the needs of the young people whether it be more consistent escorts, types of transport, or consideration of a move to a school nearer to the home.

The homes each offer a varying range of activities for the young people to meet their needs and interests. Haven and Strut have a well-established routine of activities both in and outside the home which promote social inclusion and experiences. All activities are well risk assessed and even if there are incidents during the activity there is an emphasis on reflecting and reviewing the risk assessment to ensure the young person can still participate rather than withdraw the activity. Eastgate and Northolme provide a good variety to activities and actively promote independence where they can and encourage community participation, develop the young people's interests and positive social interactions with peers such as visiting friends after school for tea. They are also enabled to go on extended trips within the UK or abroad. The secure unit have been building on community links, for example young people have been enjoying the regular input of an ex GB table tennis coach; one young person accessing a community based college; the planned introduction of the bike scheme; and an acknowledgement that this can be improved and built upon. Beacon staff continue to develop a system whereby all the children access activities outside as well as within the home providing them a varied experience. The introduction of a tuck shop in the home enables the young people to develop skills and experience purchasing items and the young people have been involved in setting up the scheme. Albion Street are having a renewed focus on promoting activities and structured routines within the home and there has been some evidence of this on visits such as at Christmas when the young people have created sour dough decorations and the young people are routinely accessing gym and horse-riding.

Eastgate have now completed the homework room and were awaiting a grand opening of the facility which now houses the computer. Beacon is awaiting the development of the outdoor space which is due to be completed now funding has been agreed. Within Haven, the modernisation projects have been agreed for refurbishment of the sound and sensory room; a new front door entry system; improvements to the garden to include a fire evacuation cabin and swings; refurbishment of the Arjo bathroom; and window inserts for one bedroom. These are due to be completed by the end of March 2019 and will be of great benefit to the young people. There is a significant refurbishment that has been scheduled for Albion Street to include all new doors; new kitchen; new en-suite bathrooms; new laundry room and facilities; new entrance; re-carpeting and redecorating; new soft furnishings. The Registered Manager acknowledged that this will be a huge task and they will be planning the building schedule around the young people's daily routines but were also booking a cottage for half term to take the young people away to enable the builders to undertake a bulk of the work in the absence of the young people. The homes seek to ensure that the home environment is clean, well-kept and ultimately safe for the young people. Where damage has been caused, this is fixed and home conditions do not deteriorate.

Independent Visitors would make particular reference to the swift and supportive response from Beacon, Strut and Haven to the emergency admissions of young people arising from the suspension of a private children's home provider. These homes have provided exceptional levels of care to a number of young people and have been responsive to their needs in exceptional circumstances and the feedback from other professionals and families has been wholly positive and should be commended.

### **Social Pedagogy**

Social Pedagogy (SP) is evident within all of the homes to varying degrees, being on the visual display boards and individualised to the child within the home. Some homes, whilst they agree that SP work needs to be promoted, are currently having to prioritise other pertinent factors and areas of recording. Work is being done, albeit informally in some homes, however it is not being consistently recorded in the most effective way. For new staff SP continues to be promoted through the induction process and consequently through continuing professional development.

Each home has identified champions that have responsibility for integrating SP and promoting practice although there has been some challenges where the lead has left the home. Across the board, staff have reported the training is very good though intense. This is now being embedded in homes via adhoc activities as well as organised events. SP is recorded on individual case files along with SP activity files, team meeting agendas and is subject to regular audits by senior staff within the home.

SP is used alongside other working methodologies such as restorative practice to reflect on daily activities and providing a structure for focussed work with the young person following an incident. Its use is being aligned with the young person targets and care plans in order to embed this into the day to day interactions with staff and activities. Staff are reporting that this is complimenting their practice rather than being seen as a standalone piece of work and they are seeing the benefits of linking behaviours to feelings and reflecting on their contribution to dynamics and relationships.

The SP ethos and practices have provided an outlet for a more structured and reflective practice within the staff teams although some homes are at quite an early stage of embedding practice. It is instrumental in supporting the development of deep and meaningful relationships between the staff members and the children/young people and a focused method to support the young people with emotional difficulties.

### **Challenges**

The Independent Visitors had scheduled a meeting with Ofsted to explore the role of the Visitor and to identify and areas for improvement and development however this meeting was rescheduled to March 2019. The Visitors are welcoming this opportunity to develop their knowledge and role and are also exploring other networking options regionally and nationally with the focus to improve and develop the service.

Visits are conducted on a monthly basis, there have been challenges in ensuring that the written reports are completed and fed back in a timely manner, this continues to be a focus for improvement for the visitors.

The mix of young people and their individual needs has presented a real challenge for some of the homes over the course of the last 6 months. Particular young people have been challenging and their behaviour has impacted on the staff and young people. This has led at times to a chaotic living environment with physical damage to the home environment as well as a negative impact on the other children and injuries to staff. Staff and managers have shown a resilience in responding to these issues, proactively seeking out multi agency ways to reduce risk to the individual displaying these behaviours. Staffing of the children's homes remains one of the ongoing challenges that is addressed through ongoing rolling recruitment and more targeted advertising alongside the risk assessing and matching of children within the homes.

### **Ofsted inspections**

All of the children's homes are subject to Ofsted inspection. Each home is subject to twice yearly inspections, ordinarily there will be a full inspection annually followed by an interim inspection approximately six months later.



The effectiveness of leaders and managers Outstanding

The children's home provides highly effective services that consistently exceed the standard of good. The actions of the children's home contribute to significantly improved outcomes and positive experience of the children and young people who need help, protection and care.

Strut House, a short term unit for children with special needs had an inspection on the 9 to 10 Oct 2018 and continue to be awarded an Outstanding grading.

Eastgate, was subject to an OFSTED Rating of the Home from the last inspection Outstanding: Inspection dates: 17 to 18 October 2018

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people, taking into account outstanding

Overall experiences and progress of children and young people Outstanding

Taking into account:

How well children and young people are helped and protected Outstanding

The effectiveness of leaders and managers Outstanding

The Children's home provides highly effective services that consistently exceed the standard of good. The actions of the children's home contribute to significantly improve outcomes and positive experiences for children and young people who need help, protection and care.

## **Conclusion**

Overall the homes provide good if not in some instances exceptional levels of care for the young people in their homes. There is an ethos of reflective practice and approaches within the homes; they ensure that learning is shared across the team. The use of champions ensures that practice is continually updated and promoted rather than being lost. Staff teams have been resilient and remained motivated even when staffing issues and management of young people have caused additional challenges. Homes continue to promote positive practice and strive for positive outcomes for the young people in their care.

There is the enthusiasm to develop the role of the Independent Visitor through engagement with Ofsted and engaging at a regional and national level.

The staff and manager's commitment to providing good quality care to the young people in spite of the challenges is to be commended and is consistently evident across the service.

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