

I recently talked to Helen McInnes about Somerset Council's Route1 Advocacy and Independent Visitor Service.



Hello Helen, what is Route1 Advocacy and what do you do?

In a nutshell, we are a very small team of 7 field staff, a team manager and a business support officer who recruit train and support volunteers. In addition to this, we all do advocacy ourselves and some of us are also Independent Visitors!

So are you an independent company or part of Somerset Council?

We are part of Somerset Council, but 'sit' within the Quality Assurance team to maintain the required level of independent that is required for the roles we carry out. This also allows us to support young people with complaints without their being a conflict of interest.

You've mentioned Independent Visitors and advocacy, what is the difference between these roles?

Independent Visitors (IVs) are trusted adult friends and are available to any child who is Looked After, who would like one. As a volunteer the IV is often the only person in a child's life who is not paid to be there – which is quite a powerful message to the young person. The relationship can continue to be supported by Route1 for as long as the young person wants it to, and all volunteers agree to at least two years.

Advocacy is quite different. Firstly, it's available to any child who has a social worker, and who wants to speak to an advocate, and each advocacy case is usually short term with no expectation of a long-term commitment to a particular child.

Some of our volunteers do one role or the other, and quite a few do both!

Is there a reason that you use volunteers?

Absolutely. The Children Act actually identifies that IVs should be volunteers who have a role to "visit, befriend and advise the child".

One of the advocacy standards is that advocacy services should be independent, and the use of volunteers supports us in maintaining our independence. Using our team of highly trained volunteers also allows us to do much more advocacy than would be possible with a staff team of seven field staff. Last year, Route1 provided advocacy for children on more than 1000 occasions!

Why is it important to ensure the voice of the child is heard?

Children are experts in their own lives, and when decisions are being made that effect their lives it is imperative that their views are heard – and listened to! At times, the child may have key information which allows other professionals a different insight into how best to support the young person and/or family.

There have also been a number of safeguarding reviews where if the child's voice had been heard, and taken seriously, there would have been a different outcome.

If someone is interested in becoming a volunteer or supporting Route1 in any way, how can they find out more or get involved?

Our website can be found at www.route1advocacy.co.uk and has more information about the roles and a link to the application site. We also have active social media channels on Instagram and Facebook. And if you prefer the human touch, you can give us a call on 01749 822801.



Route1 Advocacy & Independent Visitors



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