Advocacy - Working together to transform children’s services and lives

How advocacy makes an impact

Advocacy can be life-changing for a young person. For many children in the care system, it may be their only chance to have a real say in decisions that profoundly affect their lives. It can also help unravel unique and complex problems, saving time and money as well as creating better outcomes.

The Children’s Society delivers high quality advocacy services across England to children in care or leaving care, and to children with Special Education Needs or disabilities.

Low cost, high impact of advocacy

Our research report, The value of independent advocacy for looked after children and young people, shows that the short-term cost of investing in advocacy - on average £31 per hour - often leads to significant long-term savings.

Placement stability alone can save children’s services up to £30,000 a year per child, and when a child remains in care and stops running away, it saves an average of £940 a year per child.

However, specifications for advocacy services vary tremendously between local authorities. This means that there can be significant barriers to access for children and young people who need it most - and unnecessary expenditure on cases that could be managed in a more effective, child-centred way.

How does advocacy work?

Advocates work directly with children to ensure that their views are heard and acted upon. We know that children particularly seek support with issues such as placement, taking part in their reviews and leaving care.

The benefits for young people include:

- increased self-esteem, confidence and life skills
- greater educational attainment
- better understanding of processes and an ability to make informed choices
- support to speak up about issues like abuse and neglect
- a voice for those whose wishes often get overlooked, such as disabled children, black and minority ethnic children, younger children and those in foster care or out of area placements.

For local authorities, advocacy is a cost-effective intervention which can:

- ensure that services and care packages are truly child-centred
- create better outcomes for young people, including those transitioning to adult services
- help resolve complaints more quickly, saving time and money.

We have nine advocacy programmes that help looked after children speak up when it counts.

What commissioners say

“We chose The Children’s Society to provide advocacy and Independent Visitors because they clearly demonstrate objectivity when presenting children’s views which helps to enhance the social care we provide. Lancashire is a large county with diverse needs spanning rural and urban areas – The Children’s Society has the knowledge and capacity to manage the service in a strategic way. We are also impressed with how they have worked with us to develop our monitoring information to make it more effective.’

John Marr, Business Relationship Manager, Lancashire County Council

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**Advocacy saves money by avoiding complaints**

In one case, a young person had been let down by her social worker and wanted a change. Our advocate supported her to communicate her views on the type of social worker she would like. She felt listened to, and as a result she did not make a formal complaint to the local authority.

The cost of using our advocates on cases to do with relationships with professionals is around £350. In comparison, our research shows that a formal complaint can cost between £1,000 and £3,000, including compensation. This can increase even further if the Local Government Ombudsman becomes involved.

Commissioning advocacy in this case is likely to have saved the local authority over £1,000 as the young person chose not to make a complaint.

**Independent Visitors**

Our advocacy services are complemented by independent visitor schemes in many areas. Independent Visitors are volunteers who befriend young people, build up positive, long-standing relationships with them and help them to develop new skills, enjoy life and make new friends.

‘I’ve found having an Independent Visitor really helpful through the last year and a half. He’s helped me to grow in confidence, find different resources, and move into my own accommodation. I’m glad my local council have agreed for me to carry on with this even though I am now 18.’

**‘I know what it’s like to be taken into care’**

Laura came into care having suffered severe emotional and physical abuse. She never settled and often tried to run away. At 16 she became pregnant, but social services thought that her own experiences and behaviour while in care meant she might not be able to look after her baby.

Laura was worried and wanted to know her rights so she called our Participation, Advocacy and Rights (PAR) programme on its free phone number. Laura explained that she didn’t want her baby to go into care - she wanted to turn her life around and give her baby the childhood she never had.

We explained her rights and helped her to speak up in social services meetings. We found her a solicitor and explained the court process. Our staff and the solicitor worked with Laura to help her articulate her views for court statements.

After several court appearances the Judge agreed that Laura and her baby could go to a mother and baby assessment unit to prove that she was able to care for her child and to learn the mothering skills she had never experienced. Laura became more confident. She began speaking up at meetings and believing in herself. At the final hearing the judge said how impressed he was with Laura’s commitment and she was allowed to keep her child.

We went on to give Laura advice about housing and she is now happily settled with her baby.

‘I know what it’s like to be taken into care. I couldn’t bear to see that happen to my baby. I’m so glad you helped me turn my life around and give my child what I never had.’ Laura, West Sussex PAR

Our advocacy services give children and young people a voice, and help commissioners make a positive impact at minimal cost.

**Commission The Children’s Society**

Contact us today to find out how we can help you achieve better outcomes for looked after children and those with special needs in your area.

Call 0845 612 9402, email bdu@childrensociety.org.uk or visit www.childrensociety.org.uk to find out more.

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A better childhood. For every child.