

The value of independent advocacy for looked after children and young people



A note for commissioners of children's services

'Advocacy is about speaking up for children and young people and ensuring their views and wishes are heard and acted upon by decision-makers.' **'Get it Sorted', Department for Education and Skills, 2004**

1. Summary

This note summarises key findings from the report, 'The value of independent advocacy for looked after children'. The report explores the value of advocacy both for the looked after children supported by independent advocates and for commissioners of these services. It uses evidence from The Children's Society's advocacy practice base and existing literature to highlight the current trends in advocacy provision in England and to demonstrate the case for extending the provision of advocacy services for looked after children.

To build the evidence for this report we undertook an audit of 142 files on cases from two of The Children's Society's advocacy projects delivered between April 2010 and March 2012, conducted semi-structured interviews with our practitioners, and reviewed expenditure data from four of our programmes.

2. Key messages

By helping children and young people communicate their wishes and feelings, independent advocates play a crucial role in enabling children and young people in the looked after system to exercise their right as stipulated in The Children Act 1989 to have a say when decisions are made about their lives.

Advocacy services support local authorities to meet their duties as corporate parents to children in care improving both children's experience of the care system and their outcomes, as well as being cost effective.



Children and young people benefit from effective advocacy support and, as their confidence and self-esteem improve, they feel more able to share their concerns with adults which in turn helps them to stay safe. Advocacy also helps children to develop skills that aid their transition to adulthood and independence.

Children's access to advocacy services remains patchy, with the most vulnerable groups such as children with complex communication needs, disabled children, very young children and children placed out of their local area, experiencing the greatest difficulties in accessing independent advocacy.

The cost of advocacy provision ranges considerably depending upon the child or young person's issue(s) and its complexity. These elements are often unknown in advance of support and this should be taken into account when commissioning decisions are made.

Case study – Ben

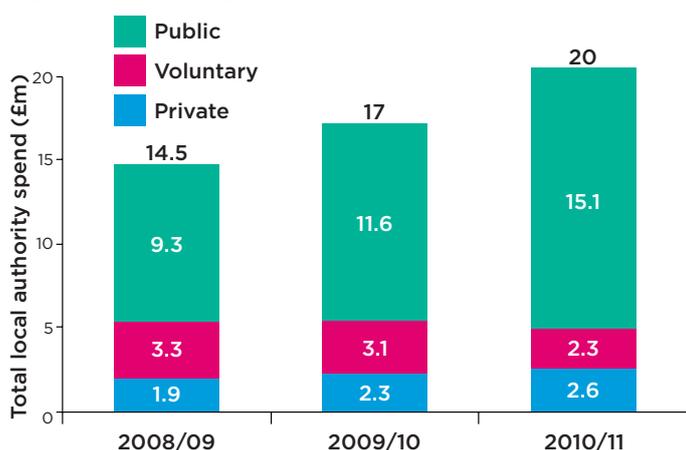
Ben was 17 and had two years left on a college course. His care plan involved moving onto a semi-independent placement post-18 with outreach support from current providers. Ben was concerned that the transition would impact on his education and, with the support of The Children’s Society’s advocate, Ben was able to communicate these views during review meetings. It was agreed that Ben would remain in his current placement for an extra nine months to help with transition. This decision made Ben more positive and confident about his education and his future.

3. Key findings

Trends – local authority expenditure

Over the past three years local authority expenditure across England on advocacy services has risen by almost 40%, from £14.5m to £20m with public sector provision driving this growth (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Spending on advocacy



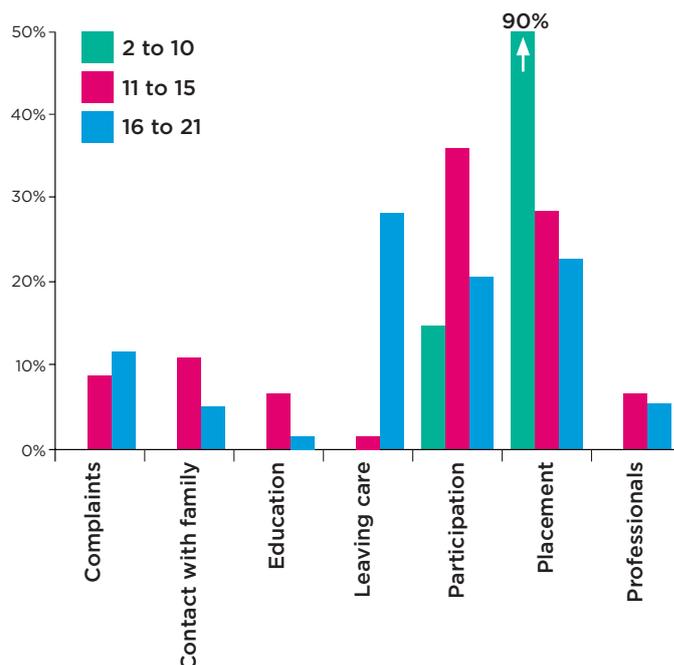
Expenditure ranges considerably by local authority. Around one third of authorities spent nothing on advocacy in 2010/11; one third spent under £100k, and the rest spent between £100k and £3.5m.

Trends – issues and characteristics

Our audit of 142 advocacy cases showed that our services support the same number of boys and girls and that just under half of cases involve support for children or young people with Special Educational Needs and/or disabilities.

The majority of young people supported (58%) were between the ages of 11 and 15. However nearly 10% of children supported were under the age of 10 and even as young as two. Where young people aged 16 to 21 were supported this mainly related to issues involving the transition process when leaving care placements.

Figure 2: Analysis of issues, by age



Across our services, advocates mostly supported children or young people on issues related to participation in decision-making or problems with care placements (see Figure 2).

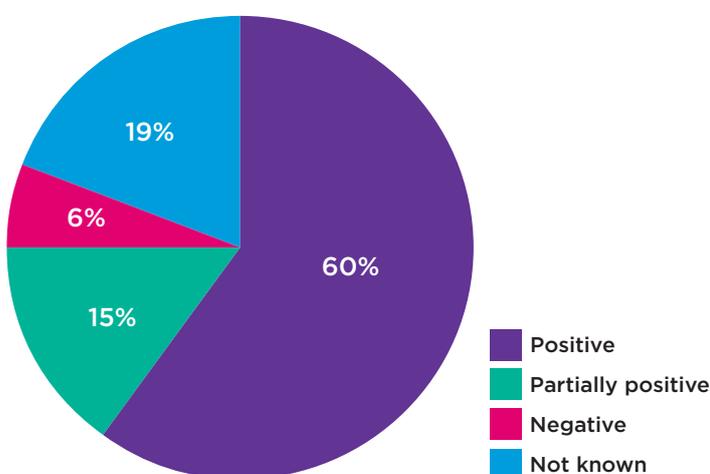
We believe that commissioning decisions about advocacy services are influenced by the following key considerations – the positive change services can make to the lives of children and young people, how services enable local authorities to meet statutory requirements and how much it costs to provide an effective service. The report demonstrates that advocacy services provided by The Children’s Society deliver on all three objectives.

The Children's Society's effectiveness

Our case file audit investigated how often the solution desired by the child or young person was achieved and/or how often the child or young person's views were expressed in key decisions affecting their lives.

In 60% of cases the solution desired by the child or young person was achieved through advocacy support and in a further 15% of cases where the desired solution was not achieved, the child or young person was happy that they were listened to in the decision making process (see Figure 3).

Figure 3: Observed change in our services



The cost of provision

We calculated the unit costs of advocacy provision in our services. The average cost per hour of effective advocacy support is £31. The cost per case ranges substantially depending upon the issue and the case complexity, ranging from £320 for family contact to £3,830 for safeguarding.

We calculated that cases focusing on issues such as contact with family or relationships with professionals cost on average up to £1,500. Cases focused on education, placement or leaving care issues cost on average from £1,500 to £2,500. Cases involving support with formal complaints or legal proceedings and safeguarding issues on average cost between £2,500 and £4,000.

The cost effectiveness of provision

The role of an advocate is clearly not to save money for a local authority and in some cases a solution that is in the child or young person's best interest may not be the cheapest one. However, by resolving issues early and in the child or young person's best interest, it is logical to assume that potential future issues are avoided at a cost saving to local authorities. The cases we cite in this brief paper, like Nadia's case below, evidence this.



Case study – Nadia

Nadia was not happy with her social worker who did not turn up to three consecutive meetings and wanted to make a formal complaint to the local authority. The Children's Society advocate became involved and began to explore with Nadia her views on what type of social worker she would like to have. The advocate supported Nadia to communicate her views, resulting in Nadia promptly being allocated a new social worker who she was happy with. Nadia felt listened to and decided not to pursue a formal complaint.

A cost focus

In this case study, the advocate helped the young person to change social workers, which prevented the young person from making a formal complaint to the local authority.

The cost of The Children's Society advocates working on cases relating to relationships with professionals is around £350. In comparison a formal complaint can cost local authorities in the region of £1,000 to £3,000 per investigation, including average sums of compensation. It becomes even more expensive if the Local Government Ombudsman becomes involved in resolving the case.

In this case commissioning the advocacy service is likely to have saved the local authority over £1,000 as the young person no longer wished to make a formal complaint.



Case study – James

The Children's Society's advocate visited James in a small residential unit as James wanted to have more contact with his dad. As trust developed between the young person and his advocate, James was able to talk about inappropriate staff behaviour at the unit which made him repeatedly run away from care. The advocate helped James to make a complaint and was instrumental in securing a new placement for him. The Local Safeguarding Children's Board investigated the unit and local authority stopped placing children there. James is now settled in a new placement where he feels happy. His behaviour has improved and he has stopped running away.

A cost focus

We can estimate that advocacy support at the cost of £2,250 resulted in certain savings to the local authority. For example placement stability can save children's services up to £30,000 for each year that the child remains in care and the prevention of running away episodes saves on average £940. But of course the positive impact of a stable placement and not running away on a child's well-being and his long-term life chances outweigh these estimated financial savings to the local authority.

You may download a full copy of this report at:

www.childrenssociety.org.uk/what-we-do/commission-us/our-services/advocacy

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To find out more about commissioning services contact The Children's Society's Business Development Unit at: www.childrenssociety.org.uk/what-we-do/commission-us

4. Policy recommendations

The report makes the following key recommendations that we believe would improve children's access to advocacy services and ensure that learning from individual advocacy cases leads to improvements for all looked after children:

1. The statutory framework for advocacy provision, including the National Standards and statutory guidance, should be revised and strengthened.
2. A monitoring and reporting system for advocacy services should be developed. The lead members, Ofsted, the Office for the Children's Commissioner, the Children in Care Councils all should have a role to play in this new system.
3. Commissioning of advocacy services should take into account the full range of legislation, regulation and guidance, and services should be commissioned on at least a three year basis.
4. Children and young people themselves and adults involved in their lives should be better informed of the advocacy services available and the benefits these services bring.

About The Children's Society's services

The Children's Society runs nine advocacy programmes across England. These programmes support children and young people who wish to make their views known when decisions are made about their lives, challenge decisions or make representations and/or complaints, but who need someone else to help them to do so. These programmes support children who are looked after, those who are leaving care and disabled children.