

Helping Children Get the Care Experience They Need: Independent Advocacy for Children and Young People in Care

Background

In June 2016 the Children's Commissioner published '*Helping Children Get the Care Experience They Need: Independent Advocacy for Children and Young People in Care*'. The Children's Commissioner has a special responsibility for children who are in or leaving care, living away from home or receiving social care services. The aim of the research was to ask children and young people what they thought about advocacy. Research on the recording and measurement of outcomes was commissioned from the University of Central Lancashire (UCLan) and the National Children's Bureau (NCB)¹.

Both reports are available at:

<http://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/publications/helping-children-get-care-experience-they-need-independent-advocacy-children-and-young>

Overview / Summary

The research concludes that many children in care do not know about advocacy, their right to it or how to access services and reveals a lack of consistency in advocacy provision across the country. However, it also draws attention to the many benefits of advocacy for children and young people and puts forward a number of proposals to strengthen advocacy support and improve the quality of the care experience.

A variety of research methods was used. Children and young people were asked what they thought about advocacy, information that was gathered from the National Survey of Children in Care, *State of the Nation*² was included and children and young people were consulted in a number of settings, including in care and mental health facilities.

The Children's Commissioner emphasises the fact that the views of young people who have experienced advocacy guided the project.

¹ Independent Advocacy: Impact and Outcomes for Children and young people The Centre for Children and Young People's Participation at the University of Central Lancashire (UCLan), in partnership with the National Children's Bureau Research Centre (NCB)(2016)Office of the Children's Commissioner

² State of the Nation:Report1:Children in Care and Care Leavers Survey (2015)Office of the Children's Commissioner

Defining Advocacy

The report takes its definition of advocacy from the National Standards for the Provision of Children's Advocacy Services³:

'Advocacy is about speaking up for children and young people. Advocacy is about empowering children and young people to make sure that their rights are respected and their views and wishes are heard at all times. Advocacy is about representing the views, wishes and needs of children and young people to decision-makers, and helping them to navigate the system.'

Key Findings

- Young people clearly value advocacy, it has an impact on young people's lives and policy and practice;
- High quality advocates, who listen to and take account of children's views on their care, drive up the standard of care experiences;
- Many children in care do not know about advocacy;
- There are wide inconsistencies in children's access to advocacy support across the country, with great differences in allocated budgets;
- Half of local authorities supported less than 1 in 14 of the children they considered eligible for the service;
- There were low levels of advocacy access by children in care and care leavers. 10% or fewer accessed a service in half of local authorities;
- Young children and disabled children are less able to use advocacy as not all areas provided services to assist them;
- In the secure estate every young person is able to access advocacy through a visiting service but there were limitations on the linking of data systems;
- In mental health settings levels of access by young people are not known and indications from research are that children have unequal access to advocacy;
- There are low numbers of disabled children using advocates;
- Greater consistency is needed in the recording and measurement of outcomes.

Children and Young People's Perspective on Advocacy

When it came to accessing advocacy services, children and young people acknowledged that some of their peers did not know about advocacy, how to access it or felt too uncomfortable to ask.

55% of children and young people responding to a question in the Children's Commissioner's national survey of children in care, *State of the Nation*, did not know, or were unsure, how to get an advocate.

³ National Standards for the Provision of Children's Advocacy Services (2002) Department for Health

However, the research concluded that children and young people who had experience of advocacy were clear about the benefits on a number of levels. In addition to problem resolution, they valued the learning gained from the experience of advocacy and the relationship with an advocate. For example, benefits included improving confidence, gaining a sense of agency and developing problem solving skills.

Access to Advocacy

In terms of access to advocacy, researchers found that whilst high quality services are provided by some local authorities, the overall picture is that advocacy provision is inconsistent. Wide variations in the number of advocates available, groups of children served and the amount spent on advocacy in a local area, mean that children in different parts of the country receive different levels of support.

Another area of concern was the low number of disabled children using advocates. For example, 41% of local authorities provide no access to non - instructed advocacy for younger children and only 61% said they provided advocacy to children who were receiving services.

It was also noted that children placed out of area are dependent on their 'home' authority to provide advocacy and that organising advocacy at a distance can make access problematic.

Furthermore, it was found that only a third of children making a complaint had an advocate.

Secure Estate and Mental Health Units

One of the key aims of the research was to explore advocacy available to young people in secure mental health facilities and the justice system.

The Children's Commissioner found that advocacy support is available to all children in the secure estate and that advocates visit secure units at least weekly. This model was deemed to be very helpful for increasing access and could be used in other residential settings with children. However, it is recommended that improvements are made to the way issues involving advocates are recorded.

Independent mental health advocates are provided in mental health units. As there is no central directory of advocacy providers in this context it was difficult for researchers to determine commissioning responsibility and details of access about advocacy services.

Issues, Outcomes and Effective Recording

As mentioned in the introduction this piece of research was accompanied by a research report commissioned from UCLan and NCB. The report highlights a clear need for consistent recording and measurement of outcomes. It provides a helpful measure comprising:

- Short term outcomes for individual children;
- Long term outcomes or impact for individuals;

- Wider impact on systems and services.

The research undertaken by UCLan and NCB found that agencies had a variety of ways of recording outcomes and that there was no systematic way of capturing information, although agencies were all in agreement that it was important.

It also reveals the impact advocacy can have on a practice level, for example advocacy can create a shift in culture where children are seen as service users with entitlements and professionals are held more accountable.

Conclusions

In summary, the research highlights the benefits of advocacy and the value young people place on advocates who have supported them. It presents strong arguments for a consistent national system of recording and measuring outcomes which would result in a greater consistency of service provision for children and young people.

Recommendations

The report recommends that:

1. Advocacy is recognised as being crucial in ensuring children's voices and understanding of care are heard and is acknowledged as an important aspect of the care system;
2. The Government's vision for social care reform and strategy for improving the outcomes and experiences of children in care sets out an ambition for a strong and well understood statutory framework delivered through local best practice. It is recommended that the National Standards and range of guidance addressing advocacy are reviewed and embedded as a key aspect of the national framework;
3. Practice guidance on 'what works' in delivering high quality advocacy support is produced by Government, including best practice on commissioning;
4. Advocacy is included in the framework of inspection by Ofsted;
5. Local authorities and mental health providers should ensure that all children and young people are aware of their entitlement to and the availability of advocacy support;
6. Local authorities to monitor availability and take up of advocacy support and ensure that younger children, disabled children and those placed out of their home area are getting the help they need;
7. Local authorities should review their commissioning of advocacy to ensure they are meeting the requirements of statutory guidance and contracts should ensure stability of provision;
8. Youth Justice Board should review and take account of the issues raised by young people, particularly those affecting children in care and care leavers, through advocates and the outcomes of involvement to improve practice and quality;

9. That with regard to advocacy support in mental health settings, it is recommended that NHS England, the Department of Health and Department for Education, consider how best to collect and collate information about access to and commissioning of advocacy to children and young people in mental health settings; specifically those who are in care or care leavers; that relevant bodies should ensure that advocacy services to young people in in-patient settings follow the Code of Practice so that the requirements for Independent Mental Health Advocates are met; and that Clinical Commissioning Groups (CCGs) and Health and Wellbeing Boards assess the advocacy needs of young people in the area to inform commissioning and ensure that young people are aware of their entitlements.

Reconstruct, part of the Signis Group works directly with looked after children in the South West. We provide advocates for children and young people when social services are involved in their lives, including young people in foster care, children's homes and in residential school settings. We also support children and young people to participate in child protection services. The aim of our advocacy service is to make sure young people are protected and well cared for by providing an opportunity for views to be listened to and properly considered.

To find out more about our direct work with children and young people please call 0117 244 6560.

Contact Us

Reconstruct offers a range of up-to-date training for social care professionals for more information contact us on: 01895 549 910 or visit our website www.reconstruct.co.uk.

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