

A stronger Voice? A scoping study of independent advocacy for people with learning disabilities – Key Findings

A right to advocacy

People with learning disabilities often find it difficult to make their voice heard. They may experience barriers to accessing their human rights in areas such as health and wellbeing, housing, personal assistance, employment, finance and decision-making. Independent advocacy can promote choice, access, justice, and empowerment by helping people to have a stronger voice and address power imbalances.

Although people with learning disabilities have a legal right to access independent advocacy under the Mental Health (Care and Treatment) (Scotland) Act 2003, the SIAA Map of Advocacy report 2015-16¹ identifies people with learning disabilities as a group for whom there are gaps in provision and who may be unaware of their right to access advocacy.

Impact of advocacy

People with learning disabilities' identified two main types of positive impact resulting from one to one advocacy support: greater confidence in speaking up for themselves/ability to communicate their views, and resolution of problems they were experiencing. The main benefits of being part of an advocacy group related to social interaction, a long term relationship with the group facilitator, and increased confidence.

Examples of the positive benefits of advocacy included feeling calmer, being listened to, having processes and rights explained and having help to articulate views. These 'soft outcomes' were more identifiable and numerous than tangible 'hard outcomes' of problem resolution which were less common. Feeling that someone was on their side was seen as a major advantage of advocacy.

She helped me resolve things in a calm way... She listened to me and helped me understand what was going on.

Without advocacy I'd be stuck in the same old pattern, stuck in meetings, not getting my say.

Some people were disappointed with lack of progress in relation to specific identified problems and expressed a desire for deeper and more intensive support in order to achieve the changes that were required

Advocacy provision and commissioning

Advocacy services in Scotland are facing significant pressures in the context of static or reducing budgets and increasing demand. The landscape for advocacy

¹ A Map of Advocacy across Scotland 2015-2016 edition, SIAA (2017)

provision for people with learning disabilities is complex and there is considerable variation in the type of advocacy support which is accessible in different areas.

There is an absence of robust, up to date strategic advocacy plans in many areas. Two-thirds of commissioners reported not having an up to date plan and 40% of commissioners reported there was no local group responsible for development and/or implementation of a strategic plan.

The lack of a shared approach to advocacy evaluation and outcomes measurement by providers and commissioners continues to leave funders and organisations open to criticisms that they are over-reliant on case studies, anecdotes and personal opinion.

Recommendations

On the basis of this research SCLD has made the following eight recommendations which span four key themes:

Increasing access to provision

1. Advocacy commissioners and providers should ensure that people with learning disabilities are aware of their right to access advocacy, and know how to access it.
2. Advocacy commissioners and providers should review policies and service level agreements which prioritise access for those subject to compulsory measures taking account of the needs of other groups who also have a statutory right of access.

Improving strategic planning and commissioning

3. All those with responsibility for advocacy planning must ensure robust, up to date strategic advocacy plans are in place.
4. Advocacy commissioners and planners should undertake local needs assessments and consultations with people with learning disabilities.

Developing monitoring and evaluation practices

5. Advocacy providers should continue to develop and improve approaches to monitoring and evaluation, with particular focus on outcomes and impact measurement and identify barriers for groups with unmet need.
6. Advocacy providers and commissioners should be involved in road testing the new Measuring Impact of Advocacy Framework to inform future delivery plans and strategic commissioning cycles.

Facilitating knowledge exchange and learning

7. All advocacy stakeholders should work to promote a better understanding and awareness of the remit and purpose of advocacy amongst their fellow professionals.
8. All those involved in the planning, commissioning, management and delivery of advocacy would benefit from a learning network to share good practice.

Full report

A stronger Voice? A scoping study of independent advocacy for people with learning disabilities is available to download at www.sclld.co.uk