

Briefing Paper 1

Independent Children's Advocacy and Representation Services

National Assembly Elections 2007

"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 heard at all times. Advocacy is about representing the views, wishes and needs of children and young people to decision makers and helping them navigate the system."

National Standards for the Provision of Children's Advocacy Services (2003)
Welsh Assembly Government



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What has been achieved since 2003?

In 2002 the Welsh Assembly Government set up a Task and Finish Group made up of commissioners and providers to advise on the development of independent advocacy in Wales. This was soon after the dramatic withdrawal of the Children's Society from Wales and the setting up of Tros Gynnal with the help of Children in Wales and the Welsh Assembly Government to replace the children's rights and advocacy capacity that would have been lost.

The Welsh Assembly Government published the National Standards in 2003 as a guide to commissioners and providers. The statutory right for looked after children or children in need, who wished to make a complaint against social services, to receive an advocacy service, which was granted in 2002, was extended to young people leaving care in 2004.

By the middle of 2004 all counties in Wales offered an independent advocacy service to restricted groups of vulnerable children and young people. However, as the Children's Commissioner highlighted in 'Telling Concerns' (2003) and Pithouse et al (2005), Cardiff University in 'A study of Advocacy Services for Children and Young People in Wales', these services vary in their accessibility and quality - whilst acknowledging that this situation is often created by inadequate commissioning and resources. The problem of advocacy not being properly independent of the local authority that commissions it was highlighted as an important issue, as was the unavailability of advocacy for children accessing most health and education services. The cornerstone of any advocacy service is to be easily available when needed and until recently this was a principle, which had been established in Wales.

In order to overcome these problems, the Welsh Assembly Government has produced guidance for the commissioning of Advocacy Services for Children and Young People in collaboration with the Institute of Public Care. The New Service Model proposed would provide a comprehensive range of advocacy services available to children and young people accessing public services commissioned on a regional basis by Framework Partnerships and available via a One Stop Shop approach. Since 2005 there have been regular meetings of both the advocacy providers and advocacy workers facilitated by Children in Wales.

What are our current concerns?

The Children's Commissioner in his annual report 2004-05 and 2005-06 was very critical of the lack of progress in the development of advocacy services since his 'Telling Concerns' report was published. Moreover, he pointed out that the short-term nature of contracts and subsequent change of provider often means that children and young people experienced unhelpful change at a time when they need stability.

Although the Wales Assembly Government Commissioning Guidance is well intentioned, it remains to be seen whether it can facilitate the creation of a sufficiently funded national network of comprehensive and truly independent advocacy services to safeguard and support vulnerable children. Advocacy services remain the only services commissioned by Local Authorities where providers are regularly changed, providing instability for children and young people when they are especially vulnerable.

Finally, it is important to note that the core aim of advocacy is the participation of children and young people in decision making rather as simply a support element in the complaints process as it is increasingly being portrayed.

Recommendations

We support the WAG proposals for a comprehensive, integrated service model for advocacy while reserving judgement on the efficacy of regional commissioning. However, in order to make the vision a reality we recommend the following:

- Sufficient resources. Current financial commitment to children's advocacy varies considerably across Wales and with advocacy being available to more eligible children and young people there is a need for a funding formula, which would ensure an equal spread of resources.
- Both 'Telling Concerns' and the recently published Report of the Safeguarding Review 'Keeping us Safe' (2006) recommended the setting up of a central Advocacy Unit to promote and monitor good practice and develop the advocacy sector. We believe regional commissioning is more likely to be successful if supported by a central 'unit.'
- Occupational standards and accredited training should be further developed to ensure consistency and quality practice.
- Consideration should be given to whether advocates as a professional group should be registered with the Care Council for Wales.
- There is a need for a wider acceptance of children's rights and a necessary culture change if advocacy is to be accepted in the long term. Consideration should be given to developing common elements in the training of teachers, social workers and health professionals, which stress the importance of children's rights and participation.
- There is a need to monitor the mechanisms for children and young individuals and collectively to ensure that they are encouraged to make representations when necessary.

CONTACT DETAILS

BARNARDO'S CYMRU

ANDY JAMES, ASSISTANT DIRECTOR, POLICY

Tel: 01792 463357

Email: andy.james@barnardos.org.uk

NCH CYMRU

JAYNE ISAAC, PUBLIC POLICY OFFICER

Tel: 029 20 222127

Email: jayne.isaac@nch.org.uk

NSPCC

SIMON JONES, POLICY ADVISER WALES

Tel: 029 20 267000

Email: simonjones@nspcc.org.uk

SAVE THE CHILDREN

ANNE CROWLEY, SENIOR POLICY ADVISER

Tel: 029 20 396838

Email: a.crowley@savethechildren.org.uk

TROS GYNNAL

JACKIE MURPHY, ASSISTANT DIRECTOR

Tel: 029 20 396974

Email: jackie.murphy@trosgynnal.org.uk

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