

Children's views on advocacy

A report by the Children's Rights Director for England



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Contents

About this report	5
About the children who gave their views	6
Explaining advocacy	6
The ideal advocate	10
Should advocates be independent?	13
Using an advocate	14
How good are advocates?	16
The future of advocates	19
Should Independent Visitors become advocates?	21
Children's messages about advocacy	22
Last words from children	23
Recommendations from the children's views	23

About the Children's Rights Director



Roger Morgan, Children's Rights Director for England

The law sets out my duties as Children's Rights Director for England. One of my main jobs, with my team, is to ask children and young people for their views about how they are looked after when they are living away from home, or being helped by local councils' social care services. I then tell the Government, as well as Ofsted (which does inspections to check on how children and young people are being looked after and supported), what those children and young people think.

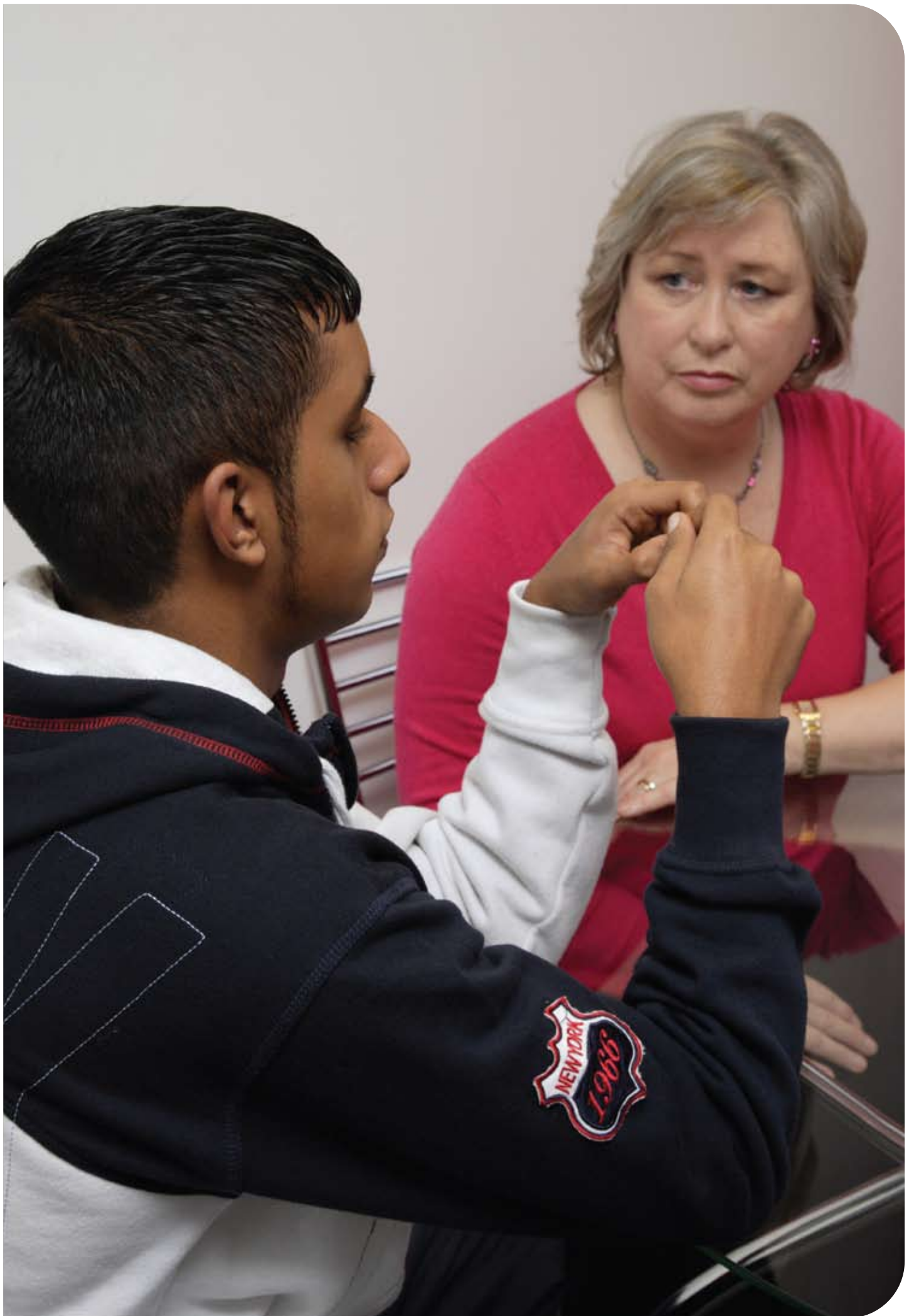
'Children's Views' reports of what children and young people have told me are published for everyone to read. You can find copies of all my Children's Views reports on our children's rights website www.rights4me.org.

The children and young people whose views I ask for are those living away from home in England (in children's homes, boarding schools, residential special schools, residential further education colleges, foster care, adoption placements or residential family centres), those who are getting help of any sort from the children's social care services of their local council, and care leavers.

As well as asking children for their views and publishing what they tell us, I and my team also give advice to Her Majesty's Chief Inspector at Ofsted, and to the Government, on children's rights and welfare. We have a duty to identify and raise issues we think are important about the rights and welfare of children living away from home or getting children's social care support. We do this both for individual children and for whole groups of children.

Advocacy, especially for children and young people living away from home or getting children's social care services, is something that is important to safeguarding and promoting children's rights. This report sets out children's own views on what advocacy is (and isn't); what makes a good advocate; how a child or young person gets an advocate when they need one; and how well advocates do at speaking up for children.

A handwritten signature in black ink, which appears to read "Roger Morgan". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, sweeping initial 'R'.



About this report

To make sure the children's messages about advocacy are clear, we have taken the key messages that they told us and put them in a box at the start of each section of this report. We have also put some recommendations at the end of the report, all based on what the children told us.

We asked children and young people for their views about advocacy in two different ways. First, we invited children and young people from different council areas and different sorts of services (such as children's homes, residential special schools and foster care) to meet us to give us their views. We met groups of children and young people at a pizza restaurant in London, at the National Ice Centre in Nottingham, at Urbis in Manchester and at Explore in Bristol. We also visited three young people at their children's home. We invited children and young people from places we had chosen at random, to give as many children and young people as possible an equal chance of being invited. We did not just invite children and young people who were already in their own children's rights or participation groups. Some children and young people joined in discussion groups to discuss advocacy with us, while others filled in question cards about advocacy. In return for giving us their views, everyone was given either free entry to the venue, or a token prize, shop vouchers or a meal. Each discussion group was led by a member of the Children's Rights Director's team, with another member of the team taking notes. The people filling in question cards could ask anyone they chose to help them fill in their cards if they wanted. Some people in discussion groups needed a supporter to help them say what they wanted to say. Some chose a member of our team; others chose their own parents, carers or staff. Apart from these helpers, no staff, carers or parents joined in any of the discussion groups.

The other way we asked children and young people for their views was by inviting them to take part in a web survey. We invited children and young people from schools, homes and services we had chosen at random, so we were not just asking children from places we already knew, or from places we thought had a lot, or not much, to say about advocacy. More people replied to our survey from children's homes than from other places, probably because they were likely to have more experience of advocacy.

This report gives only the children's views, without adult views being added. We have not left out any views the Government, Ofsted or the Children's Rights Director might disagree with. We have not just picked out those views that we happen to agree with, either. This report is a bit like a research report. We asked children and young people a set of questions about advocacy and reported the answers they gave us.

The numbers in the report come from adding together the answers given in our web survey and those written on our question cards. We looked at all the answers and added up how many people gave us each one. If people gave very similar answers, but used different words, we counted them all as the same answer. In this report, we have listed the main answers people gave to each question. We have included quotes from individual children where we think these sum up what others said or where we think they are important examples of children's views. The quotes are exactly what the children wrote on their question cards or said at one of our discussion groups – we have not changed or corrected them.

We are sending this report to Ministers and other key people in Parliament, and to government officials. We are giving the report to people in Ofsted, and sending it to each of the UK Children's Commissioners, and to all children's social care authorities in England. We are also sending it to the homes and services of the children who gave us their views, so that children and young people themselves can see what we have said in this report.

About the children who gave their views

In all, **138 children and young people gave us their views on advocacy**. We met 49 children in our groups, visited three more in their home, and 86 children and young people filled in our web survey. Of the people who filled in the web survey or our question cards, not everyone answered every question, so we have shown the number that did answer each question.

The youngest child who gave us their views was nine, and the oldest young person was a care leaver aged 19. The 'middle' age out of everyone was 14. Out of the 122 people who filled in their details on cards or the web survey, most (85, which was 70%) were boys, 37 were girls.

Out of 115 people who told us their ethnic background, 93 (81%) said they were white, nine said they were from a 'mixed' background, seven said 'Asian or Asian British', five said 'black or Black British' and one said 'other ethnic group'.

Of 112 children who answered our question about whether they have a disability, 90 (80%) said 'no'. Out of the 22 (20%) who said 'yes', seven said they had Asperger's syndrome, five said they had attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), four said they had epilepsy, two had a learning disability, two had dyslexia, one had a motor sensory disability and one said they had a hearing impairment. We did not suggest the sorts of disabilities we wanted children to tell us about, and as we have found in other consultations, children tell us about a wide range of different sorts of disability.

All 138 children who filled in either question cards or the web survey told us where they were living. Most (62%) were living in children's homes of one type or another. Here is the full list:

- 71 were from children's homes
- 14 were from secure children's homes
- 28 were from residential special schools
- 7 were from foster care
- 6 had left care

Explaining advocacy

Just over half of the children had heard of advocacy.

They see the main role of an advocate as listening to the child, then speaking up for them, and in some cases fighting their cause for them.

Children's experience of advocacy is very varied, from those who have regular routine contact with an advocate, to those who have not heard of advocacy.

Some see advocates as people who speak on their behalf; others see them as people who can also sort problems out for them.

Many children get help from others, but don't have a clear view of what counts as advocacy.

Seven out of 10 children had been helped by someone speaking out on their behalf – a third of these helpers were advocates, and two thirds were other people such as social workers, key workers or parents.

One in five children did not know how to get an advocate.

Good practice example

An advocate visits a secure unit every week, and the children feel able to discuss things on their own with her if they want and can contact her between visits.

Many children in our discussions told us of lots of different people – not just advocates – who speak out for them and help them put their views across. We asked: ‘Have you ever had someone speak out on your behalf about issues that affect you?’, and 112 children and young people answered this question. **Seven out of ten said they had been helped by someone speaking out on their behalf – a third of these helpers were advocates and two thirds were other people.** Here is the complete list of the people children told us had spoken out for them (many children said more than one person):

Social worker	38 children
Key worker	31 children
Parent or relative	28 children
Appointed advocate	26 children
Teacher	22 children
Member of staff	15 children
Friend	10 children
Children’s rights officer	7 children
Foster carer	4 children
Solicitor	4 children
Connexions/careers adviser	4 children
Guardian	3 children
Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service worker	2 children
Youth Offending Team worker	1 child

Here is the complete list of the issues these people had helped children with (again, children could give more than one answer):

Help with personal issues	15
Court cases/legal issues	9
Care planning/review	9
Family contact	8
Education/getting back to school	8
Placements and moves	7
Problems at home	7
Future (including careers)	4
Bullying	3
Anger management	3
Lots of things	2
Complaints	2
Bereavement	1

Here are some examples of the help children had been given:

‘They helped me get back into school... they helped me give my views across’

‘They helped me to speak my voice in my reviews’

‘My solicitor tried to stop me from going to a secure unit’

‘She helped me with my court case and was helpful to me’

‘My advocate always spoke for me at pathway reviews. When social services tried to make decisions for me I used to get angry so my advocate spoke for me and worked to what I wanted’

‘A solicitor... helped me to get help from social services because they weren’t helping me even though I was a child in need’

One young person with a disability explained how they were helped by an advocate. In their words, the advocate had ‘helped them to be bothered to get out of bed each day’. They had helped with relationships in the children’s home and foster care, and had supported them in using the complaints procedure to complain about the council refusing to pay for travel to a college course a long distance away.

Most children and young people had asked for help, but some had been asked if they wanted help and others were given help anyway: ‘They asked if I needed their help’; ‘They saw I needed help and stepped in.’

It is clear that children saw many sorts of help, from many sorts of people, as important to them, and that for many children this included speaking out on their behalf. Even when we told children what we thought an advocate was, **many were not sure whether to count help they were getting as ‘advocacy’ or something else.** We said an advocate is ‘someone who speaks out on behalf of another person. You might have had someone help you this way but didn’t know they were being your advocate or you may have had someone officially appointed as your advocate.’ Even then, 29 children (a quarter of all those answering this particular question) told us they couldn’t say whether or not they had ever had someone to be an advocate for them.



In order to benefit from an advocacy service, children and young people first need to know what advocacy is and how to get an advocate. Before we told children what an advocate was, we asked the question: ‘Have you ever heard the term advocacy?’, and 126 children answered this question on our cards or web survey. **Just over half (67 children) had heard of advocacy,** and were able to tell us the sort of help an advocate might give to a child. All children in care have the right to help from an advocate if they want to make a complaint or a proposal for improving things, but this shows us that not all the children knew about this right.

The responses showed a fairly even split between those young people who said that they knew what advocacy was and those who didn’t. Unsurprisingly, the children and young people who had previously seen an advocate were the ones most likely to know what advocacy was. Many of the children we spoke to in our groups who didn’t know what advocacy was were not clear about the difference between advocates and independent visitors. One person saw the role of an advocate as the same as a responsible adult attending a police station with them: ‘If you was in trouble with the police you will have to have a responsible adult to come and pick you up from the police station and to speak up for you as well.’

Also before we told children what advocacy was, we asked them what the word 'advocacy' meant for them. Altogether, 45 children told us they thought they knew what advocacy was. Here are the top answers they gave us (a few children gave us more than one answer):

- **16** said that an advocate is someone who speaks for you on your behalf
- **15** said that an advocate is someone who helps/supports you
- **10** said an advocate is someone who visits you and listens to problems/complaints
- **7** said an advocate is someone who helps you put your point of view across

Some direct quotes we received from children and young people give a very clear definition of what advocacy is:

'An advocate is a person who listens to what you have to say and then speaks for you somewhere you are not comfortable or cannot otherwise be represented'

'An advocate is someone who listens to my views and helps me to put my point across'

'Advocacy is the act of arguing on behalf of a particular issue, idea or person'

'Advocates are people who you can talk to, who listen to you, who voice your opinion ...'

'People who listen to you, take your views into consideration and talk to the right people for you'

The themes of 'listening to' and 'speaking up for' children and young people were very common amongst the answers we received. Some children and young people, however, also saw advocacy as involving something more than that. As well as having advocates listen to them and speak up for them, they also saw them as people who could fight their cause for them. As one person summed it up: 'someone who speaks on your behalf ... and when you need to challenge a decision that has been made the advocate will fight in your corner.'

From what children told us, not only can advocacy mean different things to different children and young people, but it seems that advocates can actually be different things. Where for some advocates it is enough to speak for children, others seem more active in taking on and sorting out issues for them. 'They speak on our behalf and get our point across if we don't know how to'; 'if I disagree with a decision that has been made then I can speak to her and she will try and resolve the situation'.

We asked children: 'What have you been told about getting an advocate?' Here are the top answers about getting an advocate, from the 81 children who answered this question:

- Not much or nothing (from 15 children)
- Have been told they are there to help (from 12 children)
- Have been told how to get an advocate (from 7 children)
- Have leaflets or phone numbers of an advocate (from 3 children)

Seven children told us they were already in touch with an advocate. Three children told us they already had an advocate, and another three said they were on a waiting list for an advocate. Another told us that an advocate already visits their home once a week.

Altogether, out of those who answered this question, **just under one in five told us they would not know how to get hold of an advocate if they needed one.**

The answers from the cards and the survey were supported by some of the explanations children and young people gave us in the discussion groups:

'You can read leaflets and they tell you what an advocate is and how to get one. You can either use the telephone or email'

'There's one comes here every week to talk to us if we want them to... she talks to us about everything but we can be on our own if we want'

'I have an advocate, but never been told how to get one'

'I've been told nothing about getting an advocate'

'I have the phone number'

This confirms many of the different experiences of advocacy children and young people have had. **Whilst some have never seen an advocate and don't know what one is, for others access to advocacy is part of their care service.**

We heard good examples of how children can get help from an advocate; for example, in secure children's homes, we heard about advocates who visit on a regular basis. As well as these visits, they are available to children and young people by phone or email as and when they need to contact them. For many others, getting access to an advocate is more restricted, and the process for doing so far from child-friendly.

When we asked: 'How would you get an advocate if you needed one?', we heard from 77 children. Most (56 children) said they were able to ask for one. Here are the main people they told us they would ask:

- A social worker (15 children)
- Staff where they were living (13 children)
- A voluntary organisation (7 children)
- A teacher or staff at school (3 children)

Those who said they could contact a voluntary organisation direct to ask for an advocate named organisations like Barnardo's, the National Youth Advocacy Service and Voice. Many said they had a choice of how to ask for an advocate, for example by telephone or in writing. 'All I have to do is ask my social worker'; 'We have leaflets on the wall where I live'; 'I tell my staff I want an advocate.'

Other people that children said they would ask about getting them an advocate were their parents, guardians, carers, police, solicitors and a children's rights officer.

Sixteen children and young people told us that they didn't know how to get an advocate. This is again one in five of those who answered the question. Another five children said they would either read a leaflet telling them how to get an advocate, or if necessary they would ask someone how they could go about getting one. Again, there was some confusion between advocates and independent visitors. One person told us they would be getting an advocate because they were 'on a waiting list for an independent visitor'.

One young person said they had been told that they would be getting an advocate but weren't sure when, and another had been told that they would be old enough to get an advocate when they were 16.

One group explained how it can be difficult to get an advocate if you are in foster care, but easier when you're in a home. They said that social workers and youth groups give out leaflets or you could contact the children's rights office. Some children said that there were not enough advocates around, not enough was known about them and some people didn't know anything about them.

The ideal advocate

Advocates need to be good listeners and speakers, understand children's issues, have the right personal qualities and be reliable.

Just under half the children thought advocates should be trained; others thought either that they should not be trained, or that training isn't important for being a good advocate.

When we asked children: 'What qualities do you think a good advocate should have?', we received answers from 88 children on cards or the web survey, and had a great deal of discussion in our groups. We didn't suggest any answers for this question. There were two main qualities that children wanted advocates to have.

Firstly, on our cards and web survey, 59 children said advocates need **good communication skills**. In particular, they should be good at listening and at speaking out for the child. Some put listening first and others put speaking first, but many said they must have both. In our discussions, children gave us more detail about **listening and speaking**:

'Someone who can listen to what you say and understand what you are trying to say. Someone who isn't patronising and someone who tries their hardest to tell others your point of view'

'They should be willing to hear you out'



‘I would say a good advocate is easy to get on with, easy to talk to, knows what you are talking about and has a good background and understands about your key points and teenage talk’

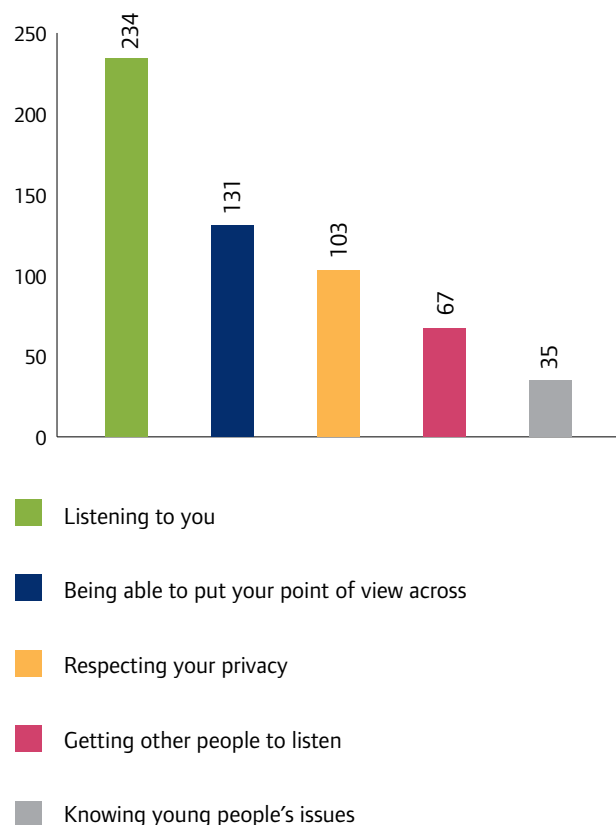
Some children and young people thought an advocate was more likely to be a good listener if they had similar experiences to the children’s own, as well as being the right sort of person: ‘I think they should have similar experience of what most looked after children have gone through. Be friendly, good listening skills, be a people person.’

Second, advocates need an **understanding of young people’s issues**. This came from 17 children on our cards and survey. This included being able to give advice, knowing the individual children and having the necessary training and experience.

Others talked about advocates needing to be reliable, trustworthy and someone who respects children’s privacy. Some said they should not be too old, others wanted advocates who were ‘not too young to have relevant experience’ and someone with the same experiences as them. Qualifications were thought to help, but many said that they did not see these as essential. Choice was more important, particularly in gender and in choosing between a peer or adult advocate.

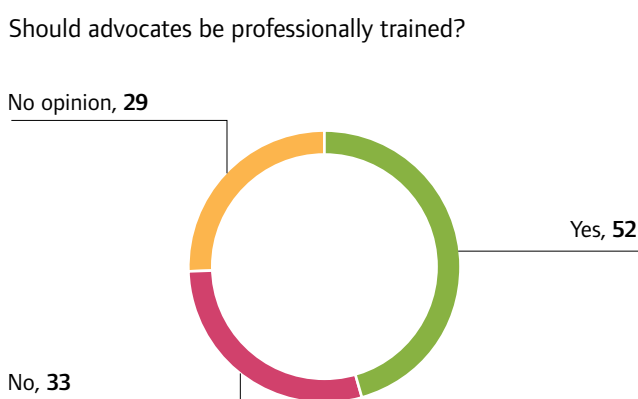
To find out how much agreement there was among children about the most important qualities of a good advocate, towards the end of our cards and survey we asked children to tell us which qualities they would choose as most important, next most important, and third most important, out of five qualities we suggested. Ninety-five children answered the question. We gave each of the qualities a score of three every time it was chosen by someone as the most important, two each time it was chosen as next most important, and one each time it was chosen as third most important. This is how the children scored the five qualities of a good advocate that we had suggested (the numbers are the total scores the children gave):

How children scored the qualities of a good advocate



Clearly, **being good at listening to children properly is the top quality children look for in an advocate**, followed by being good at speaking on behalf of the child to get the child's views across well.

We asked whether advocates need to be professionally trained people. The chart shows the answers from the 114 children and young people who answered this question (the numbers are the children who gave each answer):



Among those children and young people who thought that advocates should be professionally trained were those who worried that some people might not know what they were doing, or might not take being an advocate seriously enough. They thought training was needed so that advocates would be better able to 'react to different situations'; 'deal with what they hear'; and 'know who to go to'. In all, children and young people were quite clear as to why they thought advocates should be trained. Some typical quotes on this were:

- 'To do the best job they can do for me'
- 'Because they need to talk for you... they need to know what they're talking about'
- 'Because they might not know the answers to some questions you ask'
- 'So they don't make it up'

'Because there are many people who do things differently and therefore should be trained so they all have the same understanding of children and we don't get mixed messages from them'

'Because if they weren't they probably couldn't help at all'

Among those children and young people who thought advocates should not be trained, some of their comments were every bit as pointed:

'Because they only need to speak'

'Because you don't need to be trained to listen'

'I think anyone can be an advocate as long as they have all the good qualities'

'I think they don't have to be professionally trained people because professionals sometimes don't have life experience and have had quite a sheltered life'

'As long as they know what they are doing, and they get things done!'

Here are some of the comments from the children and young people who said that they weren't sure whether advocates needed training:

'Say it was a parent, there not going to be professionally trained to talk to your teacher on your behalf'

'Ordinary people can help you as well as trained'

'It depends on what they are helping you with'

One young person summed up why it did not matter to him if people were professionals or not; he just wanted someone who could solve his problems: 'They should have the imagination to find solutions to problems.'

More important to some than training or qualifications were the **personal qualities** an advocate should have. They should have 'honesty and respect'; '... if when they say they can help with things they actually can'; 'have a good sense of humour'; 'be confident'; 'be well spoken'; 'not be too quiet'; 'be considerate'; 'have experience of the care system'; and be 'able to give you advice if you request it'. One person also commented: 'I think they should have acquired skill of not judging people on what they may have heard or read about that person.'

Six children told us that **good time-keeping and reliability** were especially important to them: ‘Advocates should have the time to deal with problems... and keep appointments and be reliable.’

As well as telling us what makes a good advocate, some children told us what they thought would make a bad advocate:

- ‘They tend to make promises they can’t keep’
- ‘They may not give you feedback’
- ‘They might not have the right information to get it right for you’
- ‘Not support you as an individual and take a side that isn’t yours’
- ‘Not keeping information confidential’

Should advocates be independent?

Over half the children thought advocates should be independent of the people looking after them.

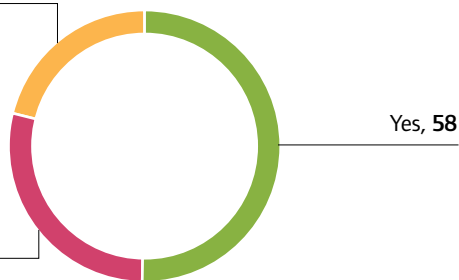
Being independent is important, but being part of the organisation looking after you could help with some issues.

We asked, ‘Do you think it is important for advocates to be independent of the people who look after you?’ The chart shows the answers from the 115 children who answered this question (again, the numbers are the number of children who gave each answer):

Should advocates be independent of the people who look after you?

Sometimes, 24

No, 33



This time, the majority (just over half) thought that advocates should definitely be independent of the people looking after the children. Many of those who said ‘sometimes’ told us that it depended on what the issue was. For some things, it could be helpful if the advocate worked in the organisation that looked after you, but for other things it was very important that they were completely independent.

Independence was important to many children and young people, mainly because the advocate would not be involved with the issue, would be less judgemental and it would be more private.

Many children and young people expressed very strong views about this. Some thought it was important that advocates did not work for the same organisation as the people looking after them. Others thought that advocates should not be people in the same home as themselves. Others again thought it important that advocates should be people who did not already know you, or know about you. This is how some of them put it:

- ‘You can talk to them better’
- ‘Because you can tell them things that you can’t tell the people you live with’
- ‘Because it could be about them’
- ‘It’s very important that advocates are independent so if you have a bad past then they wouldn’t know about it’
- ‘They may be biased if they are already linked to you’
- ‘Could cause arguments if they are linked to your service and not independent’
- ‘It is not important that an advocate knows you’
- ‘It’s more confidential’
- ‘It’s easier to talk to someone who doesn’t know you and they can put your point across better because they don’t know both sides of the story’
- ‘It should be your choice whether it is an advocate that you know or not’

Confidentiality and privacy were clearly important issues for those children and young people who said that their advocate needed to be someone independent. Having someone who wouldn't just take the adult's side was also important amongst those saying advocates should be independent.

Those who thought advocates should not be independent of those looking after them gave us fewer reasons for their answer, but some of the more typical comments were:

'No problem if advocate works for social services, only needs to be independent if working on a complaint about social services'

'If they are linked to your service then the positive thing would be that they already know you'

'They need to know what's going on'

'Because I'd feel close to anyone especially people who look after me'

Those who had answered 'sometimes' said things like:

'Because the problem may be in your home'

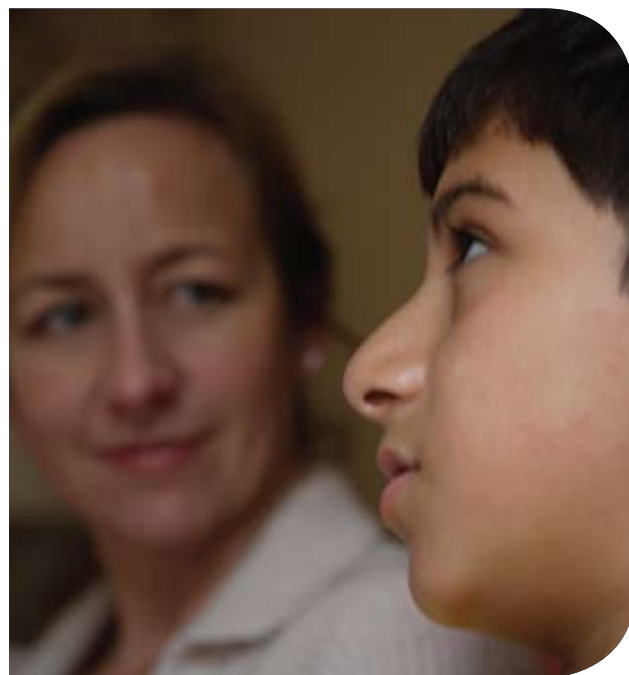
'Sometimes are independent, sometimes not'

'Sometimes they are independent and it is like another place'

Some of those saying 'sometimes' said that they did not know why they had given that particular answer, but others explained that for them it was an issue about choice.

Others were just undecided. For some, the choice might be between a person from the organisation looking after them (like social services) or someone who was an unpaid volunteer from somewhere else. One person summed up why they had answered 'sometimes':

'If in social services they may attend meetings about you rather than speaking for you. If in social services, they risk breaking your confidentiality. Social services might block them on some things. If independent, especially if voluntary, they may be harder to get hold of. If unpaid volunteers, not likely to be so good or do a good job for you. Volunteers may be more unreliable.'



Using an advocate

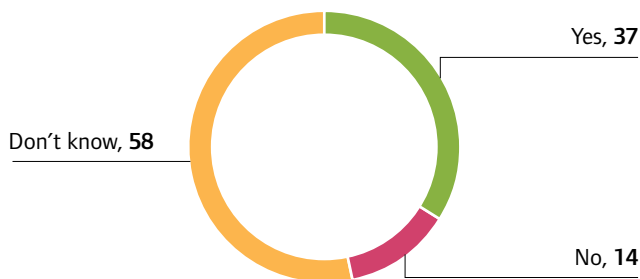
Most children do not know whether there are enough advocacy services in their area.

Some children are given the wrong information about what advocates do.

Few children have a choice of advocate, but most children want a choice of who is to be their advocate and to be able to change advocates if they aren't happy with the one they've got.

We wanted to know whether children thought there were enough advocacy services where they lived. The chart shows the answers from the 109 children who answered this question:

Are there enough advocacy services where you live?



In addition to what young people told us during this consultation, evidence from our own individual work with children and young people suggests that there is uneven access to advocacy services around the country. In some areas, few services exist and those that do can be limited to the statutory minimum of supporting children and young people using the local authority complaints procedure. In other parts of the country, advocacy is sometimes a local service restricted to children and young people from the local area. This can, therefore, disadvantage some children and young people placed 'out of area', who cannot get a local advocate.

We have seen from answers to some earlier questions that many children are unsure about exactly what an advocate does. Only 62 children answered our question about what they had already been told advocates are for. **Children and young people were told many different things about what advocates were for.** Sixteen children said they had been told advocates were for 'help and support', and 12 that they were 'for listening to you'. Twenty-three had been told more exactly that advocates were either 'to help me get my point of view across' or 'for speaking on my behalf'. Two said they had been told that advocates are to help people to complain. Three had been told that advocates were 'to help you at court'.

Others said they had been told, incorrectly, that advocates were mainly people who would take them out, to be their Independent Visitors, or help with their schooling and homework. Twelve children out of the 62 who answered the question said that they had been told nothing about what an advocate is for.

It seems that not only did young people have different ideas about what advocates were for, but, from what the young people told us, so too did a few of the adults advising them.

We asked children who had experience of being helped by an advocate whether they had a **choice in picking their advocate**. Out of 58 children and young people who replied to the question, only nine said they had been given either a lot of choice or some choice. Many agreed that they should get a choice, particularly in choosing someone of their own gender. One young person was asked the question 'Male or female?' when ringing up for an advocate. Seventy-seven out of 95 people answering a question about choosing an advocate (that is, eight out of ten) told us that it is 'important' or 'very important' to be able to have a say in who becomes your advocate. 'I think you should ask for one that understands you and your background.'

One young person said 'I could choose anyone I wanted', while another said 'I didn't have a choice'. A third said that they didn't so much want a choice of individual but: 'If you don't like them then you should be able to ask for another advocate.' Sometimes children had whichever advocate a member of their staff found for them: 'I spoke to staff and they said they would get me an advocate.' Children who found an advocate for themselves might find they accepted whichever advocate they could find; 'I rang up a random advocate in my area and asked for help.'

Few children told us that they had tried to get an advocate but had been refused one. Only 7 children out of 111 (6%) who answered a question on this said they had been refused an advocate. Three of these gave us the reason they had been refused an advocate. One said there was a waiting list for advocates, another said their social worker wouldn't let them have an advocate. The third said: 'Yes I was refused because I don't have enough special needs and I have recently suffered a traumatic event which has affected me and dramatically affected my family and social life.'



Since not many children have a choice of advocate, but most think they should have a choice, it is important to know what children thought should happen **if they are not happy with their advocate**. Seventy-nine children answered a question about this. Most (48 children) thought they should be able to change to a more suitable advocate: ‘you should get the option to another’; ‘you should be able to talk it over with them, and if you are still not happy ask for another’. Seventeen thought they should be able to tell their social worker or other professional who should then sort out the best solution. As well as being able to change advocates, many children in discussions told us that it was important that they then had a choice of their new advocate. Five children thought it should be up to the child to talk things over with their advocate to sort out any problems. Being happy with your advocate is important to advocacy working out: ‘People need to know that they are being listened to and they won’t get challenged over their views and opinions’; ‘If you’re not happy with them then you can’t work with them to help you get things you need and want, as there will be a lack of communication.’

Discussion groups told us that in many parts of the country children and young people are not being told about advocacy. Some children and young people did not know if there was an advocate in their area. Many were only told about such services after they had made a complaint. We heard from quite a few that they would like to talk to an advocate first. They made it very clear that they did not feel that advocacy should be restricted only to dealing with their complaints. Children and young people identified many other important areas that advocates should be able to help them with. Some told us that receiving earlier help from an advocate to get their views across to people making decisions might avoid the need for them to complain later on.

How good are advocates?

Children who had experience of advocacy rated their advocates very positively for listening to them and putting over their point of view, getting others to listen to the child’s views, and respecting children’s privacy.

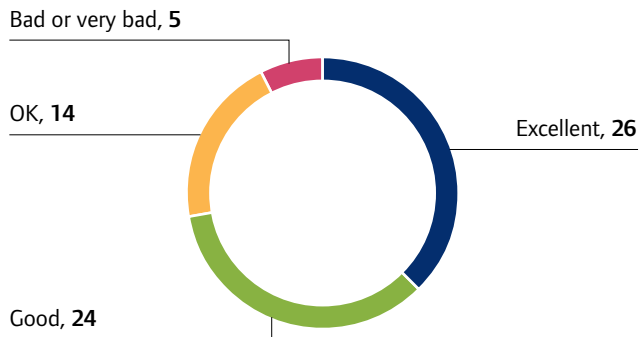
Half of the children said that advocates put their own opinions forward rather than keeping to the child’s views.

Nine out of ten children said their advocates had either made a difference for them, or had sometimes made a difference.

We asked a series of questions designed to tell us how good children and young people had found the advocates who had worked with them.

First we asked how good children had found their advocates to be at listening to them. Sixty-nine children answered this question, and the chart shows their answers:

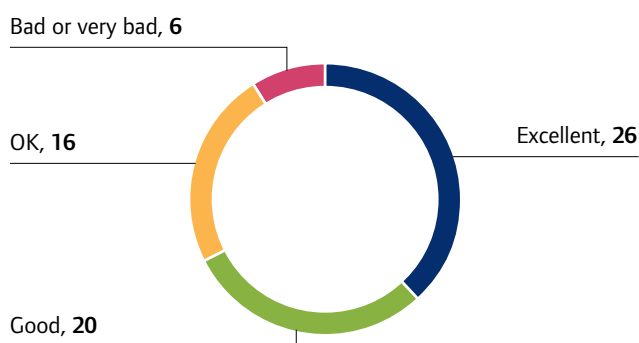
How good was your advocate at listening to you?



This shows a lot of satisfaction with how advocates listen to children they are working with; almost three quarters saw their advocates as either good, or excellent, at listening to them.

Next, we asked how good children had found their advocates at putting over their point of view. The next chart shows the answers from the 68 children who answered this question:

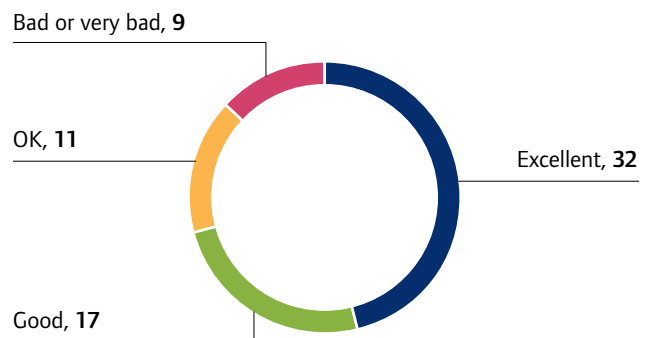
How good was your advocate at putting over your point of view?



The great majority of children saw their advocates as good or excellent at putting over the child's point of view, although the ratings were slightly less good overall than they were for how good advocates were at listening.

Our next question was to ask how good children had found their advocates at getting other people to listen to the child's point of view. The next chart gives the answers we had from 69 children and young people:

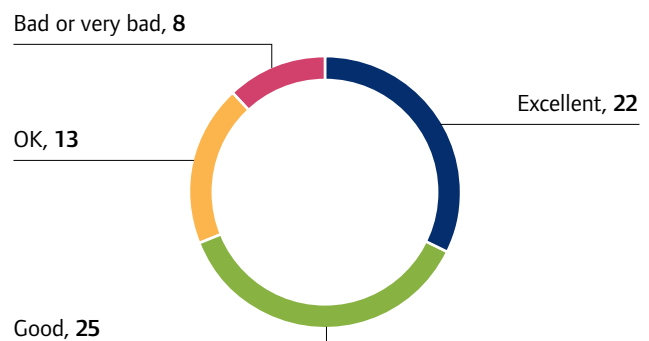
How good was your advocate at getting other people to listen to your point of view?



Children still rated their advocates well at getting other people to listen to the child's point of view, an important skill in putting the child's views across. However, their ratings overall were lower than the ratings children gave their advocates for listening and putting children's views across themselves.

The next question was about how good advocates were at respecting children's privacy. Again, we had answers from 69 children, and these are in the chart below:

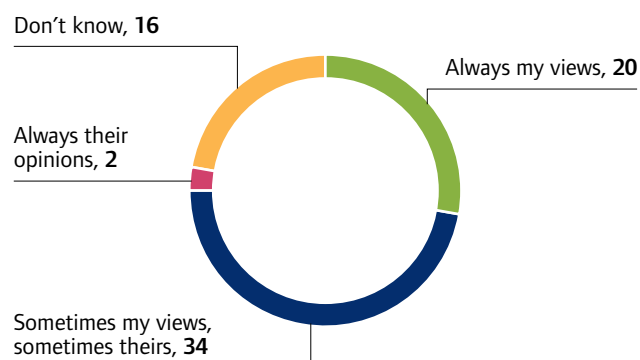
How good was your advocate at respecting your privacy?



Advocates were, with some exceptions, rated very well on respecting children’s privacy.

In discussions, some children said how important it is that advocates do actually put forward what the child wants to say, and not their own views about things – even if sometimes they might not agree with the child. When we asked whether advocates put forward the child’s views or sometimes give their own opinions, 72 children gave the answers in this next chart:

Do advocates put forward your views or give their own opinions?

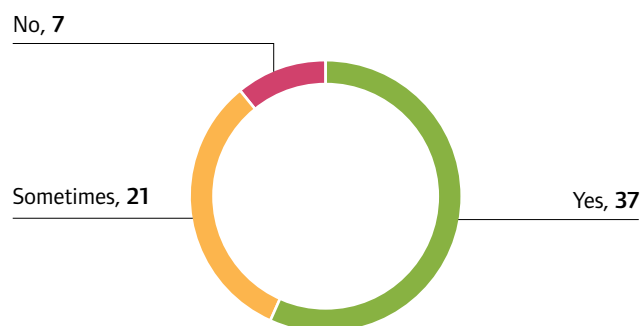


Only just over a quarter of the children told us that in their experience, their advocates always put over the child’s views. Almost half the children said that their advocates had sometimes put over the child’s views, but sometimes had put over their own opinions, and two of the children said the advocate had always put over their own opinions rather than the child’s views. It is important to see how many children said their advocates were putting over something other than the child’s views, since we know from other questions how important children think it is that advocates speak on their behalf. For some children, however, it could be a good thing that advocates sometimes give their own opinions as well as putting over what the child wants to say. As one young person told us: ‘They put forward my opinions because they know me well and I trust them to make decisions on what they think is right for me as well as what I think is right for me.’

As many as 16 children, nearly a quarter, were not able to say whether their advocates had in fact put the children’s views forward rather than their own opinions as advocates.

Finally, we wanted to know how well children thought advocates had done for them. We asked whether they thought their advocates had in fact made a difference for them. Sixty-five children answered this question, and the chart gives their verdict:

Do advocates make a difference?



Children clearly thought their advocates usually did a good job and made a difference for them. **Six out of ten said yes, their advocates had made a difference. A third said they had sometimes made a difference. Only one in ten said their advocates had made no difference for them.**

These quotes give examples of how children said advocates had definitely made a difference for them:

‘Because things went well for me because I had an advocate’

‘Because they can sort it out’ (three young people separately said this)

‘They have helped me to understand what is going on’

‘Everything I’m entitled to she has got me, when I disagree with a decision it has been changed’

‘Could tell the positive difference that was made when an advocate became involved’

‘They gave information about the court proceedings and gave my statement to the court’

Here are some examples of why some children said that their advocates had only sometimes made a difference for them:

‘Sometimes they may not have the power to do so’

‘Because they can sometimes prevent you from being locked up’

‘Because sometimes they don’t say everything you ask them to’

‘Because sometimes they make things worse’

‘Because some complaints can be sorted and some sadly can’t’

Finally, here are some of the reasons children gave for saying that their advocates had not made a difference for them:

‘Because when I make a complaint nothing ever happens’

‘She keeps saying the same things’

‘They don’t do anything you want them to do; they do what they want to do’

‘They just try to influence you to do the right thing, talk about all the positives about the particular problem and end up convincing you to do exactly what you’re not happy with’

And a few young people made a point of saying that they had experience of good and bad advocates: ‘It depends who it is.’

Clearly, for many children and young people advocacy had made a real difference in helping them achieve better outcomes in their lives. Some said that good things only appeared to happen once an advocate had taken up their cause. However, whilst they saw this as a positive for advocacy, some children and young people told us that needing an advocate was a poor reflection on other services that should be helping them.

The future of advocates

In future, children want to be able to have an advocate whenever they feel they need one.

They also want to have someone to be an independent personal adviser, rather than an advocate to represent their views.

Children did not see helping with complaints as the main reason for having an advocate in the future.

Having asked children about their experiences of having advocates in the past, we wanted to find out what they thought advocates should be doing for children in the future. We asked children when they thought they should be given the right to an advocate in future. We had answers from 79 children on our cards and web survey. Here are the top answers (remembering that a few children gave us more than one answer):

When you feel you need one	31 children
You should always have a right to an advocate any time	15 children
When you are in trouble (e.g. with the police/at school)	12 children
At meetings	7 children
When you are in court	7 children

Here are some examples of when children said they should have the right to an advocate in the future:

‘When you feel like complaining’

‘When you’re in a meeting and you don’t understand it’

‘When you’re locked up’

‘When you have been arrested or in trouble at school or in any other bad situation’

‘When I’m too afraid to ask the council’

‘Whenever you feel unable to speak for yourself’



We also asked children to tell us **other things they thought advocates could be helpful with**, as well as things they thought should bring a right to have an advocate. We had answers from 77 children and young people. Most (41 children) saw advocates as outside people who could help with almost any sort of problem or worry: ‘anything and everything’; ‘Everything, helping you fill forms out and understand what things mean’; ‘Everything from puberty to petty house problems.’

Eight children said they wanted advocates to help them whenever they needed to speak out for themselves: ‘helping them at meetings and speaking on their behalf’; ‘Be there at your pathway plan meeting to help you speak up because there are many people present at that meeting and you may not feel comfortable speaking up.’

Others wanted help in planning for their future, with education, with police and court issues, or simply finding out about their rights. Only one young person said that advocates should in future be for helping with complaints. That is interesting because for many children and young people, in care, in custody or who have left care, that is exactly what the law says advocates are for.

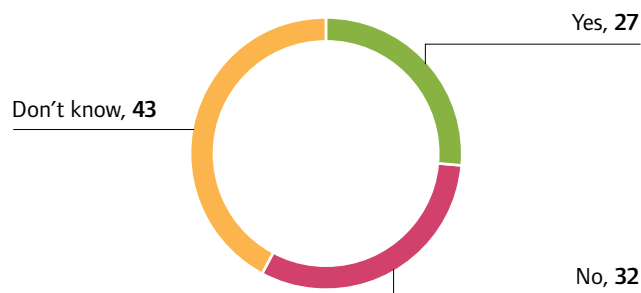
Clearly, many children and young people not only wanted advocates to speak out for them, but also wanted someone independent to be a general personal adviser on a range of issues and concerns, someone to ‘talk to them about difficult things. They will listen and can take things forward.’ ‘Advocates should be able to help people with special needs, drug users, people who are in an abusive relationship, with housing and people who have issues at home and surrounding areas.’

Should Independent Visitors become advocates?

There is little support for combining the roles of advocate and Independent Visitor.

Because this is an idea that has been suggested, we asked a question about whether the same person can be both an Independent Visitor and an advocate. The answers from the 102 children who gave us their views on this are in the chart below:

Can Independent Visitors be advocates as well?



Children were very unsure about this idea; the most usual answer was that they didn't know whether it was a good idea. Of those who expressed a view, more children said no than yes. Examples of why some children voted for the idea were: ‘because they are out of the care profession’; ‘you would be closer to your independent visitor’; ‘because this means there will be a lot more advocates’. Examples of why children voted against the idea were: ‘they are different ... befrienders take you out’; ‘no, I think we should have both Independent Visitors and advocacy’; ‘Independent Visitors and advocates are different.’



One person summed it up for many others: 'Independent Visitors should be to talk to you on a personal level or so you can get something off your chest. They can't help you speak out. An advocate is to help you get your point across and talk to your social worker.'

It is important to note that in some of our discussion groups, it became clear that some did not know what an Independent Visitor was, and therefore were not able to discuss this idea further.

Children's messages about advocacy

We invited children to suggest some final messages about advocacy to put in this report. Here are examples of what they said:

'Advocates should always listen to you and your opinions, and put your point of view across... whether he thinks you are right or not'

'Advocates should always keep to what they say and keep things private'

'Be honest, be trusted, be presentable, be independent'

'Don't judge the young person. Listen to what the young person wants. Don't give any false promises. Tell us how it is!'

'If it wasn't for people out there to listen to us we would run off a lot more'

'They need to make sure they are more advertised'

'Pointless having more advocates... need to know where to put them'

'For those with limited time in this country and limited English, education is vital for your future, and what you need most is someone who can speak out for you on educational issues'

'They are very important and it's vital that a relationship is built so that the advocate knows what the child needs and can talk with the child so they can discuss what can be said in meetings'

'Do it for the children, not for themselves'

'Advocates should be able to listen and understand what is being said. They should be understanding of different cultures, beliefs, religions and political views'

Last words from children...

‘Children should be helped, heard and understood’

‘Listen to young people as it is their lives you are dealing with... it is hard to find someone you trust and they don’t leave you, judge you or put you down for what you have said’

‘Be on my side...’

Recommendations from the children’s views

1. All children who have a right to help from an advocate need to be told about advocacy and how to contact an advocate.
2. Advocates should focus on putting forward the child’s views rather than their own opinions, and be clear whether they are solely putting views forward or also trying to resolve issues for the child.
3. Most advocates should be independent of the organisation looking after the child, although children should be able to choose an advocate they know from their own service if they wish.
4. Children should have a choice of advocate, and be able to change their advocate if they do not get on with them.
5. Children should be able to have the help of an advocate if they need one to help get their views across, and not only in relation to complaints.
6. Consideration needs to be given to how best to meet some children’s wish for an independent adviser, separate from an advocate, to speak for them.
7. The role of advocate should not be combined with that of Independent Visitor.

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