



Advocacy - an introduction

This factsheet is an introduction to advocacy. It explains what advocacy is, what an advocate does and where you can get advocacy support.

What is advocacy?

Advocacy is a special relationship between the advocate and the person they support, using tools such as representation and negotiation to bring about change.

Advocacy is also taking action to help people:

- say what they want
- secure their rights/entitlements
- represent their interests
- change or get services they need
- represent their views and wishes

Advocacy promotes social inclusion, equality and social justice. It can empower people by supporting them to speak up for themselves.

Advocates work in partnership with the people they support.

What are the types of advocacy?

Advocacy can happen in different ways and there are different types of advocacy.

- **Citizen advocacy.** A person who needs an advocate is matched with a volunteer. The volunteer becomes their advocate. The relationship is on a one to one basis and usually lasts a long time. The volunteer is recruited, supported and trained by a co-ordinator.
- **Self-advocacy.** Self-advocacy is when people speak up for themselves. People can be self-advocates alone or as part of a group.
- **Peer advocacy.** The advocate shares something in common with the person they are providing advocacy for (like they have the same experiences or live in the same place)
- **Professional advocacy.** The advocate is a paid worker. This is usually, though not always, a short-term involvement about a specific issue in the individual's life.
- **Collective advocacy.** A group of people join together to change or do something. This could be getting better transport for people with a learning disability or complaining about a day centre closing.

When can an advocate help?

An advocate can help many people in many situations. Who an advocate works with in practice depends on the eligibility criteria of the advocacy service.

Advocacy can be particularly helpful when:

- a person has ways of communicating that other people find difficult to understand
- a person has only paid workers to speak up for them
- there are disagreements between the people that are providing support services to a person
- a person has very limited life experiences from which to make choices. For example, if they have been living in long stay hospitals.
- a change has happened or is going to happen in a person's life
- a person wants to make a complaint about something in their lives, in particular about the support they get.
- a crisis happens.

What will an advocate do?

- An advocate will sometimes build a relationship with the person they are working with. They will learn to understand the way that person communicates. They will spend time with the person finding out what is important to them, what they like and want.
- An advocate will get permission, where possible, from the person to talk to other people about them. They will only put forward the wishes and views of the person they are working with. An advocate will be concerned with the person's rights, wishes and entitlements.
- An advocate can present up to date information to help the person to make an informed choice. They can support someone to make clear their views and wishes and then to express these effectively. An advocate will attend meetings, write letters, and make telephone calls for the person they are working with. They will enable negotiation and resolution of conflict to take place.
- An advocate will listen to you and discuss options but will not impose their view or opinions on you. They will also talk to, write or call family members and professionals, with your permission, but will not make decisions or choices on your behalf.

Non instructed advocacy

If you cannot communicate clearly an advocate will take time to get to know you. They will build a picture of your preferences and lifestyle, including your cultural background. An advocate would use alternative forms of communication to enable you to express your views and choice, such as video, CD and pictures. They could also talk to the people close to you, with your permission, about the best methods of communication for you.

What an advocate is not

- A replacement for family or friends
- A replacement for a service which is lacking
- The go-between or messenger for other services
- Someone to approve a decision that is already made
- An extra pair of hands to do things that support staff don't have time to do
- Someone to resolve the conflict between professionals
- Persuading the person to agree with others
- An advocate does not need to agree with the person they are supporting, but they should respect their views and express them accurately.

How can you get advocacy support?

You can find out about advocacy in your area by

- contacting social services
- contacting a local or national advocacy organisation

You can contact an advocacy organisation or project yourself to ask for an advocate or you can ask someone to contact them for you. The advocacy service will take some details from you and arrange to meet with you. You will need to tell the advocacy service what the issue is for them to be able to help you. You do not have to tell them anything you don't want to. As there are not enough advocates for everyone, you may have to wait on a waiting list for one.

You can contact Avon North Mencap who may be able to act as Advocate or would be able to put you in contact with another organisation who may be able to help

Key terms:

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| 1. Advocate | a person who identifies with you and represents your views and concerns. |
| 2. Eligibility criteria | the way in which an organisation or project decides who is entitled to their services. |
| 3. Resolution | a way of resolving a problem or issue. |