

NDTi Insights give you the most important bits of learning from a piece of work by the National Development Team for Inclusion (NDTi). We aim to make them quick to read; they point to more detailed materials for those who want more information.

The impact of advocacy for people who use social care services: a review of the evidence

Who should read this?

This paper is for people who are responsible for commissioning advocacy services for all people who use social care services and for organisations that provide advocacy. It will also be of interest to all people who use social care services, including older people, people with learning disabilities and people with mental health problems.

Background and Purpose of Report

The role of advocacy in supporting people who use social care services is vital, and has long been a focus of UK Government policy. However, there is a lack of understanding about the evidence of its impact in social care, with anecdotal evidence of recent disinvestment in advocacy taking place without consideration of the impact this might have. The School for Social Care Research commissioned the NDTi to carry out a scoping review to identify what evidence exists on the impact of advocacy, including around the difference it makes to people's lives and its cost effectiveness.

Plain English summary

NDTi were asked to find out what evidence there is about the impact of advocacy – both in terms of the effect it has on people's lives and whether the money is well spent. We checked all the research evidence we could find to help answer this.

We found there is very little strong evidence to help answer this question. There are a lot of individual stories about the positive work of advocacy, but very little information that helps to measure the difference advocacy makes to the lives of people using it.

If advocacy services are to continue and grow, it is important that this type of evidence is collected and reported.

Main findings

The review found an overwhelming lack of published, robust evidence on the impact of advocacy, especially regarding its cost-effectiveness, but also with regard to both quantitative and qualitative data that evidences the impact of advocacy.

These findings were significantly informed by shortcomings in the robustness and quality of existing published evidence. The three main problems with published materials were:

- Relying on stories or anecdotes without analysing common themes
- A reliance on people's views rather than empirical evidence
- No consistent basis for assessing the evidence of advocacy's impact.

These problems significantly arose from a lack of rigorous, routine and consistent collection of local data on outcomes by both providers and commissioners of advocacy.

Evidence from cost benefit analysis of the financial impact of advocacy is very limited and focused on specific groups. Where robust evidence exists, it is positive about the impact of advocacy. For example, a rigorous cost-benefit analysis undertaken by LSE of advocacy when the children of parents with learning disabilities are subject to child safeguarding procedures showed a Return on Investment for the public sector of £2 for every £1 invested. There is no robust evidence that shows advocacy does not have a cost effective impact i.e. the issue is mainly a lack of evidence either way.

Other 'grey' literature – produced, for example, by advocacy providers – conveys the difference independent advocacy can make. This is based on



Main findings – continued

Further NDTi Insights

Also available:

Insights 14: A review of the Economic Evidence Around Supported Employment

Insights 7: Prevention that works

Insights 3: Increasing voice, choice and control for older people with high support needs

www.ndti.org.uk/publications/ndti-insights

This report

A copy of the full report is available via our website:

<http://www.ndti.org.uk/what-we-do/voice-choice-and-control/the-impact-of-advocacy-for-people-who-need-support/>

For more information on our work on People’s Voice, please visit the NDTi website:

<http://www.ndti.org.uk/what-we-do/voice-choice-and-control/>

For more information on our advocacy work, please contact Tom Raines at NDTi on 01225 789135 or

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descriptions given by people of the difference it has made to them, as well as service reviews. Though this information hasn’t always been independently or robustly verified it does, however, provide an indication of why such strong beliefs are held on the positive difference advocacy makes.

There is very little robust evidence on outcomes for individuals arising from advocacy interventions. Evidence is also not available that highlights the outcomes different types of advocacy achieve and very little evidence that describes the different types of outcomes that advocacy can achieve at an individual, service, or local/national level with regards to strategy or policy.

Some qualitative evidence exists on the process of advocacy for particular people (such as disabled children and young people and those in the care system). However, there are significant gaps in the literature on the evidenced effectiveness of advocacy, particularly (though not limited to) older people and people with mental health problems or who lack capacity.

There is a similar lack of evidence on the impact advocacy has on service delivery, design or local strategy. Literature describes positive impacts such as on professionals’ attitudes, but this typically relies just on personal opinions of those professionals or advocates. Beyond this, it is not possible to determine whether positive developments could only have happened because of the presence of advocacy organisations. Nationally, the literature reflects a stronger sense of policy initiatives impacting on advocacy, rather than vice versa.

Conclusions and key messages

It is very important to clarify that the lack of evidence about the impact of advocacy should not be interpreted as stating there is evidence that advocacy fails to have a positive impact, nor that it is not a cost effective use of public resources. It could well be a highly effective, cost efficient way of investing public money. What this work has identified is that there is a lack of robust research and evidence to enable conclusions to be drawn either way.

Consequently, this work suggests that the lack of robust evidence leaves advocacy in a potentially vulnerable position. During difficult financial times, with an increasing need to demonstrate effectiveness in public spending and a downward trend in the funding advocacy organisations receive, the need for better quality, more widely quantified information on the outcomes of advocacy has never been greater.

There exist well-developed outcome frameworks which could provide a platform from which advocacy organisations can build the case for their (cost) effectiveness. Similarly, the advocacy Quality Performance Mark also enables advocacy organisations to demonstrate the quality of the service they deliver against a recognised national benchmark. The use of such tools should be encouraged by both advocacy providers and commissioners alike.

NDTi strongly believes that advocacy should be available to people to help them speak up and have their voices heard by services and society. If advocacy is to be protected and grow, this study shows there is a clear need for commissioners and providers to work together to generate evidence of impact, including cost effectiveness, in order to help justify continued funding.