Advocacy and People with Learning Disabilities: Local Authority Perceptions of the Scope of its Activity, Extent and Effectiveness

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Aims

Recent policy and legislative developments have placed advocacy services high on the policy agenda. This timely research funded by the Department of Health examines how local authorities evaluate the outcomes of advocacy for adults with learning disabilities.

Background

Advocacy plays an essential part in securing the rights and protecting the interests of socially excluded groups or individuals. There has been a considerable expansion of advocacy schemes in recent years, largely as a result of a series of policy initiatives such as Valuing People (DH, 2001). Such schemes are mostly funded by local authorities and delivered by charities or trusts through service level agreements. Local authorities have considerable discretion in how they monitor these schemes and this research sought to identify the different ways in which they evaluate the outcomes of the services that they fund.

Summary of key findings

• The outcomes of advocacy are difficult to measure because of the range of schemes available and their differing aims and objectives.

• There is widespread agreement among those commissioning and providing services on the importance of advocacy as a way of improving people’s lives and of meeting the policy objective of ensuring that people with learning disabilities are able to achieve their rights to citizenship, inclusion, choice and independence.

• Evaluation is seen as an important way of demonstrating the value of advocacy schemes and of ensuring accountability to funders, taxpayers, and those using the service.

• Service level agreements and the submission of annual reports currently remain the main method of monitoring advocacy schemes.
• Some authorities do not systematically collect data on or scrutinise the outcomes of the services that they fund.

• Although some schemes participating in the research use different formal models of evaluation (such as P-Qasso, CLSQM, CAPE, CAPE-revised, CAIT, and ANNETTE), this is comparatively unusual.

• The need for external funding in order to continue operating may mean that the judgements of commissioners and service planners are given greater importance than those of service users in creating the framework for local advocacy services. This could cause conflicts with the principles behind the advocacy movement.

• In some areas, advocacy schemes are in very short supply. There are concerns that a combination of short term funding together with an insensitive evaluation tool could jeopardise the future viability of some schemes, meaning that some people with learning disabilities and their families may have no access to advocacy services at all.

• There is speculation that the development of professional advocates could create a two-tier advocacy service, with professional advocates being accorded more status than volunteer, peer or self advocates.

In terms of making improvements to the current methods for monitoring the outcome of advocacy services, participants identified that:

• The development of common standards and a funding framework to address accountability for public funding and safeguard the objectives of advocacy schemes is vitally important.

• There is a need for multidimensional evaluation that explores the perspectives of different stakeholders, including people with learning disabilities and their carers. This will require a mix of methods.

• Some models of advocacy lend themselves better to external evaluation than others. For example, the quality of the partnership is key to citizen advocacy but this can be very hard to capture in evaluations that focus upon numerical targets, such as the number of people seen.

• The pressure on local authorities to demonstrate accountability and indicate that they are investing in ‘what works’ may result in models that are seen as being more ‘difficult’ to evaluate being disadvantaged in terms of their ability to attract funding. In order to prevent this, different models of evaluation may need to be developed for different types of advocacy scheme.

• Evaluation must also identify who is not using the service – is it meeting the needs of people from minority ethnic groups, people with complex needs or other marginalised groups?
Implications for policymakers

- The Department of Health and key national organisations such as the Care Services Improvement Partnership, Valuing People Support Team, the Association of Directors of Social Services and national bodies representing advocacy schemes should work together to coordinate the development of a national advocacy plan and national advocacy code of practice.

- Consideration should be given as to the best way of ensuring that local authorities and other commissioners of advocacy schemes are supported in developing and evaluating advocacy schemes in their area. The model of the Learning and Information Networks established by the Health and Social Care Change Agent Team may be one approach that is worth adapting.

Implications for local authorities

- Local authorities should evaluate their systems for reviewing the advocacy schemes that they support.

- They should ensure that those commissioning and planning advocacy services are familiar with the purpose of differing models of advocacy and mechanisms for ensuring their quality assurance.

Implications for advocacy schemes

- Advocacy schemes should identify the most suitable internal evaluation tools for their own scheme and help develop appropriate outcome measures, taking into account the differing range of stakeholder perspectives.

- They should cooperate with external evaluation and promote its importance with service users, volunteers and advocacy workers while ensuring that these groups are supported throughout the process.

Implications for service users and carers

- Service users and carers should be supported so that they can be fully involved in the evaluation process.

- They should be included in the development of evaluation tools to ensure that any evaluation tools that are used are both comprehensible and relevant to them.

About the study

The study consisted of a review of the published and unpublished UK literature on advocacy, details about 97 separate advocacy schemes obtained through a postal questionnaire sent to local authorities in the UK and 27 semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders involved in commissioning and
developing advocacy schemes. A consultation event attended by groups representing people with learning difficulties, advocacy organisations, service providers and social work practitioners was held to validate the findings. The work was undertaken between 2004-2005.