



Looking out for each other – Defining informal advocacy

National Coalition of Advocacy Schemes

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Looking out for each other – Defining informal advocacy

Some useful guidance for those assisting people in speaking up and in having a say in what happens to them.

Introduction

We can all go through difficult times in our lives when we face problems or choices. For instance, we might want somebody to go with us to an appointment or help us to understand the contents of an official letter and/or a form that we have received or to help us to make an important telephone call. Many of us are daunted by digitalised systems, the use of jargon and the widespread compulsion to do everything 'online'. Sometimes we just want to talk over or simply share something that is concerning us. If we are lucky, we will have friends, family, or neighbours at hand to help us with these tasks. However, not everyone has this support available to them and they can really struggle to access essential services and facilities.

At some point, most of us will have been asked or offered, in either our personal or work life, to provide support that might not be in our usual remit. We might not realise it, but this type of basic human solidarity is what helps to protect our rights and dignity and is what lies at the heart of 'informal advocacy.' Any of us could find ourselves both in need of support and capable of providing it at different points in our lives. Most of us have a range of life and personal skills that could enable us to be informal advocates ourselves. However, we can struggle at times to fulfil this, with lack of knowledge about where to go for help and having a lack of confidence in our own ability to make a difference.

In this document, we seek to define what is meant by **informal** advocacy and the variety of ways in which it is provided. We also attempt to distinguish it from the various models of statutory advocacy that now exist, and which are described in more detail below. **The Looking Out For Each Other Project**¹ has produced this document with the aim of suggesting possible sources of

support and connections that could strengthen the vital role that informal advocates play within our communities. In doing so, we recognise that many people, given the right connections and support, could do something about making our communities more equal and inclusive.

¹ The Looking out for Each Other Project was funded by the Community Fund's Awards for All programme.



Why is 'advocacy' necessary?

Unfortunately, many of us find ourselves cut off from wider communities and from the natural support that they can offer. In addition, many of us can find ourselves physically isolated, perhaps because of limitations to our mobility and/or the circumstances in which we live. These factors do not necessarily need to limit us, as we all have things to offer other people. The National Coalition of Advocacy Schemes represents community-based groups that are working within local communities both in providing structured informal advocacy and in supporting friends, relatives, neighbours and others. See 'A very brief background to advocacy in Britain' (Page 14).

Ways in which informal advocacy is provided

Informal advocacy is provided and/or occurs in several different ways and very often without the word 'advocacy' being used. People help others to speak up for themselves and to access support out of a sense of human

solidarity. However, there are community-based advocacy organisations that provide informal support in a more structured way through paid workers and trained volunteers. Those groups would operate to certain organisational standards and principles that would apply to any formal volunteer role. Some informal advocacy roles are undertaken by paid staff who would likewise be properly prepared, supervised and supported. We detail below the main ways in which informal advocacy is provided. None of these are mutually exclusive and often groups will provide and/or facilitate several types of informal advocacy. An important feature of most informal advocacy is a focus on being person-centred and on building relationships within local communities.

Citizen advocacy or community partnerships matched by organisations

Citizen advocacy or community partnerships are one-to-one, informal relationships between unpaid advocates and their (advocacy) partners². This is where an organisation has a project that recruits a person to

look out for another individual within their local community. That is usually because that person is particularly isolated and in a position in which their rights and dignity are vulnerable. It is a longer-term partnership that is focused on equality, promoting human rights and challenging social exclusion.

² The word partner is used rather than user or client to emphasise the informal nature of the relationship

Issue based (generic) advocacy

This is where an independent (usually an advocacy) organisation secures funding for a project that addresses the needs of people when facing specific problems. The short-term advocate would be somebody who is not involved in the person's issues and offers them person-centred independent support in accessing advice and assistance from the appropriate agency or agencies. It usually involves supporting people in, for example, obtaining benefits advice, understanding letters and forms, interacting with local and national government and care agencies, housing providers and utility providers. Some advocacy

groups support young carers and parents and people dealing with specific health conditions. This involves working one-to-one with the person at their pace in addressing the issue, and the level of support will vary according to the needs of the people's differing needs. The advocate would usually stay involved until the issue has been fully addressed and hopefully resolved.

Advocacy visitors

Advocacy Visitors (usually volunteers) maintain contact with one or more people who have been identified as isolated and at risk of not being able to exercise their rights and choices, and consequently might need advocacy support at a future date. Their role involves visiting or meeting with people on a regular basis and getting to know them. They would then be expected to identify any advocacy or other needs and report them back to the Citizen Advocacy or Volunteer Co-ordinator, who would then consider what other interventions/supports might be required.

Telephone advocacy/ befriending

Some groups offer a befriending/advocacy service via telephone, an area of support that has grown since 2020. This consists of volunteers and/or staff members committing to telephone either one or several people on a regular basis. The objective is to check that they are okay and to identify any issues with which they might need support. In some instances, this might be limited to chatting and making sure that people are safe. However, it can also include taking up issues of concern and talking them through. When necessary, the volunteer/staff member might make an intervention to assist the person or signpost them to the appropriate support. This might involve making telephone calls or internet searches on behalf of people or linking to other supports including issue-based or citizen advocacy when necessary.

Peer Advocacy

Peer advocacy recognises the value of a person having shared common experiences with another that they are supporting, e.g. a person who has faced mental health issues

supporting somebody with similar experiences. It can often arise out of relationships that have developed through shared membership of self and or collective or group advocacy.

Self-Advocacy

The process of people speaking out for themselves thereby gaining or regaining control over their lives. It often involves people working as a group and often self-advocates become peer and/or citizen advocates.

Collective or Group Advocacy

This is when people who face a similar situation or have a shared concern come together to make their common cause known, and get their collective voice heard. Examples of this are trade union branches, tenants' and campaign groups

Organic (natural) informal advocacy

When we talk about organic (natural) informal advocacy, we are referring to relationships that develop out of a wide range of interactions. Additionally, people can often be supported in meeting their own advocacy needs (self-advocacy), and

sometimes their life experiences can make them uniquely placed to assist in meeting the advocacy needs of others (peer advocacy). A lot of people do have networks of friends, relatives and/or colleagues that are willing to assist and/or speak up for them when they face an issue or problem. This natural support should be encouraged, and informal advocates assisted, when necessary, in recognising conflict of interest and/or their own need for support.

Organic informal advocacy sometimes evolves through other agencies that are providing other support that they wouldn't call 'advocacy'. This includes Health and Social Care workers and those involved in pastoral care, community organisations and social activities.

What is meant by community-based?

By community-based we mean having a long-standing, deep-rooted connection to the community in which a group or organisation is operating. That community might be a neighbourhood, estate or other specific geographical area or it might be a community of interest. Many people relate to more

than one single community. Being 'community based' is not about a status, but rather it is about having an ongoing live interaction and, ideally, being locally accountable to the people you serve.

The Importance of informal advocacy

The informal role of both citizen and organic (natural) advocates means that they can take their time in listening to and responding to the person at a pace that best suits them. The long-term nature of the partnership helps in having a real understanding of the partner, and seeing the individual, and not the label that has been attached to them.

Other important features of informal advocacy are the potential to introduce the partner to wider social networks and a readiness to identify issues and concerns at an early stage. Operating holistically enables informal advocates to connect with other models of advocacy and professional supports when these are required. This makes it possible to facilitate access to expert knowledge and formal models of advocacy.

A new model of operation for independent community-based informal advocacy groups

Given the apparent demise of smaller community informal advocacy groups and the almost total focus on statutory advocacy provided by large organisations that lack a real local base, it is time to look at a new model of operation. Some groups, by responding to identified needs, have been operating in this way for some time without necessarily defining it. This model ensures that limited resources are maximised, and that people are encouraged to have the confidence to act to prevent abuse, promote rights and to build a more just and equitable society. It can also help to ensure that people have choice in who advocates for them and/or in which type of support they have. It can also make it easier by providing one central point of access to people looking for support in protecting and promoting either their own or somebody else's rights and

wishes. It would encourage collaborative working between the different individuals and organisations.

This approach can help to facilitate responses to the following range of needs and abilities that people have at different times in their lives and by the resources that they are able to draw upon:

- Some people might need a degree of informal advocacy support long-term
- Some people might need informal advocacy support (e.g., issue based) at specific periods of crisis, difficulty and/or change
- Some people might need support both in identifying their advocacy needs and in having them met (informal advocacy)
- Some people might need signposting or linking to a specific service or support that can help them to advocate for themselves. This might include to some more 'formal' models of advocacy

- Some people might be able, as a result of their own experience, to support somebody else in a similar situation
- Some friends, neighbours, relatives and others might be capable of identifying need, of being part of the advocacy process and/or of assisting communication

Some friends, neighbours, relatives and others who advocate might need help both with coping with the system and in dealing with conflicts of interest in their role when these arise and/or recognising that others might be better placed to advocate thereby ensuring independence.

What would this different model look like?

An informal advocacy facilitator (organisation) would ideally be an independent organisation (without conflict of interest) that takes responsibility for ensuring that people get the different components of support and advocacy that they need. It would provide a connection, through local knowledge, to the range of organisations

and groups that contribute to ensuring that people's rights are protected and promoted. This would include Advocacy, Advice and Information services in addition to broader informal community activities such as those provided by faith, community and leisure groups. It would seek to ensure that all the potential responses and roles that can help to guarantee people's rights and dignity are connected. It would provide a central point at which people can be put in touch with the support that is most appropriate to their needs. Such a body might:

- Be the first point of contact for people needing assistance or for those who are just interested in protecting and promoting people's rights and wishes
- Provide someone to listen to individuals and 'assess' the type of support they need
- Provide information, signposting and community connections to those needing support, and to those wishing to self-advocate or act as organic (natural) advocates

- Offer support and connections to organic (natural) advocacy partnerships within communities
- Help them to identify where there might be conflicts of interest and additional support needs in their role
- Ensure connectivity between the different types of support ranging from friendships through to legal interventions
- Recruit and match informal citizen advocates, issue-based advocates, visitors, telephone supporters and other volunteers

Supporting organic (natural) advocates and identifying conflicts of interest

If people are to trust an organisation, they need to have confidence in its independence and ability to help them challenge the system, it would need, like advocacy generally, to be free of any direct connection with service provision. When supporting organic (natural)

advocates it is important to help people identify their skills and to have confidence in their ability to make a difference. However, it is equally important that they recognise when they might have a potential or perceived conflict in advocating for somebody. It is also important that they understand the commitment that they take on and the availability of other support and training that they might find useful in fulfilling it. Anybody taking on an advocacy role should understand the limits to knowledge and experience and how to address these.

What is conflict of interest?

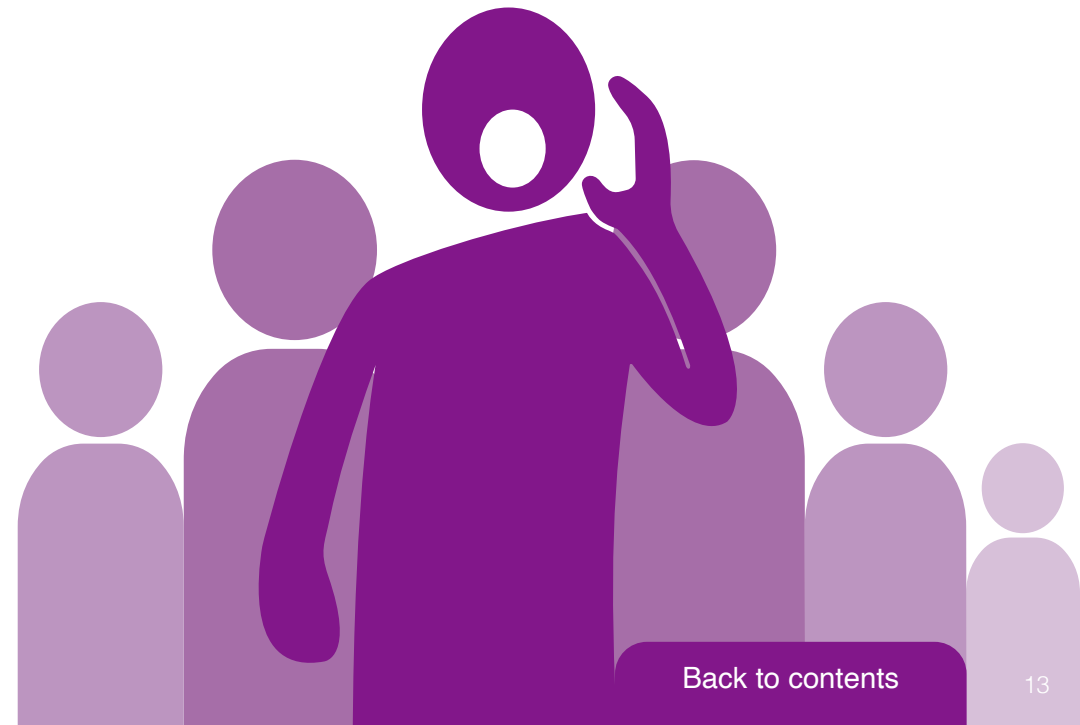
Conflict of interest is present in most of our lives, but it is vital to recognise and address it when involved in helping people to express themselves. Conflict can range from having a direct financial conflict to not fully respecting the independence of the person and having a willingness to accept that you might not agree with their choice or decision. For people working in different (especially care) services there can be additional conflict with their managers which make it difficult

to effectively challenge on the partner's behalf. This could mean that they can only be part of the advocacy process by perhaps signposting the person to independent advocacy support.

Even when there isn't a direct or real conflict of interest, there can be a perceived conflict. This can sometimes prevent an advocate from being effective. It is important to be aware of

this possibility and perhaps involve other advocacy support. The suggestion of conflict is sometimes used to prevent advocacy happening and so it is important that identifying both potential and obvious conflict is recognised by the organisation.

Any informal advocacy organisation will be required to operate to certain principles and standards, and these are detailed in Appendix Two.



A very brief background to advocacy in Britain

'Advocacy' groups began to develop in Britain from 1981 to provide one-to-one support for people who were almost completely cut off from the communities in which they lived. Over time, these groups evolved to develop and provide different models of advocacy support. Some of these are defined in law and are what we call statutory advocacy.

There are also groups that match and support more organised models of informal advocacy to address the specific needs of some people. Brief definitions of the more formal models of advocacy and related activities can be found in Appendix One. All these different types of support are guided by a commitment to the rights and dignity of people, but they operate differently in a variety of circumstances.

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Appendix One

Independent Mental Capacity Advocate (IMCA)

In operation since April 2007, it is a statutorily defined role that was introduced with the Mental Capacity Act. IMCAs should be involved in situations where a person is considered not to have the capacity to make a particular decision and is 'unbefriended'. The situations in which the IMCA service is applicable are specifically defined. Since April 2009, IMCAs should also be involved when Deprivation of Liberty Safeguards (DOLS) are registered.

Independent Mental Health Advocate (IMHA)

In operation since April 2009, it is a statutorily defined role that was introduced with the new Mental Health Act. IMHAs should be involved when a person is sectioned under the Mental Health Act or under a Community Treatment Order.

NHS (Healthwatch) Complaints Advocacy

From April 2013, this replaced what was the Independent

Complaints Advocacy Service (ICAS). It assists people wishing to make a complaint about the care and/or treatment that they have received from the National Health Service (NHS). It provides advocates as well as offering a range of 'self-help' materials to people that wish to self-advocate but want some advice on the best way to make a complaint.

Care Act (2014) Advocates

A statutory advocacy role was introduced in April 2015 under the Care Act (2014). If a person appears to a local authority to have a substantial difficulty in being involved in the care assessment, planning, care review, safeguarding enquiry or safeguarding adult review processes, and has no appropriate individual to support them, an independent advocate must be appointed. The independent advocate will support and represent the person for the purpose of assisting their involvement.



Advocacy related activities

Befriending

Befriending involves the matching of volunteers to visit and/or take part in social and leisure activities with another person.

Information Giving

This is the communication of knowledge, facts and ideas to people. It is generally about providing information that will help people to deal with an issue their self or signpost them to other services such, for example, as Advice

Advice

What used to be the Community Legal Service divided Advice into three levels. General help was described as diagnosing clients' problems, giving information and explaining options, identifying further actions the client can take and giving basic assistance. General help with casework was described as taking action on behalf of clients to move the case on. This might include negotiation and speaking on the client's behalf to third parties. Specialist help involves advice and legal help on complex matters. This would include representation in a formal context such as a tribunal, court or adjudication.

Appendix Two

Principles and Standards of Independent Informal Advocacy

It is vital that the advocacy that people need must be clearly independent of service providers. It is also important that organic (natural) advocates and especially those that are family members and/or carers recognise when there is a real, potential or perceived conflict of interests. An informal advocate assists, supports and/or encourages the advocacy partner in expressing her/his views and wishes. When appropriate, an advocate might speak on the partner's behalf. There are things that people should be able to expect from any independent advocacy organisation. These would include the following:

- That the advocate's primary loyalty is to the partner, whose views and rights they support and defend as vigorously as if they were their own.
- That the advocate will be clear about what s/he can and can't do and will make this clear to the partner.
- That the organisation will ensure that advocates and other volunteers are supported in their role.
- That advocacy support is free to those wishing to use it.

- That the advocacy partner is in control of things and will be given information so that s/he can make her/his own choice.
- That the advocate will help the partner to speak up for her/himself whenever possible.

Involving those who use informal advocacy: Any organisation, but particularly advocacy, should be guided by the needs and wishes of those who use it. This is not only important as a matter of principle but can also help to further ensure its' independence. For these reasons, it is important that people using it are involved as much as is possible in its' management.



Basic organisational standards

The Charity Commission requires those registered to meet certain standards and have specific policies and procedures in place. In addition, there are certain standards that apply to any group working with people. These following apply to advocacy groups, as they do to other organisations:

- Being clear to those using them what information is recorded and keeping it private.
- Providing information that is easy to understand.
- Treating all people fairly and equally and having a policy that says how they will do this.
- Ensuring that the service/group is safe for everyone both involved in it and using it.
- Checking what it does for people and identifying those it is not reaching.
- Ensuring that the views of the people who have used or are using the service/group are heard and reflected in their management.



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