

Voices From Care is giving evidence to the Children and Young People Committee based on the experiences and views of children and young people receiving advice and support from the Voices From Care and also on the experiences and views of our members and volunteers. As we work across Wales experiences and views do not relate to any one particular local authority but are gathered from children and young people in the various local authorities across Wales.

1.2 Voices From Care welcomes the opportunity to give evidence to the Children and Young People Committee review of advocacy services. We have structured our evidence according to the four main themes and recommendations set in the Committee's report of March 2008. These being:

The need for independent advocacy

The need for skilled advocates

The need for accessible advocacy services

The need for continuity of service

## **Background Information On Voices From Care**

### **1.3 Introduction**

Voices From Care is an organisation for children and young people who are or have been looked after by local authorities in Wales. Voices From Care is unique in that it is run by people who have experienced the care system themselves.

### **1.4 General Mission Statement**

At Voices From Care we bring children and young people together throughout Wales, who are, or have been looked after by local authorities, in order to: 1) provide opportunities, 2) improve conditions, 3) promote the voice of children and young people, 4) protect their interests.

### **1.5 The History of Voices From Care**

In the 1980's children and young people in England and Wales began to ask questions about how the care system (as it was known then) was being run. They were unhappy with: 1) some of the conditions in residential units, 2) having to buy their clothes from certain shops, 3) they were not being listened to individually or as a group about what being in care should be like.

Some children and young people spoke up about the physical and even sexual abuse they were witnessing and suffering in the care system, including in residential units in Wales. This activity resulted, in March 1993, in the development of Voices From Care - a name chosen by children and young people - and in the north Wales Tribunal Enquiry, looking at how the care system had failed to protect children and young people, and making strong recommendations for change.

### **1.6 The Structure of Voices From Care**

Voices From Care is an all Wales organisation for children and young people who are or have been looked after in local authority care. Most of the staff have had experience of being looked after. Voices From Care is a user - led organisation. Young people are involved in our work, either as volunteers or board members. Volunteers assist in the work of the organisation - in training and consultation work. Young people also sit as Board members on the Board of Trustees, assisting in the main management decisions of the organisation. They are supported on the Board by professional trustees.

#### **1.7 Work Areas**

##### **1) Membership**

Any child or young person, who is or has been looked after in Wales, is welcome to become a member of Voices From Care and to be kept in touch with the work of the organisation.

##### **2) Advice and Support Work**

Voices From Care provides an Advice and Support Work Service for children and young people who are or have been looked after.

Examples of work in the area are: - supporting young people at meetings, assisting them to ensure that they have support from Social Services in their education / leaving care etc., helping them to seek legal advice, support to become involved in the work of the organisation.

##### **3) The Training Service**

Voices From Care operates a training service that involves young people in the training of those who work with young people who are or have been in the looked after system. Children's and young people's experiences are used to educate others.

##### **4) Research**

Voices From Care needs to know exactly what is happening to children and young people who are or have been looked after, so we know what things need to change. The organisation engages in research - asking members and volunteers about their experiences and issues. This research is then used to inform the other work areas of Voices From Care.

#### 5) Campaigning

Voices From Care exists to improve conditions and outcomes for young people who are or have been looked after. The organisation actively campaigns around issues which are of concern to children and young people, and works to ensure that those making decisions about the looked after system consider the voices of children and young people.

### **Evidence**

#### **The Need For Independent Advocacy**

1.8 It is still the view of Voices From Care, as expressed in the evidence given in January 2008 that only advocacy services nationally commissioned and funded from a central unit, would be able to offer complete independence. Voices From Care was disappointed that the Welsh Assembly Government has favoured the regional commissioning model through the Children and Young People's Partnerships.

1.9 At the moment Voices From Care believes that it is too early to say how the regional commissioning will work out. We are aware that there are discussion between local authorities and advocacy providers, but that for most it is still early days. On the ground Voices From Care has seen very little change. We are aware that vulnerable groups other than looked after children / care leavers and child in need are able to access advocacy services in a number of areas.

2.1 Voices From Care is concerned that at this current time, particularly with the economic pressures, that the further 'independence' which was hoped to be achieved through the regional commissioning through Children and Young People's Partnerships may be in jeopardy. Children and Young People's Partnership are going to be under immense financial pressure, which we feel could lead Advocacy Providers to being in a position where independence is compromised, particularly in a climate where services are competing in a financially difficult climate.

#### **The Need For Skilled Advocates**

2.2 The basis for Voices From Care is user involvement and peer advocacy. Whilst the organisation supports developments for 'skilling' professional advocates, we do have some concerns that the 'skilling' of other advocates has not been given enough attention and resources. We would like to see a concentrated focus on self- advocacy as an essential tool in empowering children and young people. Voices From Care, whilst recognising the need for inspection and regulation of a growing and developing advocacy sector does have some concerns about the impact on smaller advocacy providers. We feel there needs to be some work undertaken to look at the financial and operational impact of these requirements.

2.3 Voices From Care feels that we need to keep a focus on the full range of advocacy experiences and recognise that the outcomes of advocacy are not necessarily limited to a change of a decision, or a one-off attendance at a meeting. The positive outcomes of advocacy include increased awareness of circumstances and rights, analysis of options and views / wishes, increased self confidence and ability to communicate with others and to self - advocate. We have to continue to monitor these softer and more long-term outcomes. Voices From Care has some concerns that advocacy remains vulnerable to becoming a short-term systemised measure.

#### **The Need For Accessible Advocacy Services**

2.4 Voices From Care welcomes the development of the Advocacy and Advice Line for children and young people. We feel that it is too early yet to evaluate fully how effective this development has been in improving the knowledge of and accessibility to advocacy. We are aware that the number of calls to the helpline has been positive. Voices From Care hopes that evaluation of this service will look at the access of vulnerable groups such as looked after children and care leavers. We believe that such groups will require particular targeting, and will face particular access issues.

2.5 It is still our experience that the majority of children and young people access advocacy through an adult already known to them - i.e. a foster carer, birth relative, social worker. The need to raise awareness of the full range of advocacy issues, including their role as lay advocates, amongst these adults is paramount if accessibility is to be improved. Although there have been developments over recent years in raising awareness of advocacy services amongst for example teachers, Voices From Care believes there is still much to be done. A comprehensive plan of how this awareness raising could be achieved needs to be drawn up, ensuring that there is a realistic understanding of what advocacy is and the advocacy process.

2.6 Voices From Care welcomes extending the accessibility of advocacy universally to children and young people. We see that advocacy is a useful tool in preventing the escalation of problems for children and young people. Voices From Care believes that the possible demand for advocacy services is unknown. The impact of this, we believe, is that Children and Young People's Partnerships are commissioning services without really knowing what the demand for them may be. Advocacy providers are being contracted to provide services, where it may be difficult to forecast demand and ensure that capacity is there to meet the demand.

2.7 Voices From Care is concerned about the capacity of advocacy services to meet this demand. Recent promotion of advocacy as a principle and in terms of encouraging access to services has increased demand for advocacy. This is of course a positive situation, but we are concerned about the ability of services to meet the demand and to meet the demand effectively and in the best way for children and young people.

2.8 Within the context of the recent developments of advocacy, there has been discussion about identifying the gaps in provision, which Voices From Care obviously supports. Although we are concerned about what happens for children and young people who are part of that process of the identifying of gaps and also how long it will take for the gaps to be filled. This may be a particularly pertinent factor at a time of economic strain.

2.9 In terms of accessibility Voices From Care believes that at the moment we are still in a postcode lottery situation. From our experience advocacy services are developing in accordance with 'The New Service Framework for the Future Provision of Advocacy Services in Wales' at different rates in different areas of Wales.

3.1 This is possibly as a result of the status of advocacy on the local agenda, and also vulnerable to differing local financial pressures. Voices From Care would like to see an audit of where exactly each local authority is in terms of their development of advocacy services. We would push for consistency to ensure that children and young people do not experience further inequality in terms of their accessibility to effective advocacy services.

### **The Need For Continuity Of Service**

3.2 Voices From Care welcomes the agreement to a 3 year commissioning cycle for advocacy services. We are aware that advocacy providers are working together in terms of the development of advocacy services and in terms of policy. We are concerned that with the new Advocacy and Advice Line, which covers young people up to the age of 25years, improves knowledge and working with adult advocacy providers as this will be key if access to advocacy services is to work effectively for the full age range being served by this line.