

coram
Voice 
getting young voices heard

ALWAYS HEARD

The national advice and advocacy safety net
for children in and leaving care

2019

Andrew Dickie
December 2019

INTRODUCTION

ALWAYS HEARD is the national advocacy advice helpline and safety net service for children in and leaving care aged 0-25 in England. Coram Voice delivers this vital service on behalf of the Department for Education. We make sure that every child and young person who needs an advocate gets an advocate.

As you will read in this report too many children and young people continue to be denied the local independent advocacy support they need and are entitled to. **ALWAYS HEARD** works with young people and decision makers to address this issue head on.

ALWAYS HEARD is unique, we are the only national service that provides the **No Child Turned Away** advocacy guarantee. Every child or young person who contacts us looking for advocacy support gets an advocate. We do this by supporting young people to access their local advocacy service but where that service cannot help we give them an Always Heard advocate so they have the vital support they need.

ALWAYS HEARD also works to change the systemic barriers to advocacy. We share the voice and experience of young people who face barriers to advocacy with their local authorities. We support and challenge local authorities to put in place the advocacy service their young people are entitled to. We also share information about barriers to advocacy with the Department for Education, Ofsted and the Children's Commissioner to help them address these.

Over the last year ALWAYS HEARD provided:



"Advocacy was helpful - during a tough time it gave me a bit more hope."

Jack, 14, about his Safety Net advocate

ALWAYS HEARD

provides the national database of advocacy providers for looked after children and care leavers.

Our team keeps this database live and up to date to make sure that young people can find their advocacy service. Young people can find their local advocacy service at www.coramvoice.org.uk/findmyadvocate

When the local service cannot help the Always Heard team steps in to provide a Safety Net advocate - no matter where in the country the child is.

Children's right to advocacy



Children and young people in care, leaving care and in need have a legal right to advocacy.^{1,2}

However while many children and young people receive excellent advocacy support there are also too many who still struggle to get an advocate.

ALWAYS HEARD exists to address this problem.

¹ The Children Act 1989, Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000, Adoption and Children Act 2002 and a range of statutory guidance has given, and extended, the legal rights of young people in England who are looked after, leaving care or assessed as 'in need', to advocacy support when they want to make a complaint or representation about their care.

² The National Standards for the Provision of Children's Advocacy Services (2002) set out the principles that should inform the delivery of this advocacy support. These include the key standards that advocacy is independent, young person led, easy to use, gives help and advice quickly, and meets the need of all young people.

ALWAYS HEARD

HOW IT WORKS

NO CHILD TURNED AWAY

- Our service guarantees that no child is turned away.
- Every child or young person who needs advice about their rights gets advice.
- Every child or young person who needs an advocate gets an advocate.

The ALWAYS HEARD Advocacy Guarantee is:



"Advocacy has been very helpful in guiding me. I am braver now and if I want to say something I am not going to keep quiet about it."
Darren, 17, about his Safety Net advocate

1 Free access to a helpline, digital resources and one-to-one advice and support

Our specialist Always Heard helpline team is on hand **Monday-Friday 9.30-6pm and Saturday 10-4pm** to support children and young people via freephone, online, email, text and WhatsApp.

THE ALWAYS HEARD SERVICE

- EVERY CALL IS ANSWERED
- EVERY CONTACT RESPONDED TO



ADVICE AND INFORMATION
over the phone, on line and in person



2 A single access point for advocacy

Always Heard helps children and young people identify and access their advocacy service



Always Heard support children and young people to overcome initial barriers to advocacy



3 Safety net advocacy - for when local advocacy is not there

Some children and young people are refused advocacy support because of their care status, age, complex needs, where they live or simply because there is no advocate there to help them. When this happens Always Heard advocates provide safety net advocacy.





THE BARRIERS TO ADVOCACY IN 2019

Many children and young people continue to tell us that they are not able to get the support from an advocate that they need. We also know from many advocacy providers that they cannot help children and young people in the way they would like to because of contractual and financial restrictions placed on them by local authorities.

Over the year we have continued to gather data on the barriers for children and young people experience when trying to get an advocate. We obtained information on **127** of the **152** local authorities in England. This data and the lived experience of the young people we work with is shared with the Department for Education, Office of the Children's Commissioner and Ofsted to support their work and ensure that young people's voices are always heard.

Advocacy services
NOT COMPLIANT
with National Standards

89

=



"You helped make me more confident about advocating for myself, I wouldn't have been able to get things done without your knowledge of the complaints system, I wouldn't have gone anywhere."

Layla, 19, about her Safety Net advocate

1

"I've got no credit."

59% of local advocacy services don't have freephone access to children and young people.



2

"I need help now, not in 2 weeks!"

At least **26%** of local advocacy services unable to provide help and advice in time.

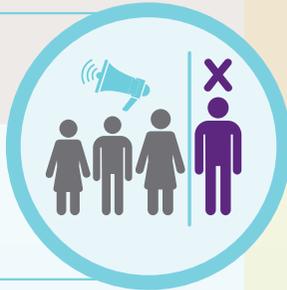


THE BARRIERS TO ADVOCACY IN 2019

3

"They said they can't help adults."

At least **25%** of local advocacy services are restricted or unable to support care leavers. (18-25)



6

"We can't advocate for children under 8."

At least **36%** of advocacy services do not offer advocacy support to the full age range of children in care and care leavers (0-25).



4

"They said they didn't have an advocate in my area."

At least **22%** of local advocacy services are unable to support young people placed outside of the authority area.



7

"This is not something we can do."

At least **13%** of advocacy providers are unable to provide Non-Instructed Advocacy to young people with disabilities who need it.



5

"I don't speak English."

At least **39%** of local advocacy services are unable to provide interpreters for young people who are refugees or migrants.



"I am so grateful to you for your support. I will meet with an advocate on Friday. It has all gone really quickly."

Said, 15, after being supported to access local advocacy

This report highlights the barriers we are aware of from what local services and young people tell us **BUT WE KNOW THAT IT'S LIKELY THAT THERE ARE MORE BARRIERS WE HAVE YET TO IDENTIFY**



Homeless but no help

We continued to work with many children who told us they were homeless or not safe at home but were being turned away or not getting the help they needed from Children's Services. These children are at their most vulnerable but are often unable to get an advocate who can help them challenge the decision to refuse their request to be accommodated.

"They told me to go home but I can't go home. I have nowhere to stay tonight."

At least 63% of local children's advocacy services are unable to give an advocate to homeless children despite the fact that they are entitled to this independent support.

FOCUS: In care but homeless

In 2019 we worked with an increasing number of looked after children, who were often unaccompanied refugees or migrants, who had become homeless because they felt unable to stay in the placement they had been offered. This can be because they have been moved against their wishes to the care of another local authority, feel culturally and socially isolated, or don't feel safe where they are placed. All too often these looked after children can't get the support of an advocate because they are not living in their local authority area. That's when Always Heard advocates stepped in, to help these children to speak out and have somewhere safe to live.

Independence: Who decides if advocacy is needed?

Advocacy for children and young people should be independent and led by them. It should be for young people to decide when they want to access advocacy support and what concerns or issues they want their advocate to help them with³.

However we frequently come across situations where advocacy providers are required to get permission from Children's Services before they can offer support to a young person. Young people are also asked to request advocacy from their social worker - even when their advocacy issue relates to this worker. We know this "gate keeping" sometimes leads to young people being refused advocacy because social care professionals do not agree that there is an advocacy need or young people are not willing to ask for advocacy. Gatekeeping also undermines young people faith in the independence of their advocate, makes advocacy harder to access, and creates delays.

We also know that some advocacy commissioners set restrictions to the time that advocates can spend supporting young people. They often refuse additional time when they - and not the young person - consider the advocacy issue resolved.



Who provides advocacy?



Advocacy for children and young people in England is provided by local and national charities and businesses commissioned by local authorities or in-house by advocates employed by the local authority.



TYPE OF ADVOCACY PROVIDER	%
Commercial	2
Independent Charity National	58
Independent Charity Regional	14
In-House	26

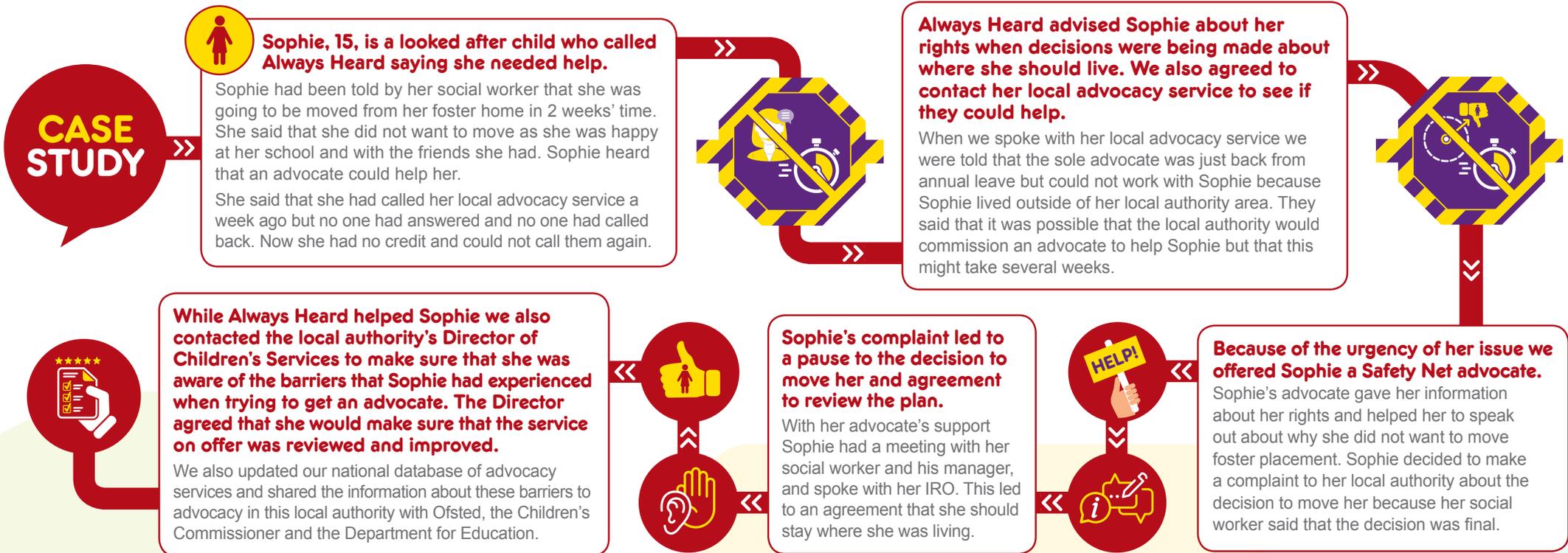
"You gave me the chance to express myself. You didn't turn me away or judge me."

Amina, 16, after speaking with our helpline

Advocacy Matters

Children and young people seek advocacy support for a range of reasons... like wanting help to make a complaint about their care, make request to change where they live, or because they are unhappy about plans for their future. These issues are important

to young people so it's vital they have an independent advocate that can help them sort things out. When this help is denied Always Heard advocates provide Safety Net advocacy.



The change that Safety Net advocacy made for Zoe

Before	“I have anxiety problems and can't express myself in meetings.”	After	“I feel much more confident in meetings and speaking up for myself. I'm not scared to speak up with council people.”
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Keeping Children Safe

ALWAYS HEARD advocates shared over **300** safeguarding concerns with Children's Services in **91** local authorities. These included concerns about children experiencing abuse at home, being sexually or criminally exploited, or experiencing homelessness. We supported children making disclosures and helped them through the process of sharing safeguarding concerns. We made sure children understood what was going on and felt safe and supported.

Care experienced? Want support? Find out about Always Heard.

YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/user/voiceyp>



The difference we made in 2019

- Supporting more children and young people to access advocacy from their local advocacy services, and helping these services reach more children and young people.
- Providing more children and young people with direct Safety Net advocacy and supporting (and challenging) local authorities to address the gaps in their services.
- Raising the profile of key areas of advocacy such as Non-Instructed Advocacy and advocacy with homeless children and seeing improved service provision in these areas.
- Amplifying the voice of children and young people by sharing authority by authority data and case examples with Ofsted, the Department for Education, and Office of the Children's Commissioner to help them target local issues and tackle national problems.

Contact ALWAYS HEARD on

-  **Freephone helpline: 0808 800 5792**
-  **Email: help@coramvoice.org.uk**
-  **Text & WhatsApp: 07758 670369**
-  **www.coramvoice.org.uk/alwaysheard**
-  **YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/user/voiceyp>**



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**We have changed names and other identifying details to protect young people's and others anonymity*