



# INTRODUCTION

**ALWAYS HEARD** is the national advocacy advice helpline and safety net service for children in and leaving care 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.

2020 has been an extraordinary and challenging year for everyone. The coronavirus pandemic has disrupted the lives of children and young people and those who work to support them. As you will read in this report advocates across the country have worked hard with young people to overcome the barriers presented by restrictions on direct face to face contact. However, it is still the case that too many children and young people are denied the local independent advocacy support they need and are entitled to.

**ALWAYS HEARD** has worked 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. We maintained this guarantee throughout the year providing consistency

of support despite the initial lockdown and subsequent restrictions.

Every young person who contacts us looking for advocacy 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 get vital support when they need it.

**ALWAYS HEARD** also works to change the systemic barriers to accessing 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 has provided:**



**“I’m happy now and everything is clearer. You heard me, thank you.”**

Ula, 16, about her Safety Net advocate

## **ALWAYS HEARD**

maintains the national database of local advocacy services 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 an advocate. Young people can find their local advocacy service at [www.coramvoice.org.uk/findmyadvocate](http://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.

## **The right to advocacy**



**Children and young people in care, leaving care and in need have a legal right to good quality advocacy support.<sup>1,2</sup> While many children and young people receive excellent advocacy there are still too many who face barriers to this vital support.**

**ALWAYS HEARD** exists to address this problem.

<sup>1</sup> 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.

<sup>2</sup> 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 or young person 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:



“I am very appreciative and can’t stress enough how helpful this has been. You have given me some knowledge and I think I can now handle it myself.”

Trinice who called Always Heard for advice about her rights

**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, online and in person



**WHAT ARE MY RIGHTS?**



Young person contacts **ALWAYS HEARD**



Given information and advice



Young person listened to



Young person more confident to speak out

## 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 available to help them. When this happens Always Heard advocates provide safety net advocacy.

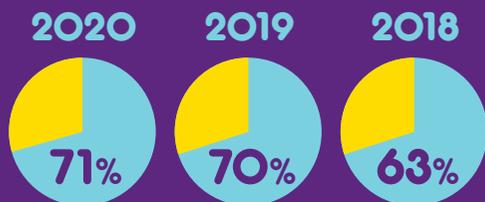


# THE BARRIERS TO ADVOCACY IN 2020

Too many children and young people 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.

We have continued to gather data on the barriers that children and young people experience when trying to get an advocate. We were successful in getting information on all the local authorities in England. This data and the stories of the young people we work with is shared with the Department for Education, Ofsted, 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



"I have managed to achieve a lot of my goals. I wouldn't have been able to do it without an advocate helping to get my voice heard."

Layla, 19, about her Safety Net advocate

THE  
BARRIERS  
TO  
ADVOCACY  
IN  
2019

1

“I can’t call, got no credit.”

57% of local advocacy services don’t provide freephone access.



2

“It’s been weeks, I need help now.”

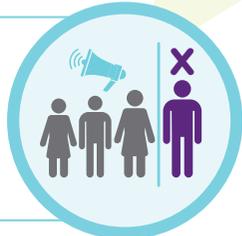
At least 29% of local advocacy services are unable to provide help and advice in time.



3

“They said I’m not eligible.”

At least 28% of local advocacy services are restricted or unable to support care leavers. (18-24)



4

“They told me I lived too far away.”

At least 23% of local advocacy services are unable to support young people placed outside of the authority area.



THE  
BARRIERS  
TO  
ADVOCACY  
IN  
2019

5

"I'm confused, I don't know what they said to me."

At least **37%** of local advocacy services are unable to provide interpreters for young people who are refugees or migrants



6

"Our contract does not cover under 8's."

At least **37%** of advocacy services do not offer advocacy support to the full age range of children in care and care leavers (0-25).



7

"We don't have anyone who can do this."

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



"They have been in touch and I am meeting my advocate next week. Thanks for the help and advice."

David, 16, 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 AND RESOLVE**



# Advocacy in a time of Covid-19

**Always Heard provided advice, access to local services, and Safety Net advocacy throughout the crisis. Despite the challenges caused by the pandemic the number of young people we worked with increased by 20% from the year before.**

The pandemic has presented a huge challenge to the children and young people we work with. This has included children who have lost family to Covid-19, had much needed placement moves delayed, or were experiencing disruption to contact with family. The crisis fuelled family breakdowns and homelessness. Young people also reported the toll the pandemic had on their mental health and well being.

The response to the pandemic did have some positive impacts for young people. Some young people who had been waiting for months for access to a laptop found this issue resolved within weeks of the lockdown - though access to the internet remains a major problem for many. Other young people welcomed the increased use of technology and virtual meetings.

**“I haven't seen anyone. It feels like no one cares.”**

## Different ways of working

**The pandemic led to a huge reduction in the provision of in person advocacy nationally, resulting in an increased use of video and messaging apps.**

We asked local advocacy services how they had approached the challenge presented by the coronavirus pandemic<sup>3</sup>. Most services adopted new ways of working including rapidly increasing the use of video and messaging apps, and revisiting other more traditional means of communication.



## Alternatives to face to face support

Video calls



Messaging apps



Phone calls



Sending letters



Sharing photos and profiles of advocate to children



<sup>3</sup> 38 responding services, surveyed December 2020



Advocacy services **able** to offer video meetings



Advocacy services **not able** to offer video meetings



“It’s great [using video conferencing], everyone turns up on time for my meetings now!”

However, children and young people missed not being able to meet with an advocate in person. Young children and those with disabilities were particularly impacted.

The good news is that after the initial lockdown most services are now able to offer some in person support to children and young people. But this is often in very limited circumstances.

“The fact is that for many children if you can’t meet with them it’s harder for them to get to know you and trust you.”

### Services providing face to face support



Advocates sometimes **able** to meet young people in person



Advocates **NOT able** to meet with young people in person



“Seeing young people face to face has so many benefits which can’t be replaced by virtual methods.”

It will be vital in 2021 that advocacy services take every opportunity to work safely in person with young people while offering them more channels of communication.

# Advocacy Matters - Now more than ever

Children and young people seek advocacy for a wide range of reasons. This year they have faced the additional challenges of the coronavirus pandemic and lockdown. They come to us when they need an independent advocate that can help them sort things out. When this help is denied locally an Always Heard advocate steps in to provide Safety Net advocacy.

## CASE STUDY



### **Isla is a care leaver who called Always Heard a few weeks after turning 18.**

Isla had been told by her social worker that her case was being closed by Children's Services because she had never been taken into care. This confused Isla because she thought that she had been in care since she was 16. She had a social worker and was being provided with semi-independent accommodation. All of the other young people she knew who were in the same situation were care leavers. She was now terrified that she would be homeless and without support in the middle of the national lockdown.



### **She said that she had called her local advocacy service a couple of times in the last week but no one had responded to the messages she had left.**

Always Heard advised Isla about her right to ask Children's Services to explain and review their decision. We also told her that sometimes Children's Services make mistakes about the care they provide and she could ask them to rectify things.

We agreed to contact her local advocacy service to see if they could help.



**When we spoke with her local advocacy service we were told that they could not help Isla because they had reached their contractual capacity and could not help any more care leavers.**

**continued overleaf**



They also said that because Isla's leaving care status was in dispute they would not be able to help anyway as she would not be eligible for advocacy.



Isla's Safety Net advocate helped her make a complaint to Children's Services. Isla was delighted when this complaint was accepted. Children Services apologised for the way that she had been treated and confirmed that she would be offered support as a care leaver.



**While we advocated for Isla we alerted the Director of Children's Services to the barriers to advocacy and support issues she had experienced. He confirmed that the local authority would release more funds to make the advocacy service available and review the outcome of Isla's complaint.**

We also shared the information about these advocacy barriers in this local authority with Ofsted, the Children's Commissioner and the Department for Education.



## The change that Safety Net advocacy made for Barry

**Before**

“No one was listening and I almost gave up.”

**After**

“It was good to have an advocate, it has helped me with my confidence. I feel my voice is heard.”

## 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 delivered in-house by advocates employed by the local authority.

### TYPE OF ADVOCACY PROVIDER %

Commercial	2
Independent Charity National	63
Independent Charity Regional	10
In-House	24
Mixed model (In-House and Independent Charity)	1

“Thank you for giving me advice and telling me about my rights. It is a big help.”

Mellody, 18, after speaking with our helpline

## Keeping Children Safe

**ALWAYS HEARD** advocates shared over **300** safeguarding concerns with Children’s Services in **81** 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.

The logo consists of the words "ALWAYS" and "HEARD" stacked vertically in a bold, sans-serif font. "ALWAYS" is in red and "HEARD" is in blue. The text is contained within a white circle with a purple border.

## The difference we made in 2020 despite the challenge of the coronavirus pandemic

- 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.
- Amplified the voice of children and young people by sharing local authority data and young peoples stories with Ofsted, the Department for Education, and 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](mailto:help@coramvoice.org.uk)**
-  **Text/WhatsApp(16+): 07758 670369**
-  **[www.coramvoice.org.uk/alwaysheard](http://www.coramvoice.org.uk/alwaysheard)**

Coram Voice, Coram Campus, 41 Brunswick Square, London WC1N 1AZ.

Web: [www.coramvoice.org.uk](http://www.coramvoice.org.uk)

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

Instagram: <https://www.instagram.com/coramvoice/>

Twitter: <https://twitter.com/CoramVoice>

Phone: **020 7833 5792**

Registered Charity Number 1046207 Company Reg. No. 3050826

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**Voice**   
getting young voices heard

Funded by



Department  
for Education

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

