



ALWAYS HEARD

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

2022

Andrew Dickie
March 2022

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.

ALWAYS HEARD is unique. We are the only national service that provides the **No Child Turned Away** advocacy guarantee. Our team has worked incredibly hard to maintain this guarantee throughout last year. 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. If young people's local service cannot help we give them an Always Heard advocate so they get the support they need.

As the country emerges from the coronavirus pandemic we continue to find that too many young people are being denied the local independent advocacy they are entitled to. We have also increased our work with young people on the edges of care denied the support they need. This includes children seeking

asylum who are being disbelieved and treated as adults through to children who are homeless.

ALWAYS HEARD works with young people and decision makers to make advocacy available for all who need it. We want to bring about wider change to the systemic barriers to access 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 has:



"I know what I can ask for now and have an advocate who is helping."

Amal reflects on the impact of the advice and help from Always Heard

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

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.^{1,2} Many children and young people received excellent advocacy during 2021. However year after year we work with too many young people denied this vital support.

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 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:



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 young people via freephone, email, text and messaging app.

“You helped me to understand my rights and what help I could get in ways that I didn’t know I could get.”

Alison, 19, who called Always Heard for advice about her rights



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





THE BARRIERS TO ADVOCACY IN 2021

ALWAYS HEARD has successfully challenged local authorities whose children and young people face barriers to advocacy. We have seen some local authorities putting in additional resources for advocacy, commissioning new services or expanding previously restrictive eligibility criteria. We have seen some of the barriers to advocacy that young people previously faced come down.

However too many young people still tell us that they are not able to get the support from an advocate that they need. We also know from many advocates across the country that they cannot help young people in the way they would like to because of contractual and financial restrictions placed on them by local authorities.

We gather data on the barriers that young people experience when trying to get an advocate. 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 to support their work and make sure that young people's voices are heard.

"I feel so much better now that I've spoken to you. Thank you so much for listening to me. No one else has been able to help."

Lola reflects on the impact of the support of his Safety Net advocate

THE
BARRIERS
TO
ADVOCACY
IN
2021

1

"I don't have credit."

55% of local advocacy services don't provide freephone access.



2

"I need help now."

At least 21% of local advocacy services are unable to provide help and advice in time.



3

"They told me they can't help."

At least 14% of local advocacy services are restricted or unable to support care leavers (18-24).



4

"They said they can't meet me."

At least 18% of local advocacy services are unable to support young people placed outside of the authority area.



5

"I don't understand what is going on."

At least 26% of local advocacy services are unable to provide interpreters for young people who are refugees or migrants.



THE BARRIERS TO ADVOCACY IN 2021

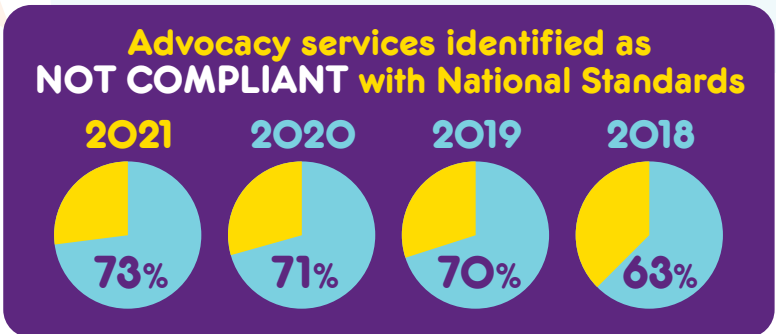
6
“He’s too young for an advocate.”

At least **38%** 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 an advocate who can do that.”

At least **12%** of advocacy providers are unable to provide Non-Instructed Advocacy to young people with disabilities who need it.



“I feel like you have been really great with your help and advice, you really listened to me and wanted to help.”
 Nadia, 17, after calling Always Heard

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

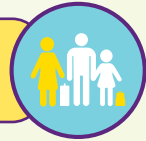


SPOTLIGHT: Who is missing out?

We know that some children and young people are missing out on advocacy even where they are clearly entitled to it. Beyond this there are many groups of young people whose legal right to advocacy is less clear.

Some of the groups missing are:

Refugee and migrant children and young people



These children and young people should have equal access to advocacy but too often face barriers to support. At least **26%** of local advocacy services are unable to provide full access to interpretation service.

Over the last year we have worked with an increasing number of children who have been incorrectly assessed to be adults. We have helped 30 children who have come to the UK to seeking protection only to find that they were disbelieved about their age and placed in adult accommodation by Home Office officials. Some children were detained as if they were adults. These children describe being distressed and confused when they first contact Always Heard.

It can be very hard for some children to prove their age if they arrive as refugees in this country without identify papers. The Home Office and local authorities should give children in this situation the benefit of the doubt. They should treat them as children unless it is absolutely clear that they are not.

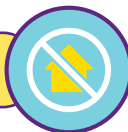
Without help these children are left unsafe and unsupported. However few local advocacy services are able to provide support to children who have been assessed to be adults. **80%** of children we have worked with on this issue have successfully challenged their age assessment and been provided the support from Children's Services they are entitled to.

Children in need and children in the child protection process



Whilst some local authorities do provide an advocacy service for children in need or subject to child protection processes many do not. This leaves children without access to independent information. Or support to have a voice in the processes that are there to protect them and promote their wellbeing. We frequently get contacted by children, families and professionals seeking advocacy in relation to child protection conference or support to children in need. However these children do not currently have a properly recognised right to advocacy and all too often are unable to get advocacy.

Homeless children



Despite being entitled to advocacy homeless 16-17 year old children in at least **70%** of local authorities are denied advocacy to help them as they seek support from Children's Services. Always Heard is able to step in and provide Safety Net advocacy. This crucial support leads to children being made safe and taken into care. But what homeless children need is an active offer of local advocacy when they seek support from their local authority.



SPOTLIGHT: What we share with Ofsted

A key part of the mission of the Always Heard service is to fix the problem of barriers to advocacy. We share information about these with the Department for Education, Ofsted and the Children's Commissioner to help them address these problems.

Every 3 months we provide Ofsted with information about advocacy provision in all 152 local authorities in the country. We also share any serious concerns that children and young people have raised about social work practice.

This information is shared with Ofsted's Social Care Inspection Insight team. This means that the voice and lived experience of children and young people who have worked with Always Heard is available to Ofsted inspectors and can inform inspections of Children's Services across the country.

Advocacy changes lives

Children and young people seek advocacy for a wide range of reasons. They come to us when they need an independent advocate that can help them sort things out. The nature of some of the issues that young people bring to us mean that local advocacy services are unable to help. That's when an Always Heard advocate steps in to provide Safety Net advocacy.

CASE STUDY



AWET'S STORY

AWET is a 17 year old refugee. He called Always Heard because he was scared and confused after being sent to an adult hotel while his asylum claim was processed.



ISSUE

CHILD REFUGEE TREATED AS AN ADULT

Awet said, through our interpreter, that he had fled Eritrea because he feared persecution.

When he arrived in the UK without his family he was detained by the Home Office. Awet told the Home Office officials that he was 17 but he did not have any papers to prove this and they did not believe him. He was sent to a hotel in the Midlands that was being used to accommodate adult asylum seekers.



ISSUE

SAFEGUARDING CONCERN

Awet told us that he could not sleep because he was scared of some of the adults at the hotel. He said he was sad and cried a lot. He had no one to talk to. He could not seek the point of life anymore.

Our Helpline Advocate reassured Awet that we would help him. Awet agreed that we could make a safeguarding alert to Children's Services and ask them to look after him while they made an assessment of his age and care needs.

continued overleaf



BARRIER NOT ELIGIBLE FOR ADVOCACY

As a person found to be an adult and not in care Awet was not eligible to support from his local advocacy service. We provided this vital support under our Safety Net.



SUCCESSFUL OUTCOME FOR YOUNG PERSON

Our Safety Net advocate worked side by side with Awet making sure his voice was heard. With a lot of persistent advocacy and after helping Awet access legal support Children's Services took action to safeguard him.

Awet was taken out of the hotel and placed with other young people his own age. His age and needs were assessed by Children's Services. Awet was then taken into care.

Awet is now at college and getting the support he needs from his social worker. He feels much safer and more secure.



FIXING THE PROBLEM

It is hugely concerning that traumatised and vulnerable children, like Awet, who have come to this country seeking protection are being treated in this way.

We see this as a problem that is getting worse (see Spotlight on page 11) We have shared this and other stories of the children we have supported with Ofsted, the Children's Commissioner and the Department for Education. We will continue to work to challenge this injustice.

Keeping children safe



ALWAYS HEARD advocates shared over 200 safeguarding concerns with Children's Services with local authorities across the country. These included concerns about children and young people experiencing abuse or neglect 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. Due to our safeguarding work children were taken into care, taken out of harmful situations and provided with additional support.

Who provides advocacy?



As in previous years we find that most advocacy for children and young people in England is provided by local and national charities commissioned by local authorities. 'In-house' children's rights services also play an important role.

TYPE OF ADVOCACY PROVIDER %

Commercial 3

Independent Charity National 62

Independent Charity Regional 11

In-House 23

Mixed model (In-House and Independent Charity) 1

The change that Safety Net advocacy made for Mohammed

"They were just ignoring me, treating me like a big problem."

Before

"Thank you so much for everything you did for me. I've been able to tell the council how they I'm about to go back to college to do English like I wanted and I'm also in a flat when I was about to be evicted.

After

You helped me so much, you never stopped even when they said no. I am more confident to speak up for myself now."

"Thanks you were great, I have an advocate now and they are helping me."

Carrie, 14, after being supported to access her local advocacy service

The logo consists of the words "ALWAYS" and "HEARD" stacked vertically in a bold, sans-serif font. The letters are filled with various colors like red, blue, and green, and have a slight shadow effect. The logo is enclosed in a thin purple circular border.

The difference we made in 2021 despite the challenge of the ongoing coronavirus pandemic

- Supporting more children and young people to access advocacy from their local advocacy services. Helped these services reach more children and young people.
- Provided more children and young people with direct Safety Net advocacy. Helping some of the most vulnerable and excluded children get the care and stability they needed.
- Promoted advocacy and challenged local authorities to focus on the need to have a proper advocacy service in place for the children and young people who need their care.
- Amplified the voice of children and young people by sharing local authority data and young people's 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**

 **Text/WhatsApp(16+): 07758 670369**

 **www.coramvoice.org.uk/alwaysheard**

coram
Voice 
getting young voices heard

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

Web: 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

Funded by



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

