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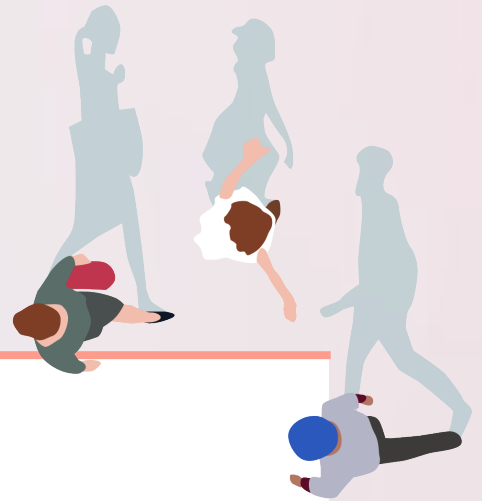
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UNDERSTANDING HOW ADVOCACY SERVICES SUPPORT CARE-EXPERIENCED YOUNG PEOPLE TO PARTICIPATE IN DECISION-MAKING

October 2024

What Works *for* Children's Social Care

EARLY INTERVENTION FOUNDATION

Coming together as What Works
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The Children's Social Care Research and Development Centre (CASCADE) at Cardiff University is concerned with all aspects of community responses to social need in children and families, including family support services, children in need services, child protection, looked after children, and adoption. It is the only centre of its kind in Wales and has strong links with policy and practice.

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Glossary of terms

Acronym	Full term
BCT	Birmingham Children's Trust
CYP	Children and Young People
CIC	Child in Care
CiN	Child in Need
CMO	Context-Mechanism-Outcome
ICPC	Initial Child Protection Conference
IPT	Initial Programme Theory
IRO	Independent Reviewing Officer
LA	Local Authority
RAPS	Rights and Participation Service

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Background

Independent advocacy supports vulnerable individuals such as care-experienced children and young people (CYP) to understand information, articulate needs and wishes, secure rights, represent interests, and access services (Oliver et al., 2006). For children in care, advocacy acts as an important safeguard when problems arise, ensuring their voices are heard in decision-making. This report presents findings from a realist-informed study of the Rights and Participation Service (RAPS) which provides an in-house advocacy service within Birmingham Children's Trust. Through stakeholder discussions, interviews, focus groups, and collaborative workshops, this study develops an initial theory of how, why and under what circumstances RAPS facilitates participation, represents young people's interests, and contributes to positive outcomes. Resulting practice recommendations and a 'good practice framework' offer advocacy services' guidance grounded in lived experience.

Research questions

The study explores the following key questions related to advocacy for care-experienced children and young people:

- How do those who deliver, refer into, and receive advocacy services in the participating children's service think they work, and for whom?
  - What contexts might impact on whether or not advocacy services lead to positive outcomes?
- How might the advocacy service empower or enable care-experienced children and young people to play a meaningful role in decision-making about their lives?
  - What enables and facilitates this?
  - What outcomes are important to young people from this participation?
- How can data from one advocacy service be used to inform the collaborative development of a framework for practice to support the delivery of advocacy services more widely for care-experienced children and young people?

Design

This study employed a qualitative realist-informed approach to understand how, why, for whom, and under what contexts the advocacy intervention for CYP in and leaving care works. The study utilised Context-Mechanism-Outcome (CMO) configurations to analyse the interplay between the intervention's components and the contextual factors influencing perceived outcomes. Data collection occurred in three phases:

1) initial theory gleaning through interviews with operational staff (n=3) and focus groups (one with advocates (n=6), two with care-experienced young people (n=9), and key stakeholder discussions with experienced advocacy academics (n=4)
2) theory testing via follow-up interviews (senior practitioner (n=1), advocates (n=3), care-experienced young people (n=3)
3) theory consolidation through collaborative workshops (four workshops with care-experienced young people (n=25).

Key findings

Key themes emerging from the interviews and focus groups provided insight into the advocacy service, including:

1) **Participation and decision-making:** 'Varying levels' of participation were seen, often depending on perceptions of the age, need, issue, and way they were involved with the service. While the aim of the service was to 'put young people in charge', services may be more adult-led than child-led. One important way that that young people participated beyond their own specific issue was through integrating the work of the service into wider participation and involvement practices in the local authority.
2) **The advocacy role itself:** The advocates had strategies for working with children and young people that they felt helped the role to be effective, including communicating that they are independent and exactly what their role was. However, this was not always reflected by young people who saw that advocates were also connected to the local authority. There were also qualities that staff and young people identified related to being a 'good' advocate, which included communication styles, dressing casually, and being transparent and reliable.
3) **Trust and relationship building:** The way in which the relationship is set up and ended, and the communication of boundaries and roles was seen as important in building trust by young people and advocates. This included transparency about when a decision was made that was not what the young person wanted. It was also felt to be important that the advocate worked in flexible ways to meet the specific needs and preferences of the young person, and that they stayed in touch.
4) **Key service delivery elements:** How young people were able to access advocacy was a key theme from young people who felt that it be offered consistently, in different ways and from different people – and that they should be able to self-refer. The practicalities, including opt-out options were felt to be confusing, however. Where the service was delivered and the model of delivery (i.e. in house) had pros and cons including the space being welcoming for young people, and advocates having close relationships with social workers to be able to get key information, but also the service not necessarily being seen as independent because of this. Manageable caseloads and low staff turnover were also highlighted as helpful for quality service delivery.

These themes shaped the analysis and understanding of key components, mechanisms, and contextual factors influencing the advocacy service and its participatory approach.

The Initial Programme Theory (IPT) identified advocacy service components enabling participation in decision-making: the organisational culture, in-house resourcing model, information provision, and relationship building. Key mechanisms theorised as critical for translating service activities into meaningful participation outcomes include:

- Building trusting relationships through consistent communication and decision-making.
- Facilitating power-sharing by placing young people in tangible decision-making roles.
- Promoting ownership by demonstrably valuing ideas put forward by CYP and allowing them to see the impact of their involvement.
- Cultivating accountability via clear communication channels and responsiveness to feedback.

Discussion and implications

While the IPT provides an important starting point for understanding the contexts, mechanisms, and outcomes underlying the advocacy service, further research is needed to refine and validate the theory. The complex service environment means the current transferability of findings to other advocacy models should be approached cautiously. Ongoing multi-method research across different provisions would strengthen the evidence base to systematically identify what works, for whom, how, and under what conditions.

Several priority areas for recommendations were identified for improved implementation and delivery of this service, and implications for other similar services. These include:

- awareness building through targeted outreach and communication
- flexibility in service delivery to accommodate diverse needs and preferences
- embedding youth participation in governance and oversight
- facilitating relationship-building opportunities beyond formal advocacy
- aligning practices with the good practice framework developed as a part of this research
- committing to accessibility, responsivity, creativity, and relationship building.

1. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Independent advocacy refers to an independent, trained person supporting an individual to understand information, express their needs and wishes, secure rights, represent interests and obtain required services (Oliver et al., 2006). For children in care, advocacy can be "an important safeguard when things go wrong" (Morgan, 2011, p. 1), providing support to participate in decisions and ensuring their rights and needs are considered in welfare planning (Pona & Hounsell, 2012).

Previous research has highlighted the importance of strengthening the rights of children and young people (CYP) in care to meaningfully participate in decision-making about their lives (Diaz, 2020; Dickens et al., 2015). In England, legislation and policy highlights that children in care and transitioning from care should be supported to participate in decision-making (DfE, 2018). However, despite renewed government attention, participation of children in care often continues to be "tokenistic" in practice (Stabler, 2020, p. 29). Local authorities provide advocacy through various arrangements including in-house services directly delivered by authority staff, externally commissioned contracts with independent providers, and spot purchasing arrangements on a case-by-case basis (Oliver et al., 2006; Children's Commissioner, 2019). In 2019, a report by the Children's Commissioner found that a significant majority of local authorities (n=80) commission advocacy services from independent providers such as Barnardo's, Voice, or the National Youth Advocacy Service (NYAS). A smaller number (n=29) operate in-house services for advocacy, including Birmingham Children's Trust (BCT). The remainder offer alternative arrangements, including freelance advocacy, or are currently unknown (Children's Commissioner, 2019).

Few of the existing services have been independently evaluated, and there have been calls for more evaluation of whether or how advocacy can improve outcomes for children in and leaving care (Children's Commissioner, 2019). No evaluations specifically into in-house advocacy services for looked after children or care leavers, were identified, although it is likely that these may be evaluated internally rather than independently.

One paper (Boylan & Ing, 2005) reported on two studies of advocacy and participation in decision-making for children in care in five areas in England. These studies highlighted barriers to participation specifically with power imbalances between young people and adults, but also based on the characteristics of the young people and how able, supported and prepared they felt to participate. The research was conducted in 2001, and does not focus specifically a certain advocacy service, but provides insight into the factors that might lead to young people feeling advocacy worked, or not, for them. A later paper, drawing on data from one of these studies (Boylan & Braye, 2006), highlighted three critical themes related to how advocacy had developed in response to the National Standards:

1) 'professionalisation' of advocacy and a sense of state and adult ownership of child advocacy
2) increasing externalisation of advocacy within the welfare market diminishing the advocacy role of social workers
3) advocacy clearly situated within the consumerist model.

One evaluation based on case files (Pona et al., 2012) focused on the delivery of advocacy services across two sites in England, delivered by the Children's Society. They concluded that statutory obligations and advocacy standards were inadequate, resulting in significant inconsistency in young people's access to an independent advocate. This study was carried out quite a long time ago, however, and standards have evolved since.

Another evaluation of legal advocacy case work provided by the charity Just for Kids Law (Menzies & Farrow, 2018) provided insight into the role of youth advocates – who were young graduates going through training as advocates. Although not focused specifically on children in care, the service mainly supported children involved with children's services, some of whom where in care. The evaluation found a high level of satisfaction with how the youth advocates in particular supported young people. Young people reported that they saw the youth advocates as caring and understanding and reported forming positive and trusting relationships. Young people reported that they felt listened to, were treated in a non-stigmatising manner, and were seen as being capable.

While all local authorities commission some model of independent advocacy, provision remains patchy and inconsistent (Children's Commissioner, 2019). Issues also persist around availability, accessibility, and quality (Pona & Hounsell, 2012). Although these evaluations are helpful for service development in their relevant contexts, they are very different from in-house providers, highlighting a clear gap in the current research base. The need to build on this evidence base is important in light of the recommendation by the Independent Care Review in England to increase advocacy services for children in care (MacAlister, 2022, p. 142), and ongoing campaigns to improve standards and awareness of advocacy services among young people (e.g. NYAS Advocates4U campaign).

This report presents findings from an exploratory, realist-informed study of the Rights and Participation Service (RAPS) advocacy programme within Birmingham Children's Trust (BCT). Through interviews, focus groups, and workshops with service users, advocates, and social care practitioners, this study developed an initial programme theory (IPT) exploring if, how, and why this service facilitates meaningful participation for children in and leaving care and positive outcomes. The resulting framework offers theoretical insights and practice recommendations to guide future implementation of similar advocacy services, grounded in lived experience.

1.1 Research questions and objectives

The study explores the following key questions related to advocacy for care-experienced children and young people:

- How do those who deliver, refer into, and receive advocacy services in the participating children's service think they work, and for whom?
  - What contexts might impact on whether or not advocacy services lead to positive outcomes?
- How might the advocacy service empower or enable care-experienced children and young people to play a meaningful role in decision-making about their lives?
  - What enables and facilitates this?

○ What outcomes are important to young people from this participation?

- How can data from one advocacy service be used to inform the collaborative development of a framework for practice to support the delivery of advocacy services more widely for care-experienced children and young people?

To address these questions, the key evaluation objectives were:

- To map how advocacy services at the study site operate (e.g. how referrals are made, by whom, who receives the service, and what type of activities are carried out).
- To explore the perceptions of those accessing and delivering this advocacy service in terms of the operation of the service, how they feel it might work, and what outcomes might be impacted by the service.
- To understand how advocacy services as a specific mechanism – enabling young people to participate in decision-making – may work in this advocacy service from the perspective of those using and delivering the service.
- To synthesise qualitative findings into a framework to support the delivery of advocacy services in collaboration with care-experienced young people.

2. SERVICE MAPPING

2.1 Overview of the Rights and Participation Service

2.1.1 Background to the service

The advocacy service operates within Birmingham Children's Trust, a large local authority (LA) children's service in England. The service has been provided in-house for several years. As an in-house service within the wider children's service, the advocacy team works alongside professionals including social workers, Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs), senior managers and the Children in Care team. The advocacy service sits within the Trust's Rights and Participation Service (RAPS), which incorporates advocacy and other initiatives aimed at promoting rights and participation for children in and leaving care. During COVID-19, some adaptations were made to the structure and responsibilities within this team to respond to emerging needs.

2.1.2 Service structure and organisational overview

The advocacy service functions independently under the Trusts' commissioning umbrella. The service operates with a multi-agency networking system aimed at fostering strong relationships with professionals across the Trust. As seen in Figure 1 below, the Head of Service maintains overall responsibility for the management of the Rights and Participation Service (RAPS), while three senior managers have oversight over the advocacy, children's rights, and the independent visitor's strands. Individual advocates hold direct responsibility for their allocated caseloads in addition to running participation groups as part of the wider service.

Figure 1. Hierarchal structure within RAPS
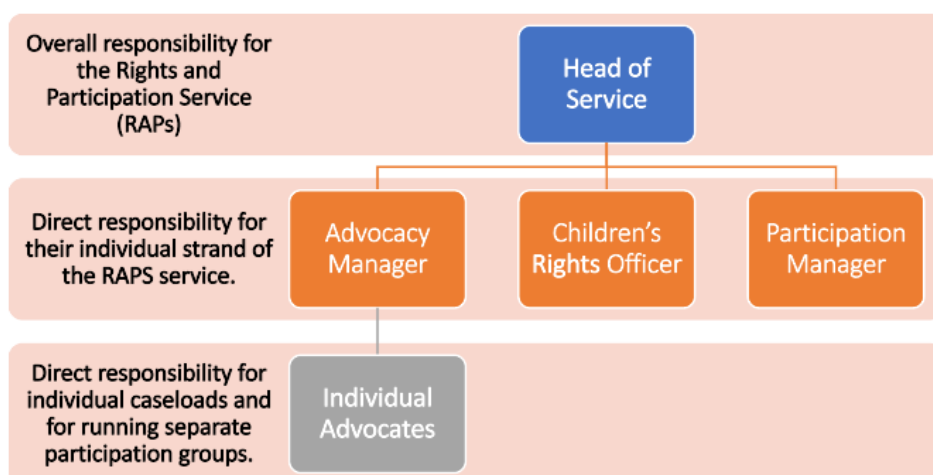
Referrals can originate from professionals, agencies, organisations, or the young people themselves.

2.2 Operational model

2.2.1 Service eligibility criteria

The service supports a range of care-experienced CYP within the LA's remit. The primary eligibility criteria to access advocacy services include:

- CYP 'in care' and subject to child protection plans: this encompasses those placed in foster care (family and friends or non-related foster carers) as well as those in residential care settings. These CYP are eligible for the full range of advocacy services, including both instructed and non-instructed advocacy, depending on their age, understanding, and ability.
- Care leavers receiving ongoing support: young people who have left the care system but continue to receive support from the LA up until age 25 are also eligible for the full range of advocacy services.
- Children in need accessing complaints support: for CYP classified as 'in need', the service provides a limited scope of advocacy support, specifically related to complaints against the Trust or LA services.
- The service also currently operates a pilot programme that extends advocacy support to 15- to 17-year-olds attending initial child protection conferences (ICPCs), in addition to 16- to 17-year-olds presenting homeless, under 16 year olds and 16- to 17-year-olds in unregulated placement settings, unborn children on a child protection plan and to CIC and care-leaver parents with regards to their children's child protection process, including core group meetings.

2.2.2 Issues and topics covered

The advocacy service supports CYP across a broad range of issues and topics, tailored to their specific needs and circumstances:

- Assisting in voicing complaints and concerns about the Trust or the services they receive. This includes guiding them through the formal complaints process and advocating on their behalf.
- Supporting participation in CIC review meetings child protection reviews, ICPCs, Personal Education Plan meetings, Family Group Conference meetings, core group meetings and other professional meetings in relation to children on child protection plans or other matters. The aim is to ensure their voices are heard during these important discussions about their care and wellbeing.
- Addressing housing/accommodation concerns and ensuring rights and preferences are heard and respected.
- Helping CYP understand decisions made about their lives, ensuring they have a clear understanding of the rationale and implications.
- Providing guidance and support to empower informed participation in decision-making.

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- Addressing education issues such as school placements, academic support, or accessing educational resources.
- Identifying and accessing any additional help or support needed from the LA or external organisations.

The focus is on resolving individual issues on a case-by-case basis meaning that once a particular issue is resolved, the case is closed. Advocacy support is then provided again if another issue arises, rather than providing open-ended, ongoing support.

2.2.3 Team training and qualifications

The advocacy service team members receive training and qualifications to effectively support care-experienced CYP. All advocates are required to hold a level three accredited qualification in advocacy. If an advocate does not possess this upon recruitment, they are provided with the opportunity to complete the course. In addition, advocates also require prior experience of working with CYP, as well as some background in advocacy.

The service facilitates ongoing professional development for its advocates through additional Trust training opportunities. Advocates can also access training from external organisations, such as Article39 and Coram Voice, ensuring they stay up to date with best practices. Regular team meetings provide a platform for advocates to discuss themes, trends, and identified training needs. Advocates are required to demonstrate ongoing engagement with training via regular appraisals. These meetings and appraisals aim to ensure that the team stays well informed about changes in policy, legislation, and any other relevant developments that may impact their work or the broader service. The service also employs care-experienced apprentices who receive specialised advocacy training and support.

As part of their onboarding, newly qualified social workers undergo a whole-day training session covering children's rights, advocacy, and participation delivered by the RAPS Team and the Corporate Parenting Team. This aims to provide a foundation and awareness of the support offered by the Trust among professionals working with CYP.

2.2.4 Case management and monitoring

The service has implemented measures to ensure effective case management and monitoring. These measures aim to provide children in placements with structured mechanisms to express their feelings, report issues, and voice their views and wishes. There is also a broader focus on case management and monitoring at both national and regional levels.

Caseloads are a critical aspect of case management, with the service's current structure involving five advocates who also serve as participation workers. These individuals manage varied caseloads including group work, projects, and other tasks. The integration of participation and advocacy aims to incorporate individual advocacy and broader systemic initiatives. The service has low staff turnover and high application numbers. In an attempt to reduce pressure and anxiety, the service does not have statutory timescales, its focus being on the quality of the work and the needs of young people.

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2.3 Young people's participation in service delivery

The integration of advocacy with the broader participation groups operating within the RAPS emphasises co-production with young people, with the aim of a culture of active participation in service delivery. A wide range of issues and themes identified through the advocacy service are brought to participation groups, where they are transformed into advocacy campaigns led by young people themselves. This process aims to empower CYP to drive change on a larger scale, addressing systemic concerns through collective action.

Young people are actively encouraged to participate in meetings where various issues are discussed as part of wider corporate parenting responsibilities, to enable their voices and perspectives to inform decision-making processes that directly impact their lives. Opportunities are provided for young people to participate in interviewing panels and engage directly with leadership, to raise issues, and have their voices heard at the highest levels. To recognise the value of young people's contributions, the service compensates them for time spent in activities that their professional counterparts would be paid for.

2.4 Plans for service growth

While there does not appear to be any immediate plans for significant growth or expansion of the advocacy service, insights from senior managers indicate potential areas for future development in response to evolving needs. A pilot programme is under way to provide 16- to 17-year-olds advocacy during initial child protection conference, with plans to continue this pilot. In addition, the service is working closely with the Commissioning Team to establish a more proactive approach when young people are placed in children's homes to ensure young people are aware of rights and receive necessary support, even without an advocacy request.

The service is currently in the process of recruiting another advocate in response to an increase in the demand for advocacy services. However, the service must continue to operate within the constraints of its existing resources and capacity.

3. RESEARCH METHODS

3.1 Design

This chapter presents an overview of the methodology used in our research on advocacy for children in care and care leavers. This research employs a qualitative realist-informed approach to understand not just whether the advocacy intervention works but how, why, for whom, and in what contexts (Pawson & Tilley, 1997). Recognising that interventions have varying effects contingent upon individual, contextual, and interactional factors, this study explores the underlying mechanisms that influence the effectiveness and outcomes of advocacy.

The realist approach provides a useful framework for understanding the complex interplay between context, mechanisms, and outcomes in this advocacy intervention. We utilise Context-Mechanism-Outcome (CMO) configurations to present findings, a pivotal tool within the realist research paradigm to discern the interplay between the intervention's components and the contextual factors influencing its outcomes.

The CMO configuration comprises three integral components:

- **Context:** This encompasses the broader environment in which the intervention operates, and involves social, cultural, economic, and political factors. It also considers the specific characteristics of the population targeted by the intervention – children in care and care leavers in our case.
- **Mechanism:** This refers to the underlying processes or pathways intrinsic to the intervention that lead to the desired outcomes. Understanding these mechanisms is crucial for understanding the intricacies of the advocacy service.
- **Outcome:** Pertaining to the intended effects of the intervention in the short and long term, this component allows us to assess the advocacy service's overall impact on the wellbeing and experiences of children in care and care leavers.

The CMO framework enabled us to develop an IPT on how advocacy is expected to trigger mechanisms in certain contexts to lead to outcomes. We then test and refine this theory through interviews and focus groups. Ultimately, the realist approach provides explanatory insight into what works in advocacy for CYP and how it works at the study site, rather than simply determining if the intervention works.

This study was divided into three distinct research phases to support the realist analysis:

Phase 1: Theory gleaning

Initial data collection through semi-structured interviews and focus groups. Aligning with the realist principle of 'theory gleaning' (Manzano, 2016), this phase aimed to elicit stakeholders' assumptions and beliefs about if and how the advocacy intervention works and the factors influencing its outcomes.

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Phase 2: Theory testing

Testing and refining the emerging hypotheses through a second round of semi-structured interviews. This aligns with the realist principle of consolidating, confirming, and discounting theories (Manzano, 2016).

Phase 3: Theory consolidation

Consolidating the refined theory into a coherent advocacy framework through collaborative workshops. These provide an opportunity to ground the programme theory against stakeholders' lived experiences and priorities (Greenhalgh et al., 2009).

3.1.1 Research Site

The research was conducted within a large LA children's services department in England. Specifically, this exploratory study focused on the Rights and Participation Service (RAPS) advocacy programme delivered as a part of this broader organisation. RAPS sits within the local authority structure, providing an in-house service but operates confidentially and independently in its advocacy work with children in care. Further information about the research site can be found in Chapter 2 of this report.

3.1.2 Recruitment and sample

Participants were recruited with support from RAPS staff who facilitated access to advocates and young people. They supported with distributing information sheets and consent forms and signing up young people to focus groups. Our opt-in recruitment strategy allowed potential participants to voluntarily express willingness to partake in the study. This approach respects individual autonomy and ensures that participants actively choose to contribute their insights.

Participants were recruited via purposive sampling techniques to deliberately target individuals who could provide rich and varied insights into the experiences of CYP, as well as practitioners engaged in their support. Participants were sampled on their age, ethnicity, and level of involvement with advocacy services (i.e. no involvement, one off, repeated involvement, trained peer advocates). This is an efficient approach for small-scale, in-depth studies exploring a specific intervention as it allows intentional selection of information-rich participants with relevant expertise and lived experience (Palinkas et al., 2015). As the goal was to understand experiences and mechanisms of a particular advocacy service, we intentionally sampled young people, advocates, and linked professionals to capture diverse perspectives.

Eligibility criteria ensured participants had relevant experience and were able to participate meaningfully. The criteria required young people to be aged 10–21 and have capacity to consent or assent alongside guardian consent. The lower age limit reflects evidence that children below this age struggle to meaningfully participate in research interviews without substantial adjustments (Lambert & Glacken, 2011). Additionally, 10 years aligns with current practice guidance on including children's voices in decision-making processes (Lefevre, 2018). Participants speaking any language were eligible and were able to be provided an interpreter through RAPS. Inclusion criteria for professionals and advocates

required working directly with RAPS to ensure familiarity with and relevant perspectives on the advocacy model. Practitioners included team managers and heads of service.

Workshops were also conducted to develop the advocacy framework. These were not data collection as such, but informed the analysis. Criteria for participation in these workshops was any children and young people involved in the wider participation service. Participants speaking any language were eligible and were able to be provided an interpreter through RAPS.

3.1.3 Ethics

This study received ethical approval from Cardiff University Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (ref:345) and permission to proceed from the BCT Research Governance Team. Informed consent was obtained from all participants. For children under 16, guardian consent was gained alongside child assent using age-appropriate procedures. Information sheets provided appropriate details on aims, methods, and confidentiality. Participants were informed they could stop interviews at any time or withdraw for any reason up to a specific date.

Risk protocols included specific procedures if distress or safeguarding issues arose, including signposting to services and appropriate staff notified if necessary. An independent advocate could accompany care-experienced participants if preferred. Recordings, transcripts, and analyses were anonymised with secure data procedures adhering to data protection legislation. In addition, we consulted an advisory group of care-experienced young people whose guidance shaped information materials, interview questions, and research delivery. Care was taken in framing questions and probing answers to avoid assumptions or judgement.

3.1.4 Researcher positionality and reflexivity

The research team included two care-experienced academics and a researcher with extensive social work practice and experience as an IRO. This brought an 'insider' perspective to the research which was valuable. However, this needed to be managed by regular team meetings to discuss the data collection and analysis to ensure that the data interpretation was not biased by individual experiences that may have seemed similar or dissimilar on the surface to those of the participants.

3.1.5 Data collection

Data was collected primarily via interviews, focus groups and stakeholder discussions.

Data collection occurred in two phases with the first round of data collection focused on initial theory gleaning, with a second round testing emerging theories. This multi-modal, phased approach allowed for progressive focusing, exploration of divergent data, and ultimately collaborative sensemaking between researchers and participants:

1) initial theory gleaning through interviews with operational staff (n=3) and focus groups (one with advocates (n=6), two with care-experienced young people (n=9), and key stakeholder discussions with experienced advocacy academics (n=4)

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2) theory testing via follow-up interviews (senior practitioner (n=1), advocates (n=3), care-experienced young people (n=3).

These semi-structured sessions aimed to elicit in-depth qualitative data on participant experiences and perspectives of the advocacy service. Interviews took place online using Microsoft Teams and were audio recorded with permission and transcribed. Stakeholder discussions took place in person in the stakeholder's offices or online using Microsoft Teams. Researchers used interview schedules developed in consultation with care-experienced advisors to ensure sensitivity. Focus groups with young people took place in person at a building within the service which young people were familiar with. The focus group with practitioners took place online using Microsoft Teams. Interviews and discussions lasted around 60 minutes, with focus groups approximately 90 minutes.

All interviews and focus groups were audio-recorded, transcribed smart verbatim, and anonymised before analysis. Additional data was generated in the focus groups by young people writing out responses on A1 paper. These were then typed up for analysis.

3.1.6 Data analysis

Data was analysed in two ways: through thematic analysis and a realist synthesis.
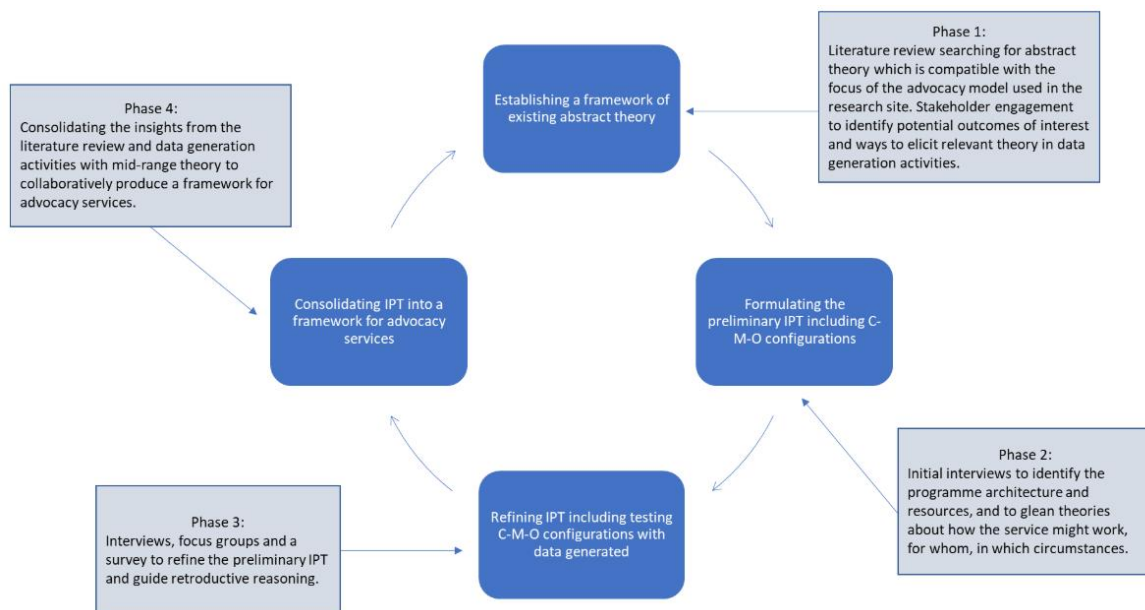
Initial thematic analysis

Data were initially thematically analysed to map out the important components and experiences of the advocacy services. Thematic analysis was conducted using the six-stage approach outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). This begins with familiarisation through repeated reading of transcripts followed by initial, open coding. Codes were then collated into preliminary overarching themes and sub-themes before refinement into a thematic framework. NVivo 12 software assisted data management and analysis.

Inductive analysis enabled findings to be identified directly from the data generated with participant perspectives rather than imposing preconceptions (Thomas, 2006). All transcripts were closely analysed by paragraph with codes and themes remaining close to the data. Themes were reviewed for internal consistency and heterogeneity between cases. Analysis aimed to identify shared patterns across the dataset while acknowledging areas of divergence reflecting the variety of experiences and perspectives.

Realist synthesis

A secondary data analysis conducted was a realist synthesis of all data generated and data extracted from relevant literature (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. Developing and consolidating an IPT into a framework for advocacy services for care-experienced young people (diagram adapted from Smeets et al., 2022)

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Phase 1:
Literature review searching for abstract theory which is compatible with the focus of the advocacy model used in the research site. Stakeholder engagement to identify potential outcomes of interest and ways to elicit relevant theory in data generation activities.

Phase 2:
Initial interviews to identify the programme architecture and resources, and to glean theories about how the service might work, for whom, in which circumstances.

Phase 3:
Interviews, focus groups and a survey to refine the preliminary IPT and guide retroductive reasoning.

Phase 4:
Consolidating the insights from the literature review and data generation activities with mid-range theory to collaboratively produce a framework for advocacy services.

Cycle nodes: Establishing a framework of existing abstract theory → Formulating the preliminary IPT including C-M-O configurations → Refining IPT including testing C-M-O configurations with data generated → Consolidating IPT into a framework for advocacy services

An important initial phase in realist research is developing an IPT – this refers to an explanatory hypothesis regarding how the intervention is expected to lead to its intended outcomes (Pawson & Tilley, 1997). Specifically, an IPT maps out the contextual factors, mechanisms and outcome patterns hypothesised to be associated with the advocacy intervention, providing defined assumptions that can be tested and refined through data collection. The IPT provided a guiding framework, focusing subsequent data collection on eliciting stakeholders' perspectives and experiences to conform, refine, or negate aspects of the theory.

Step 1: Developing initial programme theories (IPTs)

Our IPT development was informed by existing literature on advocacy interventions, analysis of administrative documents from the advocacy service, as well as the thematic analysis of the data generated in the 'theory gleaning' stage. Reviewing previous evidence can elicit initial hypotheses on contextual conditions and mechanisms that may influence outcomes (Saul et al., 2013).

During this stage, we developed a series of initial 'if–then' statements specifying assumed relationships between contexts, mechanisms, and outcomes. These statements articulate hypothesised causal links between components in the programme theory (Jagosh, 2019), providing an explanatory narrative. Developing these statements supported us in structuring our thinking into testable assumptions linking advocacy processes to outcomes and provide an accessible articulation of our IPTs for gathering stakeholder feedback during subsequent theory refinement. These statements are discussed further in the findings section of this report.

Step 2: Testing, refining and developing the IPTs

The second stage synthesised data generated in the second round of data collection. These interviews aimed to test the identified concepts and if–then statements from the first round of

data collection by eliciting perspectives on whether resonated with participants' experiences. This aligns with the realist principle of consolidating, confirming, and negating theories through gathering additional evidence (Manzano, 2016).

Additional testing was through a targeted thematic analysis of the data to determine whether the IPTs aligned with practice-based insights, versus components needing adjustment or further elucidation to better reflect stakeholders' lived experiences.

IPTs were then refined to reflect the findings of this data. These were visually depicted in a refined logic model (see section 4.2) depicting hypothesised causal pathways linking advocacy activities to outcomes. A logic model visually represents the theory of change underpinning an intervention, mapping out the relationships between contextual factors, mechanisms, outputs, and outcomes. Constructing the logic model supported the systematic articulation of our refined theories in relation to 'what works, for whom, under what contexts' and was particularly useful to synthesise the relationships between contexts, mechanisms, and outcomes into a coherent model (Coryn et al., 2011). The components of this logic model are discussed in depth in the findings section of this report (Chapter 4).

3.1.7 Developing the good practice framework

The final phase of this project involved consolidating our refined initial programme theory into an actionable good practice framework to guide advocacy delivery. Theory consolidation workshops were carried out which supported the interpretation of the data and the development of an advocacy framework (see Chapter 5). In total, four collaborative workshops were carried out with an advisory group of care-experienced young people (n=7) and children/young people supported by the advocacy service within the Trust (n=18). The workshops provided an opportunity to ground-truth the programme theory against young people's priorities, ensuring the framework reflects lived-experience and genuine needs. Beyond a theoretical understanding, the framework translates knowledge on what works into applicable guidance for advocacy delivery.

Voices from Care Cymru pilot

An initial pilot was held on 27 January 2024 to test the planned activities and materials for the development of the good practice framework. This involved seven young people, aged between 19 and 27 from Voices from Care Cymru. Voices from Care Cymru is an advisory group comprised of care-experienced individuals who have previously provided consultation on this research. As with all advisory inputs, the Voices from Care Cymru members were compensated for their time through vouchers in acknowledgement of their expertise.

The one-hour workshop was facilitated by the lead researcher and a member of Voices from Care Cymru staff. It began with an overview of the advocacy study, key findings to date and an explanation of the purpose of a good practice framework. Participants were then split into two groups to review framework domains and consider whether they reflected their perspectives and experiences of advocacy. Discussion within groups was recorded on flipchart paper by the young people. This was followed by a whole-group discussion of ideas and suggestions. Voices from Care Cymru also had valuable recommendations for improving engagement and supporting young people to participate at the main workshops. In

particular, they emphasised the importance of multiple participation methods including writing, drawing, verbal discussion, and prioritising themes through the use of stickers. Their feedback helped adapt the planned approach to be more creative, dynamic, and young person centred.

Birmingham workshops

Three further workshops were held on 16 February 2024 with a total of 18 young people aged between 9–24 years to inform the development of the good practice framework. The workshops took place in Birmingham during a wider participation event for CYP, each lasting for approximately 45 minutes. Workshop participants were recruited on the day and all young people were compensated for their time and experience with vouchers.

Each workshop began with an icebreaker activity to make the participants feel comfortable and build rapport. This was followed by a brief overview of the research study and its aims. The context of the good practice framework was introduced and explained to provide context. Following this, participants were split into small groups with each group facilitated by a member of the research team. In these groups, they engaged in guided discussions focusing on separate elements to ensure each section of the framework was discussed. Detailed notes were taken during these discussions to capture the perspectives, ideas, and recommendations of young people. The input of these young people directly informed the development of the framework and helped to ensure it reflects what young people see as good practice in advocacy provision.

4. FINDINGS

This chapter presents the findings of the study. The first section presents the thematic analysis, and a diagram of the thematic framework can be seen in Figure 3 below. The second section sets out our IPT as developed throughout the study based on all data collection and previous literature, presented alongside a logic model (see Figure 4) to describe the advocacy model used by BCT.

Figure 3. Thematic analysis framework
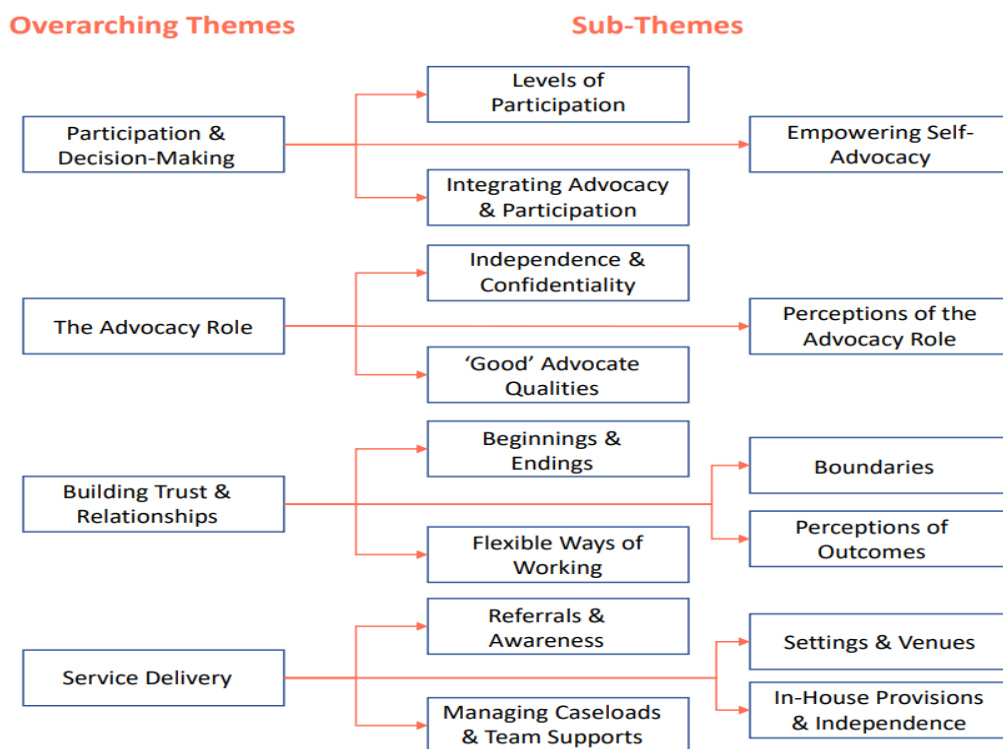
4.1 Thematic analysis

4.1.1 Participation and decision-making

Levels of participation

The extent to which CYP are able to participate in decision-making processes varied depending on different factors. Advocates highlighted age as a possible factor in the level of participation. One example suggested that a group of older children were more vocal in expressing their preferences. In contrast, younger children may be perceived as more reliant

on external guidance and require prompting to participate, potentially due to their accustomed experiences in school environments.

> *"I think they're [younger children] very used to being in your school setting and things where they're always told this is what we're doing. So, when it comes to working with them to say, what would you like to work on, they're always a bit stumped. We've got another children in care council group that's from 13 to 18 and they know what matters to them ... they're a lot more vocal…" (Advocate in interview)*

Discussions with advocates also suggested the degree of participation could be influenced by the amount of choice and autonomy children have previously experienced in other areas of their lives.

> *"It varies a lot with … how much, I suppose in other areas of their life, they're given that choice and I don't think they are that much. So, when we come and say, well, this is led by you, what would you like to do? They're always a bit like whatever you want us to do." (Advocate in interview)*

This could indicate that youth-led advocacy might require building confidence and capacity to drive decision-making after a relative lack of previous autonomy. Careful scaffolding can be needed to empower young people to meaningfully participate (Lundy, 2007), which may be particularly important to ensure young people feel that the service is led by them rather than by adults. However, as indicated by a young person, in practice this can prove difficult.

> *"I think adults take more of the lead ... So, I think adults are more in control and then the service will say whether they can help or not. But I think whether with children it's a bit like the adults are trying to get the child out of their shell, I think. I think it's just very different being an adult and being a child." (Young Person in interview)*

This underscores the need to consider how different levels of participation impact how young people view decision-making.

Participation looks different depending on the needs of the young person involved, and where they are in the service. For example, one stakeholder (an IRO), noted that the ability of young people to engage in various conversations and activities varies greatly depending on their personal circumstances and what is going on in other parts of their lives. A manager talked about how parent–child relationships could impact participation, including CYP's engagement with social workers and advocates, particularly for children receiving child protection interventions and statutory advocacy services.

> *"Traditionally [children subject to child protection are] a really difficult cohort to get to engage and the feedback I've had from children who are in care now ... was how well they engaged with social workers and other professionals depended on their parents' relationship with them." (Senior Manager in interview)*

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Another advocate described a positive experience where a young person had the opportunity to choose the date of their move to a new placement.

> *"So, he'd been able to participate in that decision-making that was very personal to him … So, I suppose in a participation sense, it's varying levels depending on which hat we've got on I guess." (Advocate in interview)*

The mention of 'varying levels' indicates nuances in how different young people engage in decision-making within the advocacy service. This emphasises the importance of tailoring support and involvement based on individual needs and preferences. At another end of the spectrum, one senior manager showcased how responsiveness to feedback from young people has led to a meaningful systemic change.

> *"We were picking up that children and young people were saying that they would like to chair their own meetings, the child in care reviews. So, we took that to the head of service for IROs … So, what happened that the end result ... was that the independent reviewing service offers young people the opportunity to chair their reviews and also are paid an incentive for it." (Senior Manager in interview)*

Where advocacy efforts are successful in enabling young people to participate successfully in decision-making, they could also have transformative potential for the young people to themselves become advocates and support policy and practice changes.

> *"And sometimes some of the children that have been involved in advocacy will then go on to be the voice of children. So, if they've had a difficult experience and they can sometimes help shape that going forward so they can help change policy and practice." (Senior Manager in interview)*

Empowering self-advocacy in children and young people

A key goal underpinning the service's participatory approach is empowering CYP towards greater self-advocacy over time. One stakeholder (an IRO) echoed this, emphasising the importance of empowering young people to take ownership in decision-making. Advocates are clear from the outset that young people are in the driving seat and their voice is at the centre of the service provided.

> *"We always say to the young people that you are the boss, you are in charge and make sure that they lead on what their issue is. Then we obviously recommend decisions and things like that, but we make sure it's led by the person they want and bring their voice to the centre of it." (Advocate in focus group)*

However, in practice how this is approached can depend on the specific situation and young person. For example, while Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs) aim to facilitate child-led meetings, sometimes the formal processes involved can limit the extent of the participation of young people in relation to chairing their own meetings.

"I've not had an experience of a young person chairing it because I think that, not that they're overwhelmed, but I think because it follows quite a process … whoever's kind of chairing it. But we do have some that are more vocal, which is excellent." (Advocate in focus group)

This highlights the need to balance structured processes with flexibility to accommodate preferences and capabilities of young people who wish to be more involved in formal processes like reviews. Similarly, sustaining meaningful, empowering participation requires commitment through conversations rather than tokenistic engagement.

"You need to be brave. I think there's a certain amount of courage because our young people will stand up and talk in front of our Corporate Parenting Board and really challenge people, so they need to be brave and then we need to be brave, when we kind of continue those conversations." (Senior Manager in interview)

Advocacy staff play a key role in ensuring that the voices of CYP are heard within meetings and that challenging conversations are sustained and translated into broader systemic change. Ultimately, the goal is to equip CYP with knowledge and skills to self-advocate in the future.

"The whole point is that we leave that young person more able to deal with something in the future, so we upskill them so that they shouldn't always need to come back to us next time, they should be able to go, well actually last time my advocate said this … kind of empower them a little bit as well." (Senior Manager in interview)

"What we try to do as well is before we end that advocacy relationship is to ensure that the young person is empowered to be able to share their views independently without the need for an advocate to be there all the time." (Advocate in focus group)

This aligns advocacy with the long-term aim of fostering self-reliance and confidence in navigating issues independently and reflects a commitment to long-term positive outcomes beyond immediate advocacy interventions.

Integration of advocacy and broader participation initiatives

RAPS encompasses both advocacy interventions as well as broader participation initiatives. Advocates function in two key dimensions: facilitating youth participation groups to enable collective engagement, as well as more personalised advocacy tailored to individual needs.

"Because in our service we're classed as children's rights and participation workers. So, we're advocates, but we also run participation groups. So, it kind of has two meanings for me ... participation in an advocacy sense, I suppose is a lot more personal to that young person." (Advocate in interview)

Managers and advocates talked about how they have worked to develop a diverse range of specialist groups as part of the wider participation initiative to address the needs of particular sub-groups based on factors such as age, ethnicity, disabilities, and so on.

> *"We've also developed more niche and specialist sort of groups that can really listen to that particular group of children and young people's needs. So, we've got a really diverse population ... the fact is that some of their needs might be slightly different, and we need to just listen to that." (Senior Manager in interview)*

The commitment to inclusivity supports participation aligned with the unique needs of different sub-groups within the larger population. Critically, there is integration between individualised advocacy interventions and the participation initiatives. It appears that trends emerging from individual advocacy cases inform potential group campaign themes.

> *"The other good thing is that we can take the trends that are coming out of our advocacy and kind of use that to start discussions within the groups, so sometimes their campaigns have been driven off the trends in advocacy." (Senior Manager in interview)*

Subsequently, these campaigns may lead to substantive changes in corporate parenting practices and policies, creating a cyclical relationship between advocacy support and systemic impact.

> *"The board may sort of make a decision to change certain practices or policy or procedure based on the campaigns that the young people are leading through the groups which have been channelled through the advocacy themes and issues that we pick up through the advocacy service. So, it also ties in together." (Senior Manager in interview)*

This indicates that integration between advocacy, participation groups, and corporate parenting decisions could enable collective campaigns to be initiated by CYP themselves.

4.1.2 The advocacy role

Communicating independence and confidentiality

As the advocacy service operates within the broader Trust, advocates place particular emphasis on communicating their independence from the LA as well as confidentiality protections around CYP's information. One stakeholder echoes the need for clear role boundaries to maintain independence with an in-house service. In this case, advocates highlight that they are in a distinct and independent position when introducing their role to CYP.

> *"I think that because we work at Birmingham Children's Trust, we still have to say, I'm employed by the same place, but I work completely independently. I don't work with your family. I won't meet other professionals without speaking to you first ... And we won't do anything*

without asking them first unless it's a safeguarding thing." (Advocate in interview)

This autonomy enables advocates to prioritise the perspectives and consent of the young person when providing advocacy services while highlighting the exception of safeguarding ensures that young people are fully aware of the need to prioritise their wellbeing and safety while also balancing the need for transparency and communication. Advocates are also clear with young people where their priorities are based.

"I always say I can support you making a complaint. I'm not here to be your social worker's best friend. I'm here for you and the service is for you … It's about them understanding that we can be their voice and we can make positive changes." (Advocate in interview)

Confidentiality is addressed upfront by advocates to build trust and alleviate concerns about sharing information. Advocates discussed how they explain the concept of confidentiality, including exceptions for safeguarding, openly and honestly from the initial meeting.

"I think being really honest about confidentiality helps. So, in that first meeting I'll always say how it's confidential, check they know what that means ... And I think having that openness straight away rather than sometimes them being worried about saying something to another professional, it just again brings that kind of a bit more hopefully of an equal working relationship between us." (Advocate in interview)

The focus on confidentiality extends to working with young people to ensure that information is shared only so far as they are comfortable.

"When we are working with the young people, we always ask them if they've asked us to put emails together, we always say to them are you happy with your social worker being in this email? Do you want your IRO in this email?" (Advocate in focus group)

Perceptions of the advocacy role

In focus groups, children and young people gave a long list of ways in which advocates had and could help them, including with specific areas like home life, school, budgeting, and housing. They also noted that advocates were there to listen to young people and help them to speak up. How this role is differentiated from other professionals involved in children's lives can be difficult for young people to understand. Explaining and demystifying the advocacy role is often an essential first step for an advocate to navigate, given the lack of widespread awareness and understanding surrounding this.

"That is almost kind of the first port of call with any kind of call or visit is to be really clear about our role ... so I think there's still not necessarily a wide awareness of what we do, but once we explain to the children, I usually explain again age dependent that I work at the same place as their social

worker but do a very different job and then explain what the job is."
(Advocate in interview)

Another advocate highlighted how the advocacy role may be explained in different ways by different professionals. However, difficulties may arise where young people are unable to understand the explanation.

> *"I think every professional explains advocacy in a different way … we try not to use big words, even though a professional may have discussed advocacy sometimes they forget what an advocate does. So, if you keep it short and simple and sweet, then they'll understand." (Advocate in interview)*

Even when young people actively ask for support from an advocate, they may not have an awareness of the full purpose of advocacy or, the depth of support advocates can provide. Therefore, the specifics around how advocates can support meetings, voice concerns to decision-makers, and so forth, requires explanation.

> *"Even when a young person's asked for an advocate, they know it's someone for them and that we can help them to share their views. But beyond that, they don't really know that we can support at meetings, speak on their behalf and make sure the right people are doing the right things." (Advocate in interview)*

In addition, the terminology itself can confuse CYP. This potential confusion emphasises the need for advocates to bridge the gap in understanding by clarifying and translating the meaning of 'advocate' into relatable explanations.

> *"But yeah, I think even the name of our role, you say I'm your advocate, do you know what that means? And it's such a strange and alien kind of name to young people. They know what a social worker is, but an advocate, they're like, that's weird. What is that?" (Advocate in interview)*

There can also be mismatched expectations for young people around the temporary, issue-based nature of advocacy, rather than an assumption of indefinite advocacy.

> *"I think a lot of young people think that having an advocate means that you're going to have one person that's going to fight for you forever regardless of what your issue is, as opposed to understanding that the advocacy service works on issue-based." (Young Person in interview)*

This means that communicating the parameters and processes around continuity of service provision is critical to the advocates role. Finally, misunderstanding extends to other professionals within and outside the Trust as well, particularly around scope and resourcing.

> *"I think the advocates explain themselves really well, but I think there is a misunderstanding across, perhaps professionals around what we do and what we don't do … people seem to think there's tens and tens of us and,*

could you just do this and you're like, no I can't just do that, no." (Senior Manager in interview)

This gap highlights the wider expectation of professionals that the advocates can easily accommodate various requests outside their scope and capacity and reflects a need for communication and awareness about the service's capabilities and limitations.

Perceived qualities of a 'good' advocate

The ability of advocates to build trust and facilitate open engagement with CYP also depends on perceived qualities and interpersonal approaches. Two stakeholders noted that while perceptions of advocacy sometimes differ between young people and advocates, certain explicit and implicit qualities characterise a 'good' advocate. Both young people and staff shared perspectives on the key attributes they value in advocates that enable connection. Both groups emphasise relatability, approachability, and relaxed self-presentation as core qualities that enable advocates to build rapport and trust.

> *"I think as a young person, seeing how the advocates carry themselves is very obvious to me that they're not social workers … Your social worker comes in wearing smart casual, but an advocate they look like your friend. So, it's like I feel a lot more comfortable because you don't look like a professional, you look like a normal person." (Young Person in interview)*

This was mirrored by advocates who talked about strategies such as avoiding overt professionalism in dress and demeanour to lower barriers.

> *"I think it's really important not to dress as a social worker ... I think just be aware of how you're presenting again with that relationship, power balance, body language, those kind of things of not putting any kind of divide between you." (Advocate in interview)*

In addition, advocates display openness through behaviours such as admitting uncertainty and non-judgemental listening.

> *"I think someone that listens well and when I say listens, I don't mean listens to respond, I mean listens to what I'm saying to them because that's really important. I think someone that doesn't try to put words in my mouth, because as a young person sometimes it's difficult to articulate what I want to say." (Young Person in interview)*

This young person particularly indicates that this patience and focus on comprehension rather than simply listening to respond fosters more meaningful engagement. Honesty and transparency are also seen as key qualities for advocates. Young people and advocates particularly highlight the preference for direct and open communication which is crucial to cultivating trust in the advocacy relationship.

> *"I think I want someone that's very open, very transparent with me. And if there's a meeting today and it's been cancelled, tell me it's been cancelled*

... And I think also when delivering the outcome, I would need an advocate that is able to deliver the news whether good, bad, or ugly in an honest way." (Young Person in interview)

"I think honesty as best as possible. If you don't know, you say you don't know and having lots of different ways to work. So, lots of different resources again to make it as accessible as possible, doing what you'll say you'll do and if you can't, say why you can't." (Advocate in interview)

Other inter-personal skills and attributes were also highlighted as key to the role and as qualities that should be possessed by advocates, with one advocate particularly noting the importance of advocates recognising the difficult experiences young people may have had.

"And for professionals not to have that bias attitude or this is a bad child for a reason that the young person behaves because of trauma … So, it is just to give them empathy, to listen to them, give them the time that they deserve, to value them and allow them to kind of engage at their pace." (Advocate in interview)

Staff also highlight that advocates or 'apprentices' with lived experience of care provide unique insight and credibility that aids engagement, particularly for young people who are harder to reach. Crucially, this increased relatability stems from shared backgrounds.

"I think having young people with care experience going into these roles, I think gives them just a different sort of level of insight than maybe it would somebody else going into that particular role." (Senior Manager in interview)

Similarly, a young person who received advocacy services and now supports others in an informal peer support role highlights the value of their lived experience to the role.

"I think if I can be the person that I wanted to work with as a young person and I'm making a difference to at least one child's life, and that's good enough for me because that one child would then go on to make a difference to somebody else's life. And then that brings hope. I think hope is all we need." (Young Person in interview)

Finally, the ability to identify and address 'the bigger picture' during challenging cases with many complex dynamics also emerges as a particularly impactful quality. Importantly, the ability to interpret and navigate difficult situations with sensitivity is valued.

"But yeah, being able to just be that, help people see the bigger picture sometimes. They tend to be like the really technical ones or the ones that are a bit … where there's politics potentially, or there's just a clash between personalities, between kind of children and parents and carers and people within the Trust itself." (Senior Manager in interview)

These conversations highlight that prioritising elements such as approachability, openness, honesty, experiential insight and situational awareness are hallmarks of quality advocacy and help to foster productive and trusting relationships.

4.1.3 Building trust and relationships

Beginnings and endings

The initiation and closure processes involved in the advocacy process can carry particular significance given the temporary nature of these relationships. Advocates emphasised the vital role of first meetings in framing expectations around independence and the overall tone of partnership.

> *"I do think it's how you set up that beginning of this is what I'm here for, but you are the boss, you lead this, and you tell me what you want me to do. That automatically builds the relationship of I can actually share what I want." (Advocate in interview)*

It was felt by some that the advocates themselves were best placed to provide initial introductions, partially as a way of ensuring that young people understood the independence of their role. Advocates emphasise the need to set the right tone from the very first meeting by clearly explaining their independent role and the young person's role in leading the relationship.

> *"I find because going in straight away explain the role, I'm purely here for you, I'm led by you, you tell me what you want and need. It kind of shifts that … I suppose that power dynamic almost that is very different with all the other adults in their life ... I think that the power balance is much more there … which I think really helps build that relationship pretty quickly." (Advocate in interview)*

The advocate particularly highlights that positioning the young person in charge can disrupt traditional adult–young person power imbalances and helps to build trust. Similarly, advocates and young people emphasise the need to avoid background assumptions by limiting prior knowledge, allowing young people to shape first impressions.

> *"I don't want to go into any child's house with any sort of preconception of them because I'm very much aware that even though I would tell myself I won't feel that way, as soon as I've read it somewhere, in my mind there's going to be that little idea of whatever I've read." (Young Person in interview)*

It was generally felt that this clean slate supports more equal, collaborative partnerships. Just as beginnings set the tone, thoughtful endings help provide positive closure to relationships with CYP who may be accustomed to impermanence in their broader networks of support.

"I think we just need to be really clear on its short-term work and then finish our working relationship as well as we begin it ... think the ending is just as important if not more important than the beginning of working relationships like this because the young people have so many people coming in and out of their lives." (Advocate in interview)

However, there were also ways in which the service supported young people to come together and influence decisions beyond their individual advocacy issues such as convening groups and hosting participation days. These additional ways of working with and engaging young people could maintain and build these trusting relationships between the service and young people.

Boundaries

While cultivating trusting relationships with CYP is vital, advocates emphasised the equal importance of maintaining clear boundaries around their role. Transparency and honesty about the specific parameters and limitations of advocacy is key to preventing confusing or unrealistic expectations.

"So, we do tend to, even if they've had the information before, make sure we are really clear about what we can and what we can't do as well." (Advocate in interview).

Young people also seem to be receptive to these boundaries and understand the limitations of the advocates' role.

"They can't work a miracle. So, knowing that there's going to be limits." (Young Person in focus group)

While rapport is built through respect and compassion, it was generally felt that professional boundaries can help manage expectations and prevent overdependence.

"Respect, sharing a lot of respect for the young person, just again to give them that equal part in the relationship. We build really good relationships with young people that maybe don't have other support networks. So, I think it's important to still have those professional, friendly but professional boundaries in place that keeps them emotionally secure in the working relationship." (Advocate in interview)

In addition, advocates must balance responsive support with issue-specific time frames. As one manager suggests, cases may sometimes reach a point where the advocates may have to advise closing the advocacy issue.

"I think that's when it gets quite complicated, because you have to say to that young person 'I can't stay here with you forever so you either need to do this … or, I'll leave you my phone number and if anything comes up in the future then you can give me a ring, but I can't help you with this anymore'." (Senior Manager in interview)

One young person who now acts as an advocate for other young people explains that honesty about the boundaries of the role is important so that unrealistic expectations are not built.

> *"I sit down with young people and I tell them exactly what my role is and tell them exactly what I can do and what I can't do ... It then allows our relationship to be so much easier because there's no expectations."*
> *(Young Person in interview)*

Overall, both young people, advocates and senior managers felt that transparency surrounding parameters allows for the building of trust within role limits.

Perceptions of outcomes

The impact of advocacy engagement encompasses both tangible results and intangible emotional outcomes for young people. Advocates describe balancing validating young people's perspectives with realistic guidance when preferred outcomes remain unlikely or unfeasible. Positive solutions to issues were often viewed by participants as being on a spectrum, with outcomes ranging from supporting self-expression in meetings to reinstating severed family contact.

> *"So, for one young person, the issue that advocacy might be referred for would be support at their next CIC review ... their views be heard and taken on board and that's a positive outcome. And then you've got the other extreme where working with a young person, that contact was stopped with their child but after a long period of work contact has now been reinstated. So that's a positive on you could say a bigger scale ... but they've still both had their views listened to and respected."* (Advocate in interview)

Even when the tangible or substantive result falls short of the young person's wishes or expectations, effort to support understanding of the constraints while exploring alternative solutions was seen to convey an attitude of care towards young people.

> *"I think the advocate even asked her [a friend of the young person], if you can't have that, what's another solution? What's something else you would like? … you know what, I knew I wasn't going to get what I wanted but this person fought for me. And for the first time, I actually felt like I was important."* (Young Person in interview)

> *"It can be really tricky because sometimes young people are asking for things that aren't going to happen … So even though he wasn't getting the outcome he wanted, the really important bit was it was explained to him in an appropriate way … he knows he's been heard, respected, knows the reasons for the decision."* (Advocate in interview)

This indicates that the support provided to young people in understanding the decisions that are made, even if they are not the decisions that young people want, can be as important as

the decision going their way. Exploring alternative solutions could help young people still feel listened to.

> *"So, as long as there's always an explanation if something can't happen and if it could happen in the future, plan how that could happen, even though they're not getting the outcome they want at that time, it hopefully reassures them that they're being listened to." (Advocate in interview)*

However, one young person highlighted how partial or delayed decisions can be underwhelming, with timelines perhaps leaving young people feeling frustrated.

> *"It will get to a point where it's like, okay, we've asked X, Y, Z and there's not really much we can do now. So, it is that kind of, that's what does tend to happen and it takes quite a long time, but processes take quite a long time. They take quite a long time to deal with things." (Young Person in interview)*

This is an important example as it emphasises that there are exceptions to a wholly positive experience of the service, with potentially more time needed to be spent on the experiences of young people in relation to how quickly processes take place or, how efficiently issues are resolved.

Overall, while it is clear that concrete changes or outcomes from issue-based advocacy represent optimal and intended outcomes, the youth-centric experience that is supported by the service also carries significant weight. Advocates play a nuanced role in expanding possibilities while grounding expectations in reality.

Flexible ways of working

A key aspect of good advocacy practice was also described as flexible ways of working with young people. Young people particularly noted the importance of advocates being flexible in how they work with young people.

> *"Everyone's individual, so what might work for you might not work for [someone else] and it's just having that conversation. This is why I'm here, this is what I can do for you, these are some of the things that if you wanted me to do I could." (Young Person in focus group)*

Advocacy staff in particular highlighted a number of flexible ways of working that supported relationship building during and subsequently following the pandemic. The move to remote working during the pandemic opened up new options for connecting with young people, especially for those who struggle with face-to-face interactions. Advocates described using video calls and phone conversations to help ease the transition when meeting new people or discussing personal matters, removing the pressure of in-person meetings. For some young people, the shift online made engaging more accessible and comfortable.

> *"I work with a young person, really struggles meeting new people, really struggles in person and needs a lot of support to meet people in person.*

So, for her to know that, well, I'll just call you in on Teams or we'll have a chat on the phone or when you meet this new person, we'll do it on Teams first. That's really been helpful for her." (Advocate in interview)

However, staff acknowledged that digital ways of working are not suitable or accessible for all young people. In addition, some staff feel less confident with technology themselves.

"Some members of staff are more confident and competent with kinds of technology than others, in the same way that some are more comfortable sitting on the floor on a beanbag, or climbing under a table, you know again we all practice differently." (Senior Manager in interview)

There are also barriers around access to devices, data and internet connectivity. One senior manager describes how when participation groups moved online during the pandemic, these technology constraints limited engagement opportunities for some.

"So, we kept all our groups online ... but the barriers for us are young people's access to technology ... if they're on a Teams call on their phone it's really limited as to how they can engage with that. And then you've got problems with data and problems with internet ..." (Senior Manager in interview)

Despite this, managers expressed hope that more flexibility around how, when and where they connect with young people continues as in-person social work continues post-pandemic. Simple alternatives like going for a walk rather than sitting in the office were noted as positive practice shifts.

And I'm hoping that's kind of carried on within the social work world as well, kind of being a little bit more, oh yeah, we don't kind of have to sit in our office. Or I don't have to sit in this young person's bedroom in their private space you know." (Senior Manager in interview).

Advocates also highlighted the creative ways in which they engage with CYP who may need support with communication, such as needing an interpreter.

"We use the BSL Language Team to support us with young people that can't communicate [verbally], picture books and stuff as well … we have the [Mind of My Own App] but we have an express app with the children but who can point to the pictures which works well with children with Autism." (Advocate in focus group)

The advocates particularly noted the importance of recognising that there are various routes through which to communicate with CYP and that often a formal approach was less helpful when it comes to building trust and relationships.

"You're an advocate for them, to be their voice, so you have to get down on their level." (Advocate in focus group)

4.1.4 Service delivery

Referrals and awareness of the service

Referrals to the advocacy service primarily come through professionals involved with CYP, rather than direct outreach.

> "We have quite a lot of social workers referring, the family group conference coordinators refer to our service ... our social workers are coming in, we make sure they've got information on advocacy so they're able to ask their young people if they'd like an advocate." (Advocate in focus group)

In addition, explanatory materials and resources are made available to both professionals within the Trust and young people.

> "So, we've got postcards, we put blogs out, we're in the newsletter that's emailed to all the care leavers, but there is a gap, a weakness in how we communicate directly with our young people and I know other local authorities use an app, or they've got a website, and I really think that's needed." (Senior Manager in interview)

While self-referrals do occur, this often seemed to come via the route of young people requesting a referral through a relevant professional.

> "It's a bit like a lot of children, they wouldn't book their own doctor's appointment, they'd get an adult to do this. And I suppose with this, it's the same way a child might ask for an advocate, but it might come via a carer … or a social worker or another professional saying, look this young person needs an advocate." (Senior Manager in interview)

However, in focus groups, young people stressed that they should be offered advocacy in different ways, and by everyone that they are in contact with, as they might want to raise issues with the person they would have to rely on for a referral. They also felt that some carers or social workers might not tell young people about advocacy if they thought that a young person might make a complaint about them.

The service has some strategies to try and address this. For example, paperwork from CIC Reviews now also includes a section for advocacy details as a result of a campaign from one of the participation groups within RAPS.

> "The paperwork for the education plan meetings has a section at the bottom now that talks about advocacy and asks if the young person would like an advocate. I think that came from a child in care council project to get that done. So, any young person in care having those meetings is regularly asked if they'd like an advocate. And I believe in the child in care reviews as well, there's a section about has the young person been asked if they'd like an advocate." (Advocate in interview)

Formalisation through an automatic opt-out process also offers access but might require careful implementation to align with the readiness of CYP to access advocacy and their relative understanding of the service.

> *"I think probably opt-out is really good as long as the young person has all the information to make that informed decision… So, we contact a young person, they don't know a referral has been made to us, they don't know what we do. And it makes that initial engagement quite tricky because they're at the beginning of a process." (Advocate in interview)*

This is particularly highlighted by one young person who highlights the potential confusing nature of the opt-out scheme:

> *"I do think that the opt-out scheme is really confusing for children and young people because I think it makes them think that they have to have an advocate even if they don't have any issues particularly." (Young Person in interview).*

While referrals are clearly a key part of access to the service, awareness of advocacy and the services available remain limited without proactive visibility efforts, even when opt-out referral processes seek to boost access.

Advocates and young people alike noted the benefits of targeted promotion alongside professional referrals to help bridge this gap. One young person explains how they found out about the service through a rights event and the creative communications tailored to young people that were available at the event.

> *"I remember seeing a really bright coloured leaflet with massive writing on … it was the only thing that was catching my eye. Everything else was just boring, black, and orange … But this was just a really cute little leaflet and it said something about rights and participation …" (Young Person in interview)*

Another young person describes how they found out about the service and were able to access through being a part of another participation event within RAPS, again highlighting the benefits of the integrated nature of the service.

> *"So, when I did the Care Leavers Forum, obviously the Care Leavers Forum is linked to the rights and participation. So that's how I knew about it because I was already involved. But if I wasn't involved already, I wouldn't have known that was an option." (Young Person in interview)*

Feedback from advocates, managers, and young people highlights that context on the purpose and scope of advocacy is vital alongside promotion and increased visibility of advocacy availability. Overall, tailored awareness-building to explain advocacy aligned with multiple referral options enables CYP to make informed choices. In contrast, overreliance on a passive opt-out model risks access inequities without the presence of additional communication and materials.

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Settings and venues

Our research also suggests that the locations and spaces where advocacy interventions occur can also influence the openness and ability of CYP to engage with advocates. One stakeholder particularly noted the importance of creating a safe and non-threatening environment for young people where their voices are heard and respected. As such, choices over meeting venues carry significance for young people from an empowerment perspective.

> *"I think it'd be nice to have some level of control over where I get to have my meetings where professionals come and see me." (Young Person in interview)*

Ideal venues for young people and advocates enable private conversations in neutral spaces where CYP feel comfortable sharing and communicating freely.

> *"We aim for school as we hope it's a bit of a neutral place. There's generally somewhere we can just be on our own with the child or young person. It's a safe space as well for both of us." (Advocate in interview)*

However, there appears to be some dissonance on the perspective of the use of schools as a venue, highlighting the very individualised needs of young people.

> *"As a child I hated having meetings at school, but they always used to come at school and I used to think 'why?'" (Young Person in interview)*

One advocate explained how home visits are generally avoided when carrying out advocacy work, unless necessary. This is because young people may sometimes lack privacy or be influenced by caregivers, meaning they might not be able to say what they want to.

> *"[We] rarely do home visits. It's very much if we have no other choice because with home visits, especially if a young person's on a child protection plan, they're not always able to speak as freely because the adults that they live with are there … Or sometimes slightly older ones meet at McDonald's, Greggs, a café, a couple of them you will go and meet them at their house. So, with older young people that are living independently, it's a bit more flexible really." (Advocate in interview).*

The needs and preferences of young people themselves is highlighted as a key factor in deciding the venue of meetings and visits, with the creation of a safe space for young people highlighted as a key priority.

> *"It's what they feel comfortable with … we have to respect that. How are you supposed to build a relationship if you're not listening to them? Listening is key." (Advocate in interview)*

Intra-service dynamics

As an advocacy service situated within the LA Children's Trust, perceptions of independence from the rest of the LA carries particular significance. Advocacy staff and young people alike

reflected on the nuances of autonomy alongside key benefits enabled by the in-house structure.

> *"So, a lot of the advocacy services are contracted out, so they sit outside the local authorities … and we do get challenged about 'how can you call yourself independent'. And I'm quite vehement about that, because I can't think of a single time when we've backed off a challenge, and in some ways I think it works better." (Senior Manager in interview)*

Senior managers highlighted how, in practice, this doesn't impact the job that advocates are able to do for young people, emphasising their distinct roles and protocols despite common employment.

> *"Yes, it's an in-house service but … because we're independent advocates although we're paid by the Trust, we're an in-house service, we're able to challenge and we're able to do exactly what any other advocate would be able to do if they were independent." (Senior Manager in interview)*

> *"Obviously our advocates act independently, even though we are employed by the Trust, our advocates act very much independently, so they won't be worried about challenging the Trust. Quite often I think it helps us actually … sometimes I think it helps that we're part of the Trust. We can email the director of practice and say, look this could escalate further." (Senior Manager in interview)*

One advocate noted that the advocates do not have access to any social work records, ensuring the independence of their role. This focus on ensuring independent practices aids impartiality akin to that of Independent Reviewing Officers.

> *"It's a bit like the IRO service across the country. It's usually part of the Council or Trust, whatever the delivery model is for that authority. But it's almost like one step removed, it has an independent function … We see ourselves very much the same as IROs. They act independently for children … they will challenge a care plan; they will challenge a social worker. We do exactly the same." (Senior Manager in interview)*

It was also felt by the senior managers interviewed that familiarity with other Trust professionals is seen as a positive attribute of the in-house nature of the service since it smooths urgent discussions and escalations when needed to support children.

> *"It's a very good sort of multi-agency networking system that we have, and we still sit as independent. So having that sort of relationship with the other professionals within the Trust sitting in-house, the benefit is that we … people know who we are, we're not total strangers." (Senior Manager in interview)*

In addition, it was felt that, as the Trust operates as a non-profit organisation, flexibility around capacity and responsiveness is enhanced without commercial service constraints as with other models of advocacy.

> *"Say you commission someone to work with 100 children, when they get to 101 they're not working with the one you'll have to commission that on top of. So, you'll have to pay additionally and pilots that we've done that would be extra ... If we are asked to do something or if there's extra capacity needs, we try and make that work. It's not like we then go back to the Trust, say if we can't do it or we're going to charge you more for this."*
> *(Senior Manager in interview)*

Professionals further highlighted that the pre-existing connectivity further enables acceptance of challenges raised by advocates, as it is felt that there is a larger culture of respect for the voices, wishes and needs of young people.

> *"I think people tend to listen to our advocates. They respect our advocates; they respect what our young people are saying. There's a culture of really listening to children and young people."* *(Senior Manager in interview)*

This indicates a perception among advocates and managers that avoiding an 'outsider' status garners buy-in from other professionals within the Trust. However, the influence of broader power dynamics within the LA could potentially blur boundaries and perceptions of independence.

> *"Even though it is independent, I do feel like Birmingham City Council, they do have kind of a bit of power over them. I don't know how, but not in terms of the advocacy but just from my observation, observing over the years, because I've been there a long time, I do feel like there is a point that they just get and they can't really go in higher."* *(Young Person in interview)*

> *"Yeah, because I know that they're independent, but they still have to go to board meetings with the council ... but then again all the services have to, so I don't know."* *(Young Person in interview)*

These are key insights from this young person, recognising that while the service is positive, there are still questions around the impartiality of the service from the LA. This indicates that trust between young people and the advocates therefore hinges on demonstrated impartiality in action and clear communication with young people about the nature of the service.

> *"I can completely see on the face of it, it doesn't look independent because I've got the same badge as their social worker getting paid by the same people ... So, it's not until we kind of explain … I always say I work at the same place, but I do a very different job and I just work with you."* *(Advocate in interview)*

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When issues emerge, it may be necessary for advocates to leverage their integrated positioning to escalate concerns while preserving working relationships. Navigating complaints relies on professional protocols and a culture of respect for the role given the inter-departmental dynamics at play. Advocates noted that in the first instance, they seek resolutions directly with frontline staff, and elevate to higher level management where patterns in advocacy trends suggest systemic gaps.

> *"Supporting a young person to make a complaint, if our advocate is making that complaint obviously the first stage we'll go to the [relevant manager] and the head to service to address at first stage. And what we do is the advocate will escalate it to myself as the manager, for example. If we see a pattern where young people are not being supported by social workers for a certain matter and there's a regular pattern, that's when we will actually ask for a meeting with the head of service to discuss what's happening."* (Senior Manager in interview)

It was felt that remaining professional, respectful, and protecting partnerships enables smoother long-term coordination between departments.

> *"A lot of workers appreciate that we are working on behalf of the young person and doing exactly what they want to do ... And it's just keeping that positive working relationship, keeping it completely professional and factual and just being mindful of the other person's role when you're kind of raising a concern or escalating something to their manager."* (Advocate in interview)

The security provided by the in-house structure also seemed to facilitate persistent elevation of unresolved complaints without fear of severed contracts as might be experienced within alternative models of advocacy.

> *"If anything, we could be more challenging because they can't get rid of us if you like. So, if you've got someone like [a commissioned service] who is being really challenging, and really pushing a local authority, when their contract comes up ... you know how they sit with that if they've spent the last two years you know, really annoying people? Whereas for us, because we're employees, yeah there's some politics to it but we sit quite securely."* (Senior Manager in interview)

However, organisational politics still require navigation, such as the ability to identify 'entrenched positions' and ensuring that a helicopter view of CYP's best interests are considered.

> *"So it tends to be if you've got a social worker and an advocate, or say a school, and you end up with those really entrenched positions where people are so … it's the human nature of our job where people are adamant that they're right … and you lose that kind of helicopter view to be able to kind of just step back and go, 'right these are the facts what are we going to do about that?'"* (Senior Manager in interview)

Overall, while being a part of the Trust presents connectivity advantages and access to senior management within the LA, ensuring impartial assessment and progression of complaints protects the credibility and perceived independence of advocates.

Managing caseloads and team supports

Key to effective advocacy service delivery is the ability to balance rising advocacy demands with limited resourcing. Advocates particularly note that key to this is supportive management and that limited turnover aids stability.

> *"We do have very low staff turnover and very high application numbers when we do put … I think the last couple of posts we put out I think we had 140 for each application, for each vacancy, so yeah lots of people wanting to do it." (Senior Manager in interview)*

In addition, careful allocation aligned with capacity protects service quality and staff wellbeing. It was recognised that while the availability of advocacy was continuing to expand and indeed this is perceived as positive to promoting participation within the Trust, the service still needed to align with available resources and that this naturally limited the extent to which expansion is possible.

> *"So realistically speaking, although the advocacy is expanding, it's limited to certain groups … where it comes to children in need if it doesn't stay specific to complaints and opens up to all various issues, that's a bigger, wider group. So, at the moment it's something we've been pondering on, but don't think we can move further unless we've got the resources to cope with it." (Senior Manager in interview)*

Currently, it is generally felt by most advocates that the caseloads remain manageable without waitlists, a feat which is aided by responsive backups such as managers carrying cases when high volumes arise.

> *"Over the years there's never been an issue where we've had to have a waiting list ... I mean initially we try to allocate within three working days of receipt of a referral. We've always said that we're not an emergency service, so we do expect people to give us notice when a referral is coming through for a meeting or anything like that." (Senior Manager in interview)*

However, one young person raised a concern over the capacity of advocates, noting the high case numbers and the difficulty in finding advocates who are right for the job.

> *"So, the advocates have a high number of cases right now because there's not enough of them. The issue is it is very difficult to find a good advocate. Anyone can do the advocacy course, but to actually be a good advocate, it's very difficult." (Young Person in interview)*

It was acknowledged by senior managers that the demands of advocacy are increasing as provisions are being expanded to more young people under the remit of the Trust.

> *"So, demand for advocacy, it seems to be increasing and the kind of advocacy that we are doing, a lot of it is changing as well." (Senior Manager in interview)*

Advocates underscore the extensive peer support which enables a higher degree of problem-solving and reassurance within the team, particularly where high caseloads are at play. This is particularly noted by one young person who was training to be an advocate.

> *"I think the team structure is really supportive of each other because I'm quite new to advocacy. So, whenever I've got an issue, I can message any of the other advocates and they will find time in their very busy diaries to have a meeting with me or to see me at the lighthouse and actually go through it with me …" (Young Person in interview)*

It is generally felt that this safety net engenders confidence among the advocates. In addition, senior managers emphasise a compassionate ethos, encouraging openness surrounding stressors and offering accommodations to support staff.

> *"But I would much rather someone come to me and go, 'I'm really stressed today'. Or, 'I've got this kicking off at home today' … And just being able to say to them, 'look take the rest of the day go and do whatever you need to do … and we'll catch up in the morning ...' I know that person will work twice as hard because they've been listened to and cared about, and I know that they do work really hard." (Senior Manager in interview).*

4.2 Initial programme theory

The IPT that was developed from the exploratory study identifies core components and mechanisms enabling the advocacy service's participatory approach for CYP. As Figure 4 below illustrates, core components comprise organisational culture, allocation of resources via an in-house model, provision of information, and the role of relationship building. Crucial mediating mechanisms theorised between service activities and meaningful participation are establishing a trusting relationship, meaningful power sharing, promoting ownership and establishing a sense of accountability. This section details the IPT developed through the realist approach taken to data synthesis.

Figure 4. IPT visual framework

Mechanism 2
POWER SHARING

Mechanism 1
TRUST

Mechanism 3
OWNERSHIP

Mechanism 4
ACCOUNTABILITY

Organisational Culture
- Youth centred, participatory
- Values transparency
- Power-sharing with YP

Resource Allocation
- In-house model
- Enables flexible distribution
- Wider RAPS service

Participation in Decision-Making Processes

Relationship Building
- Intentional
- Consistent time investment
- Safe relational spaces

Information Provisions
- Tailored communication
- Clear responsibility
- Availability & Access

4.2.1 Core components of the advocacy service

Impact of organisational culture

The advocacy service's participatory culture emerged as a key contextual condition which supports young people to meaningfully engage in decision-making. Specifically, practices promoting transparency, power sharing, and youth ownership create an empowering environment where young people feel able to express their perspectives and contribute. A core element of the culture is open and active information sharing with CYP about decisions impacting them. When young people feel respected and as much a part of decision-making as professionals, they gain trust and confidence to voice opinions knowing that their input is considered seriously. Additionally, practices and norms deliberately aimed at shifting traditional power hierarchies support meaningful participation. Power-sharing practices such as chairing meetings and leading campaigns provide contextual proof that the young person steers decision-making. The findings reveal how these participatory cultural conditions initiate mechanisms like trust and self-efficacy which facilitate meaningful engagement. By embedding transparency, power sharing, and youth ownership into practice, the service creates contexts for CYP to not just express opinions but actively participate and co-determine decisions.

Figure 5: Organisational culture logic diagram
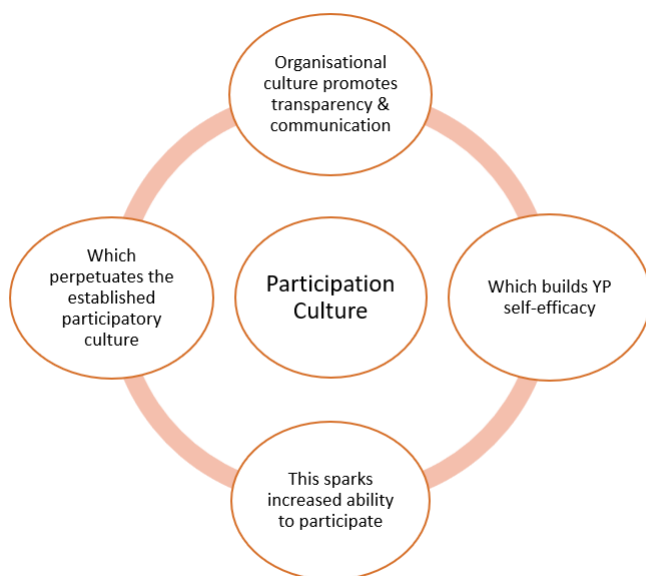
Alternative allocation of resources via an in-house approach

The service's in-house model within the Trust presents a key contextual condition underpinning advocacy provision and participatory approaches. Though direct oversight enables flexible resource distribution which enables the service to align with evolving needs, the structure raises questions about independence that could undermine engagement. Interviews with senior managers revealed that the in-house delivery model affords more responsive allocation of funds compared to contracting external advocacy providers. Additionally, in-house delivery enables the service to redirect advocates and participation efforts towards emerging themes and trends. However, interviews also highlighted a need to clearly communicate the nature of the service's relationship with the Trust, to support young people to feel confident in the independence of the service through recognition of their concerns, discussions around the operation of the service, and utilising their feedback to better improve the service. The resourcing model is therefore an ambiguous condition that seems to enable responsiveness to the needs of young people but could affect the perception of the independence of the service without effective communication and demonstration by advocates.

Provision of information to young people

The advocacy service's provision of information about availability and access is a vital ingredient for enabling participation. Consistent, tailored communication and clear delineated responsibility for information sharing foster awareness and accessibility that facilitates service uptake. Our findings suggest a level of variability in young people's initial knowledge of advocacy support prior to referral. While some learned through formal channels such as through social workers or foster carers, others depended on informal peer networks or discoveries through other participation events. This potential informational deficiency is

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highlighted in interviews which described a lack of awareness around the role and boundaries of the advocate. Effective communication is vital not just for awareness but also for tailored accessibility of information to enable participation. Information should be age-appropriate, visual, and multi-channelled. A realist lens identifies quality information channels, accessible materials, and transparency of responsibility as key ingredients for enabling participation. Patchy and inconsistent communication contexts hinder awareness and accessibility mechanisms that facilitate advocacy uptake.

Relationship building

Cultivating trusting relationships between advocates and young people constitutes another vital contextual ingredient for enabling participation. Specifically, intentional time allocation, two-way communication, and safe relational spaces help to facilitate connections instrumental to building trust. One challenge facing advocates is establishing rapport with young people who carry distrust of social work professionals due to adverse prior experiences. Open communication channels provide conduits for relationship building. Advocates emphasised flexibility and provision of multiple forums for open expression while responding transparently to concerns. Wider service provisions such as participation groups also provide safe relational spaces beyond formal advocacy and enable connection time to build trust. A realist lens illustrates how the broader service approach shapes relationship mechanisms linked to participation outcomes. While the independent advocacy provisions represent a standalone intervention, the findings suggest that advocacy efficacy also equally depends on the contextual resourcing of trust-building opportunities through time and communication channels that exist as part of the wider participation service.

4.2.2 Key mechanisms underpinning advocacy provision

Mechanism 1: Establishing a trusting relationship

The first key mechanism emerging from a realist analysis of the findings is the importance of trust in explaining how transparent, participatory conditions are translated into CYP's meaningful engagement in decision-making. Trust forms the basis for open communication, cooperation, and willingness for young people to actively participate. When established, trust makes young people feel valued and empowered in their interactions with the service.

A key facilitator promoting trust is transparency around decision pathways. Advocates build trust by clearly explaining organisational dynamics and being honest and open about working relationships with other social work professionals. Explaining and unpacking complex dynamics builds trust in young people that staff will reveal organisational truths and maintain honesty rather than avoid accountability. Inconsistent communication between the advocacy service and young people is a key barrier, causing uncertainty about the service's intentions or ability to provide appropriate support. Interviews and focus groups reveal that trust operates as a key generative ingredient, not a by-product. Consistent openness, honesty, and embodying organisational transparency around young people-led approaches builds cumulative belief and trust in the service.

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Statement 1: If the service maintains consistency in its actions, communications, and decisions, young people are more likely to trust the service because predictability creates a sense of reliability.

Statement 2: If the service actively engages in initiatives to involve and engage with young people beyond specific advocacy issues, then this signifies a long-term commitment to their development and wellbeing which supports young people to feel they can place trust in the service.

Statement 3: If young people perceive that their voices and opinions are genuinely valued and considered in decision-making processes, then trust in the advocacy service grows because they can see evidence of their input having an impact.

Mechanism 2: Meaningful power sharing

The second key mechanism is the service's facilitation of power sharing between young people and professionals, explaining how participatory cultural conditions facilitate meaningful participation. By positioning CYP in tangible decision-making roles, the service builds self-efficacy and confidence in influencing priorities and outcomes in their lives.

A key barrier to power sharing is the often-internalised learned passivity in younger children which stems from a culture of exclusion from agenda setting in other aspects of their lives. This highlights the importance of purposeful rather than just rhetorical power sharing between young people and adults to shift perceptions of capability. Clear participation policies and an embedded inclusive culture facilitate power-sharing by providing structured frameworks for sustained participation. However, if services involve young people for symbolic or 'tick-box' reasons, then power sharing remains superficial and ineffective.

Initiatives such as young people chairing their CIC meetings, leading agendas, and bringing common advocacy concerns to the wider participation groups provide concrete proof that their participation manifests in organisational behaviours. A realist lens demonstrates that consistently reinforcing a culture of power sharing is essential for promoting agency and participation. While transparency, resources and open communication are necessary components, they are on their own insufficient. Sincere transfers of power activate self-efficacy and participation, providing the key ingredient for genuine rather than symbolic participation.

Statement 4: If the service ensures that young people have equal representation and participation rights in meetings, discussions, and forums related to child and youth advocacy, then this reinforces power sharing by demonstrably valuing their input as equal to that of professionals.

Statement 5: If young people are encouraged to take leadership roles within RAPS, such as chairing reviews, steering decision-making efforts and leading campaigns, then power sharing is better facilitated and embedded within the service because they have tangible influence and impact on decision-making.

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Mechanism 3: Promoting ownership

Cultivating a sense of ownership among CYP over advocacy processes and decisions impacting their lives is a psychological mechanism which if activated, can spark self-driven participation. A strong sense of ownership makes young people more likely to engage, take initiative, and remain committed to decision-making processes. Engaging young people in planning and recognising impacts builds a base to facilitate further involvement.

Key enablers for developing a sense of ownership include appropriate availability of resources and support to implement young people's ideas and promoting accessibility to ensure young people are not excluded based on logistic or physical limitations. This highlights the importance of appropriate communication methods and the setting in which advocates engage with young people. Practical barriers that limit participation may constrain their sense of ownership by effectively excluding them from participation or engagement opportunities. Interviews suggest that young people's participation often initially stems from adult-driven efforts, while sustained service efforts develop self-efficacy, confidence, and activism leading to sustained ownership over decisions impacting young people. A realist perspective highlights an ownership mechanism that is not always at the forefront in traditional evaluation frameworks, tracing the generative process of CYP moving from the position of passive bystanders to active stakeholders.

Statement 6: If the service demonstrably values and respects the ideas and contributions of young people, then they are more likely to develop a sense of ownership over the decisions and actions taken because they feel that their input has been genuinely valued and taken on board.

Statement 7: If the service actively creates opportunities for young people to see the direct impact of their actions and involvement then they are able to develop a sense of ownership over the outcomes because they understand that their efforts can and do make a difference.

Mechanism 4: Establishing a sense of accountability

The final key mechanism is a sense of accountability between young people and advocacy staff, ensuring that professionals are held responsible for agreed actions and decisions. A culture of accountability helps to maintain perceived transparency and fairness within the service. More specifically, consistent and embedded communication channels build integrity between words and actions of advocates and staff.

Our findings show that transparency, clear communication processes, and reliable feedback loops are essential to building accountability, enabled by accessible complaints processes and advocates' willingness to raise challenges within structural processes. Complex bureaucratic processes, in contrast, act as procedural barriers to ensuring professional accountability. In addition, a fear of retaliation or negative consequences from raising complaints, particularly in an in-house model, may also hinder accountability. Over time, reliable accountability builds trust that the voices of CYP genuinely matter. As transparency and follow-through become embedded practice, scepticism of involvement converts into willing participation. Young people are more likely to step into leadership roles when they feel assured that staff integrity and responsibility to maintaining a partnership are embedded

practice. A realist lens therefore helps to explain how context turns participation from rhetoric into a permanent norm.

Statement 8: If there is a clear mechanism for young people to raise concerns or complaints about the service's practices or other decision-making processes within the Trust, then it promotes a sense of accountability because it allows for the identification and resolution of issues.

Statement 9: If the service maintains transparency in its decision-making processes and communicates openly about its actions, then it strengthens a sense of accountability because it allows young people to understand the rationale behind decisions.

Statement 10: If professionals within the advocacy service and in the broader Trust listen to and act on the feedback and recommendations shared by young people, then this builds a sense of accountability because it demonstrates responsiveness to their concerns.

5. GOOD PRACTICE FRAMEWORK

5.1 Purpose and scope of the framework

As a final strand of the research study, four workshops were held to develop a good practice framework for advocates that reflects the needs and wishes of young people accessing these services. In total, the workshops engaged 25 care-experienced individuals between the ages of 9 and 24. The workshops aimed to consolidate the theory built in the previous stages of the project (from interviews and focus groups) to translate the theories into priorities and recommendations for advocacy practice. The resulting good practice framework is envisioned as a visual information resource that advocates can utilise to ensure their services align with what matters most to the young people they support. The framework represents an important initial step in foregrounding the needs and perspectives of care-experienced young people accessing advocacy services. Going forward, it can be expanded through further collaborative efforts and iteration.

5.1.1 Findings from the workshops

The workshops yielded valuable insights into the perspectives, needs, and expectations regarding advocacy services and perspectives on how the framework should be conveyed. The majority of workshop participants felt that the framework should be expressed in first person, from the perspective of young people themselves. In addition, several key themes emerged from the discussions around elements of the proposed framework.

Accessibility and awareness of the advocacy services

A key theme that emerged was the need to ensure advocacy services are accessible and that CYP are aware that such services exist. Specific ideas included:

- Using creative methods to promote awareness of advocacy among CYP, such as creating comics, leveraging social media platforms, and having professionals like social workers directly communicate the availability of advocacy.
- Providing multiple avenues for accessing information about advocacy services to cater to diverse needs and preferences. This includes both online and offline channels and formats accessible to those with disabilities.

Choice and autonomy

Another important theme was enabling CYP to exercise choice and autonomy in their interactions with the advocacy service. Specific ideas included:

- The importance of allowing young people to choose the location and settings of meetings with advocates based on where they feel most comfortable. This provides them with greater control and minimises feelings of being singled out.
- Young people have different preferences in relation to how they interact with advocates, therefore, being flexible and providing options as to how meetings take

place – e.g. in person, over the phone/video or, through the use of a messaging platform such as text messaging, is key to promoting autonomy in these interactions.

- Respecting the choices made by young people about their desired level of involvement in meetings about them or decision-making processes affecting them. Advocates should facilitate participation based on individual preferences.

Relationship building and trust

The importance of advocacy services prioritising relationship building and trust with CYP was also highlighted within discussion in the workshops. Key points included:

- Advocates taking time early on to understand the young person's background, culture, communication style, and preferences. This aids in building rapport.
- Developing relationships through consistent and long-term relationships with advocates. Young people value having the same advocate support them through multiple issues rather than just short-term, singular issue interactions. However, this clashes with the issue-based nature of advocacy and should be balanced.
- Advocates demonstrating active listening, empathy, and person-centred approaches in all interactions and treating each young person as an individual.

Communication and understanding

Discussions among young people also recognised the need for effective communication, which is seen as being necessary to ensure young people feel heard and understood within advocacy services. Key points included:

- Advocates using plain, jargon-free language tailored to each young person's age, reading level, and abilities.
- Advocates acting as interpreters and facilitators, helping young people to express their thoughts and opinions effectively.
- Providing opportunities after meetings to debrief and reflect on what was discussed, and giving young people the space to voice additional thoughts or concerns.

Advocacy support and empowerment

The discussions also emphasised the importance of advocacy in supporting greater participation and inclusion of CYP in decisions affecting their lives. Key discussion points included:

- Advocates ensuring young people understand their rights and supporting them to participate in meetings, reviews, conferences, or other decision-making forums. Some young people felt that this was sometimes the role of the IRO as opposed to the advocate.
- Advocates helping young people to navigate key processes, following through on ideas, and holding professionals accountable.
- It was also felt that advocates play a key role in instilling confidence and validation in young people.

Advocate characteristics and qualities

Finally, young people participating in the workshops highlighted several important characteristics and qualities that they value in their advocates. These include:

1) Being reliable, patient, empathetic, and understanding – all seen as key characteristics for building rapport.
2) Maintaining confidentiality conscientiously and adhering to professional boundaries.
3) Flexibility to adapt their approach to suit individual young people's preferences and abilities, avoiding a one-size-fits-all attitude. Important to this was balancing friendliness with professionalism and avoiding patronising behaviour.
4) Young people particularly noted that preferred advocate characteristics would likely vary depending on the young person, emphasising the importance of a flexible approach.

5.1.2 Presentation of the Framework

The priorities, principles, and recommendations gathered during the workshops and other data collection methods were synthesised and organised into five key elements reflecting important areas of good practice in advocacy services. These elements included:

- Element 1: Advocacy That Works for Me (a person-centred service)
- Element 2: My Voice My Choice (facilitating decision-making)
- Element 3: Amplifying My Voice and Being Heard (effective communication)
- Element 4: Information Tailored for Me (accessible resources)
- Element 5: Someone Who Has My Back (relationship-building).

To transform the written framework into an engaging and practical visual resource, a graphic designer was commissioned. An iterative process aligned the graphical presentation with the voices and perspectives of participating young people. The result is a series of visual components to represent each practice element, alongside a list of associated statements and recommendations written from the point of view of young service users (see Appendix). In addition, a standalone poster was created to spotlight the visual components (see Figure 6). This is intended as both a creative visual to sit alongside the other elements of the framework as well as to be a practical tool for display to promote the principles of quality advocacy rooted in the needs of CYP.

Figure 6: Advocacy good practice framework poster

6. DISCUSSION

6.1 Discussion of findings

The findings from this study align well with existing research on the importance of effective advocacy support for children and young people in care. This research has the added benefit of providing an in-depth exploration of an in-house advocacy programme compared to much of the existing literature which focuses on independent or contracted services (Children's Commissioner, 2019).

Other research has found that independent advocacy that is tailored to individual needs, preferences, and circumstances is a necessity for every young person or child in care (Children's Commissioner, 2019; Kennan et al., 2018). Effective advocacy supports have been found to contribute to positive outcomes such as empowering young people to express views, preferences, and needs and to participate in decision-making processes (Thomas et al., 2017). This can facilitate positive relationships between young people and professionals, enhances communication, collaborative and partnership working, and improves the quality and effectiveness of decision-making processes (Thomas et al., 2017). Our findings similarly highlight that individualised and tailored advocacy aligned to young people's needs supports young people to feel that they can meaningfully participate in decision-making.

Our IPT underscores the role of effective communication, power sharing, collaboration, and meaningfully enabling young people's voices to steer decisions. Combining the findings from our study and what is reported in other literature, levels of participation in decision-making seemed to vary based on factors such as age and previous experiences of choice and autonomy in their lives. Advocates felt that older CYP were typically more vocal in expressing preferences, while younger CYP may be more reliant on guidance to participate. This is logical based on children's development. However, other research indicates that children might be excluded from decision-making due to their age and assumptions about their abilities (Toros, 2021). Awareness that increasing autonomy builds confidence to participate in decision-making was important among adults and professionals delivering the service.

Although this study did not specifically evaluate outcomes, participants felt that this youth-led advocacy approach enabled young people to feel safe with and trust their advocates, linking to the importance of relationship building. This transparent approach could help to foster an equal and mutually respectful approach to the advocacy partnership. Crucially, it aims to contribute to the creating of a safe space where young people feel comfortable expressing themselves and communicating with their advocate. We also found that outcomes of effective advocacy were perceived to encompass both tangible results and intangible emotional aspects. Listening, exploring alternatives, and supporting self-expression mattered to young people, even if their preferred outcomes were unlikely to be agreed.

A barrier identified in young people accessing appropriate support was a lack of knowledge about the type of support that advocacy can provide and the boundaries of the advocates'

role. Many of the young people and advocates in this study highlighted that there was often uncertainty about what an advocate could support with; advocates themselves emphasised the importance of clearly communicating the nature of their role and addressing expectations. These findings align with existing literature demonstrating that often care-experienced young people do not know about advocacy, or how to access an advocate (Dickie, 2022; Wood & Selwyn, 2013; Pona et al., 2012).

Cultivating a clear, shared understanding of an advocates' capacities and limitations is vital for managing expectations and facilitating constructive relationships between young people, advocates, and other professionals. Our study highlighted that reliance solely on referrals from other professionals can risk inequities without additional communication. In particular, tailored promotional materials and awareness building around advocacy helps bridge the information gap, further enabling CYP to make informed choices about accessing services.

Another finding from this study is the vital role that projecting independence from the broader children's service ecosystem plays in cultivating credibility and buy-in among young people. The service in this study maintains distinct structures and supervision channels, while clearly communicating to young people and other professionals that advocates have a mandate to challenge the local authority where appropriate. As noted in past work (Boylan & Braye 2006; Chase et al., 2006), visibly preserving this separation from other services and authority figures inspires greater confidence in advocates' impartiality and willingness to act in young people's interests. The 'true' independence of advocacy services has been challenged in different studies as advocates may be wary of 'challenging and questioning local authorities when they are dependent on those same authorities for their funding' (Oliver et al., 2006; Boylan & Dalrymple, 2009). Maintaining some form of independence involves the ability of the service to navigate complex dynamics within and across the local authority. This might be via overarching policy frameworks, reporting lines, accountability procedures for advocacy staff and variability in individual advocates' assertiveness and willingness to challenge.

Previous research has also highlighted that advocates' individual capabilities and interpersonal skill sets can pose barriers to effective advocacy if it is not flexible and tailored to young peoples' needs (Jelicic et al., 2013). Qualities of a 'good advocate' in this research were perceived to include being relatable, approachable, avoiding overt professionalism (not appearing or acting the same as a social worker), admitting uncertainty, non-judgemental listening, honesty, transparency, empathy, and valuing young people's perspectives. Additionally, advocates and senior managers demonstrated sensitivity to young people's backgrounds and trauma impacts when determining appropriate levels of participation and facilitating youth-led approaches. This may be facilitated by training care-experienced young people as advocates as they leave the service, which is reflective of findings elsewhere (Thomas et al., 2017).

The advocacy service's integration within the broader RAPS provisions seems to enable and enhance this flexibility and responsiveness, with trends and themes from advocacy shaping wider youth-led groups and campaigns. This appears to create a cyclical relationship between individual advocacy, collective participation and influencing corporate parenting decisions. While advocates' personal attributes only constitute one layer that shapes

advocacy accessibility and quality, embedding advocates within a larger supportive ecosystem as in the study local authority appears to be particularly impactful in amplifying the voice and leadership of young people.

6.2 Revisiting the initial programme theory

As a realist-informed study, the IPT was developed early on following initial stakeholder conversations and interviews to articulate potential contexts, mechanisms, and outcomes underpinning the advocacy service intervention. This IPT is presented and explored in depth in the findings section of this report. However, it is important to emphasise the tentative nature of this initial theory.

The complex service environment surrounding advocacy provisions means that further research is essential to refine and validate the contexts, mechanisms, and outcomes outlined in the IPT. As this study focused specifically on an in-house advocacy service within one local authority, the current transferability of the theory of other providers in different authorities should also be treated with caution. Nonetheless, the IPT represents an important starting point for generative thinking from a realist perspective. The CMO configurations mapped allow us to begin unravelling the complexity of whether, how, and why advocacy works for young people in care. Ongoing research is necessary to test and refine this theory.

6.3 Policy and practice recommendations

Several priority areas for policy and practice recommendations were identified from this preliminary analysis of an in-house advocacy programme:

- **Awareness building**: Services should create targeted outreach and communication strategies to raise awareness and understanding of advocacy among CYP. This could involve youth friendly materials, social media campaigns, collaborations with schools and wider organisations.
- **Flexibility in service delivery:** To promote accessibility, services should embrace flexibility and youth-led choices regarding when and where advocacy interactions occur to accommodate diverse needs and preferences across the target population.
- **Embedding youth participation**: Formally embedding participation of young people in governance and oversight processes helps sustain youth perspectives and voices in decision-making and accountability procedures impacting the advocacy service.
- **Relationship building:** Services should facilitate structured opportunities for advocates to build rapport and connections with CYP beyond formal advocacy issues through community events and networks. Services should also consider how long-term relationships can be maintained within an issue-based advocacy approach to ensure continuity and a feeling of security for young people accessing support.
- **Workforce development:** Ongoing professional development training focused on key skills for youth participation, including effective engagement and communication approaches, should be implemented for all advocates and wider social work practitioners interacting with CYP.

- **Practice alignment:** Advocates and advocacy organisations should utilise the developed good practice framework to align service ethos, processes, and priorities with evolving needs of CYP.
- **Commitment to best practices:** Application of identified best practices around accessibility, responsivity, creativity, and relationship-building should underpin ongoing delivery across advocacy services to embed participation in organisational culture.

These areas are reflected in the good practice framework which highlights ways in which services can build on their existing advocacy offers to best meet the needs of their young people.

6.4 Areas for further research

The findings from this initial realist-informed evaluation highlight multiple potential areas for additional research to evolve understanding of effective advocacy provision for CYP:

- **Applicability of the IPT across diverse model contexts:** Further realist-informed research could seek to validate and refine the IPT components and underlying mechanisms identified in this first phase of inquiry. In particular, testing the IPT through additional in-depth case studies across diverse service models would help to refine contextual enablers and barriers in relation to programme applicability and generalisability.
- **Youth-led participatory research:** Participatory research led by CYP themselves constitutes a valuable next phase of research. Training young people in realist approaches enables the co-production of new evidence and ensures findings emphasise the priorities, perspectives, and voices of young people themselves.
- **Evaluation of opt-out referral processes:** A formal evaluation could explore the uptake, efficiency, and outcomes associated with the opt-out approach to advocacy. This would help to elucidate the strengths and limitations for this approach and detail evidence-based principles for effective implementation and operation of this approach. In addition, a comparative exploration of automatic referral would help to inform future service design and policy.

6.5 Strengths and limitations of the research

This project employed an exploratory qualitative realist-informed approach to understanding advocacy provisions, integrating discussions, interviews, focus groups, and collaborative workshops. This inclusive strategy engaged a range of diverse stakeholders and facilitated triangulation while prioritising the perspectives of young people. This methodology therefore provides a nuanced and thorough understanding of the advocacy service in context. The application of realist principles in constructing an IPT framework laid a solid foundation for understanding key mechanisms underpinning the advocacy service in question. It enables further research opportunities to unravel the mechanisms and contextual influences that underpin effective advocacy in more diverse contexts. The IPT framework therefore provides a structured basis for ongoing investigation and analysis. Finally, the collaborative

development of practical resources, such as the good practice framework, supports the translation of research findings into practice. This resource offers a bridge between theoretical insights and practical applications.

There are also some limitations to the research. The study focused on a single LA area which impacts the extent to which the findings can be generalised to the broader landscape of advocacy services. In addition, the focus of participants from a single in-house advocacy service limits the comparability of results. Addressing this limitation through future research would enhance the project's general applicability to the wider advocacy context in the UK.

The qualitative approach, while offering rich and in-depth data collection, may constrain the generalisability of findings beyond the specific context studied. Interviews and focus groups can limit participation of young people with additional learning needs, those with different dominant languages or other reasons for finding these more traditional methods difficult to engage with. However, this was facilitated by flexibility in how people were included (i.e. interview or focus group, writing/drawing or speaking in groups, providing an advocate or interpreter where needed).

The generalisability was further limited by the small sample. While we sought to include representation of young people with a range of experiences of care and identity characteristics, this was also limited by who wanted to take part. This, alongside the inclusion only of young people who are involved in the service, means that the findings will not be representative of all the experiences of young people in this local authority – and in particular not those who have had negative, or no experience of advocacy. This is similar with the practitioners included. Interviewing primarily those already invested in this service who may have a reason for biased reporting (e.g. advocates and service managers) and absence of independent observation of service activities means there is limited opportunity for counter views. However, the focus was on exploring 'how' advocacy could work well, rather than providing an unbiased evaluation of outcomes and experiences.

Despite these limitations, this initial exploration provides a valuable foundation and for additional research into advocacy services in the UK. Acknowledging the study's preliminary nature, it acts as a springboard for further investigation to strengthen the evidence base informing planning, practice, and policy development surrounding advocacy for CYP in care.

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APPENDIX

The components of the advocacy framework

ADVOCACY THAT WORKS FOR ME

Person-centred advocacy puts young people first. It means listening to them and working together to meet their individual needs and preferences. **Advocates help young people to share what works for them.** They make sure the environment is easy to access and flexible. They also encourage open communication while providing advocacy services.

KEY MESSAGES

- The advocate asks me about my needs and preferences, such as how I want to communicate and when I want to talk. They respect my choices.
- The service makes sure I can get advocacy help no matter what my situation is.
- The service creates a friendly, safe, and inclusive environment.
- Advocacy matches my needs and priorities. The advocates listen to what I want.
- Meetings happen where I feel comfortable – at home, school, by video chat or anywhere I like.
- I can stay in touch between meetings by phone, text, WhatsApp, or email.
- The advocate follows up with me if I want them to.
- My information is kept private unless there is a good reason to share it, which they will explain to me.

MY VOICE MY CHOICE

Advocacy should help young people make their own decisions. Advocates should use clear language and be open-minded when explaining options. Advocates work together with young people, letting them take the lead as much as possible. The goal is for young people to share their priorities, make informed choices for themselves and decide their next steps.

KEY MESSAGES

- The advocate explains all options clearly and simply so I understand and make decisions myself.

- The advocate encourages me to share my opinions, priorities, and concerns without judging me.

- My opinions, needs and wants help guide the choices and next steps.

- If a decision is different from what I want, the advocate checks that I understand why and what it means for me.

- The advocate asks me what role I want in meetings and respects my choice.

- If I want to lead meetings, the advocate helps me to prepare.

- The advocate provides options and advice, but I decide the next steps.

- The advocate gives me the knowledge and resources to carry out my decisions on my own.

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HELPING ME BE HEARD

Advocates play a key role in helping young people speak up, so they feel listened to and understood. They use communication strategies that work best for each person. Advocates help turn thoughts and feelings into clear messages. They make sure conversations focus on the young person's priorities when making decisions. The goal is to give young people the support and skills they need to speak up for themselves when possible.

KEY MESSAGES

- The advocate helps me to put my thoughts and feelings into words.
- The advocate asks questions to draw out what I want to say if I'm struggling or unsure where to start.
- If needed, the advocate can rephrase what I say in a way that professionals will understand better.
- After meetings we discuss what happened and the advocate checks if I felt listened to in meetings or decisions.
- The advocate redirects conversations if others talk over me or ignore my needs.
- The advocate supports me to speak for myself when I want to.
- The advocate practices important conversations with me.
- In meetings, the advocate emphasises my key messages and concerns I want to prioritise if that's what I want.

INFORMATION TAILORED FOR ME

Resources should be easy for young people to understand and access. **This means presenting information clearly using formats that are interesting and relatable for young people.** Advocates still explain concepts verbally - resources can't do everything! **Well-designed resources empower young people to speak for themselves in the future.**

KEY MESSAGES

- Resources should be relevant to my age and interests.

- Resources should present information clearly and avoid confusing language.

- The advocate clearly explains anything complicated that I need to know.

- Resources should highlight how advocacy can help me.

- Online and printed information uses creative designs, graphics, and colours to capture my interest and help me to remember key points.

- Information is straight to the point and doesn't overwhelm me with too many details.

- Written material breaks information down into easy sections and bullet points instead of long text.

- Information is available in different formats – e.g., printed guides, animated videos, graphics, comics, websites, chat forums – so I can engage with information in the way that works best for me.

SOMEONE WHO HAS MY BACK

Building trusting relationships with young people makes advocacy work. **Taking time to understand a young person and their life without judging them builds that relationship.** Following through on agreed actions and being compassionate when things go wrong shows young people they can depend on the advocate. The goal is to create a partnership where young people feel that someone has their back.

KEY MESSAGES

- The advocate clearly explains their role and how it's different from other professionals in a way that I understand. They may dress differently and show their personality.

- The advocate clearly explains what they can and can't do to support me so I know how they can help.

- The advocate takes time to get to know me as a person before starting formal advocacy.

- I learn more about the advocate's background and interests, so they feel more relatable to me.

- The advocate is reliable and consistently follows through on agreed actions and promises.

- If the advocate makes a mistake or doesn't have an answer, they'll honestly admit it and apologise if they let me down.

- If I get frustrated, the advocate won't take it personally.

- The advocate validates my feelings and experiences without judging me before presenting options.

CONTACT