

Building stronger foundations

Insights from Henry Smith Foundation's Advocacy Programme on strengthening the independent advocacy sector supporting people with learning disabilities and autistic people

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How this work started



There are 1.5 million people in the UK with a learning disability, and more than 700,000 are autistic.



Between 2022 and 2026 Henry Smith gave money to 15 organisations who offer independent and non-statutory advocacy for people with learning disabilities and autistic people across the UK.



Social Finance looked at the difference they made and what we can learn from the work they did.



Social Finance also worked with people with learning disabilities and autistic people at Speakup.

How this work started



The aim of this work was to show the value and impact of advocacy, and to look at how independent advocacy organisation can be made stronger and keep going.



Our 2025 report “Independent advocacy for independent lives” showed that the advocacy organisations worked with more than 1667 people:



1. Advocacy was very good for people, it helped people to speak up, know their rights and local services.



2. Just over half of the people who had support from advocacy got to their goals.

How this work started



3. Most people who had advocacy support had done a lot towards their goals.



For every £1 spent on advocacy, £12 was saved for things like the NHS and Councils. This means that if we give £1 to an advocacy organisation, £12 could be saved.



This report builds on our 2025 report and it is a good idea to read it together and looks at how advocacy can keep going, where it needs more support and if it might help to have a big organisation to lead advocacy all over England.



Our ideas are important for people who help advocacy happen. This means advocacy organisations, supporters, and funders.

What we found



1. Advocacy organisations need more support



This work found that advocacy organisations need more support in three important areas:



1. Finding and getting funding



2. Training and helping staff learn new skills

What we found



3. Finding ways to work with and learn from other advocacy organisations



Advocacy organisations should have more coaching and training for their leaders.



They should also have people who focus on looking for more money and partnerships for the organisation



Advocacy organisations often compete with each other, which makes it harder for them to work together.

What we found



2. A 'sector body' could help advocacy groups have a big voice



There is no single organisation in England with the right skills, trust and links that can speak for and support all other advocacy organisation.



Our last report said there should be a big voice for advocacy (called a Sector Body). We asked the advocacy organisations if they thought this would help?



Some people thought a sector body would help and some didn't think it would because this has happened in the past, but it didn't last long.

What we found



After talking about it, we found that a sector body was good if it follows 5 important ideas:



1. Led by an independent organisation which doesn't delivery advocacy themselves



2. Has the money to do the job in the right way and for a long time

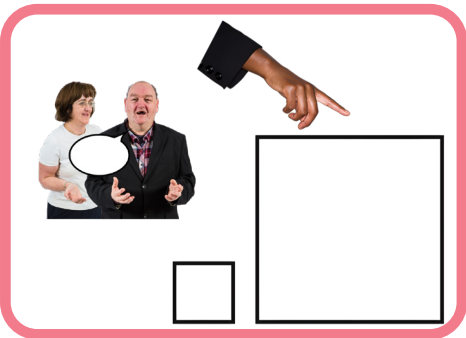


3. There is a big plan for the future which has been created with or by people with lived experience

What we found



4. Is working on independent and non-statutory advocacy (the kinds of advocacy not provided by law like Mental Health and Mental Capacity Advocacy)



5. Is set up so that all advocacy organisations have the same voice, even if they are small organisations



People thought a sector body could help by:



- Telling the government, people who pay for advocacy and the public about advocacy organisations, what they do and why it is important

What we found



- Asking government to create laws which support advocacy to happen across all areas of England



- Helping advocacy organisations work together, share ideas, training and tools in a way which works for everyone



People agreed that to help pay for the sector body, it could have members. The bigger advocacy organisations could pay more to be part of it and smallest ones could join for free.



The Scottish Independent Advocacy Alliance (SIAA) does this for advocacy organisations in Scotland.

What we found



We know that the NDTi (National Development Team for Inclusion) is looking to make an independent organisation for advocacy.



We think any future sector body would also need to look at:



- Getting more money which lasts longer



- Supporting different types of non-statutory advocacy (such as self advocacy, one-to-one advocacy, group advocacy etc)

What we found



- Being clear about how it is working with experts by experience



- Winning trust and interest in its work



- Connect with groups and organisations already out there

What we found



3. The Government should create laws to make sure advocacy happens in every area in, like in the laws in Scotland and Wales.



The sector body could campaign for this change, in the same way the organisation in Scotland does.



We think the national roll-out of independent advocacy services across England could cost about £45.7 million over five years. This would help fund at least one advocacy service in every area.



This could save non-statutory advocacy as well as support people with learning disabilities and autistic people to live more independent and fulfilling lives.

3 Ideas which could help with money



Advocacy Groups have lots of money worries that threaten to close advocacy services. This has been made worse because councils are struggling with money and have cut services.



We will keep asking for more money from the Government. But we also have 3 ideas which could help:



Idea 1: Find new and different ways to get money



Advocacy organisations could think about paid partnerships with schools, the NHS (National Health Service), and universities. These partnerships would give advice and mean being part of training and research.

3 Ideas which could help with money



This could help them quickly and there are some good examples where other organisations have done this in partnership with people; using co-production and employing experts by experience. There are some examples of this in our main report.



Idea 2: Look at partnerships in local areas



There is a lot of work being done to give more money to local areas.



Advocacy organisations could get some of this money if they are in these areas.

3 Ideas which could help with money



Some of these include:

- NHS Neighbourhood Health



- Lottery's Community Wealth Fund



- Community Enterprise Growth Plan



- Partnerships with Community Foundations and local businesses

There is information about these in our big report.

3 Ideas which could help with money



Idea 3: Social Outcomes Partnerships

For the future, advocacy organisations could look at things called Social Outcomes Partnerships (SOPs):



- Public Organisations (Councils, government and health organisations)



- Private businesses



- Voluntary, community groups and charities

3 Ideas which could help with money



They work together and get paid for the good things they do for people in the community, these are called 'outcomes'.



This could help get more money for organisations and still be person centred.



But this would take a lot of time to set up, it would also mean lots of work would have to happen with advocacy organisations so they understand how this would work and help decide how to do it.



There is more about this in our main report.

What's next?



The best way for advocacy organisations to get more money quickly is to work on paid partnerships with schools, the NHS and universities.



Our research shows that this is an important step make sure advocacy organisations keep going and it would also help experts by experience keep doing their great work.



At the same time, advocacy groups should keep looking for new options, like partnerships in local areas and social outcomes partnerships.



Advocacy organisations who are part of this work could continue meeting.

What's next?



These organisations have created good connections and a community with each other. Even though this work ending, they can keep meeting to continue learning from each other.



More money might be needed in the future to support them to meet. For now, universities could help continue this community.

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