

Building stronger foundations

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

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About this report, and acknowledgements

The authors are grateful to all 15 grantees for their close collaboration throughout the consultation process, their active participation in community of practice events, and their willingness to share valuable insights. This report would not be possible without their support, time and commitment.

Throughout the programme, Social Finance worked in close partnership with Speakup (our lived experience partner), run for and by people with learning disabilities and autistic people to help them have a voice through self-advocacy. We would particularly like to thank Harry Clarkson, Sally Ferguson, Vicky Farnsworth, Amy Telford and Marshall Wilson for their consistent guidance, convening of the steering group for experts by experience, and their invaluable role in helping to shape the report's insights and its Easyread summary.

We would also like to extend our thanks to our advisory group members for their guidance and expertise throughout the programme.

We are grateful to the insights shared by stakeholders we have consulted among policymakers, grant funders, and social investment professionals.

The report is complemented by an Easyread summary, prepared by our lived experience partner Speakup.

Finally, we thank colleagues at the Henry Smith Foundation, in particular Jonathan Oppé and Ghino Parker, for their ongoing support and trust, and for making this programme possible.

Contribution statement

This report was written by Bhavya Mehta (lead researcher) and Tanyah Hameed (project manager) with support and guidance from Tom Davies and Nadine Smith (project directors).

Section A:

Summary

Background

- Approximately **1.5 million people** in the UK have a learning disability, and more than **700,000** are known to be autistic.
- The **£2.6m Strategic Grant programme** from the Henry Smith Foundation funded **15 organisations** to provide independent and non-statutory advocacy for people with learning disabilities and autistic people across the UK between 2022 and 2026. Social Finance was the learning and evaluation partner for the programme, supported by Speakup as our lived experience partner. Our aim was to build evidence on the value and impact of advocacy, and to explore the advocacy sector's routes to sustainability.
- This report covers the second phase of the programme. Our 2025 report from the first phase of the programme, "[Independent advocacy for independent lives](#)", showed that grantees reached and supported more than **1,667 individuals**. Advocacy had a positive impact on people's lives and led to **measurable improvement across advocacy success outcomes** such as speaking up, knowledge of rights, and knowledge of local services. Fifty-eight per cent of people supported by advocacy services **achieved their self-defined primary goals** set out at the beginning of support, and a further 35% reported making progress towards their goals.
- Data analysis from the first phase showed that the programme's grantees supported an even split of males and females (48.3% male, 48.3% female). A wide range of age groups were also supported, with the 30–39 age group forming the largest segment (24.1%). However, **Asian ethnicities were underrepresented** among those accessing support (2.3%) compared to UK Census data (9.3%).
- Cost-benefit analysis from the first phase showed that non-statutory advocacy generated **benefits worth £12 for every £1 spent**. Approximately £7 of these savings accrue to the National Health Service, with £5 going to local authorities.
- This report builds on our 2025 report (and is designed to be read together with it), exploring ways the sector can become more sustainable. We examine areas where the sector needs additional support, assess whether and how it could benefit from a sector body, and explore pathways to greater financial sustainability. Our recommendations are aimed at key stakeholders within the advocacy sector, including delivery organisations, conveners, and funders (e.g. government and foundations).

Key findings

- Through our consultation, we heard that advocacy organisations require more support in three key areas: **identifying and applying for funding** opportunities, **training and professional development** for staff, and accessing **peer learning and collaboration opportunities**.
- Meanwhile, the sector continues to face **substantial funding challenges that threaten the closure of many services**. These pressures have been exacerbated by reduced local authority funding, as many councils grapple with budget deficits. This means there is **strong competition** among advocacy organisations that hinders collaborative engagement and partnerships within the sector. At present, no single national organisation in England possesses the combination of relationships, trust, capacity, lived experience leadership, and national influence necessary to effectively advocate for independent advocacy organisations.
- In line with our previous recommendation for a collective, joined-up voice for advocacy, we

consulted grantees on whether a national sector body could be helpful. Initial responses were mixed, reflecting concerns about previous attempts to create one. However, further consultation showed **support for a body** if it were guided by clear principles, including: leadership by an independent organisation with no service delivery role; sustainable funding and a long-term strategy; shaped and ideally led by experts by experience; a focus on non-statutory advocacy; and structures that prevent larger organisations from dominating smaller, grassroots groups. Such a body could add value by:

- 1. Raising the sector's profile** with government and funders as well as general public awareness.
- 2. Campaigning for legislation** to support a national roll-out of independent advocacy across England (please see pages 8 and 14 for more details).
- 3. Providing opportunities for networking and sharing resources** (e.g. training, best practice resources, funding opportunities, etc.) without over-professionalising the sector.



Liam Conlon MP speaking at the launch of our previous report at the House of Commons in February 2025

Section A: Summary

- Grantees were also open to using a **tiered membership structure**, where larger organisations would pay more while the smallest could participate for free. While this structure could support some of the funding needs for the sector body, it would still require wider funding to ensure long-term sustainability.
- While we continue to advocate for increased central government funding, this report explores three key options for the sector to consider to achieve greater financial sustainability.
 - **Option 1: Expand and diversify revenue streams (near term).** Advocacy organisations could consider new ways to expand and diversify revenue, by building paid partnerships with schools, the National Health Service, and universities. In the near term, this is the most feasible option for the sector. There are strong examples of how this can be achieved, while generating meaningful co-production with and employment for experts by experience. Please see case studies 3 and 4 for examples of best practice.
 - **Option 2: Explore place-based opportunities (opportunity dependent).** Advocacy organisations could also explore place-based opportunities, a core focus for several new programmes. This could include capitalising on emerging opportunities such as the NHS neighbourhood health initiative, The National Lottery Community Wealth Fund, the Community Enterprise Growth Plan or partnerships with community foundations and local businesses. Please see Part 2 in Section C for a detailed discussion on potential opportunities.
 - **Option 3: Social Outcomes Partnerships (medium–long term).** In the long term, advocacy organisations could explore more innovative ideas through social investment – such as social outcomes partnerships (SOPs). Pioneered by Social Finance in 2010, these partnerships are cross-sector collaborations (involving the public, private and VCSE sector) which focus payment on pre-agreed outcomes. SOPs could help inject new capital into the sector while preserving its flexible, person-centred approach. The challenge,

however, lies in the groundwork required: designing the right outcomes, engaging social investors, and building the sector’s readiness to embrace new ways of working. Please see Part 3 in Section C for more details on SOPs, considerations around applying them to the advocacy sector, and resources to guide next steps.

Recommendations

- **The sector would benefit from more support around capacity building**, especially around financial management, business development, and managing administrative burden. Where possible, advocacy organisations should invest in coaching for their leadership and allocate dedicated resourcing to business and partnership development, embedding this within financial planning and budgets from the outset.
- **Grantees could continue convening informally** to share peer learning, feed into policy consultations, and discuss how potential changes to national policy might affect them. With the Henry Smith Advocacy Programme coming to an end this year, we anticipate a gap in peer learning and collaboration, and encourage key sector stakeholders to fund and support this network to help sustain it. In the interim, university partners could help convene and support a community of practice.
- **Creating a sector body for independent advocacy could benefit the advocacy sector if it builds on the five key principles summarised above.** If implemented well, such a body could serve as a collective voice for advocacy, help unite a fragmented sector, and make a stronger case for central government funding. It could also support the sector in addressing the gaps it currently faces around identifying and applying for funding opportunities, training and professional development for staff, and accessing peer learning and collaboration opportunities. The Scottish Independent Advocacy Alliance (SIAA) offers a strong example of a successfully established sector body for independent advocacy in Scotland (see Case Study 1).

- **We suggest that any future sector body addresses the considerations below to achieve buy-in and add value:**

- Securing long-term funding
- Championing different types of non-statutory advocacy
- Transparency on co-design with experts by experience

- Creating wider buy-in and trust in a fragmented landscape
- Engagement with existing networks and organisations

At the time of writing, we were aware of only one active effort to establish a sector body for England. This effort is being undertaken by NDTi.

Overview of different types of advocacy available for people with learning disabilities and/or autistic people:

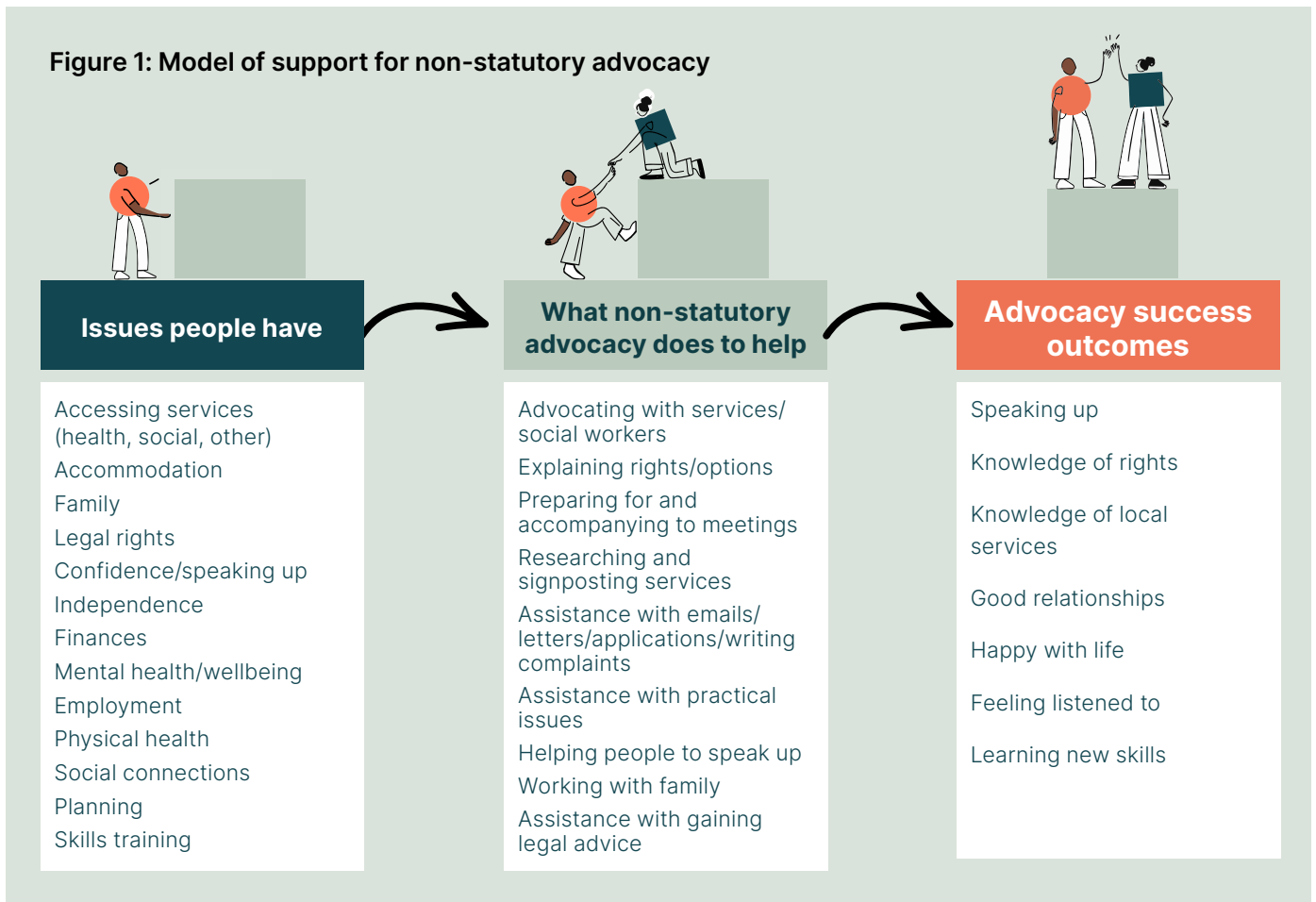
Statutory advocacy is advocacy that an individual is legally entitled to due to their circumstances. It is completely independent from healthcare and social care providers. People who are eligible for statutory advocacy services are those who are being treated under the Mental Health Act 1983 or to support people to understand their rights under the Mental Capacity Act 2005, Care Act 2014 or Children's Act 1989. The key frameworks include:

- **IMHA (Independent Mental Health Advocacy):** Authorised by the Mental Health Act 1983 (amended 2007), this supports individuals detained under the Act, on a community treatment order, or considering specific treatments. IMHAs help individuals understand their rights, challenge decisions (especially around detention), and express views, particularly if they have capacity.
- **IMCA (Independent Mental Capacity Advocacy):** Established by the Mental Capacity Act 2005, IMCAs support people aged 16+ who lack capacity to make critical decisions (e.g. serious medical treatment or long-term accommodation) and have no one else to represent them.
- **CAA (Care Act Advocacy):** Mandated by the Care Act 2014, local authorities must provide independent advocacy if a person has substantial difficulty being involved in care assessments, planning, or safeguarding reviews.

- **Children's Act (1989 & 2004):** Legal frameworks ensuring children's welfare is paramount in decisions, often involving advocacy for children in care or during complex care proceedings.

Non-statutory advocacy (also known as independent advocacy) means getting support from another person (an 'advocate') to help someone express their views and wishes and help them stand up for their rights. Non-statutory advocacy encompasses all advocacy that is not delivered under a statutory duty to provide advocacy and can take various forms, including one-to-one advocacy, self-advocacy groups, peer and citizen advocacy, among others. Each of these models is designed to ensure that a person's voice is represented in important decisions related to their health, care, employment, education or housing.

Non-statutory advocates can, for example, also support a person by talking to third parties, writing letters, making phone calls, and preparing for and attending important meetings with them (see Figure 1 on p. 8). Like statutory advocacy, support from non-statutory advocacy is free to access. The sector is primarily composed of local grassroots advocacy services, and a small number of medium-to-large organisations. Please see our 2025 report for detailed discussion, case studies and data analysis on the impact on non-statutory advocacy.



- The most practical near term route to financial sustainability is for the sector to diversify its income through paid partnerships (for example with schools, the NHS and universities).** Our analysis suggests this is a crucial step in ensuring continuity for grantees and could also create meaningful employment opportunities for experts by experience. In parallel, the sector should remain alert to emerging place-based opportunities (e.g. neighbourhood health programmes, TNLCF’s Community Wealth Fund, the Community Enterprise Growth Plan, Community Help Partnerships, and collaboration with local community foundations). Over the longer term, advocacy organisations could consider trialling social investment approaches such as SOPs. The sector is likely to need substantial support around market readiness and outcomes design to explore this route. As part of this consultation, we have done an initial analysis of how the sector could think about applying SOPs to

advocacy, and included detailed considerations and key resources to guide next steps (see Part 3 in Section C).

- We further call on the government to introduce legislation to protect independent advocacy in England** that mirrors the supportive legislative framework that Scotland and Wales have already established. A future sector body could play a role in campaigning for this legislation, similar to SIAA’s role in Scotland. Based on our estimates, a national roll-out of independent advocacy services across England could cost approximately £45.7 million over five years (please see Appendix for more details). This would help fund at least one advocacy service in every area. Such a roll-out could play a transformative role in securing the future of non-statutory advocacy as well as supporting people with learning disabilities and/or autistic people to live more independent and fulfilling lives.

Section B:

Introduction

Background and context to this work

[The Henry Smith Foundation \(HSF\)](#) set up a £2.6 million fund in 2022, supporting 15 organisations (please see the Appendix for a full list and map)¹ providing non-statutory advocacy to support people with learning disabilities and/or autistic people across the UK. Social Finance is the learning and evaluation partner for the programme. This report is designed to be read together with our previous report [Independent Advocacy for Independent Lives](#), which includes a detailed discussion of the impact and value of non-statutory advocacy.² The aim of this report is to build on its predecessor's recommendations and explore what the sector could do to become more sustainable.

The grantees of this programme offer a mix of different types of advocacy (including one-to-one advocacy and self-advocacy among other types), and many are small grassroots organisations. In the absence of supportive national legislation, there is a 'postcode lottery' in the provision of independent advocacy services across the UK. While exact figures are unavailable, we estimate that this programme's grantees and advisory group members (please see Appendix) form a substantial proportion of the overall advocacy sector.

The non-statutory advocacy sector today faces a series of interrelated challenges. Funding for non-statutory advocacy typically comes from local authorities. However, a volatile economic climate is forcing many local authorities to navigate budget deficits by cutting services. A lack of statutory protection for non-statutory advocacy services places them at risk of losing funding, resulting in some organisations providing invaluable services and self-advocacy groups ceasing operations. This has made the sector weak, vulnerable and fragmented, resulting in increased competition for funding within advocacy organisations.

Research questions

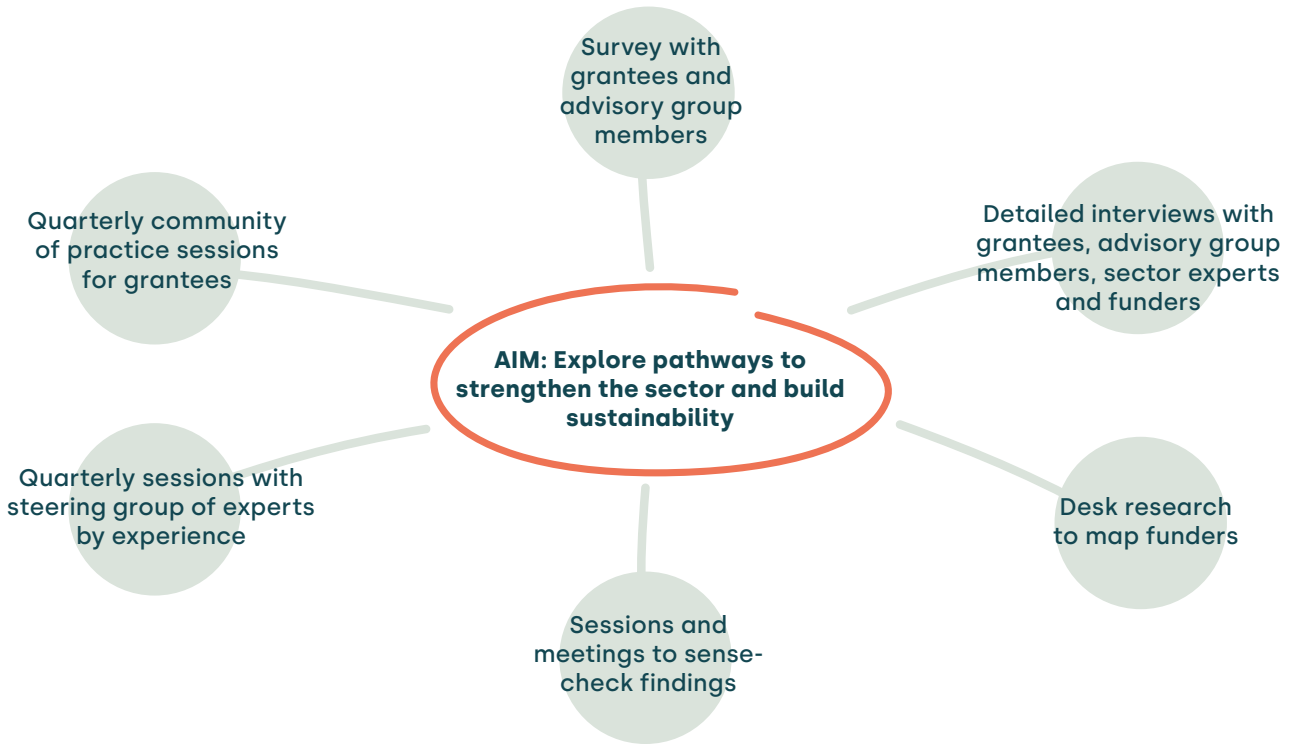
This phase of work focuses on three main questions to strengthen support and financial sustainability for the sector:

1. What are the support gaps in the non-statutory advocacy sector? (Part 1)
2. What role could a national sector body play in supporting the advocacy sector? (Part 2)
3. What are some potential ways of improving the sector's financial sustainability? (Part 3)

1 These 15 delivery organisations are referred to as 'grantees' in this report as well as in our wider work.

2 'Non-statutory advocacy' and 'independent advocacy' are used interchangeably across this report.

Figure 2: Our approach to research and consultation for this phase



Research and consultation methods

Research and consultation for this phase was completed between May 2025 and February 2026. To explore the research questions above, we ran a survey with grantees and advisory board members in August 2025. We further built on the survey findings by conducting 25 semi-structured interviews with grantees, advisory group members, as well as wider stakeholders and sector experts.³ In parallel, we conducted in-depth desk research to map out current and potential funders for the advocacy sector and visualised these in [Kumu](#) (see Appendix 4).

We sense-checked our emerging findings and sought feedback through six sessions with the 15 grantees, [Speakup](#) (our lived experience partner), advisory group members, and our steering group of experts by experience. In addition, we hosted an online workshop in January 2026 with four key organisations who have played a key role in the advocacy sector (i.e. including [National Development Team for Inclusion \(NDTi\)](#), [Learning Disabilities England \(LDE\)](#), [Scottish Independent Advocacy Alliance \(SIAA\)](#) and [All Wales People First \(AWPF\)](#)) to further build consensus around what is needed in the sector. We have summarised our emerging findings below.

³ Wider stakeholders and sector experts included representatives from The National Lottery Community Fund, The Key Fund, Three Guineas Trust, Macmillan Cancer Support, Better Society Capital, East Midlands County Combined Authority, West Yorkshire Combined Authority, Somerset Community Foundation, Bexley Mencap, and a GP.

Section C:

Research findings

Part 1. What are the support gaps in the non-statutory advocacy sector?

Through our consultation, we heard that advocacy organisations require more support in three key areas: identifying and applying for funding opportunities, training and professional development for staff, and accessing peer learning and collaboration opportunities. We explore each of these in more detail below.

Grantees struggle with capacity to identify and apply for funding opportunities

Grantees typically identify and apply for funding opportunities through subscribing to newsletters from past and potential funders and local networks (e.g. [South West London VCSE Alliance](#)). Some grantees also have internal trackers for key funding opportunities, or designated team members to research and flag opportunities. Yet, large and multi-year funding opportunities are limited in the sector and remain highly competitive. Many funding opportunities exclude overheads or offer very small grants (under £10,000), which grantees sometimes decide to pass on due to the disproportionate effort required in applying for them.

While grantees generally feel they have the technical knowledge needed to write bids, most have small teams that are stretched across delivery, operations and business development, and hence struggle to find capacity to write bids

and proposals. Some have employed professional bid-writers to support drafting of funding applications, but this is rare. Grantees also shared that they have limited time for proactive business development or building long-term partnerships that could improve the financial resilience of organisations.

Grantees draw on similar training and professional development opportunities for staff but find them expensive

Most grantees draw on similar training, standards and frameworks such as the [National Advocacy Qualification](#), [Advocacy Quality Performance Mark \(QPM\)](#), [NDTi's Advocacy Charter](#), [Code of Practice](#), and general safeguarding training. Some interviewees also referenced using additional training resources such as NICE guidelines, [Talking Mats](#), and [Kate Mercer Training](#). Most organisations leverage their local networks to access free training where they can (e.g. from local authorities, local networks, [Inclusion London](#), and online resources). Grantees draw on key legislation including the Care Act, Mental Capacity Act, Children and Families Act, Education Act and the Equality Act. Some grantees have developed proactive collaborations with their local law centres (supported by [Law Centres Network](#)) to access free legal advice.

Section C: Research findings

However, grantees reflected that they have limited budgets and find it challenging to fund these opportunities for their staff. Many find the [Quality Performance Mark \(QPM\)](#) difficult to afford and renew every three years. The criteria for the National Advocacy Qualification have also changed from a Level 3 qualification to a Level 4 qualification, including additional mandatory modules and longer timelines on claiming costs back.

Grantees acknowledged training gaps in the sector around legal knowledge, leadership development, and supporting people with profound learning disabilities. Some suggested that given more funding, they would like to invest in staff wellbeing (e.g. through access to free counselling).

Grantees would like more opportunities for peer learning and collaboration

Grantees value networking opportunities and would like these to continue and grow. Social Finance's community of practice sessions,⁴ hosted as part of the Henry Smith Advocacy Programme, were cited as a helpful example. Peer learning spaces where advocates from different

organisations can anonymously discuss case work, learn from colleagues, discuss national policy and receive support would be valuable too. These spaces could also provide an outlet and help protect the wellbeing of advocates. Such networking opportunities and spaces require a convener, especially following the end of the Henry Smith Advocacy Programme.

The advocacy sector remains fragmented and needs support to develop a collective voice

More broadly, the advocacy sector remains divided, and its fragmentation is further compounded by its limited capacity to invest in relationship-building, develop consensus and collaborate meaningfully. Strong competition among service delivery organisations, as well as those leading broader sector development, risks undermining the high trust and collaborative culture needed to establish and sustain an effective sector body. The sector needs support to come together and effectively engage with policymakers and funders. We have explored how a sector body might help achieve this in Part 2.

Part 1 Recommendations: What are the support gaps in the non-statutory advocacy sector?

To effectively address support gaps in the advocacy sector, we recommend that:

- The sector focuses on capacity building, especially around financial management, business development, and managing administrative burden. Where possible, advocacy organisations should invest in coaching for their leadership and allocate dedicated resourcing to business and partnership development, embedding this within financial planning and budgets from the outset.
- Grantees continue convening informally to share peer learning, feed into policy consultations, and discuss how potential changes to national policy might affect them. With the Henry Smith Advocacy Programme coming to an end this year, we anticipate a gap in peer learning and collaboration, and encourage key sector stakeholders to fund and support this network to help sustain it. In the interim, university partners could help convene and support a community of practice.
- A sector body supports advocacy organisations to replace the gaps highlighted above, while helping the sector develop a collective voice and engage effectively with policymakers and funders. We explore this idea in more detail in Part 2.

4 Social Finance hosted 14 community of practice sessions over four years as spaces for peer learning and connection. Participants involved the 15 grantees, Speakup, and Henry Smith Foundation. The quarterly sessions featured emerging findings from our work, wider insights from policy and external stakeholders, and group discussions to help share peer learning and discuss views.

Part 2. What role could a national sector body play in supporting the advocacy sector?

Through our consultation, we examined whether and in what ways a national sector body could add value to the non-statutory advocacy sector. Feedback suggested that such a body could be beneficial, provided it was grounded in a clear set of principles, which we outline in more detail below. We also consider how a sector body could raise the sector's national profile, support networking and the sharing of resources, and campaign for legislation to support a national roll-out of advocacy.

We are aware that, at the time of writing, there is one organisation actively exploring establishing a sector body. Based on our consultation and further analysis, we have highlighted the next steps and considerations which will be essential in helping a future sector body secure buy-in and establish credibility.

What do we mean by a national sector body?

A national sector body could represent the independent advocacy sector supporting people with learning disabilities and/or autistic people across England. It would aim to build a collective voice and support the sector, while engaging with policymakers and government on the sector's behalf. It would work proactively with key partners including government, funders and the private sector to raise the sector's profile and help it gain long-term funding.

Our consultation revealed that a sector body could be useful if it was guided by five key principles

When we first suggested the idea of a sector body to grantees and experts by experience, we heard a mixed response. Some did not understand what we meant by the term 'sector body', and most felt ambivalent about its usefulness given previous short-lived attempts. Grantees felt that these previous attempts had felt promising at the time but had ultimately failed due to a lack of long-term vision, funding, and buy-in from the sector. We

heard concerns around ensuring genuine member ownership, lived experience leadership, inclusive decision-making, and potential dilution of independent advocacy if combined with statutory advocacy.

Some experts by experience from our steering group questioned whether it was needed at all, and whether it might create more confusion in a landscape which already feels complex. Others were concerned that it may try to take a 'one-size-fits-all' approach and thereby fail to represent the different types of advocacy fairly. We also heard concerns that the sector body might add more bureaucracy, take funding away from smaller delivery organisations, or shift focus to more commercial objectives.

Following further discussion, grantees and advisory group members generally agreed that a sector body could be useful, but would achieve buy-in only if it addressed the considerations outlined above. Some experts by experience (including our lived experience partner Speakup) supported having one organisation that could represent the sector, act as a single point of access and set standards. They felt that an umbrella organisation could be helpful in securing longer term funding and supporting more consistent delivery across the sector.

Based on views shared by grantees, advisory group members and experts by experience, we have framed their suggestions as five key principles that should guide the formation of any future sector body. If a sector body did exist, it must follow the principles laid out in Figure 3.

Figure 3: Founding principles of a sector body



Led by an **independent organisation** with strong knowledge of non-statutory advocacy but no direct involvement in service delivery.



Strongly focused on **non-statutory advocacy**.



Shaped and ideally led by **people with learning disabilities and/or autistic people**.



Sustainably funded and have a long-term strategy instead of 'one-off' initiatives.



Not dominated in structure, governance or membership by large advocacy organisations (providers) that could crowd out the voices of smaller grassroots organisations (such as this programme's grantees).

We heard consensus that if a national sector body did exist, it could add value in three key ways:

1. Raising the profile and general awareness of the sector: The sector body could advocate for advocacy, especially with government and funders, to help them understand the impact of advocacy and why it must be funded. This would involve engaging strategically and developing relationships with central and regional government (e.g. Mayoral Combined Authorities) while strengthening the sector's profile with major funders such as The National Lottery Community Fund, Comic Relief, other foundations, and social investors.

In addition, the sector body could also play a role in raising public awareness of advocacy services by providing clear, accessible information. Knowledge of what advocacy is

and where to access it is currently limited even for health and social care professionals. Greater awareness and effective communication could support integration with other services and help improve access to advocacy.

2. Campaigning for legislation to support a national roll-out of independent advocacy across England: The absence of supportive national legislation remains a significant barrier to the recognition and long-term sustainability of independent advocacy in England. By contrast, both Scotland⁵ and Wales⁶ have established robust legislative frameworks that embed and sustain independent advocacy. A future sector body could play a role in campaigning for this legislation, similar to SIAA's role in Scotland.

5 In Scotland, the Mental Health (Care and Treatment) (Scotland) Act 2003 provides a clear statutory basis for independent advocacy, placing duties on local authorities and health boards to ensure access to advocacy for people with mental illness, learning disabilities, dementia, or related conditions. The legislation is designed to empower individuals to make their own decisions, safeguard their rights, and access support in both hospital and community settings. The Scottish Government has also reinforced this legislative commitment through sustained investment in national advocacy infrastructure, including funding for Scottish Independent Advocacy Alliance (SIAA) and the Advocacy Safeguards Agency, which play key roles in championing and strengthening advocacy services nationwide.

6 In Wales, the Social Services and Wellbeing (Wales) Act 2014 places a strong emphasis on prevention, with advocacy recognised as a vital preventative approach that helps address issues early and reduce escalation.

Without comparable legislation, independent advocacy in England continues to face fundamental barriers to sustainability and growth, leaving the sector without the recognition or security it requires. Based on our estimates, **a national roll-out of independent advocacy services across England could cost approximately £45.7 million⁷ over five years** (please see Appendix for more details). This would help fund at least one advocacy service in every area. We believe this represents prudent investment when compared with the cost of crisis-led care to the NHS, and could play a transformative role in scaling up the human and financial benefits that advocacy delivers, such as reducing crisis interventions, preventing costly care breakdowns, and ensuring people are heard at critical moments.

3. Providing opportunities for networking and sharing resources: The sector body could host regular networking opportunities or community of practice sessions to encourage peer learning and collaboration. It could also help share and signpost relevant resources such as best practice on service delivery, legal advice, training opportunities, and opportunities to influence policy.

However, it should be careful not to 'over-professionalise' the sector, for example, by introducing additional requirements around mandatory training, qualifications or requiring membership for a service to operate.

Grantees were open to paying a membership fee for the sector body, provided it clearly demonstrates its benefits and impact. A tiered membership model was largely supported, whereby larger organisations would contribute more while the smallest organisations could participate without a fee. A similar tiered membership approach is already in use within the sector, including by Learning Disability England

and the Scottish Independent Advocacy Alliance (SIAA, see Case Study 1 below for more details).

Considerations and next steps

Although multiple organisations have attempted to establish a sector body in recent years, none currently combines the strategic relationships, trust, organisational capacity, lived-experience leadership, and national influence required to fulfil this role effectively. Any current or future attempts must therefore build on lessons learned from previous initiatives and embody the principles outlined above. Collaboration among leading organisations will be essential to build trust and secure wider sector buy-in.

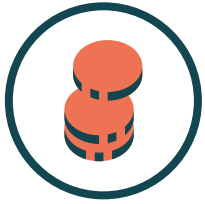
We are aware that NDTi is actively exploring the creation of a sector body for the advocacy sector. We engaged with NDTi throughout our consultation process. At the time of writing, their findings had not been published; however, we understand that the proposed body is likely to adopt a tiered membership model and that its remit would extend beyond non-statutory advocacy for people with learning disabilities and autistic people.

We organised a workshop in January 2026 to bring lessons and views from NDTi and other leading organisations (Learning Disability England, All Wales People First, and Scottish Independent Advocacy Alliance) in the sector together with ours. While we heard overall agreement on the principles summarised above (Figure 3, p.14), questions remain on how some of these will be upheld. Based on additional insights from experts by experience in our steering group⁸ and further analysis, we have summarised further considerations that must be addressed to create an effective sector body in Figure 4.

⁷ Estimates are based on costs data from the Henry Smith Advocacy Programme and have been estimated in 2025 prices.

⁸ Experts by experience included individuals who are currently using or have previously used grantee services, as well as organisations run by people with learning disabilities and/or autistic people

Figure 4. Considerations for creating an effective sector body



Securing long-term funding:

While a tiered membership model might support some of its costs, a future sector body will need wider, long-term funding to sustain itself and deliver on its vision. Some of this is likely to come from foundations or central government, and could be part of the sector's continued ask for core funding from government to help secure and scale advocacy.



Championing different types of independent advocacy:

Our work has shown the value of the different types of independent advocacy (e.g. one-to-one, self-advocacy, peer advocacy, etc.) for people with learning disabilities and/or autistic people. Together, they form a rich and complementary ecosystem, and ideally people should have the option to choose what works best for them. A future sector body should therefore be genuinely inclusive of these different types of independent advocacy while representing them collectively in engagements with policymakers and funders. If a future sector body chooses to have a broad remit, it will need to ensure that the voice of non-statutory advocacy organisations does not get diluted with statutory advocacy. Similarly, if the future sector body chooses to represent diverse cohorts of people, it will need to ensure that the distinct needs of people with learning disabilities and autistic people do not get lost in the mix.



Transparency on co-design with experts by experience:

We heard strong agreement that any sector body must be shaped and ideally led by people with learning disabilities and autistic people, but next steps on implementing this approach remain unclear. In our consultation, we have seen limited concrete ideas on how experts by experience could meaningfully set up and lead a potential sector body. Any future sector body must be transparent in how it has been co-designed with experts by experience, what role experts by experience will play in future decision-making, and how. There are encouraging examples of lived experience leadership in practice which could be drawn upon.⁹



Creating wider buy-in and trust in a fragmented landscape:

Views differed on which organisation should lead a future sector body in England. Although some interviewees suggested specific organisations, there was no clear consensus. In this fragmented landscape, any future sector body will need to engage proactively with a wide range of stakeholders – including other leading organisations and experts by experience – to build legitimacy, credibility, and broad-based support. Assuming this buy-in will emerge automatically risks undermining its effectiveness from the outset.



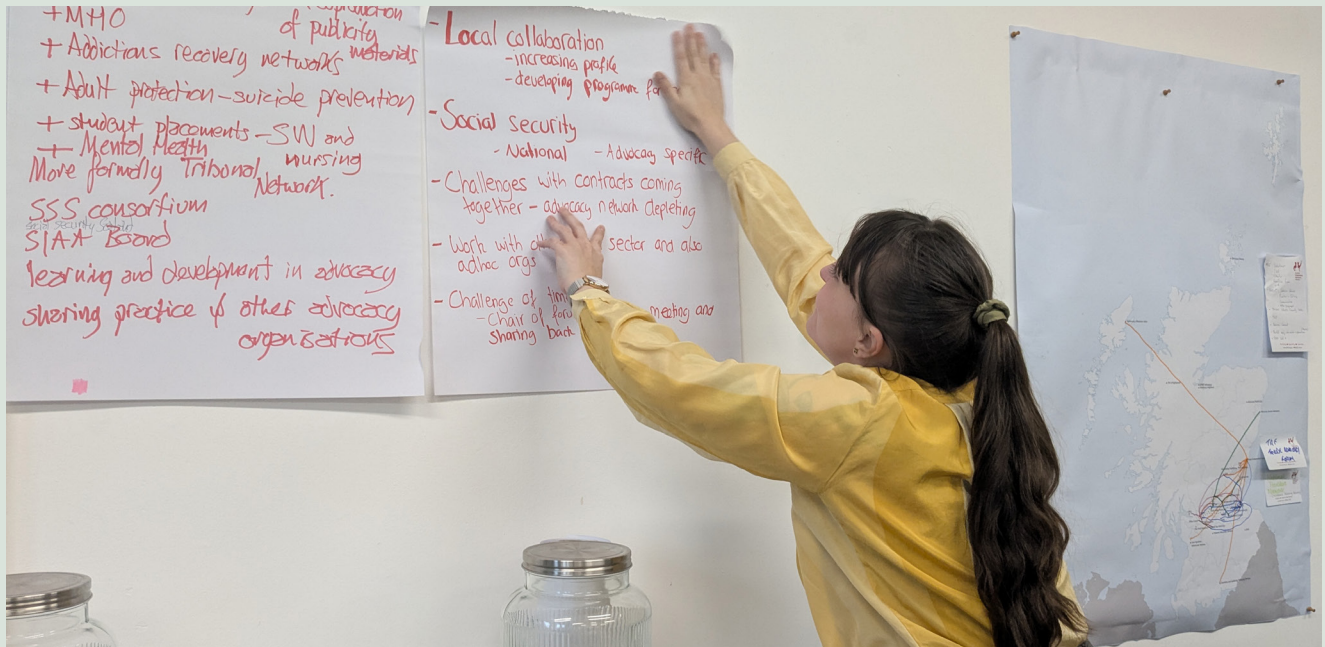
Engagement with existing networks and organisations:

Any sector body will need to clearly articulate and share its approach to engaging with existing networks and organisations,¹⁰ to ensure complementarity and avoid duplication of effort. At a minimum, this should include engagement with leading organisations in the sector such as Learning Disability England, National Development Team for Inclusion, All Wales People First and Scottish Independent Advocacy Alliance. This engagement could include learning from and building relationships with established disability organisations. On a more operational level, the sector body could adopt a lean structure by contracting certain functions to local advocacy organisations where appropriate, while retaining core responsibilities such as strategic leadership and policy engagement. This approach would help raise the sector's national profile while maintaining strong, reciprocal connections between the sector body and local organisations.

⁹ [The Three Guineas Trust](#) uses a lived experience panel to inform grant allocations. Learning Disability England enables active decision-making through co-produced frameworks such as the [Good Lives Framework](#), which was developed alongside people with learning disabilities and their families. People First Dorset, one of the programme's grantees, have found it helpful to have experts by experience on a management board to oversee strategy and overall direction of the organisation, but not fiduciary responsibilities.

¹⁰ For example, the [Autistic Self Advocacy Network](#) offers strong models of collective action, while the grassroots movement developed by [People First](#) demonstrates the value of member-led advocacy. The [Older People Advocacy Alliance UK](#), a national infrastructure organisation that has successfully promoted and developed independent advocacy services for older people, could also provide a valuable blueprint for how a sector body can be structured and sustained. Looking beyond the UK, engagement with international disability member organisations such as [Inclusion Europe](#) could help the sector remain connected to the wider European policy network and support collective campaigning for stronger rights for people with disabilities.

Case Study 1. SIAA's journey to becoming a sector body for independent advocacy in Scotland



Background and early days:

- The Scottish Independent Advocacy Alliance (SIAA) was established in 2002, emerging from the Advocacy 2000 consortium to unify Scotland's independent advocacy movement.
- The movement grew in the late 1990s when practitioners began campaigning for public funding to improve how people with learning disabilities accessing services were treated, focusing on quality and dignity of care.
- The movement received strong support from Scottish Government. This included funding for the Advocacy Safeguards Agency and the Scottish Independent Advocacy Alliance to promote and sustain independent advocacy services nationally.

The SIAA Model:

- Scotland operates a place-based and community of interest model for independent advocacy. All 32 local authorities and integrated joint health boards in Scotland have a statutory duty to ensure independent advocacy is available, though this is interpreted and funded differently across areas.
- SIAA is seen as a sector body for independent advocacy in Scotland. It is a membership organisation run by independent advocacy groups for independent advocacy groups. The majority of the board members come from advocacy organisations themselves, so the people making decisions really understand the work.
- The Scottish government provides most of the funding, with some additional income from membership fees.

Case Study 1 continued.

The functions that SIAA performs are:

- **Supports sustainable grassroots independent advocacy** focusing on strengthening local, community-based organisations rather than creating large, centralised providers.
- **Maintains regular engagement with Scottish government's** team working on independent advocacy, policy development and representing member voices on key issues and legislation.
- **Supports learning and development** through developing a members' resource library and creating a learning platform.
- **Fosters peer connection** by creating spaces for organisations to connect and discuss specific issues and running peer support groups for independent advocacy leaders.
- **Empowers member voice**, especially for those with lived experience and organisations coming from place-based or community interest perspectives.
- **Lessons for other sectors and organisations:** SIAA's success has been built on its unique ability to engage with policy at the national level, while ensuring local representation and buy-in through its member-led model.

SIAA is committed to upholding shared principles and standards, facilitating strong peer connections, and championing a locally grounded approach. The approach has enabled SIAA to maintain both its relevance and longevity in supporting independent advocacy across Scotland.

SIAA demonstrates that when organisations are given the tools to come together and decide what's best for them, they can create sustainable, effective national infrastructure.



Case Study 2. Transforming Together Network (TTN): Building place-based networks to improve services for women

TTN is a group of professionals, local decision-makers, and women with lived experience working together to build a network model for shifting power to improve support for women with multiple unmet needs in the North East of England.



The network emerged from [Dismantling Disadvantage](#) (2023), a major report which found that, in 2021, women living in the North East of England were 1.7 times more likely to die early as a result of suicide, addiction, or murder by a partner or family

member than in the rest of England and Wales. As a result, the Transforming Together network was formed, with the intention of driving forward the report's recommendations and working towards genuine systems-change within the region.

The Transforming Together network has made strong progress towards systems change across the region. Some achievements include:

- Proposed the Women's Multiple Disadvantage Taskforce to address intersectional needs and influenced the development of Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) strategies in Sunderland and Durham, embedding member perspectives in local policy.
- Co-designed commissioning processes and creative advocacy approaches that shift power dynamics.
- Partnered with Represent Women and Northumbria Police and Crime Commissioner to review and improve joint commissioning principles, promoting more collaborative and equitable funding.
- Contributed to shaping the Radical Prevention Fund – an initiative proposed for UK Mayoral Combined Authorities to tackle deep-rooted health inequalities and social determinants of health through ring-fenced funding. It aims to move beyond reactive services, investing in upstream, innovative, and preventative interventions.
- Supporting with advanced systems change through research projects (e.g. complex motherhood).

The Network's example offers important insights for building effective sector infrastructure:

- It shows that governance structures are central to making regional shared power work. The Transforming Together Network achieved this by cross-sector, member-led governance with an independent convenor who facilitates without dominating, ensuring equitable participation and decision-making.
- Much of the local partnership building and public engagement was led by local practitioners and lived experience leaders, ensuring that community relationships and context remained at the heart of the network.

Case Study 2 continued.

- This was complemented by backbone administrative support from [Agenda Alliance](#) (an organisation that advocates for women and girls at risk at national and parliamentary levels), which provided the infrastructure to keep the network functioning effectively: establishing meeting structures, developing influencing strategies, and maintaining visibility.

The TTN model illustrates that member-led networks depend on a combination of grassroots relationships and leadership and professional support to thrive.

Part 2 Recommendations: What role could a national sector body play in supporting the sector?

- 1. Creating a sector body for independent advocacy could benefit the advocacy sector if it builds on five key principles suggested by grantees and experts by experience:** leadership by an independent organisation with no service delivery role; sustainable funding and a long-term strategy; shaped and ideally led by experts by experience; a focus on non-statutory advocacy; and structures that prevent larger organisations from dominating smaller, grassroots groups.
- 2. If implemented well, the sector body could serve as a collective voice for advocacy, help unite a fragmented sector, and make a stronger case for central government funding.** It could also support the sector in addressing the gaps it currently faces around identifying and applying for funding opportunities, training and professional development for staff, and accessing peer learning and collaboration opportunities. The Scottish Independent Advocacy Alliance (SIAA) offers a strong example of a successfully established sector body for independent advocacy in Scotland (see Case Study 1).
- 3. At the time of writing, we were aware of only one active effort to establish a sector body for England.** NDTi is exploring the creation of a sector body for the advocacy sector. We would suggest that any future sector body addresses the considerations below to achieve buy-in and add value:
 - Securing long-term funding
 - Championing different types of non-statutory advocacy
 - Transparency on co-design with experts by experience
 - Creating wider buy-in and trust in a fragmented landscape
 - Engagement with existing networks and organisations
- 4. We further call on the government to introduce legislation to protect independent advocacy in England that mirrors the supportive legislative framework that Scotland and Wales have already established.** A future sector body could play a role in campaigning for this legislation, similar to SIAA's role in Scotland.

Based on our estimates, **a national roll-out of independent advocacy services across England could cost approximately £45.7 million over five years** (please see Appendix for more details). This would help fund at least one advocacy service in every area. We believe this represents prudent investment when compared with the cost of crisis-led care to the NHS, and could play a transformative role in scaling up the human and financial benefits that advocacy delivers – such as reducing crisis interventions, preventing costly care breakdowns, and ensuring people are heard at critical moments.

Part 3. What are some potential ways of improving the sector's financial sustainability?

Funding remains an existential challenge for organisations operating in the non-statutory advocacy sector. The sector has traditionally relied on grant funding and local authority funding. Grantees have consistently shared concerns that funding from local authorities has decreased substantially over recent years amidst pressures on local budgets, while grants remain both short term and ad hoc. Given the constrained funding landscape, there is an urgent need for the sector to explore alternatives beyond grants and local authority contracts.

Together with grantees and experts by experience, we have explored three potential options for the sector to strengthen its financial sustainability. These options are informed by Social Finance's wider experience, as well as by in-depth knowledge of the advocacy sector. The options include:

- **Funding Option 1:** Expand and diversify revenue streams (timeframe: near term)
- **Funding Option 2:** Explore place-based opportunities (timeframe: opportunity dependent)
- **Funding Option 3:** Explore social outcomes partnerships (timeframe: medium – long term)

Our consultation concluded that expanding and diversifying revenue streams (Option 1) is the most practical way forward for the sector in the near term. There are some strong examples in the sector which grantees and other advocacy organisations could draw upon to further build on their existing work.

Meanwhile, place-based funding (Option 2) is gaining momentum within government, philanthropic, and health funding, bringing resources closer to communities and the people who know them best. This shift opens doors for organisations already rooted in their neighbourhoods and trusted by the people they work alongside. Advocacy organisations are well-positioned to benefit from engaging with these opportunities as and when they arise.

In the long run, the sector could explore how new ideas such as social investment and social

outcomes partnerships might inject new funding into the sector. We have done an initial analysis of things the sector will need to consider to take this forward, and included resources to aid with next steps.

This section expands on the funding options outlined above and includes detailed examples and case studies which we hope will provide a practical way forward.

Funding Option 1: Expand and diversify revenue streams

Timeframe: Near term

Overview

Across the independent advocacy sector, we have heard inspiring examples of organisations successfully diversifying their income streams and building financial resilience. These pioneering organisations are demonstrating what is possible, even in a challenging financial landscape. While advocacy should remain free for the people it supports, organisations like [SpeakUp](#) and [Bexley Mencap](#) (see Case Studies 3 and 4 below) have demonstrated how advocacy organisations can create new revenue opportunities through consultancy, training, research, and capacity building. By working on paid projects with a range of partners (including schools, universities, NHS trusts, colleges, government bodies, and community organisations), these organisations have reduced their reliance on local authority contracts and achieved greater financial stability.

Our consultation concluded that expanding and diversifying revenue streams is the most practical way forward for the sector in the near term. While capacity remains a barrier and some grantees are already exploring these potential partnerships, this section offers additional ideas.

Emerging opportunities

There are new partnership opportunities emerging in the UK for advocacy organisations given the increasing recognition of disabilities in national discourse and policy reform.

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- The UK-wide [Oliver McGowan Mandatory Training on Learning Disability and Autism](#)¹¹ has presented a significant recent opportunity for advocacy organisations to generate income through delivering training for health and social care professionals, while building on their existing expertise and meaningfully involving experts by experience.
- **Universities and research organisations** are increasingly seeking to bring in the voices of lived experience into their work. Grantees and other advocacy organisations could reach out to local universities and research centres to scope out potential partnerships.
 - There is growing acknowledgment of barriers faced by disabled people within recent and ongoing **policy reviews** (e.g. Keep Britain Working Review, Milburn Review, Timms Review) and **reports** (see recent reports by [Resolution Foundation](#)), especially around the connection between disabilities and work. However, these outputs do not always include the voices of lived experience, and could present co-production opportunities for grantees.
- Grantees and advocacy organisations could consider stronger partnerships **with general disability organisations**, who are slowly seeing greater recognition. Such partnerships could involve sharing physical space and overheads while benefiting from each other's networks and expertise.

[Sheffield Voices](#), a self-advocacy group, demonstrates a useful example of how advocacy organisations can partner with general disability organisations. Following its establishment in 1997, the group grew and secured funding from the city council. When this funding ended in 2010, Sheffield Voices decided to bring itself under the umbrella of Disability Sheffield instead of tendering for additional funding. Through this arrangement, Disability Sheffield channels core funding and

provides essential infrastructure support (e.g. HR, governance, premises). This enables Sheffield Voices to focus on self-advocacy while also providing access to wider partnership opportunities, digital inclusion support, and representation on national forums such as the Learning Disabilities Partnership Board.

- **Our mapping of current and potential funders** may provide further ideas for paid partnerships. Please refer to Appendix for a summary, and to this [Kumu link](#) for the full mapping.

Considerations and next steps

There are two case studies below. Some of the key cross-cutting learnings for the sector from developing these case studies include:

- **Define and communicate the partnership offer clearly:** Advocacy organisations can benefit from developing messaging that effectively communicates their offer and impact to potential partners. This could be further tailored to different audiences and potential partners such as commissioners, universities, research organisations, NHS, schools, grant funders, and other local partners with tailored messaging for each. Having this messaging ready could help organisations respond more quickly and easily to tenders and funding opportunities. Collating and sharing case studies which effectively blend data (including insights from Social Finance's reports) with human stories could be especially powerful.
- **Develop internal costing models that can be used when developing projects with new partners:** These should ideally demonstrate value for money for funders while generating sufficient margins to cross-subsidise independent advocacy services.
- **Recruit trustees with strong networks and strategic expertise:** A strong and well-connected trustee board can be a significant

¹¹ The Oliver McGowan Mandatory Training on Learning Disability and Autism is named after Oliver McGowan, whose death shone a light on the need for health and social care staff to have better training. The Health and Care Act 2022 introduced a statutory requirement that CQC-registered providers must ensure their staff receive learning disability and autism training appropriate to their role. Oliver's Training also supports the NHS Long Term Workforce Plan ambition by upskilling the wider health and care workforce to provide appropriately adjusted care for people with a learning disability and autistic people to reduce health inequality.

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asset in helping organisations access the right opportunities. Advocacy organisations should consider recruiting trustees with expertise in business development, fundraising, financial management, policy engagement or social investment bringing in the knowledge and guidance needed to build financial sustainability, while also opening doors to networks and opportunities that might otherwise be out of reach.

- **Set up internal roles and processes to identify funding opportunities:** Funding opportunities could be identified through regularly monitoring funding platforms, tracking tenders and spotting upcoming events through LinkedIn or newsletters. This could help free up time and capacity for leaders and managers to focus on more strategic elements of business development, as discussed below.

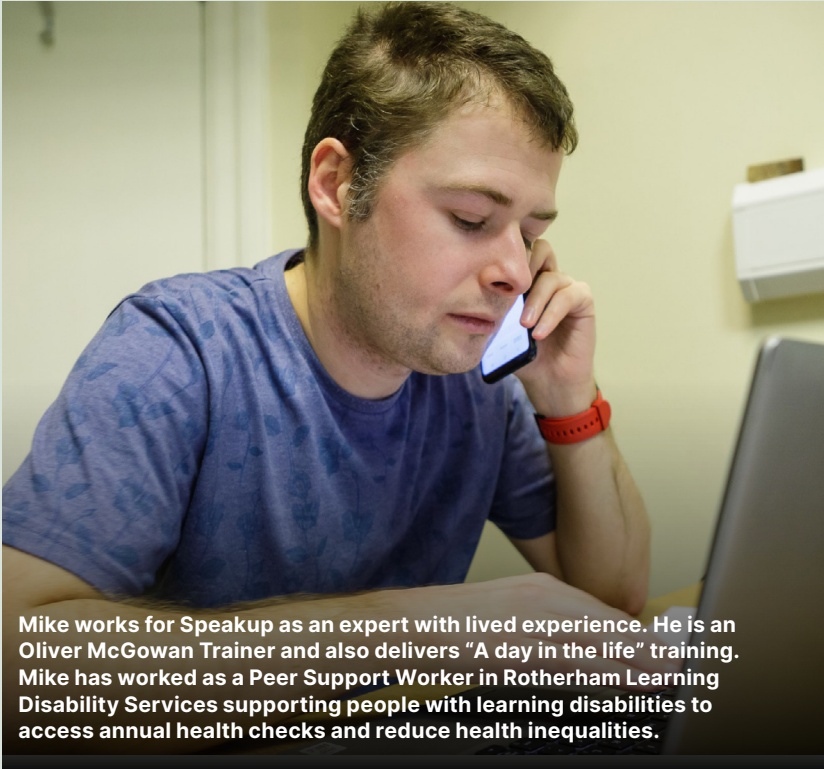
- **Support managers and leaders to protect more time for business development:** While capacity remains a challenge, business development takes time. Both Speakup and Bexley Mencap shared that developing long-term partnerships requires proactive and sustained engagement with diverse stakeholders, which leaders and managers are often best positioned to do. Leaders could remain attuned to opportunities that might initially feel 'outside the box', and identify new partners and opportunities. They might also be best able to repurpose bids or ideas even when some opportunities do not work out. Finally, grantees would benefit from developing stronger processes to retain relationships and institutional knowledge following the end of projects or staff turnover.



Speakup team members speaking at Social Finance's report launch event in February 2025 at the House of Commons

Case Study 3. Leading with lived experience – how Speakup built a sustainable business model

[Speakup](#) is a self-advocacy group run by and for people with learning disabilities and autistic people, focused on helping people have a voice, accessing employment, and feeling valued in society. Founded in Rotherham in 1988, its projects range across South Yorkshire and beyond. It is the lived experience partner to Social Finance on the Henry Smith Advocacy Programme.



Mike works for Speakup as an expert with lived experience. He is an Oliver McGowan Trainer and also delivers "A day in the life" training. Mike has worked as a Peer Support Worker in Rotherham Learning Disability Services supporting people with learning disabilities to access annual health checks and reduce health inequalities.

Speakup has built a large and diversified portfolio of projects and currently runs 33 projects which have helped it reach a point of financial sustainability. The organisation employs 35 experts by experience and peer support workers, funded through project and training contracts.

Speakup has invested significantly in partnership and relationship building. The team has built strong relationships with key organisations across the social sector ecosystem, including with NHS England, the Social Care Institute for Excellence, the Department of Health and Social Care, the Ministry of Justice, Citizens Advice, Energy Saving Trust and several universities.

Speakup's diverse partnerships demonstrate how advocacy organisations can contribute across policy areas by co-producing all work with experts by experience.

Some of Speakup's key projects include:

- **[Oliver McGowan Mandatory Training](#)**: Speakup is the service provider for this training across South Yorkshire. To date, Speakup has trained approximately 20,000 frontline staff out of an estimated 58,000.
- **[Employment is for Everyone movement](#)**: Speakup opens doors for people with learning disabilities and autistic people to find meaningful work. It has created a website to bring together job seekers and employers. By working alongside employers and support organisations across South Yorkshire, they are helping create workplaces where everyone belongs and can thrive. This grassroots approach has grown into something bigger. Speakup now leads Internship Works across Yorkshire and Humber as NDTi (National Development Team for Inclusion) associates and runs the "Positive Futures" programme through South Yorkshire's Health and Growth Accelerator.

Case Study 3 continued.

- **“Day in the Life” training sessions:** In partnership with 12 schools, Speakup runs workshops where experts by experience share their employment journeys with young people. They share details about their work, what support has helped them succeed, and the barriers they have overcome. This partnership was built on two successful pilot workshops delivered by Speakup.
- **Activity Alliance physical activity sessions:** Speakup received funding to offer free physical activity sessions that help neurodiverse young people and those with learning disabilities aged 16–25 stay active and feel good.

Speakup’s experience highlights best practice around expanding revenue streams in a values-led charity. It recognises that continued engagement and impact reporting are needed to build a strong track record and sustain these partnerships in an evolving funding landscape. We encourage government, health, social care, the voluntary sector, and academia to create more opportunities for such collaboration.



Case Study 4. Bexley Mencap – representing local voice and transitioning towards greater sustainability

[Bexley Mencap](#) is the local voice of learning disability in Bexley and operates as an independently run affiliate of the Royal Mencap Society. Like many grassroots organisations, it was historically heavily reliant on short-term grant funding, and many of its projects lacked long-term support. To secure its future, Bexley Mencap is moving away from short-term restricted grants towards a mix of unrestricted core funding, statutory service contracts, community partnerships and multi-year research projects (e.g. with the NHS and the South-East London Alliance).

Through high-quality provision and an active engagement strategy, Bexley Mencap has embedded itself in the local health and social care system. It is one of the eight local charities in the [OneBexley Partnership](#), who run the “Pathways” service working together with people who may need support to carry out adult social care assessments or reviews in partnership with Bexley Council. Bexley Mencap also provides [Oliver McGowan training](#) in its area (described in the section above) and runs a [Quality Checkers](#) programme that employs experts by experience to assess and improve the shape of local services for people with learning disabilities.

The organisation has also built partnerships with local businesses, such as the [Co-op Community Fund](#) in its area. It is developing [pathways for businesses to contribute time and expertise](#) and is investing in building an individual donor pool to increase flexible, unrestricted income.

More recently, Bexley Mencap has received funding from The National Lottery Community Fund to bring all its services under one roof and create a physical high street hub. The hub will provide advice, support services and activities for local people with a learning disability and/or autistic people, their families and carers, and other residents. The hub will also directly employ people with learning disabilities – demonstrating that financial sustainability and social mission can grow together.

This transition towards a more sustainable funding model has reduced Bexley Mencap’s reliance on any single funding source and increased employment opportunities for people with learning disabilities. Together, these changes place Bexley Mencap in a stronger position to speak up for local people with learning disabilities and to continue delivering high-quality, locally rooted support.

Funding Option 2: Explore place-based opportunities

Timeframe: Opportunity dependent

Overview

A fundamental shift is underway in how funding reaches communities. There is growing recognition that lasting systems change occurs when resources are directed to those with the deepest understanding of local needs. Reflecting this, many foundations and government programmes are funding in a place-based way, channelling funds to local organisations in the communities that need it most.

This creates new opportunities for advocacy organisations. Eligibility for much of this funding will depend on the geographical location of advocacy services, as many of the programmes identified below will target resources based on indexes of social deprivation (e.g. [Index of Multiple Deprivation](#)). While some areas may benefit from this funding in the near term, services based in more affluent areas may be less likely to be eligible.

Emerging opportunities and next steps

We have identified the following live and upcoming place-based funding programmes that could be relevant to advocacy organisations:

- **NHS Neighbourhood Health:** NHS England's Neighbourhood Health is a new model of community-centred care in England designed to shift health and care services out of hospitals and closer to communities. It forms a core part of the NHS's broader [10-Year Health Plan](#) and aims to improve access, focus on preventative and earlier intervention, and integrate local care delivery across the voluntary sector, mental health services, health and social care professionals.

The programme prioritises locations with higher levels of deprivation and long-term health needs and will initially focus on supporting people with long-term conditions such as diabetes, arthritis, high blood pressure, MS and epilepsy. As the initiative develops beyond this initial phase, neighbourhood health services are expected to expand further to cover more communities across England over time. Whether and how learning disabilities and autism are actively included in

neighbourhood health delivery may depend on local implementation, how each Integrated Care System defines its neighbourhood teams, and further national guidance as the programme scales.

Where possible, grantees could begin engaging with their neighbourhood health teams and campaign for greater integration with advocacy. The first wave of roll-out began in September 2025 and covers 43 local areas (listed [here](#)). These areas span the country, from the south-west to the north-east of England, and include areas close to some of the grantees, such as Cornwall, Coventry, Bristol, Weymouth, and Rotherham among others. Encouragingly, [NHS guidance](#) suggests that "Systems should ensure they complement these analytical approaches with wider quantitative and qualitative insight into groups that might be under-represented in NHS datasets, for example, people with severe mental illness or learning disability or autistic people." This could be another opportunity for advocacy organisations to engage with local neighbourhood health teams.

- **UK Government and National Lottery Community Wealth Fund:** A community wealth fund is a pot of money given to local communities, who decide how to spend it over the long-term (e.g. youth programmes, visual improvements, employment support and green space initiatives). In September 2025, the UK Government launched a new £175 million [Community Wealth Fund](#) in partnership with the National Lottery Community Fund (TNLCF). Funded by the Dormant Assets Scheme (which puts unclaimed money to good use) and TNLCF, the Fund will invest in areas that are 'doubly disadvantaged' by both the highest deprivation levels and weakest social infrastructure. It will focus on neighbourhoods of between 5,000 and 15,000 residents and disburse between £1 million and £2.5 million for each area over 10 years. TNLCF is currently designing the details of the programme. While [the Fund will not be open to applicants](#) like TNLCF's other programmes, we would encourage grantees and advocacy organisations to keep an eye on upcoming announcements to ascertain whether their area is included and to enable timely engagement with the funding application processes.

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- **Community Enterprise Growth Plan: [The Community Enterprise Growth Plan \(CEGP\)](#)** has been mapped out by a group of leading VCSEs and social investment organisations including the Access Foundation, Better Society Capital, and Esmée Fairbairn Foundation. Drawing on £87.5 million from the Dormant Assets Scheme, the Plan will invest in local communities over 10 years. It aims to support places affected by long-term economic decline and those serving communities that have not benefited from this type of investment previously. While more details are yet to be shared, it is likely to encourage [business-led approaches to social issues](#) such as supporting young people to develop skills and helping those with long-term health conditions find employment – both areas where grantees and advocacy organisations could play a role.
- **The Local Covenant Partnerships (LCP) Fund:** The [LCP Fund](#) will support local areas to develop and implement new ‘local covenant partnership’ agreements in 15 local authority district areas across England to tackle local policy priorities and better meet the needs of communities. Target areas will be identified later this year, selected in partnership with local areas, using a combination of metrics including the Community Needs Index (CNI), the Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) and further evidence to help identify places on the basis of need.
- **Pride in Place Programme:** The [Pride in Place Programme](#) is a £5 billion UK government initiative designed to improve disadvantaged neighbourhoods through long-term, community-led investment. It will provide funding – potentially up to £20 million per area over about 10 years – to approximately 250 areas to support local regeneration projects. Local Neighbourhood Boards made up of residents, businesses, and local leaders will decide how the money is spent. The aim is to strengthen communities, improve public spaces and local services, and restore pride in local areas.
- **Cabinet Office’s Community Help Partnership programme:** As part of the 2025 Spending Review, the Government announced a [£100 million Community Help Partnership programme](#). The programme is being developed by the Cabinet Office and will build on the Government’s [Changing Futures programme](#) to support adults with complex needs. It is likely to focus on adults in deprived areas experiencing a combination of issues including addiction, domestic abuse, homelessness and contact with the criminal justice system. While learning disabilities and autism may not be an explicit focus within this programme, our work has shown that they have strong intersections with the issues listed above. Further details are expected this year and may bring opportunities for grantees and advocacy organisations.
- **Local community foundations:** Advocacy organisations could consider partnering with their local community foundation. [Community foundations](#) are deeply rooted in their local areas, distribute grants based on local needs, and work closely with VCSE organisations. They are part of a UK-wide network, supported at the national level by UK Community Foundations (UKCF). Grantees and advocacy organisations can find their local community foundation and relevant contact details by entering their postcode [here](#).
 - Recently, Somerset Community Foundation has collaborated with experts by experience, researchers (including drawing on Social Finance’s 2025 report) and Somerset Council to create a £1 million endowment fund for advocacy in Somerset. While this fund is currently under development, it offers a unique example of how engagement with community foundations and councils can lead to innovative solutions for strengthening advocacy.
- **Partnerships with local businesses:** Advocacy organisations could also consider exploring local community wealth models and partnering with local businesses to explore corporate grant match funding opportunities. Examples include local public investment schemes through community wealth funds (e.g. [Camden’s £30m Community Wealth Fund](#)), corporate profit-sharing (e.g. Co-op has shared £115 million with over 39,000 community projects through its [Local Community Fund](#)), and customer donation schemes in restaurants (e.g. Mowgli adds a discretionary £1 to each bill to support local charities and its Oxford branch has raised [£100,000 for Oxford’s hospitals](#) since its opening in 2018).

Funding Option 3: Social Outcomes Partnerships

Timeframe: Medium – long term

Overview

Over the longer-term, advocacy organisations could explore innovative models of social investment such as Social Outcomes Partnerships (SOPs).¹²

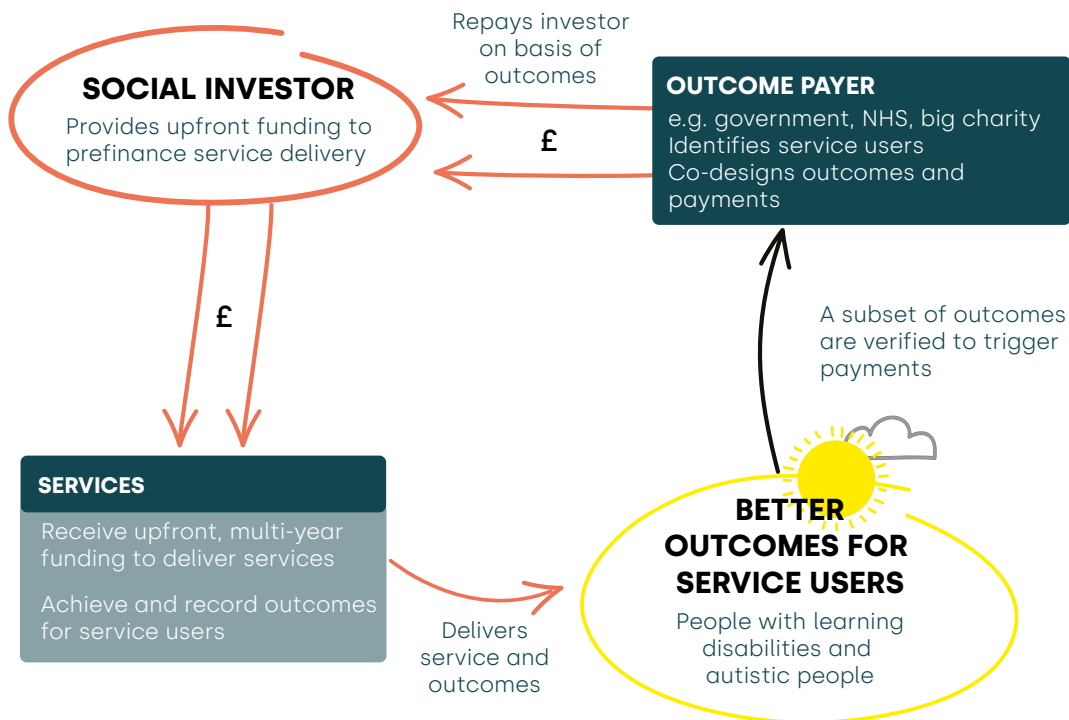
These are cross-sector partnerships that centre outcomes, rather than paying simply for activities or inputs. In SOPs, an outcomes payer (e.g. LAs, central government, NHS trusts) works with other partners and agrees to pay for specific social outcomes (e.g. entering and sustaining employment, finding stable housing, preventing a child from going into care, etc.). Social investors provide upfront funding and take the risk, enabling service providers (usually VCFSEs) to offer person-centred and flexible support to help people achieve these pre-agreed outcomes. Once the outcomes are achieved, a subset of these are independently

verified, and the outcomes payer reimburses the investor, including interest for the risk taken. The model’s value lies in its ability to align incentives around shared outcomes and inject new capital from social investors (see Figure 5).

Pioneered in 2010 by Social Finance, the model has grown to over **320 such partnerships in 42 countries**. They range across employment and skills, health and social care, and housing and homelessness amongst other policy areas, and have a rich body of evidence and data behind them.

When designed and implemented effectively, SOPs can offer several important benefits. SOPs help strengthen collaboration across private, public and VCSE sectors, by bringing them together around shared outcomes. These contracts can also enable providers with deep local knowledge to access upfront funding and can unlock new sources of investment for the sector. As funding is premised on outcomes instead of prescriptive inputs or activities, providers have more flexibility to tailor

Figure 5. High-level structure of a Social Outcomes Partnership



12 SOPs are sometimes also referred to as Social Impact Bonds (SIBs) or Social Outcomes Contracts (SOCs).

Section C: Research findings

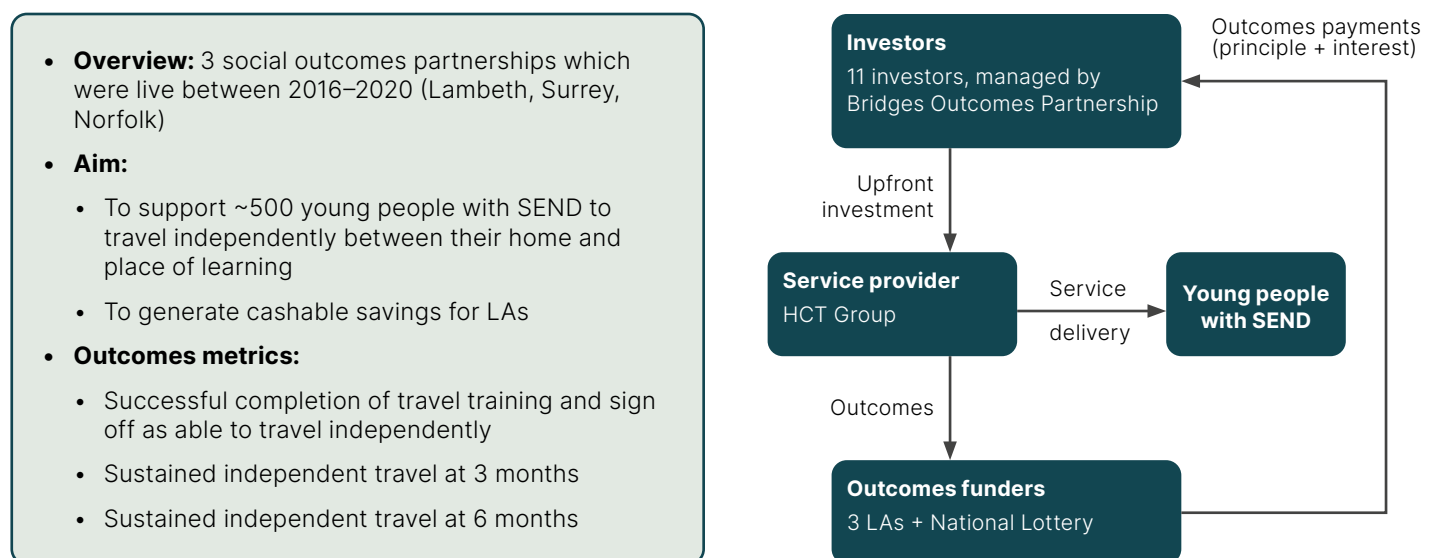
support, adjust delivery in real time and respond to people’s changing needs. In addition, SOPs often encourage a shift towards prevention and early intervention. However, they can also be expensive and time-consuming to design and implement. They are a new way of working and often require greater data collection, reporting and evidencing than fee-for-service or grant programmes.

While SOPs have not yet been used to support advocacy and would need further testing and market readiness support, the three HCT¹³ [Independent Travel Training Social Impact Bonds \(SIBs\)](#) provide relevant examples of SOPs for the sector (please see Figure 6 for an overview). The HCT Independent Travel Training SIBs launched in Lambeth in 2016, followed by Norfolk in 2018 and [Surrey](#) in 2019. The project was designed to help young people with special educational needs or disabilities (SEND) travel independently to school using public transport instead of specialist taxis or minibuses. Under this outcomes-based contract, local authorities only made payments when a young person with SEND successfully completed travel training and was formally signed off as travelling independently to and from school using public transport. Additional payments were linked

to sustaining that independent travel over subsequent school terms. It is important to recognise that the HCT Independent Travel Training SIBs supported people with learning disabilities and/or autistic people in developing only one aspect of their independence. If the sector were to design a social outcomes contract around advocacy, it would take a more holistic approach by potentially incorporating multiple elements of independence as outcomes (e.g. financial support, emotional and mental health support, housing and accommodation, etc.).

More recently, Social Finance has worked in partnership with [Macmillan Cancer Support](#), the NHS, and a range of service providers to pioneer a no or low return variation of SOPs. [Neighbourhood Transformation Funds \(NTFs\)](#) use outcomes-focused social investment to tackle the most pressing social needs in local areas. Two NTFs are currently underway in Lincolnshire and West Hertfordshire, focused on health outcomes such as reducing unplanned admissions for people at risk of frailty. Investments are managed through locally owned Community Interest Companies (CICs) that reinvest savings and attract further funding. For further details, please refer to this [how to guide](#).

Figure 6. Overview of HCT Independent Travel Training SIBs



¹³ HCT Group is a significant social enterprise in the transport industry, providing over 20 million passenger trips on its buses every year across a wide variety of services ranging from community and social services transport to conventional London buses.

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Emerging opportunities

The biggest opportunity we see on the horizon for SOPs is the [Better Futures Fund](#), a £500m outcomes fund focused on supporting children, young people and their families (with an additional £500m expected in match funding) launched by UK Government to support 200,000 children, young people and their families. The Fund is currently in development, with further details expected in summer 2026. There could be opportunities to develop advocacy-related projects, but given the Fund's focus, these would be restricted to children and young people rather than adults.

Through our consultation, we explored whether SOPs could be used in the advocacy sector to help expand funding sources. On balance, we believe this is a **longer-term option** due to the lack of relevant funding (e.g. outcomes funds that focus on relevant cohorts), limited examples to build on, and the support needed to ensure sector readiness. To explore this route, the sector will require support around outcomes design and will need to develop strong governance, financial management, and data reporting systems. We explore some of these considerations below.

Considerations and next steps

Grantees indicated strong interest to explore SOPs as an idea and agreed that dedicated capacity-building and design support would be essential for taking this forward. As part of this consultation, we have done an initial analysis of how the sector could think about applying SOPs to advocacy. We believe that the sector will need to address several considerations including:

- **Balancing 'hard' and 'soft' outcomes:** Our cost-benefit analysis has previously shown which hard outcomes would be relevant for the advocacy sector to demonstrate value for money to government and funders (e.g. step down from hospital care to supported or independent living; preventing a child from entering care; and moving from supported living to independent living). However, we also know that advocacy supports a much wider range of needs for people, many of which would fall under 'soft' outcomes (e.g. improved confidence and wellbeing, better

relationships, and reduced social isolation). [While precedents exist for SOPs that include soft outcomes](#), these are considerably harder to measure and value than hard outcomes. Bringing investors and outcomes payers together on robust outcomes measurement methodology will require extensive consultation and design support. A hybrid outcome measurement methodology such as a 'rate-card'¹⁴ combining hard and soft outcomes may offer a practical path forward. However, a narrowing down of outcomes to a manageable set will be necessary, about which grantees have expressed hesitation. We expect that co-designing this set of outcomes will be the most challenging part of taking the SOPs idea forward.

- **Identifying outcomes payers and investors:** In line with the outcomes identified in our cost-benefit analysis, the NHS and local authorities remain the most suitable outcomes payers for the sector. Despite the compelling financial and moral case for investing in advocacy through outcomes-based funding, engaging local authorities and the NHS remains difficult due to ongoing policy and structural changes and increasing pressure on budgets affecting both. To address this effectively, any design consultations and feasibility studies should account for their commissioning needs and priorities. Additionally, the sector should consider opportunities from Mayoral Combined Authorities as potential investors and commissioners. The sector should consider philanthropic foundations and other mission-aligned investors as potential investors.
- **Capacity and willingness to work in new ways:** Advocacy organisations would need to develop stronger data collection and outcomes reporting, robust financial management and governance, and the ability to collaborate effectively with partners across different sectors.

Figure 7 illustrates the typical lifecycle of a Social Outcomes Partnership, showing the six key stages needed to develop and launch such projects. While each SOP has a different journey, we hope this provides helpful context around what to expect.

There are several resources available which

14 A rate card sets fixed prices for defined outcomes (e.g. a specific payment for supporting a person into employment).

Section C: Research findings

grantees and other advocacy organisations can draw on as part of next steps:

- A map of SOPs across the world is available [here](#) (including detailed information on key organisations involved, outcomes funds, outcomes metrics, etc.).
- Additional technical guidance around designing and pricing outcomes, and procurement can be found [here](#).
- Advocacy organisations can take [this quick quiz](#) to better understand whether a SOP would be a good fit for them.

Figure 7. Lifecycle of a Social Outcomes Partnership



Part 3 Recommendations: What are some of the potential ways of improving the sector's financial sustainability?

- The most practical short-term route to financial sustainability is for the sector to diversify its income through paid partnerships (e.g. with schools, the NHS and universities). Our analysis suggests this is a crucial step in ensuring continuity for grantees and could also create meaningful employment opportunities for experts by experience.
- In parallel, the sector should remain alert to emerging place-based opportunities such as neighbourhood health programmes, TNLCF's Community Wealth Fund, the Community Enterprise Growth Plan, Community Help Partnerships, and collaboration with local community foundations.
- Over the longer term, advocacy organisations could consider trialling social investment approaches such as social outcomes partnerships. The sector is likely to need substantial support around market readiness and outcomes design to explore this route. As part of this consultation, we have done an initial analysis of how the sector could think about applying SOPs to advocacy and included detailed considerations and key resources to guide next steps.



Kerry, an Expert by Experience steering group member, speaking at the launch event for the HSF Advocacy Programme report, "Independent advocacy for independent lives"

Appendices

Appendix 1: List of grantees

Grantee organisation	Geographical coverage	Type of advocacy	Focus cohort
Advocacy Alliance Yorkshire	North Yorkshire: Scarborough & Ryedale	one-to-one support	Adults with learning disabilities and autistic people
Advocacy Service Aberdeen	Aberdeen	one-to-one support; group advocacy	People with learning disabilities and autistic people facing life-changing decisions
Advocacy Support Cymru	South Wales	one-to-one support; other	Adults with learning disabilities and autistic people
Advocacy West Wales	West Wales	one-to-one support	Adults with learning disabilities and autistic people
Brighton & Hove Speak Out	Brighton & Hove	one-to-one support; self-advocacy; group advocacy	Adults with learning disabilities and autistic people
Central Advocacy Partners	Falkirk, Forth Valley	one-to-one support	Adults and young adults age 16+
Coram Voice	London	one-to-one support	Children with learning disabilities and autistic children ineligible for statutory advocacy, who remain living with their birth family
Darlington Association on Disability	Darlington, County Durham	one-to-one support; group advocacy; peer advocacy; self-advocacy	Adults with learning disabilities and autistic people
Disability Advice Service Lambeth (DASL)	South London	one-to-one support; peer advocacy	Adults with learning disabilities and autistic people. Parents with learning disabilities going through child protection procedures
Grapevine Coventry & Warwickshire	West Midlands	one-to-one support; peer advocacy	Adults with learning disabilities and autistic people
Impact Initiatives	East Sussex	one-to-one support	Parents with learning disabilities going through child protection procedures
People First Dorset	Dorset	self-advocacy	Adults with learning disabilities and autistic people looking for support with gaining independence, resilience and long-term planning
People First North Somerset	North Somerset	self-advocacy; group advocacy; peer advocacy; one-to-one support	Young adults (16–25 years of age) with learning disabilities and autistic people
Swindon Advocacy Movement	Wiltshire	one-to-one support; self-advocacy	Adults with learning disabilities and autistic people
Vocal Advocacy	Devon	one-to-one support; peer advocacy; self-advocacy	Adults with learning disabilities and autistic people

Appendix 2: Map of grantees

Geographical distribution of grantees



Appendix 3: List of Advisory Group members

Name	Organisation
Gary Bourlet	Learning Disability England
Rachael Hall	Learning Disability England
Rhona Wilder	Scottish Independent Advocacy Alliance
Suzanne Swinton	Scottish Independent Advocacy Alliance
Elizabeth Tilley	The Open University
Joe Powell	All Wales People First
Harry Clarkson	Speakup
Sally Ferguson	Speakup
Marshall Wilson	Speakup
Vicky Taylor	Speakup
Amy Telford	Speakup
Simone Aspis	Changing Perspectives
Stephen Beyer	Cardiff University
Jabeer Butt	Race Equity Foundation
Gail Petty	NDTi
Madeline Cooper	NDTi

Appendix 4: Kumu map on funding landscape

Our [Kumu map](#) offers grantees a starting point to explore the wider funding landscape and better understand the systems and policy infrastructure present that could financially strengthen independent advocacy organisations supporting people with learning disabilities and/or autistic people. This Kumu presentation includes a series of maps designed to highlight which funders prioritise funding disabilities (including learning disabilities) according to average grant size. It provides a systems view of key funders and government bodies that support charities working with people with learning disabilities and/or autistic people.

Below is a brief description of the two maps included in Figure A1:

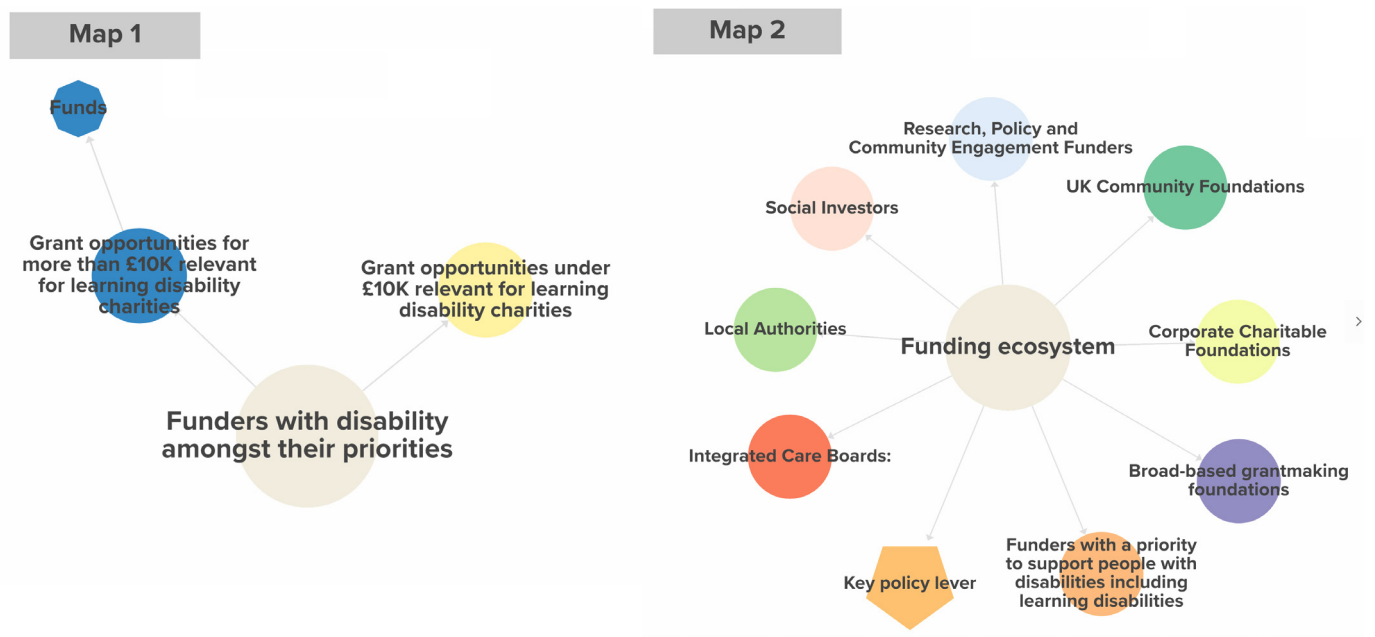
Map 1: This map shows potential funders that could be relevant for advocacy organisations according to average grant size.

Map 2: This map illustrates the current and potential diverse pathways (including key policy levers) through which funding may flow to independent advocacy.

All funders featured in the maps have been categorised by three key broad stakeholder types which are grant makers, public sector commissioners and systems change oriented funders. These have been further subdivided:

- a) Grant-makers are sub-divided according to the nature of their funding, including broad-based grant-making institutions, funders with a strategic priority for supporting people with disabilities (including those with learning disabilities and supporting autistic people), UK Community Foundations, and corporate charitable foundations.
- b) Public sector commissioners are sub-divided between local authorities and Integrated Care Boards (encompassing NHS bodies and regional healthcare partnerships).
- c) Systems change-oriented funders, such as research, policy & community engagement funders, and social investors.

Figure A1. Skeletal diagram of funders and investors



Each node across the maps contains further detail on the respective funder, including key funding criteria, core funding themes, typical grant size, the overall volume of grants awarded annually, and information on previously funded programmes relevant to advocacy work.

To provide users with a high-level overview of the key stakeholders featured across the maps, we developed a skeletal diagram outlining the main categories of funders and investors of potential relevance to advocacy organisations.

Figure A2 presents a selected list of potential funders, organised by average grant size. The funders featured have been selected on the basis that disability-related work (including learning disabilities) is either a core part of their mission, a stated strategic priority, or an area they have previously funded. The map also includes general grant-making institutions of relevance to advocacy organisations. Funders have been divided into two key categories based on average grant size (i.e. those offering grants of £10,000 or more, and those offering grants of under £10,000).

Figure A2. Potential funders by average grant size

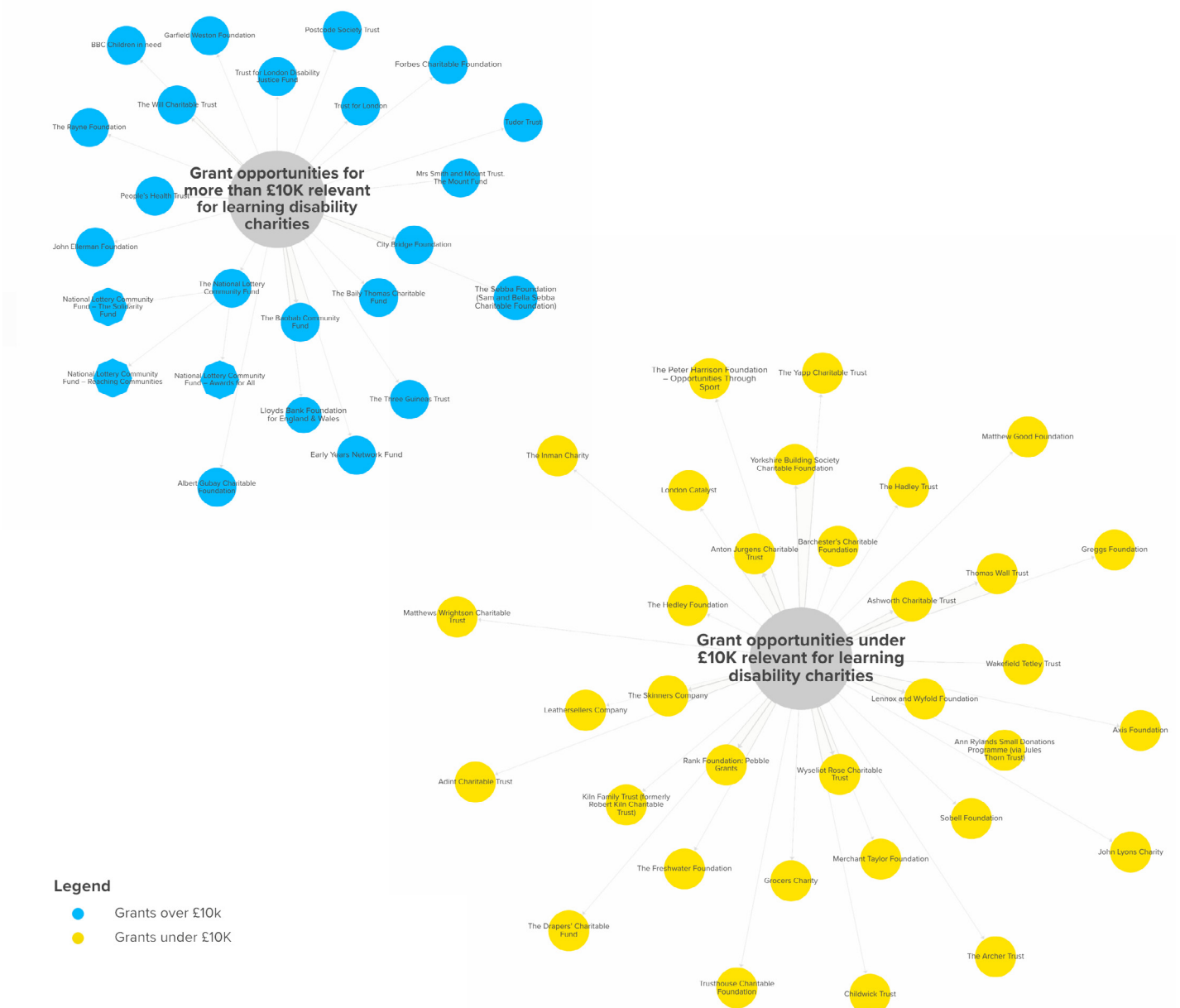


Figure A3. Independent advocacy funding systems map

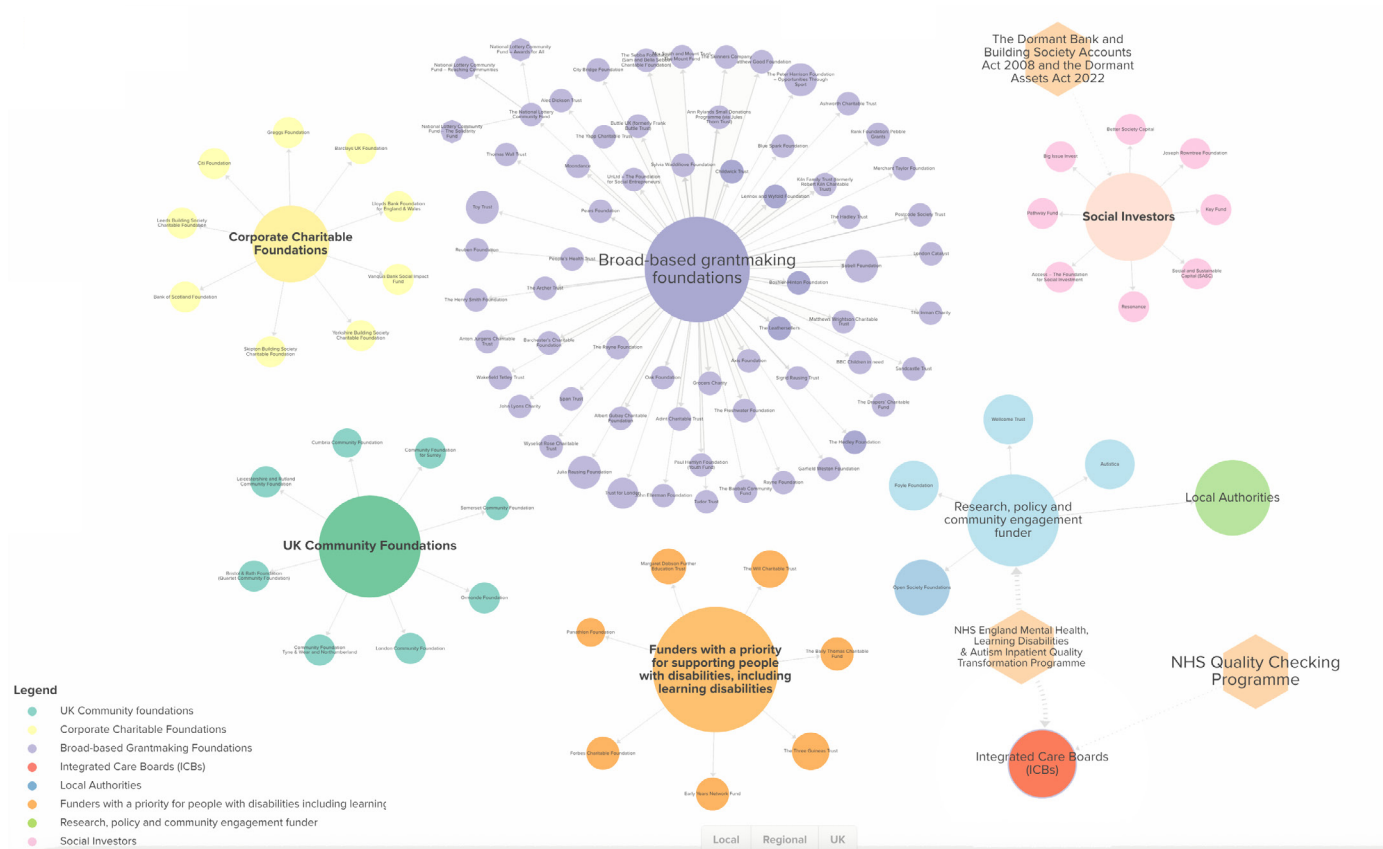


Figure A3 offers a systems-level view of independent advocacy funding, illustrating the current and potential pathways through which funding can flow to independent advocacy organisations, including the key policy levers that shape and influence these funding streams. The funders on this map have also been categorised according to their geographical funding priorities.

Appendix 5: Calculations for national roll-out of independent advocacy services across England

Costs of national rollout	2022 Prices	2025 Prices
Average annual cost of an advocacy service	£53,608	£60,099
Average cost of funding an advocacy service in every area in England	£8,148,379	£9,134,993
Average cost of funding advocacy in England for 5 years	£40,741,894	£45,674,964

Assumptions and data sources	
Average annual cost of funding an advocacy service	This figure has been calculated based on cost estimates and grant values provided by the 15 grantees for delivering independent advocacy service as part of the Henry Smith Advocacy Programme. Generally, costs include staff salaries, overheads, delivery costs, and training costs. These figures have been inflated to reflect 2025 prices.
Number of areas in England	We have calculated a total of 152 areas in England. This cumulative figure includes 62 unitary authorities, 36 metropolitan districts, 33 London boroughs, and 21 county councils. This data is sourced from here .

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