

[Children's Advocacy Services: No more false starts](#)

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On 29 March 2017, the Assembly will debate the Children and Young People and Education Committee's [report of the inquiry into statutory advocacy provision](#) (PDF 519KB), published on 2 February 2017. The [Welsh Government published their response](#) [PDF 87KB] on 22 March 2017.

What is advocacy?

The Welsh Government's 2003 [National Standards for the Provision of Children's Advocacy Services](#) [PDF 498KB] said:

Advocacy is about speaking up for children and young people. Advocacy is about empowering children and young people to make sure that their rights are respected and their views and wishes are heard at all times. Advocacy is about representing the views, wishes and needs of children and young people to decision-makers, and helping them to navigate the system.



There are statutory requirements for local authorities to provide independent advocacy services for looked after children and young people, care leavers and children in need, initially under the Children Act 1989 and more recently incorporated into the Social Services and Well-Being Act (2014).

Latest Welsh Government [statistics](#) provide an indication that 28,105 children were potentially eligible for statutory advocacy services in 2016. Of these 5,660 were looked after children; 3,060 were on the child protection register; and 19,385 were children in need.



Why it's important

The importance of looked after children being able to access independent advocates was elevated when the [Waterhouse Inquiry report](#) (published in 2000) found that the victims of decades of widespread sexual and physical abuse of children in north Wales care homes had not been believed or listened to. It recommended that all looked after children should have access to an independent advocate.

In the [Missing Voices, Right to be Heard](#) report of July 2014, the then Children's Commissioner for Wales said:

There is no starker reminder than the emergence of the fresh allegations of historic abuse in North Wales and the establishment of Operation Pallial and the Macur Review. The current prominence of historic child abuse scandals demonstrates the immediate need to get advocacy right for children and young people today. Advocacy enables us to create a climate where we listen to children and young people, a culture where we can better protect our children. In short, advocacy safeguards children and young people.

The National Youth Advocacy Service told [the Children, Young People and Education Committee](#):

Statutory advocacy is fundamentally a provision to protect and safeguard the most vulnerable children and young people in Wales. We must not lose sight into the history of why advocacy is so critical in Wales which was a direct result of many children being abused whilst in the care of local authorities. The recommendations from Sir Ronald Waterhouse report; "Lost in Care" are still as relevant today as it was in 2000.

Reports since Waterhouse

Between 2003–2014 there have been seven reports setting out concerns about advocacy services and how best to deliver them in Wales.

Between 2008 and 2010, the Children and Young People Committee of the Third Assembly published three reports and made a range of recommendations and repeated calls about the provision of advocacy services for looked after children and other vulnerable groups of children. These can be seen on the National Assembly website:



- 2008 [Report on Advocacy Services for Children and Young People](#) [PDF 683KB]
- 2009: The Committee’s follow up report, [Scrutiny of the developments in the provision of advocacy services to children and young people in Wales](#) [PDF 164KB]
- 2010: The third inquiry report, [Further review of developments in the provision of advocacy](#) [PDF 473KB] included a further 13 recommendations, including about a ‘national model’.

The Children’s Commissioner for Wales was established in 2001, the first in the UK. In 2003, the then Children’s Commissioner published his [Telling Concerns report](#) [PDF 720KB] which included a review of advocacy provision. During the period 2012–2014, the new Children’s Commissioner went on to publish three reports and made a series of recommendations in respect of statutory advocacy services.

- 2012 [Missing Voices – A review of independent professional advocacy services for looked after children and young people, care leavers and children in need in Wales](#); [PDF 833KB]
- 2013: [Missing Voices, Missing Progress](#) [PDF 672KB]
- 2014: [Missing Voices, Right to be Heard](#) [PDF 1.12 MB]

The 2014 report said that the quality and quantity of commissioning of the provision of advocacy services differed markedly between local authorities and:

Without significant change this local model of commissioning is likely to perpetuate the well documented shortcomings of current provision. It is time to move towards a national model of commissioning that would hopefully provide the focus, impetus, and accountability structures that appear to me to be lacking at the moment.

The reports published by the Children’s Commissioner led to work being undertaken by the Welsh Government and a Ministerial Expert Group on Advocacy being established in 2014 to develop a proposal for a **National Approach to Statutory Advocacy Services**.



What the Committee found

The Committee heard that there had been a frustrating and unacceptable delay in agreeing and implementing the National Approach to Statutory Advocacy Services. However, the Committee also heard that progress in agreeing the National Approach was being made during the course of the inquiry. The WLGA said they were sure that local authorities would have an agreed all-Wales approach to commissioning advocacy (the 'National Approach') in place by June 2017. The Cabinet Secretary for Communities and Children, Carl Sargeant said that this was his expectation and he had made it clear that there would be sanctions if there is a failure to deliver.

Implementation of the National Approach had been costed at between £1 and £1.1 million, including an 'active offer'. An active offer is where all children and young people are made aware of advocacy services and how they could access an advocate at the point at which they entered the statutory care system. The Welsh Government had allocated £500–550,000 towards these costs. While recognising the competition for available resources, the WLGA confirmed that there was a level of commitment to finding the remaining funding for the National Model.

The Committee makes eight recommendations in its report, including that the Welsh Government should:

- Monitor and ensure that all local authorities have actively signed up to the National Approach by January 2017;
- Monitor annually local authority expenditure on statutory advocacy services and that it is funded in line with the population needs assessment analysis; and
- Commissions an independent review of progress at the end of the first year of implementation of the National Approach;
- Provide a detailed update to the Committee on progress in implementing the 'National Approach' in June 2017.

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