

Children's Hearings Advocacy Webinar

19 January 2022

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Speaking Notes

It's a real pleasure to join you today. Scottish Ministers recognise the unique value that high quality advocacy can bring to children and young people.

This morning marks 8 months - to the very day - since I was appointed to this wonderful job. One of the best things about being Minister for Children and Young People is meeting the young people I'm here to serve.

It can be tough, but is always worthwhile, to hear direct from young people. Their voices, experiences and ideas need to be central to how to make change, and how we bring forward real improvements.

I was privileged to meet with hearings-experienced young people from the Our Hearings Our Voice Board at one of their weekend meetings back in November.

Uniquely, Our Hearings Our Voice enables us to hear directly from young people still supported by children's hearings.

I am therefore delighted that their work will connect so closely to today's event, and that you will get the chance to hear the Board members' voices later in the webinar.

At that brilliant session back in November, the young people really emphasised the absolute trust that they place in advocacy, and just how high their hopes and ambitions were for the service's further development.

I'll look to see their confidence fulfilled, and that ambition reflected, in the next period of our work together.

Hearing, and responding to, young people's views is especially vital at stressful and uncertain points in their lives where others' decisions can have major impacts. Advocacy workers' support for children not only improves the quality of discussions and decisions, but is essential to children properly understanding, and realising, their rights.

Indeed, Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child states that *“every child has the right to express their views, feelings and wishes in all matters affecting them, and to have their views considered and taken seriously.”*

To deliver on our shared objectives, we rely on commitment from all professionals and volunteers surrounding and supporting the child. Together, we all have a duty to ensure the most vulnerable children in Scotland have a platform for raising their voice, their voices are heard and their needs and wishes are respected and acted upon – while mindful of the overarching need to secure their best interests.

I'm sure you all agree with the sentiment behind those remarks. But delivering on that sentiment – for every child that wants advocacy support – is demanding and complex. Even at the best of times. And of course, the national hearings advocacy scheme was launched in the context of a global pandemic. Covid-19 has posed many profound challenges to all of our public services.

It's to all your credit that throughout the Covid-19 pandemic, children's hearings have continued to take place across Scotland to protect children.

I know there's been huge efforts to adapt long-operated procedures, and that those have happened at pace. My thanks to you all for continuing to respond so positively to the different issues thrown up by the pandemic's various phases.

In supporting those efforts, the Scottish Government introduced extensive emergency legislation in spring 2020, and committed £2 million in new funding to support the full recovery of the Children's Hearing System. This included dedicated 'data and devices' funding last winter for advocacy providers to deploy in support of children.

Today's event is the culmination of years of focused and collaborative improvement activity, involving the full range of system partners.

The work to develop a national practice model that commands wide support and delivers sustainable children's advocacy services has been hugely important. This has taken a lot of time – nearly 8 years from the commencement of the other 2011 Act provisions.

But that investment has served us so well. Testing various approaches across Scotland with a range of providers, authorities and other statutory agencies, checking with children themselves as to their own wishes, has taken us all to the very strong position we've reached now. The high quality standards and principles were heavily influenced by the work that began way back in 2015.

I am pleased we established grant arrangements in 2019-20 with a portfolio of 10 advocacy organisations, giving us Scotland wide coverage.

My thanks to all those who played their part in building this new national provision, and to Beth-Anne who supported my officials in the bid assessment work.

Training for children's advocacy workers was developed and is being delivered as an annual programme by Clan Childlaw.

It was a great achievement when the legislation came into force on 21st November 2020. Children and young people finally had proper support for advocacy for their Hearings through a national scheme.

We can confidently say to Scotland's children and young people that they are entitled to high quality, personalised advocacy support for their children's hearings.

Looking forward, the evidence gathered from implementation phases will also support further policy development with regards to wider advocacy support for care-experienced people, as highlighted in The Promise.

Indeed within 8 months of the scheme starting, we were able to expand the provision to allow the brothers and sisters of children referred to hearings to access advocacy too. New legislation and new funding made all that a reality in July last year.

That the advocacy sector, and the wider system, had earned so much confidence within months of the main scheme starting is so encouraging. Those reforms clearly show the value in your sector's dogged commitment to continuous service enhancement.

Being really serious about reflection, learning and open collaboration are ongoing features of this developing story.

One example is the Children's Hearing Advocacy Expert Reference Group – where professionals discuss and resolve issues, disseminate good ideas and practice, and make strategic decisions on the way forward.

An even better one is the national advocacy providers forming their own network. This has given a precious space for peer support and practice reflection. Escalation to national bodies, including to Government, has only happened where it really needed to. Huge thanks to all who contribute there, and to the inaugural chair Tracey McFall for super leadership up to this point. My thanks also to Selwyn McCausland as he takes on that chair role.

It is clear that Scotland's children need advocacy, and they want it to be there for them.

In the scheme's first six months there were 543 "new" referrals to the national provision. The second six months saw that accelerate to over 700 new referrals.

We know from providers reporting that the numbers of referrals continue to increase. One organisation told my officials this week 'they have gone through the roof'.

We, and you, know there is more to be done. We need to be evidence-led, and nimble, to get provision deployed to where children need us the most.

Looking forward to next year, we want to be in a strong position to bolster resource in some localities where demand patterns already show a higher demand. This especially applies as we ramp up the numbers of hearings to deliver on the Children's Hearing COVID Recovery Plans.

Scottish Government will also be working this year to commission some evaluation research on the scheme. Provider organisations will be closely involved in this work.

That's the big picture. But where your work matters the most, it relies upon a real personal human connection and relationship between a child and their advocacy worker.

That is such an essential part of establishing what each child really wants. I heard loud and clear that need for child-centred thinking from my young colleagues on the Our Hearings Our Voice Board. We need to meet those ambitions if we are to keep the Promise.

I want to close by thanking you all.

For making sure our children and young people have the chance to speak, and for making sure that decision-makers get the chance to hear and to learn.

This vital work is off to a great start, and I am excited to find out what more can be achieved in year two! Enjoy the rest of the webinar.