



Department
for Education

Proposed updates to National Standards & Guidance for the Provision of Children's and Young People's Advocacy Service

Government consultation response

October 2026

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Policy Statement

The *National Standards for the Provision of Children's Advocacy Services* were first published in 2002 and set a benchmark for advocacy provision for looked-after children, children in need and care leavers. These standards were accompanied by statutory guidance *Providing Effective Advocacy Services for Children and Young People Making a Complaint under the Children Act 1989*, published in 2004.

Both documents have been updated and are being published alongside this document which reports on the consultation undertaken by the Department for Education (DfE) on necessary changes to bring both the national standards and the statutory guidance up to date. The consultation undertaken between September and December 2023 invited views on proposed revisions to the 2002 standards and 2004 guidance. DfE received a total of 56 responses: 41 responses via the online consultation survey and 15 responses via email.

The development of the updated national standards and statutory guidance was informed by an Expert Advocacy Group, which DfE established to ensure the updated drafts were informed by views of the sector as well as wider policy development. A series of engagement sessions was held to hear from practitioners, managers, front line professionals, parents, children and young people with personal experience of advocacy and children's social care.

Thank you to everyone who took the time to contribute views based on professional and user experience to the development of and consultation on the draft National Standards and statutory guidance. We are particularly grateful to those who shared their personal experiences and for the considerable time and effort involved in gathering information from a range of sources to inform responses.

Some of the information submitted as part of the consultation made suggestions that are beyond the scope of the standards and statutory guidance. However, the updated versions of National Standards and statutory guidance reflect as far as possible the predominant themes that emerged from the consultation.

Both documents emphasise throughout the key principle that advocates must be independent and speak for the child or young person. Two further principles given greater emphasis are that:

- all children and young people eligible for advocacy services have a right to an advocate if they want one and that such services should be regularly promoted
- advocates have a key role in supporting children and young people who are more vulnerable, especially when they are placed in residential settings

This document summarises the responses received to the public consultation via the online survey, responses sent via email and topics raised at the range of stakeholder events held, including those with children and young people.

Consultation exercise

The consultation was launched on 21 September 2023 and closed on 18 December 2023. It consisted of 25 questions. 17 questions contained a quantitative response format and eight allowed for a qualitative response format. The initial five questions asked for the respondents' details, such as job role and which organisation (if any) on whose behalf they were responding.

The consultation was in two parts: section 1 on proposed updates to the *National Standards for the Provision of Children's Advocacy Services* and section 2 was on proposed updates to *Providing Effective Advocacy Services for Children and Young People Making a Complaint under the Children Act 1989*.

Structural format of this response

We received a total of 56 responses. 41 responses were via the online consultation survey and 15 responses via email.

Percentages reflect responses in the written consultation to multiple choice (quantitative) questions. We also received significant responses to text-based (qualitative) questions, where respondents were invited to share their views.

All responses, barring one, received via email followed the online survey structure and were amalgamated for analysis. The response that did not fit the survey structure has been combined with data where possible, i.e. response type and their views have been analysed as part of the text-based (qualitative) responses.

Profile of respondents

Respondents were able to choose multiple options when stating in what capacity they were responding to the consultation. There were 59 responses to this question. 6 people did not answer this question.

Option	Total	Percent
A child or young person under age 18	0	0.00%
Care leaver up until the age of 25	1	1.53%
Care leaver above the age of 25	0	0.00%
Advocate employed by a Local Authority	6	9.23%
Advocate employed by a charity	6	9.23%
Charity	11	16.92%
Regulation 44 Visitor	1	1.53%
Birth parent	1	1.53%
Local Authority	8	12.30%
Social worker	3	4.61%
Academic	1	1.53%
Prefer not to say	1	1.53%
Other	20	30.76%
Not answered	6	9.23%

20 respondents selected the 'Other' category. We shall use this information to further develop the respondent type categories for any future consultations. Feedback provided by email was amalgamated, where possible, and included in the percentage breakdown.

Methodology

Respondents did not have to answer all the questions and could focus on those relevant to them. This accounts for the differences in the number of respondents for each question.

The consultation generated a variety of opinions. Some questions produced a higher response rate than others. For the multiple-choice questions percentages are based on those who responded to the question to provide a more accurate account of their views.

The following summarises the approach used to analyse consultation responses:

- a thematic analysis supported by data scientists at the Department for Education from the Children's Social Care Analysis and Research team. A large language model (LLM) was used to create theme labels and to provide initial summaries of these themes. The LLM used anonymised data in a secure environment

- analysis of theme labels by the policy team to categorise responses
- a qualitative analysis of respondents' comments on specific standards and the guidance was done to group views expressed and help gauge the extent to which views were shared by multiple respondents or held by relatively few.
- analysis of feedback from consultation events. At the end of each event key themes, and any areas to follow up were identified. Feedback from consultation events was incorporated into the analysis of qualitative information received.
- quantitative analysis where information received in response to multiple choice (quantitative) questions (inclusive of all but one of the responses sent via email).

Stakeholder engagement

Stakeholder engagement was conducted pre and post publication of the Independent Review of Children's Social Care.

DfE held stakeholder events with children and young people, including:

- two engagement sessions facilitated by Article 39
- the Young People's Session at the Amplify event, facilitated by Coram Voice
- the National Youth Advocacy Service (NYAS) campaign advisory group
- two individual consultation events with children and young people, facilitated by Barnardo's and Coram Voice

DfE:

- held a public consultation event, chaired by government officials, where we discussed the aims of the work and hosted a question-and-answer session. The event had twelve attendees joining from a range of organisations and agencies, which included local government, advocacy providers such as Coram Voice, charities including the Children's Society and academics
- engaged individually with colleagues working in local authorities, ranging from Directors of Children's Services to advocacy service managers, advocates and Independent Reviewing Officers
- established the Expert Advocacy Group, comprised of sector experts, including the Office of the Children's Commissioner, who shared their knowledge and advice to inform the revisions to the standards and guidance.

Overview: consultation feedback

Consultation responses indicated overall support for most of the proposed changes to the National Advocacy Standards and statutory guidance. There was broad consensus that the revised standards and statutory guidance are a significant improvement which brings both documents up to date with current advocacy provision, albeit with a need for clarifications in some areas.

Themes from responses included:

- support for broadening the application of the standards to include children and young people who are in receipt of social care services in residential settings (including residential schools and special schools), in secure settings (including children placed by the youth custody service in secure children's homes, secure training centres, youth offending institutions and secure schools).
- support for placing the voice of the children and young people at the centre of the advocacy process, including involving children in service delivery and design of advocacy services
- support for inclusion of the new standard on non-instructed advocacy and the need for clear guidance to support children and young people
- support for the increased focus on the importance of independent provision of advocacy services from local authorities
- support for ensuring advocacy services meet the diverse needs of children
- feedback that the statutory guidance and the National Standards could be aligned more explicitly
- feedback about the need for increased quality and consistency of recruitment and training to improve the quality of advocacy provision, including a desire for an advocacy qualification, accreditation and career framework
- the need for increased funding and capacity within the advocacy workforce to effectively implement the revised standards and guidance.

We split the consultation into two parts: proposal 1 on updates to the National Standards for the Provision of Children's Advocacy Services and proposal 2 was on proposed updates to *Providing Effective Advocacy Services for Children and Young People Making a Complaint under the Children Act 1989*. The response below mirrors that structure.

Proposal 1: Proposed updates to *National Standards for the Provision of Children's Advocacy Services*

Standard 1-3: Children and young people are at the heart of advocacy

- Standard 1: Advocacy is led by the views, wishes and feelings of children and young people.
- Standard 2: Children and young people are active partners in the design, delivery and evaluation of advocacy services.
- Standard 3: Children and young people who may be unable to give instructions on a specific issue have their rights articulated and championed through non-instructed advocacy.

Question 11 asked 'To what extent do you agree that standards 1 to 3 put children and young people at the heart of advocacy?'

There were 55 responses. Respondents were hugely supportive with 95% either strongly agreeing (51%) or somewhat agreeing (44%). 4% somewhat disagreed. 2% did not answer this question.

Question 12 asked 'Do you think there is anything missing from standards 1 to 3?'

There were 55 responses with 60% of respondents saying yes and 31% saying no. 7% did not know and 2% did not answer this question.

Qualitative feedback

There was consensus that advocacy services should be directed and developed with children and young people at the heart of provision and no decision should be made without the views, wishes and feelings of the individual at the centre of the decision-making process.

The main themes from consultation responses on Standards 1 to 3 are summarised below.

- The need for clear definitions of advocacy and entitlements was important: what advocates do and which groups were entitled to advocacy. A recurring theme of respondents was the empowerment of children and upholding children's rights as key to the role of advocates.
- Some respondents wanted to strengthen the language around provision of a proactive offer of advocacy. There was some support for having a named advocate

as some felt it would provide much greater protection for highly vulnerable children and young people.

- There was a consensus of support for children's and young people's active participation in the planning, delivery and evaluation of advocacy services and various suggestions of how this could be implemented effectively. Engagement with children and young people was seen as particularly valuable in consideration of Standard 2.
- There was a broad consensus that the inclusion of the standard on non-instructed advocacy was welcomed but that more clarification was needed on the definition of non-instructed advocacy and the process for decision making as to whom it applies and the threshold for its provision.
- It would be helpful for the standards to emphasise the needs of a wide range of children and young people from diverse backgrounds and with special needs, such as those who are deaf.

Acting on feedback

The wording for Standards 1 to 3 has been strengthened:

- to be explicit that children and young people should be proactively supported to access advocacy where they want it
- to be clear that they should be able to access a named advocate and that they should be encouraged to represent themselves when they want and can do so
- to state that when providing children and young people with relevant information this needs to be done using communication tools that meet their needs
- to be explicit that children who want an advocate should be able to access one wherever they are in the country
- to state that the efforts of providers to gather a range of representative views means including those with special educational needs and disabilities
- by adding additional detail relating to non-instructed advocacy to emphasise that this approach requires particular sensitivity and expertise and that advocacy services should have a means of knowing the size of the cohort who may need non-instructed advocacy.

Standard 4-6: Advocates are professionals who champion children and young people

- Standard 4: Advocates ensure children and young people's views, wishes and feelings are known, understood and considered in decisions. They champion and protect the rights of children and young people.
- Standard 5: Advocates have the values, knowledge, skills, experience, and training to meet these standards. Their conditions of employment, including supervision and continuing professional development, support high quality professional practice.
- Standard 6: Advocacy services are committed to equality of opportunity and inclusion and advocates are recruited from a wide range of backgrounds.

Question 14 asked: 'To what extent do you agree that standards 4 to 6 ensure advocates are professionals who champion children and young people?'

There were 55 responses, and respondents were hugely supportive with 85% either strongly agreeing (42%) or somewhat agreeing (44%). 4% neither agreed nor disagreed and 9% somewhat disagreed. No respondents strongly disagreed and 2% did not answer this question.

Question 15 asked: 'Do you think there is anything missing from standards 4 to 6?'

There were 55 responses with 53% of respondents saying yes and 35% saying no. 9% did not know and 4% did not answer this question.

Qualitative feedback

Respondents broadly welcomed the greater emphasis on the promotion of advocacy and on the recruitment and training of suitably skilled advocates. Respondents broadly felt that the standards that related to training and recruitment could be strengthened further and could better reflect the commissioning services role in advocacy and the different types of advocacy being delivered. For clarity, we have summarised the main feedback received below:

- On recruitment when children and young people felt there should be increased emphasis on lived experience or experience working with care-experienced children and young people. They also highlighted that this may enable children and young people who are care experienced to pursue a career in advocacy. Further guidance and examples of best practice on how advocates can be recruited and trained would help to better represent the communities they serve.

- On advocacy training some responses wanted more specificity, for example, in relation to minimum training standards and accreditation. Suggestions for the knowledge that should be included in training included: legislation relating to disability, SEND; transition to adult services; protected characteristics and the Equality Act; advocacy practice in other parts of the system, e.g. mental health and housing; neurodiversity, learning needs and diverse communication to support those with particular needs, such as disabled children and deaf children, including training in relevant software; trauma-sensitive training/ practice, regular supervision/reflective practice, shadowing opportunities; safeguarding obligations and the professional responsibility to alert regulatory bodies to matters of serious concern relating to children's safety and possible human rights abuses.
- In relation to the promotion of advocacy services respondents broadly welcomed the strengthened role of commissioning organisations, particularly in relation to Standards 4.1, 4.5 and 4.9, as it places more focus on commissioning organisations to deliver quality services. Some felt this could be strengthened further to focus on co-production or through playing a more proactive role in signposting and sharing information about advocacy for children and young people. Others thought that stipulating which professionals should be aware of the role of advocacy to help improve knowledge of the service would be helpful to include.
- On the matter of inclusion, a recurring theme in responses was that the standards should refer to the inclusion of groups such as babies, homeless children, deaf children and disabled children to make clear that they should be able to access advocacy.
- Respondents also fed back that the standards should reflect the different types of advocates, for example, visiting advocacy and the types of institutions they operate in.
- Challenging discrimination was seen as important. Some respondents felt that Standard 6 could be clearer about the need to challenge discrimination, promote anti-oppressive practice and take a more proactive approach to equality and inclusion through monitoring, implementing and reviewing plans to ensure services cater to children and young people from diverse backgrounds.

Acting on feedback

The wording for Standards 1 to 3 has been strengthened:

- to be explicit that children and young people should be proactively supported to access advocacy where they want it
- to be clear that they should be able to access a named advocate and that they should be encouraged to represent themselves when they want and can do so
- to state that when providing children and young people with relevant information this needs to be done using communication tools that meet their needs
- to be explicit that children who want an advocate should be able to access one wherever they are in the country
- to state that the efforts of providers to gather a range of representative views means including those with special educational needs and disabilities
- by adding additional detail relating to non-instructed advocacy to emphasise that this approach requires particular sensitivity and expertise and that advocacy services should have a means of knowing the size of the cohort who may need non-instructed advocacy.

Standard 7-10: Advocacy services are independent, high quality and managed well

- Standard 7: Advocacy services are independent and accessible. They operate to the highest level of confidentiality and ethical practice.
- Standard 8: Advocacy services have an easy-to-use complaints procedure which ensures children and young people are listened to, their concerns are taken seriously, and they understand the outcome. Advocacy services are transparent and open when things go wrong.
- Standard 9: Advocacy services have effective safeguarding and whistleblowing arrangements.
- Standard 10: Advocacy services are well-managed and effective. They have sufficient resources to meet the needs of children and young people and are used effectively.

Question 17 in the consultation asked: ‘To what extent do you agree that standards 7 to 10 ensure advocacy services are independent, high quality and managed well?’

There were 55 responses, and respondents were hugely supportive with 82% either strongly agreeing (31%) or somewhat agreeing (51%). 7% neither agreed nor disagreed

and 7% somewhat disagreed. 2% strongly disagreed and 2% did not answer this question.

Question 18 in the consultation asked: ‘Do you think there is anything missing from standards 7 to 10?’

There were 55 responses with 60% of respondents saying yes and 25% saying no. 9% did not know and 5% did not answer this question.

Qualitative feedback

Responses were broadly supportive of these standards. Respondents liked that there was a sharper focus on independence and welcomed the inclusion of the new standard for whistleblowing and safeguarding. There was a range of views on how to strengthen these standards. The main themes emerging are summarised below.

Respondents expressed a diverse range of views about the **structure of these standards**. Some did not welcome the combination of safeguarding and whistleblowing in the same standard and said there should be separate standards on independence, accessibility, data protection and confidentiality. Others thought that a sensible structure would be to detail standards that apply to providers and those that apply to commissioning bodies.

Responses on **safeguarding and whistleblowing arrangements** wanted more detail and clarity to:

- stipulate the advocacy service has a published policy that highlights that employee whistleblowing is a vital part of the advocacy organisation meeting its safeguarding obligations and to include explicit reference advocate’s responsibilities to escalate safeguarding concerns
- make explicit that advocates should be mindful of settings where children and young people may be more at risk of being subject to institutional abuse and being clear that procedures should clearly set out when advocacy services will alert regulatory bodies for any serious concerns relating to institutional harm, institutional racism etc.
- set expectations for the availability of independent support to advocates who wish to make whistleblowing complaints and measures for protecting employees from victimisation to be set out in the advocacy service’s published policy.

The independence of the advocacy service was crucial to ensure confidence in it. To this end the following views came across strongly in the development of the standards and in consultation responses:

- children and young people highlighted that it was essential for their advocate to be independent so that they knew they were on your side
- respondents felt that this standard needed to: be clear that advocacy services work exclusively for children and young people and that training and protocols across organisations embedded the principle that advocacy services operate independently of other services.

A strong theme highlighted in responses about advocacy delivered to children and young people in **residential settings** and by **visiting advocates** was concern that there should be a separate standard for visiting advocates.

There was significant objection to the inclusion of proposed standard 7.23 "Advocacy services should not use public funds in order to undertake activities intended to influence or attempt to influence parliament, government or political activity; or attempt to influence legislative or regulatory action or petition for additional funding." Respondents thought this standard would prohibit policy development for the future of advocacy and was inconsistent with the values and purpose of advocacy services. There was a suggestion that this could be amended to enable advocacy services to carry out such activities as described but make clear that this should be from the perspective of political impartiality and solely for the purpose of the advancement of children's rights.

In response to Standard 10, there was broad support for an **outcomes framework** from respondents to support service management.

Acting on feedback

Proposed additional groups of children and young people being brought in scope of the standards.

The following amendments to Standards 7 to 10 take account of consultation responses:

- We have retained the structure of ten Standards to keep the number manageable and so that it is clear they apply to commissioners and providers.
- The important principle that advocacy services should be independent and accessible is already at the heart of Standard 7. We have strengthened the wording around what the advocacy service independence statement should include to include a reference to how advocates can escalate concerns.
- Standard 9 includes additional wording about empowering children and young people to raise complaints and uncover coercive cultures and institutional abuse. The wording of Standard 9.10 has been strengthened to make explicit that the advocacy service's published policy on whistleblowing should be clear that raising concerns will not result in victimisation.
- Standard 7.23 proscribing advocacy services from using public funds to undertake activities that attempt to influence parliament and government or petition for additional funding has been dropped.
- We have emphasised the important role of visiting advocates as part of an integrated approach to service provision.

Question 20 of the consultation asked 'Do you agree with the proposed additional groups of children and young people being brought in scope of the standards?'

There were 55 responses, and respondents were hugely supportive with 89% either strongly agreeing (56%) or somewhat agreeing (33%). 4% neither agreed nor disagreed and 4% somewhat disagreed. No one strongly disagreed and 4% did not answer this question. There was strong consensus that respondents supported the broader application of standards to new groups in the standards. Respondents felt this should be broadened further to include other groups.

Acting on feedback

The response to consultation, we have:

- We have clarified the groups of children and young people to which these Standards apply.

Proposal 2: Proposed updates to *Providing Effective Advocacy Services for Children and Young People Making a Complaint under the Children Act 1989*

Question 22 of the consultation asked ‘To what extent do you agree with the proposed revisions to the guidance?’

There were 55 responses, and respondents were supportive with 80% either strongly agreeing (40%) or somewhat agreeing (40%). 7% neither agreed nor disagreed and 4% somewhat disagreed. 2% strongly disagreed and 7% did not answer this question.

We asked, **‘Question 24: Is there anything missing from the revised guidance?’**

There were 55 responses with 53% of respondents saying yes and 31% saying no. 9% did not know and 7% did not answer this question.

Qualitative feedback

There was broad consensus from respondents that the guidance was a significant improvement on the current guidance but that further revisions were required to improve the content and structure of the guidance. The main themes highlighted are as follows.

- Some respondents wanted to see a more explicit relationship between the guidance and the National Standards.
- Respondents thought that section on complaints in the early part of the document should come later in the guidance to indicate that complaints are a subset of advocacy activity and not the most important part. Some respondents felt that the guidance was clearer than the standards, to reflect its more specific remit.
- There was also feedback that the document should be restructured to provide clarity to the reader of the different types of advocates and the types of institutions they operate in.
- Some respondents wanted more clarity on how advocacy was defined, the role of the advocate, who has an entitlement to advocacy and which groups the guidance applies to.
- A number of respondents wanted more clarification on wording to emphasise that advocacy should be available to children whenever they want to access it rather

than solely when they wish to make a formal complaint. Some respondents also highlighted that further information on escalation routes would be a helpful inclusion as well as setting an expectation that local authority complaints procedures should aim to be child-friendly and to be shared with children and young people as standard practice.

- Respondents fed back that they wanted more clarity on how advocacy supported systemic reform e.g. use of annual reports to highlight improvements and the interplay between advocates and other professionals such as IROs and Regulation 44 visitors. Respondents wanted more emphasis on promoting the independence of the advocacy role to embed this principle within advocacy services and commissioning bodies was needed.

Acting on consultation responses the main changes made to the guidance are as follows:

- The guidance has been restructured to emphasise that children and young people must be at the heart of advocacy. The material on complaints, which was at the front of the draft guidance is now at the back to convey the message that children who want an advocate can access one at any time and not just if they want to make a complaint.
- To bring out the relationship between the guidance and updated National Standards more closely we have included references to the relevant standards at the beginning of each section of the guidance.
- A summary of key messages in the guidance, useful definitions, main changes made to the 2004 guidance and to whom the guidance applies is formatted at the beginning of the document to make essential points more accessible 'at a glance'.
- Text boxes have been used throughout the guidance to emphasise key messages, for example, when advocacy should be offered to children and young people, the importance of giving them choice, the role of the advocate, what advocacy training can include, and the importance of providing reassurance to children and young people about the independence of advocacy services. The guidance also uses text boxes to give emphasis to relevant regulations (1991 and amended in 2004) for monitoring and reporting and relevant material on safeguarding and information sharing and acting on concerns.



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