

## INTRODUCTION | What is Advocacy?

*“Advocacy is about speaking up for children and young people and ensuring their views and wishes are heard and acted upon by decision-makers.”* (Get it Sorted Guidance, Department for Education and Skills, 2004)

The Children Act 1989 (Section 26A) gives children in need, looked after children and care leavers a statutory right to advocacy support when young people are wishing to make a complaint or representation to the local authority. Revisions to the Children Act statutory guidance also support young people’s right to access more general advocacy support. The Young Lives Foundation Advocacy Service observes that many children and young people seek advocacy support without wishing to make a formal complaint.

- **Care Leavers: Planning Transition to Adulthood for Care Leavers 2010** | Emphasises that independent advocacy can be particularly valuable at times when important decisions are being made about a child’s readiness to leave care and during significant transition periods.
- **The IRO Handbook 2010** | Before every review, the IRO should ensure that the child is aware of their right to an advocate and that they understand how to access one, and the role that they can play.
- **Care Planning, Placement and Case Review 2010** | Consideration must be given to securing the support of an advocate if a child has difficulty expressing their wishes and feelings about decisions being made for them.
- **National Minimum Standards for Fostering Services 2011 and National Minimum Standards for Children’s Homes 2011** | The National Minimum Standards emphasises that children should be supported to obtain an advocate if they would like help to express their wishes, feelings and views in statutory reviews.

## YLF’S ADVOCACY SERVICE

YLF provides the Advocacy Service on behalf of Kent County Council under the Representation, Rights and Advocacy Contract. Under this contract advocacy support is provided for children in care, care leavers and children in need as well as non-statutory advocacy for child protection conferences and family group conferences

During the first 15 months of delivery, the Advocacy Service received almost double the number of referrals initially anticipated. This was partly due to the addition of non-statutory advocacy services to the contract for the first time for which referral numbers could not be predicted, as well as the sudden increase in number of children entering care during the summer of 2015.



Making a Difference

As a result, YLF and KCC reviewed the referral pathways for non-statutory advocacy. From 1<sup>st</sup> September 2016 all referrals for non-statutory advocacy (child protection and family group conference) are now required to be presented to KCC Access to Resources Panel for approval before being referred to the Advocacy Service. The service has since recorded a dramatic decline in non-statutory advocacy referrals.

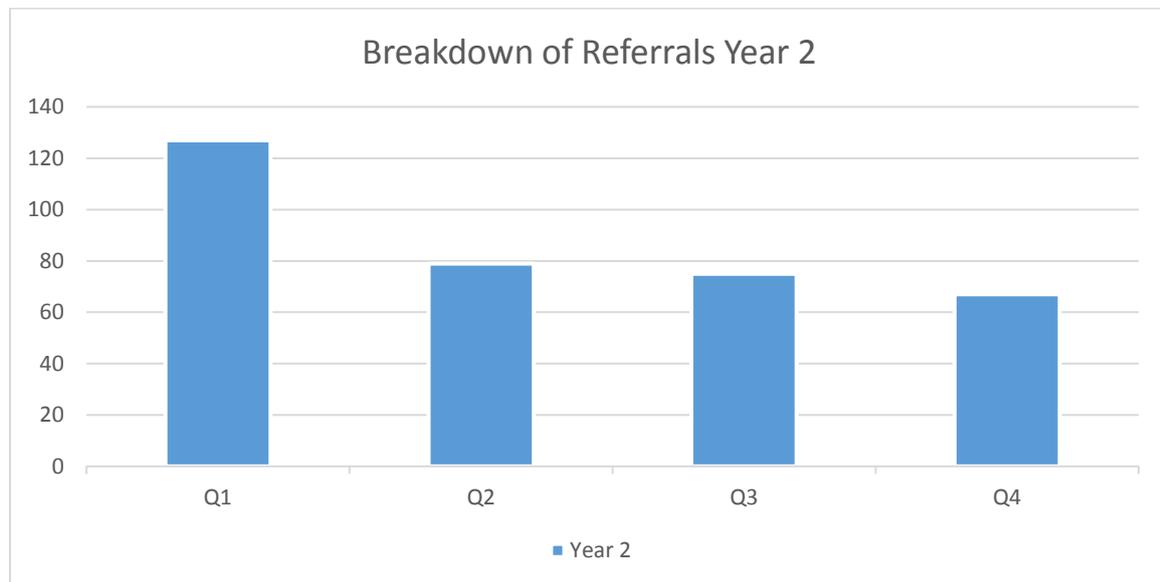
Advocacy at the Young Lives Foundation is 'issue-based', meaning the advocacy intervention is intended to be short term advocacy and focuses on specific agreed issues raised by the young person until resolved, or until all possible support has been exhausted within the advocacy role. Frequently young people raise multiple or additional issues, which are particularly complex requiring advocacy support for a longer period of time.

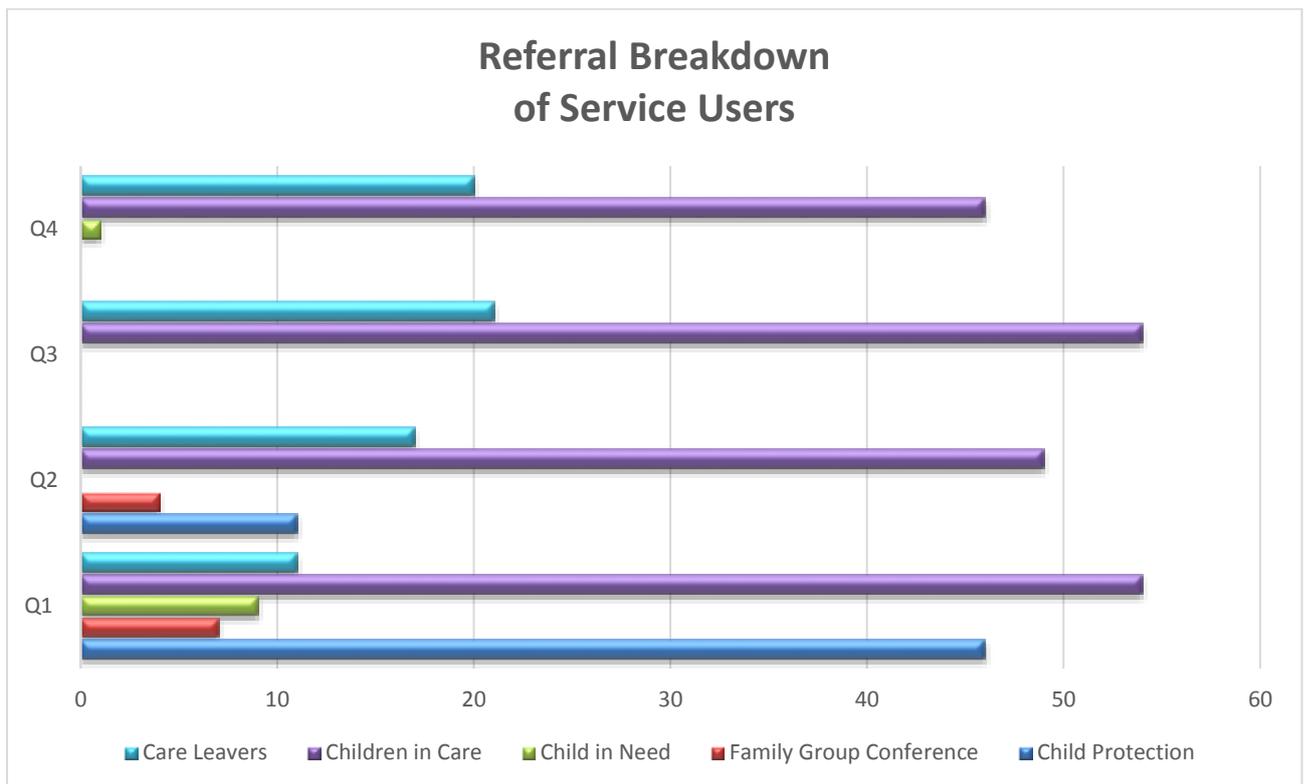
### The Advocacy Team

The advocacy team at the Young Lives Foundation comprises an Advocacy Manager, Advocacy Officer and 9 Advocates who are based across the county.

The advocacy team holds a wealth of experience in providing independent advocacy to children and young people as well as experience and knowledge in teaching, mental health social work, fostering, adoption and therapeutic counselling.

### OUTPUTS 2016/17





## Main Issues Presented by Young People April 2016 - March 2017

### Education

A significant number of young people sought advocacy support in October 2016 for issues relating to their education. Young people reported not having received support to access education which included support to identify courses of interest, attend college interviews and enrolment days, and support with travel arrangements.

Young people reported receiving inconsistent support and advice from their social workers regarding payment of travel warrants and agreement regarding the location of college being attended.

Several young people advised they had enrolled themselves at colleges outside of Kent for fear of missing out on the academic year. Young people informed the service they were confused by the system and felt there was a lack of clarity and consistency with advice being offered i.e. being informed that travel to college would be funded and then that offer being withdrawn. This led to several young people using their weekly subsistence money to be able to continue at their college placements.

### Placement

Placement issues are consistently raised by young people as something they require advocacy support to resolve. The service has supported young people to understand the availability of

Children's Services accommodation and assisted them in understanding their rights and entitlements whilst managing their expectations. However, support to move placement remains a top issue as does wishing to remain in placement.

The Advocacy Service has received several referrals this year where young people have raised concerns about the standard of their accommodation, such as heating, bedding, cleanliness and the behaviour of other young people placed within the accommodation.

### **Finance**

Young people have raised a variety of issues relating to finance that they have required support from the Advocacy Service to raise on their behalf. This included facing problems being able to receive their education bursaries which it had been advised could be used for travel to college. One barrier facing young people in receiving bursaries directly was the young people's inability to open a bank account without formal ID.

Issues have also been raised relating to difficulties accessing savings held by the local authority, requests for financial support to be able to access places of religious worship and not receiving regular subsistence money.

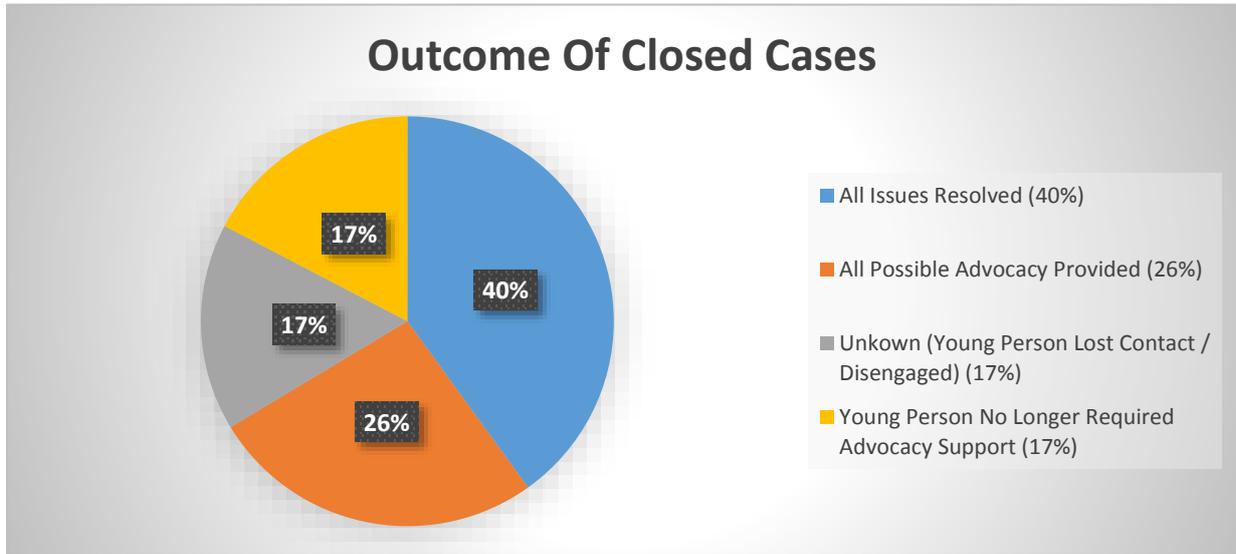
### **Trends, Themes and Sharing of Information**

The trends and themes identified by the Advocacy Service are reported to Children's Services at quarterly performance reviews and via on-going dialogue. Proactive communications on trends as they emerge with Children's Services as a preventative approach can help inform practice and reduce the probability of other young people experiencing similar issues.

Feedback gathered from young people is also shared with Children's Services to help inform practice. The recent sharing of information and feedback between the Advocacy Service and Complaints Team has been particularly successful in identifying areas of improvement and led to a more successful approach in achieving early resolutions to complaints, and positive outcomes.

## **OUTCOMES**

Independent advocacy can greatly improve a young person's experience in care by supporting them to express their wishes and views to professionals and have them taken into consideration during decision making processes. When this happens effectively the Young Lives Foundation has observed that young people's relationships with professionals can greatly improve, as can their positivity about their futures and willingness to engage in services, thus promoting positive futures.



### Feedback from Young People

*'Thank you so much for your help, I'm happy where I am and things are going well'*

*'Although I haven't got the decisions that I wanted I am glad that I went through the process and thank you for all your help and support'*

*'I have found your service really helpful and accommodating throughout and I feel you went above and beyond to help, for that I am really grateful, I didn't get the result I wanted from the complaint but having support made the whole thing less daunting and challenging'*

*'Thank you so much, I really appreciate what you did'*

*'Thank you so much for helping me and getting me to the Refugee Council, I'm going to keep your number in case I need help again, thank you so much'*

*'Thank you for signposting me to the right place even though I know you couldn't help me'*

*'Sorry I forgot to call you and say to you everything was good after the complaint and I am getting on better with my social worker'*

*'Thank you so much for your support I will call you in the future if I need help again'*

*'My advocate was excellent to get hold of'*

## CASE STUDIES

### Case Study 1

A young person aged 14 was referred for advocacy support by another agency because the young person expressed that his wishes and feelings were not being heard, he refused to attend education in the area in which he was in a foster placement and wanted to move and live in London.

During face to face discussion between the Advocate and young person, and with the use of an interpreter, the Advocate gained the young person's wishes and feelings, which included how his experiences led to having nightmares, and frequent absconding from the placement; the young person wished for all professionals to have a meeting with him to discuss how he was feeling so that he felt that he was being heard.

During the meeting, it was clear that the young person couldn't at this time see the benefits to living in his present placement area, but professionals tried to reassure him that he was well looked after at his placement, and to give a little more time to settle in, and to engage with education first.

The young person felt listened to, and agreed to try and give things more time; he engaged again with the Advocacy Service for his Child in Care meeting; and once again gave his views. At this stage the young person's use of English language was much improved and he didn't feel the need to use an interpreter; the young person said that he loved his school, and enjoyed it, and now had friends, and spoke positively about his placement, where he felt settled and happy. He expressed that he understood the differences in the area he was living in, in comparison to London. His nightmares had subsided, and life was looking more positive for him.

This young person is so confident now, he will likely be presenting his views direct in the next CIC Meeting.

### Case Study 2

A young person aged 13 was referred to the Advocacy Service by their Social Worker for advocacy support at a Child Protection Conference. At the point of referral the young person was under a Child Protection Plan under the category of neglect due to the physical abuse of their siblings taking place in the family home.

Due to the nature of the advocacy issue and age of the young person, an Advocate was allocated to meet with the young person to provide face to face advocacy support. The young person told their Advocate that they wanted support at meetings so they knew what information was being discussed and the decisions that were being made.

The young person initially lacked confidence to be able to speak openly and honestly to the Social Worker or Child Protection Chair. With the support of the Advocate the young person's involvement during the conference increased to the point they became fully involved and were able to present and share their feelings about what was happening and what they would like to happen moving forward.

During the process the allocated Social Worker kept in regular contact with the young person and Advocate enabling the relationship between the young person and Social Worker to strengthen and the young person to continue to feel empowered to speak for themselves.

A Family Group Conference was held for the family, during which the young person was assisted by the Advocate in ensuring their input was heard which allowed the young person to be heard by their family and contribute to the Family Plan. The Conference was considered a success by Children's Services and the family's case was subsequently closed.

The young person fed back to the Advocacy Service that they rated their satisfaction with the advocacy support provided as ten out of ten and their satisfaction with the outcome of the support as ten out of ten.

### **Case Study 3**

A young person aged 10 was referred to the Advocacy Service by an Independent Fostering Agency. The referral information cited that the young person would struggle to communicate effectively over the telephone so an Advocate was allocated who met with the young person face to face to ascertain and confirm the issues they required support with.

The young person had been moved from an Independent Fostering Agency placement to a Local Authority placement without an education placement having been planned or agreed in advance. This resulted in the young person being out of education for several months. The young person asked their Advocate to share their request to continue to stay at the new placement and also to be found an education placement as soon as possible.

The Advocate communicated the issues raised on behalf of the young person with the allocated Independent Reviewing Officer and Social Worker. The young person did not feel satisfied with the response from Social Services which did not indicate expected timescales for a placement to be identified or further action taken to address the issue.

The young person requested to make a complaint about their lack of education provision and requested support to address further issues relating to lack of contact with his family.

Following support to raise their wishes and feelings via the complaints process and supporting the young person at their Looked after Child Review, all of the issues were successfully resolved within a timely manner.

The young person went on to pass the Kent Test and attend Grammar School and was content with the planned contact arrangements with their family.

#### **Case Study 4**

A young person was referred to the Advocacy Service by his mentor requesting urgent help. The young person referred had sustained an injury the previous week which had become infected and was causing increasing pain. When contacted by the Advocacy Service with an interpreter the person explained that he developed a fever and his injury had swollen so he was unable to move properly. The young person had previously attempted to contact social services but nobody had been able to answer. The young person said he could not walk to hospital himself and had no money to be able to call a taxi.

The Advocacy Service contacted the Children's Services Duty Administrator immediately with the safeguarding concern to raise the issue and request support on his behalf.

Following this communication Children's Services called an ambulance for the young person and he was transported to hospital. The Advocacy Service provided a follow up call during which the young person advised that because of the language barrier he could not understand anyone at the hospital or what was happening. The Advocacy Service agreed to forward this information to his Social Worker.

Several days later the young person contacted the Advocacy Service to say thank you for the support offered, he also confirmed that he was feeling better and was receiving ongoing medication.