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'They seem to listen more now I have an advocate': A study into the implementation of parental advocacy in Wales

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Abstract

Parental advocacy is an emerging area of research and policy interest in Wales and across the UK. Although there is little research in the UK context to date, international research has indicated that parental advocacy can improve the relationship between parent and professional in the field of child protection social work. It is important that research ascertains how the implementation of parental advocacy programmes support parents to play a meaningful role in decision-making when children's services are working with them and their families.

This **small-scale** study used interviews, surveys, and focus groups to obtain qualitative data from eighteen parents, seven parent advocates, two advocacy managers, and four social workers, in order to explore the potential impact of parental advocacy on decision-making. The study identified challenges in implementing parental advocacy, particularly relating to awareness of the service. Participants also discussed experiences of the child protection system and how parents are supported by advocates. Despite challenges surrounding implementation, initial findings were encouraging, and generated examples of how parental advocacy services have helped parents to understand children's services and develop relationships of trust with social care professionals. **In doing so, this study provides provisional results which identify potential mechanisms that may be useful to support future service delivery and the need for further exploration in this area.**

Keywords: Parental advocacy; user participation; child services; child protection.

Teaser text

This paper presents findings from an ongoing study in one region of Wales, into the perceived impact of parental advocacy on parents whose families have child protection social work involvement and the professionals they work with. The paper explores how parents are supported by parent advocates and considers their experiences of children's services. In doing so, the paper draws on data from interviews, qualitative surveys, and a focus group which comprised parents, social workers, and parent advocates. Our initial findings are encouraging, highlighting the ways in which parental advocacy has helped parents to develop better relationships with the social care professionals they work with, in addition to helping to improve their understanding of children's services and child protection processes.

1. Introduction

Research has consistently highlighted parents' experiences of distrust and poor relationships with social workers (Diaz, 2020; Featherstone et al., 2017; Gibson, 2017). Parents purportedly found key child welfare meetings such as child protection conferences (CPCs) to be particularly challenging, as they felt unable to participate in decisions about their lives, which left them feeling marginalised and disempowered (Diaz, 2020). In turn, this impacted their willingness to seek help from social workers, and to accept help when it is offered.

Engagement of, and partnership with parents has long been recognised as a crucial component of social work, enshrined in law and policy, and identified as an effective way of helping children and families (Horwitz and Marshall, 2015; Sankaren, 2015). Cohen and Canan (2006) suggested that engagement is an important element of any service provision, because without this, the service could not fulfil one of its key tasks: to help families function better, and when possible, safely keep children with their parents. Research has shown that failure to engage or comply increases the chances of child protection proceedings being initiated (Devine, 2017). Thus, engagement has important legal and ethical components, in addition to the hypothetical claim that it will improve outcomes.

Among social workers, there has been consensus that parental engagement and partnership working is valuable (Corby et al., 1996; Darlington et al., 2010). The participants interviewed by Darlington et al. (2010) all agreed that parents' participation in complex child protection social work, including decision-making, was important ethically and was vital to improving outcomes for children.

Whilst there is currently a paucity of research on parental advocacy in Europe/[UK], some research has been conducted on this topic in the USA. For instance, Tobis et al. (2020) have shown that effective parental advocacy reduced the numbers of children entering state care. Further, for families with children in state care, studies have shown children of programme participants involved in parental advocacy or peer parental advocacy programmes to be more likely to return home than non-participants and parent advocacy was shown to impact decisions around child placements and improve family outcomes (Lalayants et al., 2021; Chambers et al., 2019). This research paper consequently seeks to fill a gap by exploring the topic of parental advocacy with the UK context.

There are different types of parental advocacy, this includes 'professional' advocates advocating for parents; these are advocates independent of local authorities and social services and who have undertaken training and often, obtained qualifications relevant to child welfare to support parents. Another type of parental advocacy is peer parental advocacy, whereby someone with lived experience of the child protection system advocates on behalf of another parent. The vast majority of studies carried out to date relate to peer parental advocacy (Berrick et al., 2011; Lalayants, 2012, 2015; Rockhill et al., 2015).

Whilst UK research on non-peer parental advocacy is scant, Featherstone et al. (2011) undertook an evaluation of a UK-based non-peer parental advocacy service run by the Family Rights Group. The study found that the advocates positively impacted partnership working between parents and professionals. The study also highlighted the lack of political agenda concerning the development of advocacy schemes for parents who are often left unsupported as they try to navigate complex social work processes.

This paper uses the term 'Parent Advocate' (PA), elsewhere referred to as or peer advocate and parent partner.

2. The Potential of Parental Advocacy

Parental advocacy models have emerged in order to address the marginalisation of parents when navigating complex child welfare systems. Key distinctions can be delineated between peer advocacy approaches and professional advocacy models. For example, peer advocacy programmes engage parents who have previously navigated child protection systems, to mentor and support families currently involved with children's services (Berrick et al., 2011). These peer mentors draw strongly on the power of shared lived experiences when relating to families and building trust. Activities centre on emotional encouragement, tangible assistance in meeting basic needs, informational support in explaining bureaucratic processes, insider strategies for effective participation, motivational coaching regarding

goals, such as reunification, and accompaniment to meetings, to represent parent perspectives (Berrick et al., 2011; Frame et al., 2010).

Various peer models exist, including peer recovery coaches who support the reunification of parents in substance use recovery; volunteer mentors who deliver individualized guidance; group forums which facilitate mutual learning in non-judgmental environments; and representations by parents who are experienced in child welfare conferences and legal proceedings (Berrick et al., 2011; Lalayants, 2021; Marcenko et al., 2010). Research into peer parental advocacy in the United States has identified it as a *'new and significant evidenced-based strategy for supporting families'* (Berrick et al., 2011, p. 9) that *'represents a new way of doing business'* (Frame et al., 2010, p.3). It has the potential to create a *'paradigm shift'* (ibid, p.2) that *'questions the centrality of professionally driven case planning'* (Sears et al., 2017, p.80), potentially leading to more shared decision-making and improved relationships between professionals and families.

Parents in Berrick et al.'s (2011) study reported that their PA functioned as an intermediary figure between them and services, especially in translating social work jargon and courtroom terminology. This finding was echoed in Lalayants' study, in which parents described their peer mentors as being able to *'speak their language'*, literally and figuratively, and *'explain things in a way that they could understand'* (2012, p.35). Berrick et al. (2011) concluded that parents received emotional, material, and practical support from their PAs. The PAs often had a comprehensive understanding of the available resources and support services, having needed to access these previously themselves. The authors note that it might not just be the emotional and practical support, but also *who* provides that support, which is a key ingredient. Peer PAs have been shown to help parents improve their knowledge about resources and support, understand their rights, advocate for themselves, and increase their social support, which are all key to promoting better outcomes for families (Frame et al., 2010; Lalayants, 2015; Thorpe, 2007; Watson et al., 2010; Haworth et al. 2023; Fitz-Symonds et al. 2023). In this way, PAs are intended to complement, and not replace, social worker support (Leake et al., 2012).

Common principles coalesce around empathy and empowerment to make systems more collaborative and family-driven, suggesting a promising approach in improving the relationship between professionals and families (Bohannon et al., 2016; Lalayants, 2014, 2017; Rockhill et al., 2015; Trescher and Summers, 2020). However, translating aspirational ideals into equitable practices remains challenging within resistant bureaucracies, whilst issues surrounding role clarity exist (Featherstone et al., 2018; Lalayants, 2015).

Professional advocacy encompasses those models in which advocates work independently from statutory services to represent parents' interests (Lalayants, 2017). Activities include translating information into accessible language, providing emotional support, advising on rights and responsibilities, attending meetings, and promoting participation in decision-making (Featherstone & Fraser, 2012; Tobis et al., 2021). Professional advocates import knowledge of navigating bureaucracies and upholding dignity amidst stigma (Collings et al., 2018). In addition to the advantages bestowed upon parents, through receiving advocacy, benefits to social workers have also been noted.

It has been reported that the PA facilitates engagement between social workers and parents and increases empathy between social workers and parents (Heubner et al., 2018; Lalayants, 2012; Leake et al., 2012; Sears et al., 2017). Lalayants' (2017) study examined perceptions of partnership between child protection workers and PAs. Among the 30 supervisors and 9 advocates interviewed, most social workers described their relationship with PAs positively. However, some social workers did not fully understand the role and purpose of the advocate. Some PAs believed that social workers were fixed in their judgement of a family, thereby hindering collaboration. Finally, some PAs thought that some

social workers preferred the 'old' way of working, which did not promote participation. Lalayants (2017) highlighted that whilst family engagement is highly desirable, agencies still struggled to share power and decision-making with parents.

Actualising rights-based principles whilst resources are limited poses a dilemma in itself. Independence also requires negotiation, as complete separation may inhibit constructive collaboration with authorities. There remains a need to ground aspirational professional advocacy ideals within lived experiences. For example, Collings et al. (2016) found advocates enabled more inclusive decision-making but faced dilemmas balancing independence versus collaboration with authorities. Morris et al. (2018) noted that advocates increased parents' system understanding, but that adversarial legal structures continued undermining social work aims.

Overall, while different models have proliferated, the majority focus has been on peer or paraprofessional approaches (Tobis et al., 2021), with limited United Kingdom centric evidence on professional advocacy models. When examining the UK policy landscape, some alignment emerges between participatory reforms and parental advocacy goals. For instance, Family Group Conferencing promotes collaborative decision-making which resonates with advocacy ideals of inclusion. However, austerity policies straining resources may pose barriers to fully implementing and evaluating advocacy programmes. There remains a need for exploratory research on the implementation and impacts of professional parental advocacy programmes within child welfare contexts (Featherstone et al., 2018). Elucidating lived experiences and perspectives from a range of stakeholders could enrich conceptual principles, which could lead towards context-specific, equitable practices, ultimately supporting marginalised families. Consequently, it is this 'gap' that the present study aims to help address.

3. The Research Study

This was an exploratory study into the support offered by the expanded Parental Advocacy Project (PAP) in a region in Wales, offered to parents whose children are involved with to children's social care services. We sought to understand how the PAP impacted parents' ability to meaningfully participate in decision-making, and whether the project would empower parents during child welfare meetings, including CPCs.

3.1 The Research Setting

The National Youth Advocacy Service Cymru (NYAS) is a rights-based charity operating across England and Wales. Its core aims are to ensure that marginalised children, young people, and adults have a voice and empower them to take control of their lives through advocacy intervention; to ensure they are aware of their rights and entitlements; and to build resilience and improve wellbeing. NYAS has been developing and delivering parental advocacy services since 2017, and based on the success of the initial PAP pilot, the Welsh Government has funded NYAS Cymru to continue offering PA until March 2023. The charity is also part of a ministerial advisory group, which oversees a large Welsh Government financial investment aimed at supporting families and helping to reduce the need for children to enter care (NYAS, 2018). This is the first time that a government-funded parental advocacy project has been established in the UK, providing a unique opportunity to contribute to the developing evidence base on parental advocacy in Wales. The number of children in care in Wales has risen steeply over the last 10 years (Forrester, 2021). It is

therefore important to carry out robust research to ascertain whether parental advocacy can help reduce the rates of children entering state care safely.

Most of the PAs involved in this study have previous experience working in an advocacy-based or supportive role with adults or children. PAs undertake parental advocacy-specific training, generic case management training and receive ongoing peer support from other, established PAs within the service. Referral routes to the service include self-referral or professional referral; these are accepted at any stage of the child protection process. PAs are allocated to a parent and will typically remain allocated to that parent throughout their involvement. PAs communicate with parents via phone, messages, e-mails, and home visits, and attend meetings in-person or online.

3.2 Methodology

This exploratory qualitative study was conducted as part of a broader realist evaluation examining a parental advocacy programme implemented by the National Youth Advocacy Service (NYAS) in Wales. The advocacy service provides independent, specialist support for parents engaged with statutory children's services across several local authorities in Wales. Advocates aim to empower parents, promote their rights, and enhance participation in decision-making regarding their families.

The study aimed to address two primary research questions:

- RQ1: In what ways was the Parent Advocacy Service perceived to support parents in playing a more meaningful role in decision-making when there were child welfare concerns?
- RQ2: What were parents' and professionals' experiences of the Parental Advocacy Programme?

The methods used were semi-structured interviews, an online qualitative survey, and a focus group involving parents. Using both surveys and interviews encouraged participation by offering choice, convenience, and accessibility. Further, the study was supported by an 'experts by experience' Parents Research Advisory Group, whose consultation meetings provided valuable guidance with respect to interview questions, analysis of emerging findings, and dissemination.

3.2.1 Ethics

Before commencing the research, we obtained approval from our university's ethics committee. This ensured appropriate consideration of key ethical issues including confidentiality, informed consent, data protection, and protection from harm. Particular consideration was given to the participation of parents who were identified as part of a vulnerable group, as their engagement with Children's Services may be particularly stressful or upsetting. Prior to data collection, participants were given the opportunity to ask questions, it was also discussed that they were free to withdraw from the study at any point, and that they could decline to answer specific questions. We were also prepared to offer support and signposting to appropriate services should any participants become distressed whilst taking part in the study.

3.2.2 Sampling

Our sampling frame was purposive, as we included PAs and PA managers who worked on the project, and parents and professionals who have worked with the PAP. As an exploratory study, we endeavoured to look at the in-depth experiences and accounts of as broad a range of parents and professionals as possible, within the limits of the study. There was also

a convenience element to the sampling, as PA service managers acted as a gatekeepers to accessing participants.

Participants represent a diversity of lived experiences and professional perspectives, which afforded rich, nuanced insights. However, limitations of the non-probability sampling approach are acknowledged regarding representativeness. Additionally, the small non-probability sample limits demographic representativeness and generalisation of findings.

In relation to participant recruitment, we encountered a number of challenges, including engaging with a relatively new and developing service; busy professionals; and vulnerable participants who were going through a stressful and uncertain period. We created a qualitative survey to reach participants who were unable to commit to an interview - some parents felt uncomfortable, whilst professionals were too busy – and thereby extended our sample size. Finally, a focus group was included at a later stage to ensure that our findings reflected the experiences of participants and that we had reached data saturation from the perspective of parent participants (Lietz, Langer and Furman, 2006).

PA service managers provided us with details of consenting participants, we then made contact to discuss the study, ask whether they would be happy to participate in an interview, and if so, to agree a time to meet via Microsoft Teams. PA service managers were also provided with an online survey to distribute to those participants who did not feel comfortable with participating in an interview but wished to take part in the study. In addition to this, PA service managers worked closely with advocates to identify additional parents who would be willing, and would consent to, participating in a focus group. Participants were only invited to participate in one of the data collection methods, to ensure that different perspectives and voices could be heard.

Through a combination of qualitative data collection methods, we engaged a range of stakeholders, including parents, PAs, PA managers (who manage the PA service), and social workers.

Participant	Interview (N=16)	Survey (N=11)	Focus Group (N=4)
Parents	6	8	4
Parent Advocates	2	2	0
Advocacy Managers	5	0	0
Social Workers	3	1	0

3.2.3 Data collection

All interviews took place either online using Microsoft Teams or via telephone, as Covid-19 restrictions prevented face-to-face interviews. They were carried out by the authors. Whilst the interviews were semi-structured, questions tended to centre on specific topics, for example: questions around relationships with professionals or parents; what support PAs provided inside and outside of meetings, including what could be done differently or what the service could be doing more of; and the perceived impact of parental advocacy.

Interviews typically lasted 40-60 minutes, were audio recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analysed using a thematic framework; this allowed codes, categories, and themes to emerge from the empirical data. Data collection and analysis were conducted concurrently, until we had reached a point of saturation.

Surveys were undertaken using Microsoft Forms and were distributed to participants via the service or local authority contacts. The survey framework incorporated some contextual information as well as open-ended questions relating to: the support provided by PAs (if any); what could be improved about the service; whether parental advocacy had impacted relationships with professionals/ parents; and whether it had affected decision-making. We provided a two-week window for survey responses, before we compiled the data, anonymised any details, and analysed them thematically, alongside our interview data.

We held an in-person focus group with four parents, to further develop some of the themes that had emerged throughout interviews and surveys. The focus group was carried out in a neutral public venue. The focus group was audio-recorded, the data transcribed verbatim, and transcripts were analysed using the same thematic framework as interviews and surveys.

3.2.4 Data analysis

In depth analysis was conducted using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic approach involving: familiarization, generating codes, developing themes, reviewing themes, defining themes, and writing up findings. Coding and thematic development was conducted manually by the lead author to organise the codes. Analysis adopted an inductive approach allowing themes to emerge directly from the data, while fully valuing the subjectivity of the participants' experiences (Becker et al., 2012). Peer debriefing occurred amongst the authors to enhance rigor. Themes were developed in relation to the research questions on perceived impacts of advocacy and participant experiences. Particular focus was placed on how advocacy reportedly influenced parental participation, understanding, communication, relationships and engagement in decision-making. Findings integrate verbatim quotes to privilege participant voices.

Our analysis paid particular attention to the following themes:

- 1. Challenges in implementation of parental advocacy services across one region of Wales.
- 2. Parents' views of the child protection system and social workers.
- 3. Parents' and professionals' perspectives of the parental advocacy service.

Whilst carrying out analysis, we identified several sub-themes which enabled us to identify the impact that PA had on parents. One of the sub-themes looked at how parents were supported by advocates, and how this could be broken down into different categories to answer our research questions.

4. Findings

This section presents the results of analysis from participants, concerning how PAs were able to support parents through social work involvement. To protect anonymity, social workers and PAs are distinguished by numbers, and parents have been given pseudonyms. In the following section, we explore parents' and PA's views of the child protection system and social workers before highlighting the ways in which parents and professionals believe the parental advocacy service has helped them.

4.1 How PAs support parents

All of the professionals, parents and PAs in this study provided insight into the PA role. The parents identified a range of support methods that PAs had been able to provide. Parents also reflected positively on the impact of PAs insofar as they helped manage the demands of social work involvement.

Three categories were identified concerning the ways in which PAs support parents, these related to:

- Communication, understanding jargon, and social work terminology.
- Improving the relationship between the social worker and parent.
- Improving parents' understandings of social worker expectations within Child Protection processes.

4.1.2 *Communication, understanding jargon, and social work terminology.*

Most parents noted a marked positive change in their communication with social workers after being supported by PAs. Almost all parents agreed that their PA had supported them, and noted the impact of support in meetings, including being spoken up for in situations with social workers.

Rhiannon: *Yes, sometimes in meetings before you know what to say but being there you stumble and forget and my advocate has been my rock, which makes me more confident as I know she is there supporting and helping me along the way.*

Rosie: *My advocate has spoken for me and stuck up for me because at times I feel like professionals haven't listened to me and haven't understood what I've had to go through; my advocate has made them understand that.*

Some parents reflected on the use of jargon, a recurring and divisive issue that can alienate both parents and children during social work involvement (Community Care, 2018). One parent in the focus group highlighted this by explaining that when they had asked for clarification, their needs had been misunderstood which had affected their self-esteem:

Karen: *I was actually asked by a social worker if I had learning difficulties when I asked them, 'Can you tell me plainly, please, what you want because you keep changing the goalposts?' and I've not got learning difficulties, just because I've got a mental illness doesn't mean I've got learning difficulties. They talk to you like crap.*

Rebecca highlighted how the support of a PA has helped in understanding convoluted or specialised language:

Rebecca: *I found personally um, with myself it's helped me...if I was stuck where, where you know I didn't understand any of the like jargon...after meetings I can say to her, like X Y Z about it and she's like explained it more in a less jargony way.*

Both children and parents find the jargon used by social workers and other professionals to be alienating, yet there has been little positive change in this area of practice (Community Care, 2018). Recent research has highlighted that when senior leaders work with young people and parents, that language should change to become more 'humane', which can have a positive impact on engagement and participation (Diaz et al., 2021). A precedent for changing language and jargon within children's services has been set by the successful 'Language that Cares' campaign, led by The Adolescent and Children's Trust (Community Care, 2019).

Importantly, most parents acknowledged the supportive role of PAs during meetings, especially when they were feeling emotionally heightened or under pressure.

Rebecca: *We normally have a meeting beforehand. Um and like she'll ask what I want to say um or want brought up or this that and the other. And if like I forget, I know she's like, there to prompt me to like. You know, it's having that security blanket like you know, that support...I'd probably would have had a massive meltdown because of not understanding things.*

Meera: *Because I'm not good at understanding, she'll speak up for me. I tell her what to say and then she speaks up for me and she, like, comes to meetings with me.*

Angela: *But when I had the new social worker, [name], there was a point where I just could not speak to him at all and [my advocate] would step in then as well because he would be very much the same, he would manipulate stuff and tell lies. At one point, I thought, 'I just can't speak to him, [advocate], because he's twisting all my words'. [...] Yeah, so then I was like, 'I can't speak to him, [name]' so [my advocate] started speaking to him because at that time I just couldn't deal with it, so thank God for her but like I said, now I have meetings with them, and I still find they do try to twist things.*

One PA manager noted that the PAs strengths lay in their combined knowledge of the system and emotional detachment.

Manager 3: I think for a professional advocate the advantage would be that they've got that understanding of the system they've got in a different way, from the point of view of the professional, they are less attached emotionally to the process of going through a conference.

Most PAs reinforced what parents had said about challenges in communication and social work terminology. The PAs shared the perspective that this was an integral part of their role and their work with parents:

Parent advocate 2: *Some have real difficulty in communicating verbally their views, wishes and feelings, and that will be my main role there.*

Parent advocate 3: *There's a lot of jargon sometimes, which is why afterwards it is really important for us to go through it, because they won't ask there and then, they have all these questions afterwards.*

One PA reflected on changes in a parent's self-esteem after being empowered to communicate confidently and support themselves:

Parent advocate 5: *What I like is when I have parents who...I might get the referral and these parents don't even want to speak. They don't even want to speak at conference, they don't want to speak in their core groups, they don't want to...they feel that they can't speak. And I have those parents know who I...are still open to me, but only for conference, because they actually attend their core groups independently. I don't even go now.'*

Both parent and PA reflections aligned with Brown's (2006) findings, that positive assessments from social workers were usually the result of strong parental skills to navigate social work involvement, including effective communication and the ability to research rights. Brown also found that social workers did not support parents to develop these skills. While our participants did not suggest that social workers had *failed* to support parents in developing these skills, they agreed that the use of complex language and jargon could

create barriers for parents, particularly in highly pressurised social work situations. They also illustrated the power of advocacy to help parents develop effective communication with regards to professionals.

4.1.3 Improving the relationship between the social worker and parent

Most parents noted that their relationships with social workers were challenging, with some experiencing issues due to a lack of consistency of assigned worker, whilst others felt that distrust was irreparable:

Rebecca: *That's part of what's in the complaint, you know, the inconsistency of social workers. So, like even down to when they had done a parenting assessment. It's one person who done the assessment and then she left, so another one done a follow up instead of like re-questioning me then done an addendum. You know, so all in all, just for this time alone there's been like five social workers. There's been no consistency at all.*

Anwen: *The damage has been done between myself and social services. I've just got a huge distrust of them and I can't see any way back from that. In the beginning, perhaps, I mean, maybe if I had an um had an advocate from day one, um that might have made a difference.*

Anwen's reflections suggest potential limitations concerning the degree of improvement a PA can reasonably make to the parent-social worker relationship, especially if the PA has become involved part-way. However, there is also an argument for early intervention of PA services. If PAs were involved at an earlier stage, then they could be key to offering consistency, whilst acting as mediators between parents and social workers from the outset.

Zara had fundamental issues concerning the ways in which social workers operated, and believed that every parent should be able to receive support from a PA:

Zara: *So yeah, advocacy services, I would 100% advocate them, you know, put forward for anybody, anybody dealing with social workers. It's so important.*

Some parents noted a consequent improvement in their relationship with social workers, attributing this to their newly developed confidence and ability to communicate effectively, which in turn made them feel heard.

Caroline: *Yes, I feel confident to speak more.*

Rhiannon: *They seem to listen more now I have an advocate.*

Ffion: *Advocate has changed [my relationship with social services] because I learnt how to express my way to social [workers] and how to word it tidy.*

One parent in the focus group reflected on how she felt the PA's presence changed the approach of the social worker towards them, which in turn allowed them to feel heard:

Kamal: *The mistakes that are being made that shouldn't be made, and [advocates] are there because, actually, they give people like us, that are slightly bullied by social workers... and I think it is a matter of, when [advocates] are present, there's a lot more respect for the parent if they are represented, and it actually gives the parent a greater voice, and it is heard.*

Improvements in the parent-social worker relationship again reflects Brown's (2006) research, which suggested that a parent's ability to effectively communicate with social workers can lead to increasingly productive and positive outcomes. Some of the PAs mentioned improvements in this relationship during their involvement:

Parent advocate 2: *I can think of one mum who...oh, she really thinks about everything a lot, and the social worker had said a few things to her where Mum had really caught hold of a few words that the social worker had said and it was taken negatively, and then it was sort of, you know, mulled over and over and over. And so I suggested that we speak to the social worker about that. They really didn't want to at first, but...but after many discussions about it, they said, 'you know what, I think I will...I can talk to them about it, will you help me?' And we did. And the relationship after that between the two of them was fab. You know, Mum was listening to the social worker then. It really cleared that blockage in communication that had been about a few words that may or may not have been misconstrued.*

Parent advocate 5: *I do think as well, it can be really beneficial for helping them build relationships with their children's social workers.*

One PA noted their role in building bridges between parents and professionals:

Parent advocate 2: *Build bridges, yeah, yeah, definitely. I definitely do. I think that is a big part of it as well.*

The interviews with parents and PAs demonstrated how PAs were able to help support improvements in the parent-social worker relationship, thus assisting with partnership working and collaboration (Featherstone et al., 2011; Berrick et al., 2011). Providing parents with the support in effective communication, clarifying misconceptions and misunderstandings, and helping parents feel heard, were some of the ways in which the presence of a PA helped to enhance collaborative working. Aligning with Leake et al. (2012), this finding illustrates how PAs achieve their intended role, as complementary to social workers. The ability of PAs to help manage communication challenges between parents and professionals can be seen as a valuable tool in assisting social workers, during often intense and emotional interactions.

4.1.4 Improving parents' understanding of social worker expectations within child protection processes

Parents who feel unsupported during social work involvement are less likely to engage with professionals (Muench et al., 2016). A recent report examining CPCs during the COVID-19 pandemic (Baginsky et al., 2020) found that remote CPCs hindered parental engagement further. The report highlighted the alienation parents experienced, particularly when they had not had the opportunity to speak to anyone prior to the CPC. Most of the parents we interviewed echoed these sentiments and noted that the support PAs gave them included improving their understanding of Local Authority expectations during social work involvement. Given the findings of Muench et al. (2016), without the support of a PA, outcomes might have been different in terms of engagement.

Anwen: *where my solicitor will provide me with legal information, my advocate is very good with, um, what I can and can't do outside of the law sort of thing. So, like, complaints procedures and what I'm allowed to ask for and things maybe my solicitors won't deal with. She has given very good advice on that.*

Ffion: Yes, definitely an example is when they ask about contact with baby's dad and I get to say what I want to happen, instead of social services making a choice.

When asked whether their advocate had supported them to use their voice in relation to decision-making, one parent expressed that they had gained confidence and an ability to 'speak up':

Rebecca: Yeah, I feel a lot more like, confident and um, yeah it's having that comfort blanket, you know. I feel like I'm able to speak up, 'cos it's knowing my rights and knowing a lot more um, in depth rather than just like black and white thinking of 'my children are going to be taken off me'. It was more, yeah, so she helped immensely.

These parents reflected on their improved knowledge of social work processes, including their parental rights in relation to contact and complaints. The reassurance and support of their PA, in helping them to understand complex information, enabled parents to feel less intimidated by the social work process, which lessened their fears, including those relating to removal of children from the family home. The support of a PA, also has the potential to support parents to speak up when decisions are being made about their families, promoting engagement of parents in key meetings, where decision-making is required.

Most PAs also reflected on changes in parents' understandings of social services involvement:

Parent advocate 5: Having a full explanation of the process and the social worker's responsibility can sometimes help parents to understand why social workers are doing the things they're doing.

Parent advocate 2: I can think of a parent who, within their child protection conference, the social worker had written up about something that she'd done with her son as if it was a safeguarding issue, and then on discussion with Mum, she said, 'but I put all these safeguards into place'. So during the conference, I supported her to explain all of the things that she'd put in place and that this had been an event that had been really thought through from her point of view to make sure that her son was safe.

Parent advocate 3: it's still early days but I can see that it is building the knowledge in families; it's giving them the confidence, it's giving them the knowledge so they can... It's working better as a family unit, and I think working with agencies, informing them that it's not a bad thing to be involved with Social Services. At the end of the day, that they are there to look after them and the children – well, children, fundamentally, and I think it's just kind of helping them. Like educating them to understand that working together is the best scenario really, and that's going to have the best outcome, rather than them automatically thinking Social Services are the enemy.

Social workers agreed that the addition of a PA had helped parents to understand child protection processes:

Social worker 2: I think it's just reassuring as well, because I think you know when they say 'you're going to take our kids off us' and things...But I think they are there to help them out with understanding the situation, what they've got to do to progress and get out of child protection or PLO [Public Law Outline] and things like that.

Social worker 3: I had one interesting family where the parent was trying to use the advocate to...to her benefit sort of thing, you know. But she...I know her personally as well, and she worked really hard to sort of ground the parent, and it worked in the end, and they were deregistered [...] I think she misunderstood what the advocate was

there for. I think she thought she could get away with anything. [...] You know, they're there to examine everything you put forward to them and get the very best that they can for that parent.

These quotes from social workers suggest that PAs can support parents to understand particular processes and expectations. Social worker 3's language of 'ground[ing] the parent' suggests that some emotional management was used by the PA, which enabled the parent to focus on actions and agreements. This resonates with the discussion in the previous section, which highlighted the potentially contentious relationships between social workers and parents.

Social workers also noted that whilst the primary role of the PA is to help parents in their understanding of social work processes and terminology, some parents may also value the PA for being a physical presence of support:

Social worker 1: *So, although their thoughts are shared and although they're supported with their understanding, I think they felt that everything that they said would be affirmed by her and that when she shared it with me, if it was shared by the advocate, then there would be a different response... So the Advocate was there to...and she was supporting with their understanding so she was saying, 'your cognitive ability is, you know, how you understand things'. So, I think in some respects, she does help in their understanding, but I think they see her as more of a kind of physical support a lot of the time.*

The difficult relationships between parents and social workers, and the complexities of the wider child protection system, can be seen to be eased to some extent by PAs. This may be due to their translational role; arbitrating between the two parties to improve relationships; or simply their ability to explain social workers' expectations of parents. The PAs seem to have the potential to effectively challenge or lessen the adversarial nature of the process, also helping to support parental engagement with professionals. This outcome was generally perceived positively by all stakeholders.

5. Limitations

This study was necessarily small in scale as it focused on a relatively new and developing service. In addition, it relied on gatekeepers, i.e., PA service managers in order to access our sample population, who are considered vulnerable and hard to reach. We accept that this may have influenced the sample and the consequent research findings. The Covid-19 pandemic also presented challenges in relation to participant recruitment and qualitative interviews, which were all undertaken online.

6 Discussion

This exploratory study provides provisional qualitative insights regarding participant perceptions of a parental advocacy programme in Wales. The findings cohere around three primary mechanisms through which advocacy reportedly supported parents navigating child welfare systems: Communication, understanding jargon, and social work terminology; Improving the relationship between the social worker and parent; Improving parents' understandings of social worker expectations within Child Protection processes. These perceived benefits mirror those suggested in limited prior research on parental advocacy models. For example, the enhanced understanding and system navigation assistance reported here aligns with previous literature suggesting advocates help parents comprehend rights, options and bureaucratic processes (Featherstone & Fraser, 2012;

Lalayants, 2017). Similarly, the accounts of advocates improving fragile relationships and helping parents express themselves constructively echoes studies proposing that professional advocates can mediate tensions and foster collaboration between parents and authorities (Collings et al., 2018; Tobis et al., 2021).

The perceived facilitation of greater participation and inclusion of parents also resonates with aspirations for advocacy expressed in other scholarship, though actualisation remains challenging (Featherstone et al., 2018; Morris et al., 2018). Overall, while tentative, the findings reinforce the potential value of independent professional advocacy in uplifting marginalised families within largely impersonal, complex and under-resourced child protection systems.

However, important limitations temper conclusions from this preliminary study. As acknowledged by participants, lack of awareness, late referrals, stigma and chronic underfunding constrained the reach and intensity of advocacy support. The reliance on small-scale interview and survey data precludes substantiating perceived benefits with tangible child welfare outcomes like reunification rates or case closures. Causally linking advocacy to decision-making impacts also remains tenuous without comparison groups. Lastly, the study privileged parent perceptions; incorporating perspectives from children, judges and frontline social workers could further enrich understandings.

Nonetheless, the accounts provide clues into processes through which professional advocacy models may empower parents. Findings suggest advocates fostered strengths-based, humanising alliances that helped mitigate the oppression parents encountered within systems. Potential mechanisms spanned expanding system knowledge, modelling constructive communication, lending emotional support, and facilitating participatory spaces. Overall, the data illustrates a disconnect between policy rhetoric espousing partnership, participation and family empowerment versus lived realities of marginalisation for many parents. Parental advocacy emerges as one avenue to help bridge this gulf, but wider action is needed to transform adversarial structures into equitable collaborations.

Moving forward, rigorous mixed-methods research evaluating advocacy models against child protection decisions, interventions and family outcomes will be vital. There is also need for comparative research on peer versus professional advocacy approaches, which likely differ significantly regarding relationship dynamics and system impacts. Furthermore, embedding advocacy evaluation within implementation science frameworks would illuminate how programme theories interact with complex system variables to produce outcomes. Exploring lived experiences is equally crucial for grounding concepts like rights and participation within diverse realities.

Ultimately, reducible impact necessitates moving beyond individualised remedies towards tackling oppressive attitudes, resource disparities and inflexible processes permeating systems. Well-designed, collaborative parental advocacy services grounded in human rights principles demonstrate promise as one constructive approach among many needed reforms. However, transformative change requires political will to confront biases and re-imagine accountability rooted in social justice rather than surveillance. The proliferation of advocacy models signals momentum while underscoring the magnitude of work remaining to overcome marginalization of disadvantaged families and engender equitable, compassionate child protection systems.

7 Conclusion

This exploratory qualitative study provides encouraging preliminary insights into participant perceptions regarding a professional parental advocacy programme in Wales. Analysis suggested advocacy helped parents better understand policies and processes, communicate

constructively with social workers, and participate more actively in influential decision-making forums. These perceived benefits mirror aspirations expressed in the limited prior research on professional advocacy models.

However, robust research using comparison groups and measuring child protection outcomes is vital to substantiate perceived benefits and causally link advocacy approaches to decision impacts. This will be an aim for subsequent stages of this ongoing research. Furthermore, situating advocacy programmes within broader systemic contexts, power dynamics and implementation factors is crucial to elucidate complexities shaping the design, adoption and operation of initiatives across diverse settings. Ultimately, achieving equity for marginalised families requires moving beyond fragmented interventions towards comprehensive reforms addressing institutional discrimination and lack of resources permeating child welfare systems.

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