Involved by Right

The voice of the child in the child protection conferences

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Foreword

Children and young people require a safe and secure environment and it is the responsibility of parents and the community in which they live to provide this. For a small number of children this is not enough. Instead they rely on the co-ordinated support from family and child protection agencies for their welfare to be promoted and protected.

In May 2011, the final report from the Munro Review of Child Protection, ‘A child-centred system’, was published. Professor Munro sets out the important role of Local Safeguarding Children Boards to support and enable partner organisations to change their practice and become more effective in safeguarding children.

The Involved by Right project is a local response to the consultation with children contained in the Munro report:

‘Children voiced the importance of being heard separately from their parents and being listened to’...’They made a plea for better information, honesty, and emotional support throughout the process.’

This document provides useful evidence of the benefits of statutory and voluntary agencies working together, in this case, to test a new model of advocacy within the child protection meeting process. It clarifies that the role of the independent advocate does not replace the social worker’s role in eliciting the views of the child. Instead the advocate is seen as having a separate role to report directly on the wishes and views of the child. The role is different from other professionals as the independent advocate is not involved in making decisions about the child in the child protection plan.

The report concludes that it is helpful for the child’s views to be shared by the advocate in the child protection conference; it is however still rare for the child to attend their conference. It puts forward evidence of the child’s views being better taken into consideration when professionals decide actions for the child protection plan.

I hope that this report will contribute to improving child protection practice beyond the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea where the model will continue to be developed in the next year.

Jean Daintith, Independent Chair of the LCSB
Hammersmith and Fulham, Kensington and Chelsea and Westminster
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We want to say a huge thank you to all our interview respondents who gave generously of their time to help with the research: children and their parents, the advocate, social workers and conference chairs.

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Executive summary

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989) enshrines the right of children to be involved in all decisions that affect their lives. In England there is also national legislation and guidance stressing the importance of involving children in decision-making, including specifically in child protection cases (Children Act 2004; DCSF, 2010). However, evidence has shown that children’s voices in child protection cases is often absent (e.g. Cossar et al 2011; Munro 2011). This not only denies children the right to be involved in decisions at a critical time in their lives, but failure to safeguard them effectively has been linked to the fact that professionals do not listen to children (Ofsted 2010; Munro 2011).

One way of ensuring the child’s voice is heard in child protection is to provide an advocacy service, which should enable children to put across their views, ensure they are involved in the decision-making process and their rights are protected. National guidance suggests that children should receive independent advice and support during the child protection process (DCSF, 2010). However, currently there is no statutory right to an independent advocate in the child protection system and local authorities facilitate the provision of advocacy service at their discretion.

There is limited evidence on the impact of providing advocacy to children going through the child protection system and how common this service is. The few studies that have been published so far highlight that advocacy improves children’s understanding of the child protection conference, reducing risks and empowering those who receive the service.

Through Involved by Right – an EU grant-funded programme, the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea (RBCK) has implemented an advocacy service for child protection conferences with the aim of incorporating children’s views in the decision-making process. The National Children’s Bureau (NCB) Research Centre carried out an evaluation of the service specifically to explore if, with support from the advocate, children were able to:

- attend the child protection conference
- express their views at the conference directly or via the advocate
- contribute to their child protection plan
- understand the purpose of the conference and the plan.

The advocacy service in RBKC is provided by Barnardo’s and offered to children age seven years and older. An advocate is available for both on-going cases (i.e. for child protection review conferences) and new cases (i.e. for initial child protection conferences).

The evaluation consisted of:

- An analysis of 26 family cases (involving 41 children) and 46 conference records. While most of the cases and conferences analysed involved an advocate, we were able to explore what happened in the absence of an advocate because three children did not have one, the remaining 38 had
an advocate but not for all child protection conferences and ten of the conferences analysed did not involve an advocate.

- 27 interviews with children, parents, social workers, conference chairs and the advocate.
- Analysis of data provided by the advocate on the take-up of the services and reasons for declining it.

Our research findings are summarised below. First we focus on the implementation of the advocacy service, followed by its benefits. Finally we present suggestions for the future and conclusions.

**Implementation of the advocacy service in RBKC**

*Introducing the new service*

The evaluation found that at first the introduction of the advocacy service caused confusion among some professionals. However, initial confusion about the role of the advocate was overcome with time as social workers gained more experience with how advocacy could add value to their work.

Parents, who have to give permission for their child to be supported by an advocate, were also initially unsure about what advocacy involved, and those who were guarded or hostile towards professionals tended to refuse advocacy for their children. However, if children expressed the wish to have an advocate, parents would be challenged, usually by the advocate directly. While the advocate had some success in reassuring parents and persuading them to let their children use the service, in the period we evaluated (between September 2011 and June 2012) the take-up was between 42 per cent and 50 per cent. Changing the procedure for obtaining parental consent from an opt-in to an opt-out procedure increased the take-up to 59 per cent.

Some children were also initially reluctant to work with the advocate and were very guarded about the information they shared. However, over time they tended to be more open with her, as they gained a better understanding of the conference process.

*Supporting children before, during and after the child protection conference*

Preparing children for the child protection conference was a key feature of the advocacy service, as it is at this meeting that children can, directly or through the advocate, influence the decision-making process. The evaluation found that children had been well supported to have an input at the conference. A key factor underpinning this positive result was the advocate successfully working with social workers to get information about the family and any known safeguarding issues before meeting with the child.

Flexibility in working with each child by providing them with different options on how they wished to express their views and wishes for the conference was also
important. Children felt supported by their advocate and appreciated her flexibility in helping them organise what they wanted to say, and how.

Discussions and arrangements for a child to attend only part of the conference, (e.g. to avoid parts which may involve conflict with the parents) was also very important to ensure the child would not get upset, and to reassure professionals and parents who had initial concerns about children attending conferences.

The advocate played an important role in supporting children through the conference by sitting next to them and reading out things that children did not want to say. Even though the advocate was the main person who supported the child at the conference, the chair of the conference also played an important role in making them feel more comfortable. However, the chair seemed to play the main part in preparing the child when the child did not have an advocate, although these children did not have the same level of support as those with an advocate.

Meeting with children after the child protection conference and providing them with feedback could prove difficult to arrange due to parents’ refusal or lack of co-operation. Children who met with the advocate appreciated receiving feedback, especially balanced feedback (‘good and bad things’) from the meeting. The post-conference feedback helped children to gain a better understanding of the child protection process. It also gave children more confidence in their advocate, which could lead to the disclosure of new safeguarding issues.

Benefits of the advocacy service in RBKC

The advocate enabled children’s views to be represented in a relatively systematic way, and ensured that due attention was paid to these views when formulating child protection plans. Children themselves recognised that their views had made a difference, and credited the advocate with making this possible. They reported a range of benefits from using the service, and recommended it emphatically to other children.

Parents echoed children’s views, while also identifying benefits for themselves stemming from the additional insights gained from children’s contributions, and the discussions they stimulated at the conference about children’s needs and feelings.

Social services professionals, as well as the advocate, reinforced these points. Importantly, they described how contributions from the child and advocate improved the atmosphere of the conference, facilitating constructive dialogue, and helped professionals, as well as parents, to focus on the perspective and needs of the child.

All professionals and parents considered the insights provided through advocacy to extend and complement other information on the views of the child in important ways. While the service certainly did not do away with the need for social workers to engage children in discussion about their thoughts and feelings, it was seen to provide another distinctive way for children to be heard. In some cases, this independent service appeared more acceptable to families,
and it was hoped that in time, it could serve as a bridge to more constructive engagement with social work staff.

**Suggestions for the future of advocacy service**

Looking to the future, there was a strong consensus in favour of continuing the advocacy service, and – resources permitting – making it accessible to more children; not only for their child protection conferences, but also for core group meetings\(^1\) and for children in need\(^2\). It was a common view that children could benefit from support to contribute to these meetings, which would allow for more regular input from the child into the monitoring of the family situation and to report on progress with agreed actions. Meeting children more often would also allow the advocate to build and maintain relationships with children. The post-conference feedback session was seen as a very important element of the advocacy service, but it needs to be held within a few days of the conference to ensure that children are not waiting too long for feedback.

There was consensus that all children should have access to advocacy and their views should be presented and addressed at child protection conferences. It is necessary to ensure that all professionals are aware of the distinctions between the role of advocate and that of the social worker, and that these distinctions and the benefits of advocacy are clearly communicated to parents.

Although professionals said that children’s presence at the conference had a positive impact, they thought that children’s attendance should continue to be carefully considered on a case-by-case basis. It was vital to ensure that the conference is child and family-friendly in order to make the experiences more positive for both children and parents.

**Conclusions**

Our research into the implementation and effectiveness of the RBKC advocacy pilot has provided some important learning in relation to the key features of an effective advocacy service and its benefits. We also identified a need for further research to fully evaluate the impacts and added value of an advocacy service.

**Key features of an effective advocacy service**

Our research revealed that successful implementation of the advocacy service was dependent on several factors:

- Ensuring all those involved (children, parents and professionals) have a clear understanding of the role of the advocate and the service provided to children, including the extent of the child’s involvement and presence

\(^{1}\) Core group meetings gather key professionals and family members to work on the detailed implementation of the child protection plan, refine the details of the plan as needed and monitor progress against planned outcomes set out in the plan (DfE, 2010).

\(^{2}\) When the child is not likely to continue to suffer significant harm, but there is a need for services to promote his/her health and development, then the child is placed on a Child in Need Plan.
during the child protection conference. Better information needs to be provided to professionals and parents when the service is first introduced, providing a clear idea of what advocacy looks like and what it can achieve. This might lead to greater confidence in the process for both professionals and parents, and greater take-up of the service.

- Good working relationships between the advocate and social workers and clarity about their respective roles. Thoroughly briefing social workers about the role of advocacy can help to start the new working relationship based on a shared understanding of respective roles, and how the advocate and social workers can effectively work alongside each other. This can be done through offering information sessions or training to social workers.

- The skills of the advocate were essential to the success of the service, including the ability to be sensitive in working with children of different ages and abilities, providing them with various options for expressing their views, and reassuring them if they had any concerns about the advocacy service or social services involvement in general. As well as recruitment of staff with these skills, monitoring and supervision by a line manager with safeguarding experience is essential to ensure the advocate is suitable for what is an extremely sensitive job.

**Involving children in child protection conferences**

The key aim of advocacy is to ensure children’s views are heard and taken into account when formulating the child protection plan. This can be achieved by the advocate representing the child at the child protection conference or by supporting the child to present his/her own views at the conference. In choosing the best way to present the child’s views, one needs to be guided by children’s wishes, taking also into account professionals’ advice about when it would be inappropriate for children to witness adult discussion.

It is also important that children are supported by both the advocate and the chair of the conference to feel able and confident to attend and express their views.

Children should always be consulted about whether they want to attend the child protection conference since some might be reluctant to do so for various reasons, such as not feeling comfortable at formal, adult meetings or not wanting to miss school. Some of these issues can be addressed by making sure the child protection conference is made child-friendly and, potentially, by holding it out of school hours.

**The benefits of advocacy and challenges going forward**

While our research was limited to only interviewing families who agreed to advocacy, the available evidence suggests that it offers positive benefits to children and their parents. We found evidence that children’s views influenced plans and led to actions which addressed issues raised by their contributions. Our research suggests that advocacy can empower children, enable them to better understand the process and influence decisions, and result in better targeted services for children and their families when children’s wishes and
views are addressed. Similarly, having children’s views presented by children themselves or advocates appeared beneficial for parents as well, since it provided new insights into children’s views and wishes.

One limitation of the service relates to some parents refusing to provide consent for children to be supported by an advocate. Parents who refused advocacy tended to be those who generally did not engage with other professionals either, and who were most resistant to social workers engaging with their children. One way of ensuring that more children can be supported by an advocate is to provide detailed information to parents about the service and how the child will be involved in the child protection conference. Offering advocacy to parents could also lead to a higher level of consent to children having the same service.

While the suggestions above could improve the take-up of advocacy, it is likely that some parents will continue to refuse the service on behalf of their children and other ways need to be considered to gather these children’s views and wishes, particularly as these are potentially among the most vulnerable children. Besides the issue of parents not enabling children to take-up the advocacy service, it is still worth exploring children’s views on whether a male advocate might make a difference to how comfortable they feel with the idea of sharing their views. However, more generally, it would be beneficial to explore with all children who refuse or withdraw from advocacy why they chose to do so, in order to ensure the service is accessible to all children, and to address any barriers to take-up relating to fears or misapprehensions about the support provided.

**Further research on advocacy**

Our research has provided some evidence of the benefits for children and parents when the advocacy service was used. However, it cannot provide conclusive evidence of impact due to the lack of an appropriate control group of interviewees (i.e. those who refused advocacy and those who were not given an option to have an advocate). Further research is needed to assess the impact of advocacy by comparing cases where children received the service with cases where advocacy was not offered or taken up. This research would need to be based on a higher number of cases than the pilot evaluation, to ensure a wider range of groups and circumstances were adequately represented.

Further research would also need to refine and develop further a set of outcomes from advocacy, which could be quantified and objectively observed and recorded, to assess if advocacy leads to better outcomes for children. This evidence would provide the basis for an analysis of added value, and of whether any savings can be made by investing in an advocacy service. In the current economic climate, an added value analysis could be used to make a very powerful case for advocacy in child protection.
1. Introduction

In order to improve participation and advocacy in child protection and achieve better outcomes for children at risk, the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea (RBKC) introduced, on a pilot basis, an advocacy service for child protection conferences. The service is delivered as part of the Involved by Right EU Daphne grant-funded project, which is led by the RBKC, and includes the National Children's Bureau (NCB), Barnardo's and other European partners. In RBKC, the advocacy service is delivered by Barnardo's and evaluated by NCB Research Centre3 and this report provides the findings from the evaluation.

This chapter reviews the evidence on the voice of the child4 in the child protection system in England and on advocacy practices as a way of facilitating the meaningful involvement of children in the child protection system. We then briefly describe the advocacy model implemented in RBKC for ensuring children’s involvement in child protection conferences.

At the end of this chapter we describe the aims and objectives of the evaluation and briefly summarise how the evaluation was carried out.

1.1 Research and policy background

Local authorities in England have a statutory duty to safeguard and promote the welfare of children. Section 47 of the Children Act 1989 places a duty on local authorities to investigate where there is reasonable cause to suggest a child is suffering, or is likely to suffer, significant harm5. When there is a concern that a child might be at risk of significant harm, the local authority should instigate child protection proceedings. Unless the child is considered to be at risk of immediate significant harm for which an emergency protection order can be sought, the local authority is required to undertake an assessment of the child’s living situation and if/how the child’s needs are being met. If the assessment reveals that the child’s needs are not met and the child is at risk of continuing to suffer significant harm, the local authority convenes a child protection conference. The aim of the conference is to assess all relevant information about the child and the family and plan together with parents how best to safeguard and meet the needs of the child. The child is usually placed on the Child Protection Plan which details how child’s needs should be met and harm avoided. The child’s situation and the plan are then reviewed at subsequent conferences. If professionals at the conference decide that the child is not likely to continue to suffer significant harm, but there is a need for services to promote his/her health and development, then the child is placed on a Child in Need Plan. However, if there are concerns that the child is likely to continue to

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3 For more information about the project see: http://www.participationworks.org.uk/involved-by-right
4 Throughout the report ‘child and children’ refers to both a child(ren) and a young person/people.
5 Harm is defined as ill-treatment or the impairment of development. Harm becomes significant when comparing the child’s health and development with what could be reasonably expected from a child of similar age.
suffer immediate harm the conference can decide to initiate legal actions, such as care proceedings, to take the child into the care of the local authority (Working together to safeguard children, DfE, 2010).

The English child protection system has been closely scrutinised by a number of reviews in the past few decades, because of widespread and repeated public concern that it is failing to adequately protect many children at risk. In order to improve safeguarding practices and outcomes for children, professionals have often stressed the need for the voice of the child to be heard in the child protection process (e.g. Munro 2011). The first part of this section summarises findings on the extent to which the voice of the child is being heard in child protection cases. The second part summarises the evidence on advocacy practices as one way of making a child’s voice heard in the child protection process.

The voice of the child in the child protection process

The evidence has consistently shown that the child’s voice is often not heard and effectively represented in child protection cases. Research has found that both professionals and children themselves think that the meaningful engagement of children in the decision making process would lead to better safeguarding practices and improved outcomes for children at risk. For example, an independent review into child protection and social work practice reported on a submission made by the Office of the Children’s Commissioner for England, in which children who had experience of the child protection system ‘voiced the importance of being heard separately from their parents and being listened to’ (pg. 26, Munro 2011). The children consulted for this review found the child protection process confusing and wanted better information, greater honesty and consistent support from the same worker through services which would not be withdrawn as soon as the crisis passed.

The failure to listen to children and to make sure their views are taken into account in child protection cases was highlighted in a recent Ofsted report of 67 serious case reviews (Ofsted 2010). The report indicated that:

- professionals did not see the child frequently enough or did not ask the child about their views and feelings
- professionals did not listen to adults who tried to speak on behalf of the child and could provide important information about the child

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6 We conducted keyword searches for research and policy documents published in England in last two decades using key social sciences databases and key websites. Database searches were supplemented by recommendations from NCB colleagues with relevant expertise and reference harvesting (i.e. perusing bibliographies to determine further sources of potential relevance).

7 Serious case reviews are instigated by Local Safeguarding Children Boards when a child dies or sustains serious injuries. The aim of the serious case review is for agencies to learn lessons from the case on ways they work to safeguard and promote the welfare of the child.
• parents and carers prevented professionals from seeing and listening to the child
• professionals focused too much on the needs of the parents and overlooked the implications for the child.

A rare study in which children were asked about their views of the child protection system revealed that:
• children were not always well informed by professionals, but they tried to piece together information to make sense of what was happening, mainly by getting the information from family members
• children wanted to maintain a sense of control throughout the child protection process and did not want to hand over their worries to a professional to sort out. However, they wanted to share them and work with a trusted adult on finding the best solution for making them safe (Cossar, Brandon & Jordan 2011).

A key part of the child protection process is the child protection conference where various professionals and parents/carers offer their assessment of the situation, and are meant to work together to suggest a plan to reduce the risk to the child. It is also recommended that, when appropriate, children attend the child protection conference (see following section). The Cossar et al (2011) study revealed that children who attended a child protection conference were not well prepared for it and found the conference difficult to understand. Children felt they were asked awkward questions and felt that others did not listen to what they had to say.

The voice of the child: guidance for child protection process

Children Act 2004 places a duty on local authorities to ascertain the child’s wishes and feelings and take them into consideration when making decisions during the child protection process, as far as is reasonable, practicable and consistent with child’s welfare. However, the framework for involving children was laid out six years later in the Working Together to Safeguard Children (2010) guidance. This intention is also supported by articles 3 and 12 in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child: article 3 states that the 'best interests' of the child must be the primary concern when making decisions that may affect them; article 12 preserves the child’s right to express his/her views, with his/her wishes being given due weight in accordance with his/her age and maturity (UNCRC, 1989).

The Working Together to Safeguard Children (2010) guidance recommends the development of local protocols to actively involve children in the child protection system. In order to keep the child in focus during the child protection process, professionals should:
• develop a direct relationship with the child and gather information from the child about his or her needs or situation
• elicit the child’s wishes and feelings
• provide children with honest and accurate information about what is happening and future possible actions
• invite children to make recommendations about services and support they need
• ensure that children have access to independent advice and support that enables them to express their views and influence decisions.

Advocacy services in child protection

One way of ensuring the child’s voice is being heard in child protection is to provide an advocate, who represents the views of the child throughout the child protection process and enables him/her to influence decisions.

As stated in the Department of Health guidance (2002), an advocate:
• must be led by the views and wishes of children
• must champion the rights and needs of children
• should ensure children are not discriminated against
• should be well-publicised, accessible, easy to use and available quickly when requested.

Advocates should work exclusively for children, provide a high level of confidentiality and ensure that other agencies are aware of this confidentiality policy.

Reports on children’s views on advocacy carried out by the Children’s Right Director (2008 & 2012), indicated that children thought advocates should be independent of the people looking after them or making decisions about them. Independence was important because the advocate would be less judgmental and would keep things confidential unless there are safeguarding concerns. Children also identified the following skills and qualities of a good advocate:
• listening
• being able to put a child’s point of view across
• respecting a child’s privacy
• getting other people to listen
• knowing about children’s issues (e.g. being able to give advice to children and having necessary training or experience in working with children).

Children also indicated that advocates should not decide what is best for them and should not try to interpret what the child has said to them. The advocate must also make sure to have a child’s permission for whatever they do or say on behalf of the child and to keep the child’s information confidential unless there is a safeguarding issue.

The benefits of involving children in child protection decisions and the negative consequences of not involving them are well documented, and national guidance suggests that children should receive independent advice and support during the child protection process. However, currently there is no statutory right to an independent advocate in the child protection system and local authorities facilitate the provision of advocacy service at their discretion. While in the past ten years there has been a drive to improve participation and advocacy in child protection, there is limited evidence on the impact of providing advocacy to children going through the child protection system and
how common this service is (e.g. how many local authorities provide an advocacy service).

As suggested in the Munro review (Munro 2011), children who were supported by an advocate spoke very highly of the help they received. There have also been a limited number of small qualitative studies that have explored the impact of advocacy, as indicated by a recent scoping report of advocacy services in England (Brady 2011). The study found that monitoring and evaluation of advocacy services are not standardised and are primarily done by advocacy providers for internal and/or contractual purposes.

The few studies that have been published highlight the benefits of advocacy for children based on the views and perceptions of advocates, professionals and children themselves. The benefits from this evidence can be summarised in terms of a child’s better understanding of the child protection conference, reducing risks and empowering children (Box 1.1).

**Box 1.1 Benefits of advocacy**

**Better understanding of the child protection conference and process**

An evaluation of an NSPCC local advocacy service in child protection (Scutt 1999) showed that children gained a better understanding of the purpose of the child protection conference when supported by an advocate before and during the conference. Advocates were seen as the sole source of preparation for the conference and helped children to make important decisions on participating in the conference. When the child participated in the conference, the quality of information shared was more accurate and children felt the child protection plans were more acceptable as a result of their involvement. Children who did not attend the conference felt their views were put across by the advocate who provided them with good feedback after the conference, which enabled them to understand what had happened. Being supported by an advocate was empowering for children primarily because the support was independent and confidential, and the advocate acted only on their behalf.

An evaluation of advocacy service for child protection conferences provided by Barnardo’s in Wiltshire (Dalrymple, 2004) showed that children liked having someone who would take time to listen and talk to them about what was happening. Professionals and parents thought that having children’s views presented during the conference, either by children themselves or through the advocate, helped the meeting to be more centred on their needs.

**Reducing risks**

A more recent review of largely qualitative studies of advocacy in child protection (Vis et al 2011) identified several positive effects. The participation procedure itself was therapeutic for children; participation led to better decisions and tailored services; and it helped to keep children safe by discovering and substantiating cases of abuse and neglect. The review concluded that to gain these positive effects, an advocacy service should be independent of social services and advocates should consult children before...
and after the child protection conference, as well as support them when children attend the conference.

**Empowerment service**

Advocacy has been described as an *empowerment service* for children (Scutt 1999; Dalrymple 2005; Vis et al 2011). For example, Dalrymple (2005) reviewed evidence of impact from five advocacy services provided to vulnerable children (e.g. children in care, with learning disabilities) and the findings showed that children particularly valued the independence of advocates and the fact that they were there for them alone, listening to their views and speaking on their behalf or supporting them to speak for themselves. This gave children an enhanced personal position which enabled them to participate in professional decision making.

### 1.2 The advocacy model in RBKC

In September 2011 RBKC changed the structure of their child protection conferences. They introduced the ‘Strengthening Families’ model\(^8\) for conducting child protection conferences and introduced advocacy service for children and young people going through child protection. The Strengthening Families model focuses on building upon strengths within a child’s life in order to reduce harm and protect the child rather than implementing intermittent interventions. It identifies risks while focusing upon existing strengths within the family that can be built upon. The model values family knowledge and focuses on setting goals for the future in collaboration with family members. The conference room is set up to enable participants to view a ‘White Board’ upon which Dangers/Risks, Complicating Factors, Grey Areas, Safety Factors, Strengths and the Plan are written. The visual aid provides greater transparency of the issues being raised and discussed. RBKC indicated that the feedback received from parents and professionals was very positive about the new model: they thought it made a positive difference to the process of running the child protection conferences.

The advocacy service introduced in RBKC is delivered by an advocate who is supported and managed by an experienced advocate from Barnardo’s\(^9\). The initial goal was to offer advocacy to at least 30 children who wished to take-up the service for the child protection conference. It is offered to children age seven years and older and is available for both ongoing cases (i.e. for child protection review conferences) and new cases (i.e. for initial child protection conference).

Every child who takes up the advocacy service is offered a visit before and after the child protection conference. At the pre-conference meeting, the advocate

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\(^8\) The ‘Strengthening Families’ model was developed by the Child Protection Service in West Berkshire Council. It is based on the work of Andrew Turnell who developed a partnership approach to child protection called ‘Signs of Safety’ and the work of Rob Sawyer and Suzanne Lohrbach who built on Turnell’s work. [http://www.westberks.gov.uk/index.aspx?articleid=12092](http://www.westberks.gov.uk/index.aspx?articleid=12092)

\(^9\) RBKC seconded its participation officer to Barnardo’s to deliver a pilot independent child protection advocacy service from September 2011.
should explain the purpose of the conference and consider the child’s wishes to be involved in the meeting and what they want to say. The advocate then supports the child to express his/her views during the child protection conference. If the child does not wish to attend the conference, the advocate attends to report the child’s views. The advocate should also visit the child after the child protection conference to explain the plan and any decisions made.

In addition to the advocacy service, RBKC also implemented the Viewpoint\textsuperscript{10} online interactive questionnaire through which children and young people can express their views and feelings about important aspects of their lives. The aim is to use it as an aid tool through which social workers can ascertain child’s views and explore his/her experiences. It also enables professionals to capture a snapshot of a child’s wellbeing at a particular point in time and map any changes over time.

1.3 Aims and objectives of the evaluation

NCB Research Centre carried out an evaluation of the advocacy model in RBKC to explore the effectiveness and benefits of the service. More specifically the evaluation gathered evidence to explore if, with support from the advocate, children were able to:

- attend the child protection conference
- express their views at the conference directly or via the advocate
- contribute to their child protection plan
- understand the purpose of the conference and the plan.

1.4 Evaluation methodology

The evaluation design and tools were reviewed by all project partners and approved by the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea (RBKC), on submission of the requisite London Research Governance Framework (RGF) Alliance proposal.

The evaluation included the following elements:

- A \textbf{review of anonymised child protection records} for each of 26 family cases involving 38 children who received advocacy for at least one child protection conference and another three who did not receive advocacy but attended their child protection conference\textsuperscript{11}. We reviewed a total of 46 conference records including 10 where advocacy was not used for various reasons\textsuperscript{12}. The records reviewed included conference minutes, reports which referred to children’s views and notes or other material children had prepared with the advocate, if the advocate was involved. The main focus

\textsuperscript{10} \url{http://www.vptorg.co.uk/}

\textsuperscript{11} Two cases involved three children who did not receive the advocacy service at any point in time, but the children attended the child protection conference to express their views themselves.

\textsuperscript{12} Some children did not have advocacy for every child protection conference, but their records of a conference with no advocacy were used for comparison with the conference when advocacy was used.
of analysis was to review the extent to which children’s views were included in the child protection plans, whether the child attended the conference and whether the advocate met with the child afterwards. Reasons for not being able to meet the child after the child protection conference and information on any new issues raised by the child during this feedback meeting were provided by the advocate for each family case.

- **In-depth exploration with a sub-sample of four cases** which involved a total of 20 interviews with children, their parent(s), the advocate, the social worker and the chair of the most recent conference. Interviews with children explored their experiences of advocacy and the child protection conference, if they attended. Interviews with parents explored their views on the role of advocate during the child protection conference and any benefits of the service provided. Interviews with professionals and the advocate covered similar topics in relation to the processes and impact of the advocacy service, for the families involved in interviews.

- An additional seven **interviews were conducted with relevant professionals**, including the advocate, social workers and conference chairs, focusing on their experience with families whose cases were reviewed for the study, but did not take part in the interviews.

- **Analysis of data gathered by RBKC** from anonymous feedback forms completed by parents and professionals attending conferences, focusing on key questions of relevance to their experience of advocacy. We also aimed to include relevant information from the Viewpoint questionnaire completed by children.

The Involved by Right project Youth Advisory Board13 (YAB) helped with the development of the recruitment letters, the questions and topics covered in the interviews with children. The YAB has also provided feedback on the findings from the draft report and their comments have been incorporated into our conclusions.

For the most part, the evaluation was qualitative in nature; however, where appropriate, we have quantified data from the case file review and feedback forms, to highlight patterns across the material.

Further details of the research methods are set out Appendix A.

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13 The YAB is a group of young people with experience of social services involvement. They have supported, advised and steered the IbR project.
2. Implementation of the advocacy service in RBKC

In this chapter, we focus on the implementation of the advocacy service. First we discuss how advocacy was introduced and the level of take-up. We then explore how the advocate worked with children to get their views, supported them to understand and attend the child protection conference and to understand the outcome of the conference.

2.1 Introduction and take-up of advocacy

Below we explore how advocacy was introduced to families, the level of take-up and reasons for taking up or declining the service.

Introduction to advocacy

Initially, family social workers introduced the advocacy service to parents and children. Parents had to first provide consent to allow the advocate to make contact with the child and ask if he or she wanted the service. Even though parents and children agreed to use advocacy for one child protection conference, they could opt out for any later conferences.

In several cases where parents refused advocacy for the initial child protection conference, the social worker and advocate successfully worked together to persuade the parents to provide consent for advocacy later on. This was mostly done in cases where the child had indicated to the social worker that they wished to have an advocate. In these cases the advocate was introduced to parents either at home or before the child protection conference and the advocate was able to directly provide necessary information to parents and reassure them of the process.

Take-up of advocacy

Quarterly reports provided by the advocate summarise the take-up of service during each quarter (Table 3.1). Between end of September 2011 and end of June 2012, advocacy was taken up in around half of cases (i.e. 50%, 42% and 45%, respectively). The advocate quarterly reports indicate several reasons for children not taking up the service, but mainly due to parents refusing the advocacy service on behalf of their child and with most not providing an explanation for their refusal. Those parents who specified why they declined the service on behalf of their children said that:

- the child was not interested
- it would be too upsetting for the child
- too many professionals were already involved in the child’s life.

There were also cases where parents initially provided consent for the advocacy service, but the advocate was not able to establish contact with the parents or children. In these cases it is not clear whether children had been informed about the availability of the advocacy service or not.
Table 3.1 Summary of quarterly statistics on take-up of advocacy service

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Quarter</th>
<th>No of referrals</th>
<th>Take-up</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sep – Dec 2011</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>19 (50%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jan – Mar 2012</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>14 (42%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apr – Jun 2012</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>17 (45%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Professionals we interviewed indicated that those parents who agreed to advocacy but were then hard to contact, were reluctant to work with other professionals as well. Furthermore, the advocate reported that even when she managed to speak with children whose parents were guarded and reluctant to engage with professionals, the children were also very guarded with the advocate about their feelings and views.

In some cases, a child in a family refused advocacy but their siblings agreed to it. In a couple of cases children met with the advocate but in the end did not say much because they were disengaged (e.g. having friends over while the advocate was there) or the advocate was not able to see the children alone without the parent being present.

In order to improve take-up of the service, as of June 2012, advocacy was made an integral part of child protection conference, with parents being informed that advocacy is offered to their children unless they opt-out of the service. Professionals reported that the advocacy service is now considered an integral part of the model of delivering the child protection conference to ensure children have the opportunity to express their views. This new approach has improved take-up to 59%.

The advocate’s quarterly reports also provide detailed analysis of differences in take-up of service depending on the type of child protection conference (initial or review), and ethnicity and gender of the child. The reports from the first three quarters showed that:

- take-up rates for review conferences increased whereas those for initial conferences dropped
- boys were less likely to take up the service than girls (around 25-50% of boys versus 60-80% of girls depending on which quarter)
- the difference in take-up between White and BME groups varied across quarters (in the first quarter, 71% of children from BME backgrounds versus just 41% of those from White backgrounds took up the service, whereas in the second and third quarters 70-80% children recorded as White took up the service versus just 20-40% from BME groups).

Our case file analysis which includes cases where parents agreed to advocacy, also revealed that where siblings refused to take up advocacy or dropped out, boys did so more than girls (five boys versus one girl).
Once parents and children agreed to the advocacy service for one child protection conference, advocacy was taken for the following conferences in 79% of cases\(^{14}\). Where the advocate was not able to get in touch with the family or a child and provide advocacy for subsequent conferences, this was due variously to the family being in crisis, children being ill, and, in one case, a child going missing from temporary care placement. In one instance, it was agreed that a young person should receive support at the conference from his adolescent (youth) worker, with whom he had an established, trusting relationship, rather than from the advocate.

**Acceptance of advocacy service**

Parents that we interviewed had mixed recollections on how the advocacy service was introduced to them by the family social worker, but they all mentioned that it was advertised as a ‘good thing’. Some trusted social service staff’s suggestion that it is a good idea and ‘just went along with it’. They were aware that their child would speak to an advocate before the child protection conference but, as the advocate pointed out, parents appreciated the benefits after they had the experience of the advocate reporting their child’s views at the child protection conference. This was also true for parents who said they initially had fears about agreeing to the advocacy, because they thought social services and potentially the advocate could put pressure on the child to say things that were not true. But they eventually agreed to advocacy as they thought they had nothing to hide and they trusted their social worker and the advocate involved.

In addition, professionals also described parents agreeing to advocacy because they saw advocates as independent from social services and they ‘like them more’ than social workers.

Children we interviewed had various recollections about the introduction of the service either by their parents, social workers or the advocate herself. All children said that during their first meeting the advocate explained to them who she is, what she does and how she can support them to express their views for the conference. The advocate indicated that children often agreed to advocacy, but worried about saying something that would get their parents into trouble or cause them to be taken into care. Some even worried about being negative about social workers. This indicates the importance of reassuring children about the role of the advocacy service - as discussed in the section below.

### 2.2 Obtaining the views of the child

The advocate’s main role was to gather the views and wishes of the child in order to report them during the child protection conference. Below we explore how the advocate prepared for a meeting with the child and then worked with the child to elicit his/her views. We also explore whether other professionals played a role in eliciting the child’s views and to what extent their role was different from the advocate’s role.

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\(^{14}\) Source: analysis of received case files on 38 children who received advocacy.
Preparing for advocacy

The advocate indicated that it is important to get relevant information about the child in order to elicit the child’s views in the right way. According to the advocate, the information provided by social workers varied in terms of its relevance and usefulness. This led the advocate to produce an advocacy referral form which she uses when speaking with social workers and to gather the detailed information she needs to know about the case in order to work effectively with the child, especially at the first meeting. In particular, she believed that the information provided should include any known incidents so she is aware when a child discloses new safeguarding issues and can alert the social workers. Furthermore, this information can be used to ask the child if he or she would like to comment on any known safeguarding issues.

The advocate also indicated that preparing for initial conferences was more challenging than for review conferences. Since the assessment and preparation for the initial child protection conference needs to be done in a very short time (i.e. 15 days), social workers could not always get the parents’ approval in time for the advocate to then arrange a proper preparation meeting with the child (e.g. it would be too quick to cover everything). Although ideally there would always be time for a thorough introductory meeting, the advocate felt that, in practice, the post conference feedback meeting was often the first time she had a ‘real’ conversation with the child, especially if she met the child for only fifteen minutes before the initial conference. This is one of the reasons why the advocate considered it very important to be able to meet with them after the conference.

Eliciting children’s views

Both children and the advocate indicated that the advocate made sure that children felt comfortable talking to her and gave them opportunities to ask her questions. The advocate usually prompts them by giving examples of questions other children have asked about her role and the child protection process.

Unless a safeguarding issue was reported by the child, the advocate provided a comfortable space for children to express their feelings and views without worrying that this information would go into social workers report. They could say to an advocate if they did not want specific information to be shared with others at the conference.

In order to elicit children’s views during the pre-conference meeting, the advocate created a comfortable atmosphere giving children several options depending on their age, such as ‘stickers and drawing, cutting and pasting’, creating a PowerPoint presentation on a computer and/or writing their views. Younger children were offered arts and crafts activities to help them relax so they could more comfortably discuss their views and what they would like to say at the conference. Older children preferred creating PowerPoint presentations or just asking the advocate to write down a list of things they would like her to put across on their behalf. Giving them the choice on how to present their views was very important to children:
"I don’t usually like talking about it or writing stuff down because when I write stuff down I either rush it too quickly or don’t do it. [But] PowerPoint I can handle, definitely.”

Child

At the meeting with the child prior to initial conferences the advocate would:

- explain the role of advocacy,
- ask what information they would like the adults at the conference to know
- discuss what they would like to see as a result of the conference
- prepare them for the conference if they were attending.

The meeting prior to review conferences would usually start by going over the decisions from the last conference and discussing what changes the child has seen since. Box 1 provides examples of ways in which the advocate worked with children to present their views.

**Box 2.1 Examples of how the advocate worked with children prior to child protection conference**

**‘Emma’, aged 13**

For the review conference the advocate and Emma looked together at the actions reported in the last plan and who was meant to be doing what, by when. The advocate then asked if Emma thought things had changed, and to indicate what she wanted to see happen as a result of the next meeting. She gave Emma a choice of ways to prepare her views (talking, writing, drawing, or creating a PowerPoint). Emma chose to do a PowerPoint presentation and the advocate encouraged her to write three slides focusing on: what was going well, what was not going so well and what she would like to see changed or improved.

**‘Lisa’, aged 9**

The advocate discussed with Lisa what had changed since the last conference and went through actions reported in the last plan. They then discussed what Lisa wanted to say at the conference and at the end played a game. The advocate made sure they played after the discussion, because last time they did the game first and then it was very difficult to engage Lisa to focus on anything else.

**‘Sara’, aged 10**

The advocate worked with Sara to prepare her for attending the review conference. The advocate gave Sara options including producing family pictures, which seemed to be a good way for her to relax and start talking. In addition, they wrote down on post-it notes what Sara wanted to say to adults at the meeting. With the advocate’s help, Sara then arranged the post-it notes and explained which ones she wanted to read at the conference, and which ones the advocate should read out instead.
‘Michael’, aged 9

The advocate went through the decisions made at the last conference and what Michael wanted the adults to know at the next one. Michael did some arts and crafts work while they talked, but did not want to show his art to the adults at the conference. Michael was very confident about expressing his views, and while doing arts and crafts he spoke to the advocate and told her what she should say at the child protection conference.

The advocate indicated that in presenting children’s views and wishes as faithfully and authentically as possible, sticking to what the children said and using their words was more important than the medium of the presentation. However, she found it frustrating that in some conference venues there were no facilities to present children’s views as they had prepared them, e.g. no computer/projection for PowerPoint presentations.

Once the advocate and the child agreed on the information to be presented at the conference, no child had withdrawn consent for the information to be presented. Children we interviewed indicated that they had felt able to say everything they wanted to the advocate at the preparation meetings and that the advocate had helped them to prepare everything they wanted to be presented at the child protection conference. Younger children perceived their meetings with the advocate not as ‘talking to the advocate’ but more as working together through interactive activities, e.g. ‘working on a computer’. As one child put it:

‘I never really talked to her, cos we done things on the computer. We printed them out, we did a picture and who I would like to live in it and I put mum, dad and my stepdad and my sister.’

Child

While some children felt comfortable talking to the advocate from the start, for others it took some time to open up and feel comfortable about expressing their views during their meetings. It wasn’t always easy for the advocate to judge when children were ready to confide in her, and sometimes she thought children had been fairly open with her, but then discovered at the conference relevant facts the children had not mentioned.

In addition to eliciting children’s views, at the preparation meetings the advocate’s role also involved reassuring the children about what would happen to them or their parents. Children often overheard information discussed by parents at home or by professionals and then ‘thought the worst’. Children would often express their worries to the advocate, who was then able to explain the social services process in detail so children could understand and feel reassured about what would happen (i.e. not being taken away into care or getting into trouble for saying something).

The role of the advocate versus social worker

Some professionals reported that initially there was confusion about the respective role of the advocate and the family social worker in eliciting children’s views. However, over time, as communication improved, the
respective roles were clarified. The advocate is now seen as having a separate role from the social worker: the social worker’s role is seen as providing assessment of the child rather than solely reporting on what the child wants or providing feedback on what they say, which is seen as the role of the advocate. It is still important, however, that the social worker ascertains the child’s wishes and feelings in order to produce assessment of the child.

Professionals indicated that in some cases the advocate provided new information on children’s views but in others her input supported what social workers had found already. In some cases children’s views reported by the advocate were in contradiction with what social workers believed to be the case. Professionals were aware that this could be due to children being more guarded when talking to social workers at home, particularly in front of parents. It was also possible children changed their minds between talking to the social worker and the advocate. As reported by one chair of the CP conference, having children attend the conference provided clarification in situations where the child appeared to have expressed conflicting views.

Social workers reported that the advocate can encourage children to disclose more about their wishes and views as they are more likely to be open with someone independent, as distinct from a social worker who is seen as a person who makes decisions about the family.

Children thought it was good to talk to social workers, but said it was better to have advocates as well, since their social worker could be busy. Some children were clearly distinguishing the role of the social worker who ‘arranges things’ and that of the advocate who is only focusing on the child and relaying information for and to her:

‘The social workers arrange things. Like arrange conferences. Advocate doesn’t really arrange them, she just comes for me and when I’m not there [presents my views].’

Child

The role of Viewpoint

The Viewpoint questionnaire for children going through child protection was developed at the time when the advocacy service was also introduced in RBKC. The aim of Viewpoint is to gather views and wishes of children age seven or older through an interactive tool administered on a computer. At the stage of developing the Viewpoint questionnaire it was envisioned that social workers would administer it before each child protection conference and any relevant information would be incorporated into the child assessment. The data would be centrally stored and would be used to capture children’s views and wishes over time. One of the aims of this research was also to assess whether children who receive advocacy over time report, via Viewpoint, feeling safer and happier. However, due to various difficulties in administering the Viewpoint questionnaire, as discussed below, we were not able to answer this research question.

The evaluation found some confusion about the responsibility for administering the Viewpoint questionnaire. Some social workers thought this was part of the
advocate’s broader role of gathering children’s views, while others believed they were responsible for the administration of Viewpoint as it gathers information relevant for the child protection assessments.

Professionals we spoke to acknowledged that Viewpoint was not completed regularly, as it was not clear when it needed to be completed. Some social workers thought it was only needed for the initial child protection conference, however, the initial aim was to gather evidence from the child before every review conference as well in order to monitor progress. Confusion about who and when Viewpoint should be completed were compounded by problems with accessing Viewpoint (e.g. logging-on to the system).

For the period covered by the evaluation (Sep 2011-Jun 2012), we were able to obtain 17 Viewpoint questionnaires as part of case file analysis. Analysis of these questionnaires indicates that children did not understand some questions or how to respond to them (e.g. they did not understand the 0-100 sliding scales on questions about how safe they feel or how happy they are). These problems were also picked up by some professionals we spoke to. As some suggested, it would be valuable to review how Viewpoint is set up and how best to use it in order to capture robust data via this method. At the time of writing this report, the RBKC has been working with the IbR YAB in order to revise the Viewpoint questionnaires and address some of these issues.

There were also inconsistencies with instructions on Viewpoint given to children; some children thought that it was completely confidential and that information would not be shared at the child protection conference. There was an incident where, via Viewpoint, a child mistakenly implied that a historical incident was an ongoing issue, and when this was raised at the child protection conference, her parents were upset. During the feedback session, her advocate reported what had happened and the child was worried that she would get into trouble. It was then agreed to write up instructions on Viewpoint for children and professionals, and the advocate worked with the IbR YAB to write the instructions for children in a child friendly language.

Some professionals indicated that Viewpoint is a good way of getting a snapshot picture of how the child feels and pinpointing issues the advocate can explore in more detail. However, the majority viewed Viewpoint as just confirming the information reported by the advocate and thought the information provided by the advocate was more in depth and could have more impact than that from the questionnaire. There was also an agreement that the questionnaire was not suitable for SEN and Disabled (SEN/D) children and that one to one interaction with SEN/D children was a better way to gauge their views. However, the manager overseeing implementation of Viewpoint in RBKC pointed out that Viewpoint is successfully used with looked after children, including an adapted version for SEN/D looked after children, and they will further explore how best to use it for the child protection process.

2.3 Supporting the child to attend the conference

In this section we explore how children were supported to understand the conference process, how they decided to attend and how they were supported
prior to and during the conference. We also explore professionals’ and parents’ views on children attending the conference.

**Understanding the child protection conference process**

The advocate would explain to children at their first meeting what the child protection conference was, but some children only gained a full understanding when they actually attended:

‘I don’t think she knew what child protection [conference] was... obviously I explained it to her on the first visit, but it wasn’t until the first feedback visit... she was like ‘oh that’s what those meetings are like; I didn’t realise there would be so many people there...’”

Advocate

The advocate also made sure children realised that important decisions about their lives were discussed and agreed at the conference, and that it was important that people at the conference were able to take into account what they had to say. She therefore encouraged them to contribute to the child protection conference process by providing their own views and wishes.

Some professionals thought that supporting the child around the conference should be a multi-agency responsibility, and that social workers as well as the advocate should be involved. However, others felt that the advocate rather than social worker should have the main role in explaining to children the details about the process, content and outcomes of the conference.

**Deciding to attend the child protection conference**

Children needed to have parental permission in order to attend a conference. Case file analysis indicated that only 24 per cent of children who received advocacy attended at least once.

The advocate reported that most parents were ‘very against’ the child attending the conference. However, if the child was very eager, the advocate would try, either directly or via the social worker, to persuade parents to give permission, which tended to be successful. The advocate thought that parents (as well as some professionals) were not clear that children could attend only part of the meeting, and more clarity about this may help to overcome some parents’ concerns.

Children who did not attend the meetings explained that this was because they:

- were too shy to speak
- thought they were not allowed or did not want to skip school
- did not want to sit through long meetings with adults.

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15 The YAB have developed a ‘menu of choices’ around child’s attendance at child protection conferences, which might also be useful to inform and reassure both parents and professionals on how and when the child can attend.
Children who did not attend the conference were happy for the advocate to express their views instead of them:

‘Because I’m a little shy speaking in front of everybody, I say what I think and she tells it to the people in the meeting, and they see what I said.’

Child

Some children who attended the conference said they also wanted to get out of school and some enjoyed the experience of being in a different environment:

‘The best thing about the meeting was that I got to sit in one of those swingy chairs.’

Child

**Attending a part of the child protection conference**

Professionals and parents had initial fears about children attending the child protection conference. Parents were reluctant to let children attend the conference thinking they would sit through the whole meeting. Some professionals expressed the same concerns. One social worker also reported that one risk of children staying for the whole child protection conference was that adults could become inhibited about voicing worries about the family in front of the children.

Addressing professionals’ concerns about children attending the conference, one child protection chair described how they considered which parts of the conference were appropriate for children to attend. For example, they wanted to make sure children did not witness the discussions during which there was a likelihood of conflict between parents or where an older sibling could feel responsible for answering all the questions. Therefore, they agreed that children would only attend the beginning of the conference, which usually focused on children’s views and provided the opportunity for professionals to ask children to clarify their wishes and views. This way professionals were not inhibited to voice worries about the family after children presented their views and left the room.

If children were attending the conference, before it started, the chair would briefly discuss with them whether they would like to present their views first. Sometimes children wanted to hear the social worker’s report first and then present their views which was usually allowed. There was only one case where a child wanted to stay for the whole meeting, but it was then agreed with the child that they would just stay for the social worker’s report and then come back for decisions at the end.

Professionals also reserved the right not to invite children to attend the conference in order to avoid exposing the child to unpleasant experiences with their parents. For example, in one case children were not invited to attend the child protection conference due to a history of their mother attending under the influence of alcohol.
Preparing for the child protection conference

Children we interviewed and who attended the conference said that only the advocate helped them prepare for the conference and supported them throughout the conference. This reflects the views of some professionals (both chairs and social workers) who distinguish between the advocate’s role to prepare the child for the child protection conference and the social worker’s role to organise the professionals for the conference. Social workers particularly highlighted the time constraints, with only 15 days to organise everything for the initial child protection conference (i.e. getting reports for the meeting from all adults involved with the family) there was not enough time to explain the conference process to the child in any detail, or prepare them for it. Therefore, having an advocate taking on this role was warmly welcomed by social workers and conference chairs.

Even though the advocate prepares children to attend the conference, professionals reported that they were required to make all the necessary arrangements. Besides the practicalities of how a child will get to the child protection conference and back, the social worker had to determine who would accompany them when they left the meeting room, and, if they wanted to know the outcome of the child protection conference immediately, who would provide initial feedback.

Analysis of the case files and interviews with professionals revealed that chairs were also involved in preparing the child for the child protection conference. They met with children before the conference started and agreed with them the structure of the meeting (e.g. if child would present wishes first and how long they wished to stay). Chairs also asked children to decide who should sit where during the meeting. The aim was to make the child protection conference as friendly as possible, and include the child in some decision making around how to structure the conference (e.g. who will present first and where will everyone sit). When YAB were presented brief findings of this report they found this aspect the most important for any child attending the child protection conference and should be standard procedure.

In cases where children attended the conference but did not take-up the advocacy service (due to parents refusing), the chair reported spending more time with these children before the conference to explain the process and agree with the child how and when they would contribute to the meeting. The chair also tried to encourage the child to say what they wished to share with the conference, so they could make it easier for them to do so by prompting them at appropriate points.

Supporting the child during the child protection conference

The advocate played an important role in supporting children through the conference by sitting next to them and reading out things that children did not want to say:

’Sometime if I didn’t want to speak, she would say it for me... You know when you feel kind of worried to say something out loud?’

Child
Some children wanted to attend the child protection conference, but asked the advocate to present everything they wanted to say. For example, advocate reported that one child just introduced herself but asked the advocate to report the material they had prepared about her wishes and feelings. While doing so, the advocate kept checking back with the child that she still wanted her to make each point and also offered the child the chance to speak up and present any of the points herself. Interestingly, the child also wanted the advocate to say something after she left the room, as she may have felt upset or awkward about being present while it was conveyed.

Parents also reported that the advocate supported the children during the child protection conference, and in particular if they forgot what they wanted to say (e.g. when describing their own pictures), and they thought it was easier for the children to expresses their views having advocate there to prompt and support them.

In cases where children attended the conference without an advocate, they did not have equivalent support from anyone else, although as noted above conference chairs did what they could to put children at their ease.

There were several instances when children became upset during the conference either because of the decisions taken (e.g. being placed on a child protection plan) or the nature of the discussion (e.g. around categories of abuse/neglect). The advocate reported that she would usually accompany children out of the meeting room and stay with them to calm and reassure them. Professionals found it very helpful that someone who was ‘outside of social services’ could explain the impact and the process of child protection to children, including decisions around putting them on a child protection plan.

In cases where children attended the conference without an advocate, professionals made sure that children were accompanied by another member of staff if they become upset and left the meeting room.

2.4 Supporting the child to understand the conference outcome

One of the key elements of the advocacy service provided in RBKC is a feedback meeting with the child after the conference. We explore the extent to which the advocate was able to meet with children after the conference and what typically happened at the feedback meeting.

Difficulties arranging feedback meetings

Analysis of case files revealed that out of 41 child protection conferences for which advocacy was provided, in 11 cases (27 per cent) the advocate was not able to meet with the child, primarily due to difficulties in getting hold of parents to arrange the meeting or parents not being willing to let the advocate meet with the child.

The advocate had difficulty meeting children whose parents were reluctant to agree to advocacy in the first place. Some parents would say that the social
worker or parents themselves had updated the child about the outcome of the conference and there was no need for the advocate to meet with the child. The advocate said that she was never sure if the child really received feedback and/or if he or she would have liked to meet with her to receive it. To overcome the difficulties of contacting children via their parents, the advocate arranged for some feedback sessions to take place at school, where meetings were easier to arrange. However, this was not always suitable as some children had specifically asked (social workers) not to be contacted via the school because they did not want others to be aware of what was happening in their family. In cases when the advocate was not able to meet with a child after several attempts, she would send them a letter providing written feedback on the conference.

Due to reluctant parents, the advocate had difficulties in arranging meetings within a short timeframe (i.e. a couple of days) after the child protection conference, which was seen highly desirable from the perspective of the child who should not be left wondering and worrying for too long about what was decided at the conference.

**Detailed feedback on child protection conference**

In general, even though children reported that their parents and social workers also told them the outcome of the conference, the advocate explained what happened in more detail, which they found very helpful. As one child put it, the social worker only mentioned ‘the good points’, while the advocate also mentioned ‘the bad points’ so she got ‘a more balanced story’ from the advocate.

While social workers said they told the child what were the main decisions from the child protection plan, they relied on the advocate to provide more detail. Some also found it helpful if the advocate spoke to the child first to relay the information from the conference. This gave the social worker the opportunity to organise the agreed actions (e.g. activities for children) and meet with children to inform them how actions agreed at the conference had been implemented.

Children appreciated getting feedback from the conference especially if they did not attend the meeting. The advocate reported making her own notes of the child protection conference, particularly noting how the actions linked to children’s views and wishes, as well as noting anything related to school (e.g. reported school achievement) which, in her experience, was very important for older children.

One child distinctly remembered receiving from the advocate a ‘review sheet’ of what happened at the meeting, which connected the views she had expressed with the actions from the meeting. During the feedback session, the advocate went through the main points from the meeting and told children how people responded to their views and wishes. Also she explained how the agreed plan matched with what they had requested or mentioned. If children attended the child protection conference, the advocate would also provide positive feedback on their input, for example, saying how confident they seemed to be at the conference in spite of being nervous about attending.
In addition to explaining to children what their child protection plan included and how their wishes had been addressed, the feedback sessions were also useful for the advocate to explain to children why it was not possible for some of their wishes to be fulfilled.

The advocate reported that some children were interested in the specifics of the plan that were relevant to their views and wishes, whereas others were more interested in knowing whether they were off the plan and away from social services. However, some children did not want to be taken off the plan and worried what might happen if social services were not involved anymore. In such cases, and in others, the advocate reassured children if they had any worries.

**Feedback to social workers**

The advocate would report any safeguarding disclosure made to social workers, and these were always acted on. In one case, when the child made a new disclosure to the advocate during the feedback meeting, the advocate thought this reflected the fact that the child had come to understand her own agency in the child protection process, and realised that there was something she wanted to add to the plan to improve her situation. The child accepted that the advocate would communicate this disclosure to the social worker, and was pleased with the action taken as a result.

The advocate would also report to the social worker any other wishes and views expressed by children as a response to the plan or outcome of the conference.

**2.5 Summary**

The evaluation found that initially, there was confusion about the role of the advocate, and social workers were not clear how advocacy could add value to their work. After working on cases where the advocacy service was used, social workers understood more clearly how the advocate’s distinct role complemented their own. Parents were also initially unsure about what advocacy involved, and those who were guarded or hostile towards professionals tended to refuse advocacy for their children. However, if children expressed the wish to have an advocate, parents would be challenged, usually by the advocate directly. While the advocate had some success in reassuring parents, and persuading them to let their children use the service, many parents still refused advocacy for their child. Changing the procedure for obtaining parental consent from an opt-in to an opt-out procedure has increased take-up from 42-50% to 59%.

Some children were also initially reluctant to work with the advocate and were very guarded about the information they shared. However, over time they tended to be more open with her, and gain a better understanding of the conference process.

Successfully working with social workers and chairs was important in enabling the advocate to adequately support children. Getting the right information about the family and any known safeguarding incidents and disclosures before meeting with the child was important in order to make the most of the meeting.
with the child. The advocate was very flexible in working with each child by providing them with different options on how they wished to express their views and wishes for the conference. Children felt supported by their advocate and appreciated her flexibility in helping them organise what they wanted to say, and how. Those who took up the opportunity to attend the meeting appreciated this experience, which broadened their understanding of the whole child protection process.

Professionals and parents had initial concerns about children attending conferences. Professionals made sure that children only attended those parts of the meeting judged unlikely to be upsetting, or to involve conflict with their parents. Even though the advocate was seen as the main person to support the child at the conference, the chair of the conference also played an important role in agreeing with the child the timing of their contribution (e.g. when they wished to talk) and making them feel more comfortable about attending (e.g. by giving them the task to decide who should be sitting where). The chair seemed to play the main part in preparing the child for the conference when the child did not have an advocate. However, these children did not have the same level of support during the conference as those with an advocate.

Meeting with children after the child protection conference and providing them with feedback could prove difficult to arrange due to parents’ refusal or the advocate not being able to get in touch with the family after several attempts. Children who did meet with the advocate after the conference appreciated getting feedback, especially getting balanced feedback (‘good and bad things’) from the meeting. The post-conference feedback helped children to gain a better understanding of the child protection process and more confidence in their advocate, which could lead to the disclosure of new safeguarding issues.
3. Impact of advocacy in RBKC

In this chapter, we focus on the impact of the advocacy service, in relation to conferences, child protection plans, benefits for children and benefits for families. We consider the impact of advocacy in the context of other sources of support and information about the child’s views. Finally, we compare and contrast suggestions for the future of the service, designed to increase its effectiveness and impact.

3.1 Focus on the child at the conference

In this section, we consider how conferences have been affected by the inclusion of children’s views, presented either by the advocate or by children themselves, focusing in particular on the content and conduct of the meetings and what this has meant for professionals.

*Changing the tone of the meeting*

From the advocate’s perspective, the sharing of the child’s views impacted on the tone of the meeting, in a positive way. She indicated this was particularly powerful when the child was there in person and able to interact with professionals and family members. It appeared from several accounts that the presentation of children’s views at the beginning of the meeting – rarely challenged by professionals or parents – could start the conference on a more constructive note. The advocate described various instances where inclusion of the child, or simply material they had prepared, livened up the meeting, ‘broke the ice’, made people laugh or smile, and relieved tension. Similarly, social work staff described situations where the child’s input ‘took the edge off the “not so nice” stuff at the conference’.

The advocate, social workers and conference chairs described occasions where children presented convincing pictures of the positives in their lives as well as the negatives. When even nervous children impressed their parents, as well as social services staff, with their ability to contribute to the meeting, and when children clearly showed that they enjoyed being with their parents during the conference. As one chair said:

‘It would be unusual for it not to have had an impact on you because to have a child in a very formal meeting... it’s quite an intimidating environment, even for professionals I think... It was quite powerful that she was able to come and share her picture, and her wishes and feelings.’

Chair of child protection conferences

*Bringing clarity and understanding of the child’s perspective*

Findings indicated that children’s views had a real impact on both professionals and parents primarily because their own words could convey their strength of feeling about particular issues, and also present a more holistic view of their situation, or priorities, from their point of view. Conference chairs and social workers described how the child’s words, and where applicable, their presence,
affected them and others round the conference table. They described children’s views coming across clearly, even when relayed by the advocate, in contrast to situations where the advocate was not at the conference and where the child’s voice had been lacking. When children prepared drawings or PowerPoint slides, these were described as having a strong visual impact, focusing attention. Several staff welcomed the chance to meet and interact with children for the first time, which seemed to be motivating as well as illuminating in some cases.

'Sometimes you get professionals who never meet the child and to have a little girl, little boy, or sibling group there makes the case more alive, and you realise why you’re doing what you’re doing and who you’re doing it for – it’s not just a name and a case number.’

Social worker

Several professionals also described children’s words having a powerful impact even when spoken – or reiterated - in their absence by the advocate. The common element was the reminder to see from the child’s perspective, adding to the overall assessment of the family’s strengths, weaknesses and needs, as well as priorities for action. As one social worker put it, in relation to making arrangements for contact between a child and her family at Christmas:

'You forget that kids at school are probably talking about it, and for me it’s more clinical about how I’m going to sort out the taxi rather than the excitement and anticipation the child’s having. I remember at the conference the advocate raised that and the team manager and the chair put that as a big decision we had to immediately sort out. I remember it focused all of us, to make sure we put a plan in place straight away.’

Social worker

One experienced conference chair said that, in general, professionals were provided with a much better understanding of the child’s experience through the work of the advocacy service, and also to some extent via Viewpoint. In the few cases where children had attended conferences without an advocate, professionals indicated that there were still gains from having the children there and able to contribute. However, it appeared that it could have been a more comfortable experience for the children, and more useful, if they had been supported before, during and after the conference. The age of the child, alongside support they received from other professionals influenced the extent to which they could play a meaningful part in the conference. Even without the advocate, older children (i.e. 10 year olds or older) were more able to respond to questions, and in some cases provide important new information which would not have been provided otherwise.

Even in relation to the few cases where children had become upset and needed to take a break from the conference, professionals highlighted ways in which attendance at those particular meetings was still beneficial for the children involved, and for adults attending the conference.

16 Here respondents were comparing the situation before the advocacy service was offered or cases when the family did not take up the service.
Overall, views on how the advocacy service had impacted on the conference reflected this comment from one professional:

'It makes a big difference to the information we receive and lets us put them [children’s views] in the centre of our discussions and thinking, rather than on the periphery.’

Conference chair

**Presenting positive and persuasive messages to parents**

As noted above, the children’s contribution was often described as making the meeting more positive. Importantly, though interviews with all parties confirmed that it could be hard for children to be critical of their parents, it appears that such views had been elicited by the advocate and skilfully presented. Regardless of whether the child or advocate delivered these difficult messages, it seems that this has been done helpfully, in such a way as to make it easier for the parents and professionals to agree a way forward, rather than causing additional tension in either the parent-child relationship or interactions with professionals involved in the case.

A conference chair stressed that she had never known a parent to respond negatively to views expressed by, or for, children in a conference. This was reinforced by others’ accounts. The advocate reported that there was only one case where a parent responded negatively to their child’s views, and that the issue was resolved satisfactorily.

**3.2 Contribution to the child protection plan**

A key measure of the advocacy service’s impact is the extent to which children’s views contribute to their child protection plans. In this section, we consider evidence from case file analysis alongside interviews with children, parents, the advocate, social workers and conference chairs.

**Informing the conference and the plan**

The advocate’s quarterly reports show that in 57 out of 59 instances children using the advocacy service for a conference had at least some of their views and wishes taken into account.

These figures were reinforced by analysis of case file material supplied by RBKC, covering roughly the same period. Of 37 conferences attended by the advocate, there was just one where the resulting plan did not appear to address a child’s views at all. However, this reflected the fact that two of three children in the family professed to be fine and made no requests, while the eldest – the only one who remained on the plan - had opted to engage with an adolescent worker rather than the advocate, and had not submitted views to the meeting.

In line with findings from case files and the advocate’s records, children we spoke to were convinced that their views were listened to at the conference and taken into account. Some mentioned that specific actions were put in place in line with their wishes, concerning parents’ behaviour, access arrangements, and a possible timetable for coming off plan. This positive message was reiterated
by parents and professionals. All of the parents we interviewed stated that their children’s views had clearly been listened to, and reflected in conference decisions. They referred to actions relating to activities, contact with family members, and moving from one type of plan (child protection) to another (child in need). Similarly conference feedback forms completed by professionals and parents show that seven out of eight parents, and 82 out of 87 professionals felt children’s views had been considered in formulating actions for their plans.

In some cases, the advocate had supported children to express views or wishes which had not been mentioned either to the social worker or via Viewpoint. This new information gave the conference insights into the child’s experience, extending and sometimes challenging their understanding of what was going on in the family. For example, one girl revealed that she was missing ‘quality time’ with her dad; something social workers thought was happening, but which had been stopped by the father who had not recognised its importance for the child.

Social workers and conference chairs indicated that actions were incorporated into child protection plans due to children making their wishes or worries known through advocacy. They also mentioned other instances where issues had already been raised, for example via Viewpoint, and where the advocate confirmed their importance for the child. Although children’s views were not the sole determinant of conference decisions, professionals indicated that children’s views did have a clear influence on the details of specific actions, and the emphasis put upon them in the plans.

Not only did they feel listened to, but on the basis of the feedback they had had afterwards, and changes they had seen since, children interviewed were satisfied with the decisions taken at the conference; even if they had not got exactly what they asked for. One child had wanted to come off plan immediately, for example, but was pleased that the conference agreed this as an aim for the next meeting. Another was sure that a wish she expressed – about her mother smoking - would not actually lead to change at home, but this was because she felt her mother would not go along with what was clearly stated as an action in the plan.

As described by one child, she knew that her wishes were considered important and taken into account, not just because they were reflected in the plan, but because the plan was put into action:

‘Yeah, because sometimes they would sort things out. Like when it was near Christmas and... I was worried that I wouldn’t see my parents... and then social services sorted things out, so they do listen... All the time. Cos I’m old enough and... because how I feel is important.’

Child

Asked if social services changed things as well as listened, she said:

‘It really changed. Really well, in a good way, yeah.’

The analysis of case files also included analysis of conference minutes and corresponding child protection plans in which advocate was not involved. In these instances, there was some mention of the child’s views or preferences in
the social worker’s report and - in most cases - one or more actions which addressed the children’s stated views\textsuperscript{17}. In general, any references to children’s wishes focused on one or two specific issues relating to priority concerns at the time and there was much less comprehensive coverage of children’s views than in those cases where the advocate had met with them and helped them to prepare.

\textit{Translating wishes into practical actions}

Examples of issues raised by children, predominantly with the support of the advocate, and reflected in the plan are presented throughout this section. In brief, requests typically translated into action concerned the following:

- contact with parents, siblings, other family members or carers (including any safeguarding issues)
- parenting, parent-child relationships and the home environment
- activities with friends or family members
- support with schoolwork or homework
- peer relationships or bullying
- children’s fears, worries, or misunderstandings about their situations.

The case file analysis highlighted some instances, where particular requests were not reflected in actions. However, the reasons for this were generally apparent. Children’s expressed desires which did not feature on plans included those related to expensive material goods or activities (e.g. laptops, computer games), dangerous items (e.g. guns and ammunition) and improbable fantasies (e.g. ‘five pregnant girl cats, two boy cats and a million pounds’). Notably, this ‘lottery win’ request was made via Viewpoint; wishes expressed with the guidance and support of the advocate tended to be more ‘grounded’, though not always within the gift of social services.

An important category of request which was never dismissed, but which was sometimes addressed in ways other than those requested by the child, related to contact with family members. Interviews with social workers and conference chairs gave a consistent message that the overarching decisions about placing children on plans, or ending them, depended on assessments of parents’ abilities and intentions to care for and safeguard children (see examples in Box 3.1).

\begin{boxedtext}
\textbf{Box 3.1 Contact with family members}

Case files detailed how one child had disclosed and then withdrawn an allegation amounting to physical assault against her father, and the only wish she expressed to the conference was that he be allowed to return to the family home, which clearly could not happen, pending further investigations. In other cases, too, children’s preferred arrangements in relation to contact or residency were not feasible in light of parents’ relationship and personal problems, safeguarding concerns or associated
\end{boxedtext}

\textsuperscript{17} The exception involved a case where the child had asked for a step-parent to move in with the family, but historical domestic violence meant that this was inappropriate.
legal issues. However, the records showed that where possible, actions were agreed which addressed the quality and/or quantity of contact with family members, and which involved practitioners and parents providing child-friendly explanations of why particular courses of action were not possible, at least in the short-term.

While parents who took part in interviews felt that the children’s views had been considered, they also recognised limits on the extent to which their wishes could be carried out. In several cases, social workers and chairs drew attention to the limits on what was feasible. They described actions from child protection conferences specifying that professionals and parents would explain to the child why particular requests could not be met, while offering reassurance and alternative means to address relevant issues (see Box 3.2 for examples). Similarly, the advocate also described showing children how actions in their plans were in line with their expressed wishes, even if they involved changes the child had not specifically requested.

**Box 3.2 Addressing children’s wishes in a practical way**

In one case, where a parent appreciated that appropriate, rather than unrealistic, actions were agreed, he stressed that social workers could not guarantee to the child that her parents would remain together. Despite this, he said, the support provided gave their relationship “the best chance, and the only chance” of continuing.

In another case, when it was not possible to provide an immediate respite place for a child who requested it, other out-of-home activities were arranged in line with her wish for a break, while adolescent services worked with the family on improving relationships to make home life less stressful.

In one example, one boy’s wish for a PlayStation was not granted; but his parents were persuaded to let him attend an after school club to enable him to see more of his friends and have fun.

In addition, where a young person had described problems with peer relationships and bullying, social services offered to work with the family to make it easier for her to bring friends home – which she welcomed.

In some instances, professionals described how children’s views provided an insight into how interventions were experienced and enabled them to take action to allay the child’s fears (see Box 3.3 for examples).

**Box 3.3 Addressing children’s fears and worries**

In one case, professionals were able to reassure one girl that her home situation had not been shared with ‘everyone’ at school, explained in a child-friendly way why contact with her mother was supervised, and what was being recorded during their sessions meetings.

Another child said she felt embarrassed when core group meetings were held at school, and the venue was changed as a result.
Similarly, in another case, a boy’s primary concern was his family staying together after allegations of assault against his father, and he was reassured that social services wanted to support the family rather than split them up. His positive feedback about the new style of discipline that his parents were using was helpful for them and for professionals to hear - demonstrating and validating the changes the family were making.

As one social worker stressed, the advocate’s work appeared important not only in relaying children’s views per se, but also in ensuring children understood the point of the conferences. This, she argued, increased the likelihood of children providing relevant information about what was going well or proving difficult from their perspective – a contribution which could inform the overall assessment and make a difference to the plan.

### 3.3 Benefits for children

In this section, we consider various ways in which the advocacy service, and specifically aspects of processes described in Chapter 3, are perceived to have benefitted children, drawing on the accounts of all those who took part in interviews.

#### Being supported to express things

Overall, advocacy appeared to have enabled children to express their views comprehensively, and in person if they so wished.

As highlighted in Chapter 2, children valued having someone who could speak for them if they chose not to attend a conference, or felt inhibited about saying things out loud. Certainly on the basis of children’s accounts, the advocate’s support was crucial in communicating their wishes and feelings. Some children who had not attended the meetings felt sure that their views would otherwise have gone unheard. As one child put it, without her advocate:

> ‘They don’t know what I would have said or what I think, and they wouldn’t have any of my views, and they wouldn’t really know my decisions.’

Child

Only one child seemed to consider her social worker as an alternative person with whom she could talk things through, and even she thought the advocate’s role in helping her prepare was vital, simply because the social worker could be too busy. Another child who had attended several conferences was adamant that she would never have done so without the advocate’s support.

#### Being empowered by and trusting the advocate

The fact that the advocate was there and acting for them alone clearly meant a lot to children who took part in the research. That she really listened and put across their views, not her own, was vital and appeared to be empowering; one described the ‘best thing’ about the service as:
'Having someone actually listen to you, rather than just saying what they think you would say.'

Child

Professionals, as well as the advocate, considered it helpful for children to have time and space to talk to someone separate from social services, and outside the family, about their situation. Being able to speak to the advocate in confidence was certainly valued by children we interviewed. At the same time they understood the limits of confidentiality in cases when safeguarding issues are disclosed. As one child explained:

'If you don’t want to speak to everybody, you just speak to your advocate and she won’t share anything... but... if you’re in danger or something, like getting hit, getting abused at home, they will actually tell your social worker.'

Child

The advocate described how some children who were initially wary about what she might do with information seemed reassured after a feedback meeting that they controlled what she conveyed to the conference. As a result, they tended to open up more. As she pointed out, if children become more confident in voicing their worries and making disclosures, this is conducive to their safety in future.

As highlighted by one experienced professional, the sort of negotiation children could engage in with their advocate prior to and during a conference was not possible with a social worker. Certainly, conference chairs could also empower children who attended the meetings by allowing them to choose where people sat, and when to present their views. However, it was the advocate who played the key role in providing children with options around the format and delivery of material they wished to share, and whom they could trust to accurately convey their views.

Feeling involved and informed

Children appeared to benefit from being involved in the conference process, even if they did not actually attend a meeting. As noted in Section 2.3, the advocate felt that she was able to enhance children’s understanding of the aim and focus of the meetings, even if they had been ‘in the system’ for a long time. A number of professionals also commented that children seemed pleased to see familiar faces, such as teachers, around the table, and believed they felt reassured and supported to know that the group was meeting regularly, keen to listen, and taking account of their views in supporting their family. Attending a conference, receiving feedback and having the process explained by the advocate were all seen as helpful in reducing unnecessary fears:

'Traditionally children have been given very limited information, to try to stop them worrying about what it’s all about. But I think it sort of demystifies it for them; shows them how their views are being included, interpreted back; what other people are worried about, and what they’re going to be doing about it. It’s a more transparent process. I can only
Imagine that this would make them feel less anxious than, for example, if they’re sitting there worrying if they’re going to be “taken away”.

Conference chair

As discussed further in Section 4.4, the advocate’s role was seen as particularly useful where parents had very difficult relationships with social services. It was suggested by one conference chair that, for the child as well as the parent, the advocate’s independent role could act as a bridge to working with the social worker, insofar as the child saw their views being respected by, and responded to, by social services.

Enjoyment and positive feedback

Parents whose children had attended conferences were happy with them doing so, partly because they felt aspects of it were rewarding for them. One parent said that his child really liked introducing herself and engaging with the professionals there. Another parent, who had been concerned that his daughter would feel taken aback by the roomful of people, also said that she seemed to like expressing her opinions:

’Once she went in there, she seemed to like it – to put her views across. Yeah, she was always saying she’d like to go.’

Parent

Children who had attended their conferences and were able to put across their views were building their confidence. Equally, others who chose not to attend but still had an input via the advocate were also building their confidence in expressing their opinions.

The post-conference meeting also boosted children’s confidence. The advocate described how she was able to give children positive feedback in relation to how their views had been received. This could include praise, for example, for the quality of their slides or drawings. In addition, she described how she would often pass on reports from school staff which recognised children’s achievements – something they were not expecting, but which seemed to give them a real boost. Where children actually attended the conferences, they had been able to receive this positive feedback in person, with professionals describing how they, and parents, had praised children’s creative skills or simply thanked them for coming and making an important contribution. It was hoped this would make children feel happier about taking part as well as bolster their self-esteem and self-efficacy.

Ultimately, however, on the basis of descriptions from those we interviewed, the key benefit of the advocacy service for children was the knowledge that their views had been listened to, used to inform plans, and led to progress on issues they felt were important.
3.4 Impact of the advocacy service on parents

In this section we consider the impact of the advocacy service on parents. We explore their responses to having children’s views sought and expressed at the conference, and – where applicable – having the child attend the meeting.

To a great extent, parents expressed seeing similar benefits of advocacy as those expressed by professionals. Parents we spoke to described positive effects of having their child’s views included in the conference. In one case, parents considered that allowing the advocate to work with the child had enabled them to demonstrate their willingness to engage, that they had nothing to hide, and that their child felt happy, loved and cared for, in the context of allegations about aspects of their parenting. The advocate also felt that in other cases where children conveyed positive messages about their family life, parents were encouraged because professionals were willing to recognise their achievements as well as difficulties.

Social workers, conference chairs, and the advocate described situations in which information elicited from children via advocacy reinforced what social workers had recorded. While this gave professionals more confidence in their collective assessment of the situation, it could also give parents more confidence in social services. For example, children’s expressed feelings about not having breakfast or about their father’s drinking had helped persuade parents that it is not just social workers who believe they need to make changes, and that they should accept the support on offer.

Indeed, in one case, a parent described how the child had expressed a wish for more quality time with him; something the child had not felt able to ask for before and therefore the parent was not aware of this wish.

‘Oh, it was useful, yeah. And it made me think, 'cos it brought up some things that I never knew... and some things that I used to do, and I thought, well, maybe I should start doing them again. Like family time – I started, but I sort of stopped doing it.’

Parent

Social workers and conference chairs indicated that it was helpful for parents, as well as for them, to have children’s views presented at the conference, as it demonstrated how strongly children felt about certain things. As noted in Section 3.2, professionals consistently reported that parents did not react negatively to what the child or advocate presented. As they described it, parents tended to react calmly and with acceptance, as well as with praise for any creative content to the presentations. This may to some extent reflect that parents who have consented to advocacy are more open to hearing and respecting children’s views, or that their children are relatively likely to present a positive picture of their parenting. However, the advocate and social services staff described instances in which some parents had become upset, angry and abusive during meetings after hearing professional’s views. In these instances professionals were able to successfully focus parents on information provided by the child to help them understanding children’s feelings and needs.
Parents whose children attended the child protection conference reported how powerful it was to hear their own children expressing the views themselves. As one parent said, of his daughter, things ‘probably hit home more to me, with her saying it’. In another case, the parent was able to observe the child’s contributions over time, see that the child was more reticent at recent conferences and reflect on the reasons for this. The parent acknowledged that it would be unlikely that he would consider his child’s point of view if he was relying solely on reports from professionals.

We also asked parents whether they felt able to express their own views to the conference, whether they felt listened to, and whether the decisions taken were clearly explained. Parents were typically very positive in relation to all three points, although one of them felt that parents would benefit from advocacy support of their own, as discussed further in Section 4.5. These more positive comments came from parents who had experienced social services input as vital and very supportive. In contrast, in one case the parents had felt that the social services intervention was disproportionate and disruptive to their family, but they still recognised some benefits from their work with professionals.

A number of professionals highlighted that, while they felt parents gained through inclusion of children and their perspectives, they were also benefitting from the change from the traditional conference model to the Strengthening Families conference model, which is designed to make the process more transparent, more interactive, more positive and less formal than has been in the past.

### 3.5 Summary

On the basis of evidence from case files and interviews, the advocacy service had a substantive impact in a range of related areas, over the period covered by this research. Firstly, and perhaps most importantly, it enabled children’s views to be represented in a relatively systematic way, and ensured that due attention was paid to these views when formulating child protection plans. Children themselves recognised that their views had made a difference, and credited the advocate with making this possible. They reported a range of benefits from using the service, and recommended it emphatically to other children. Parents echoed children’s views, while also identifying benefits for themselves stemming from children’s contributions, and also from discussions they stimulated at the conference about children’s needs and feelings.

Social services professionals, as well as the advocate, reinforced these points. Importantly, they described how contributions from the child and advocate improved the atmosphere of the conference, facilitating constructive dialogue, and helped professionals, as well as parents, to focus on the perspective as well as the needs of the child.

All professionals and parents considered the insights provided through advocacy to extend and complement other information on the views of the child in important ways. While the service certainly did not do away with the need for social workers to engage children in discussion about their thoughts and
feelings, it was seen to provide another distinctive, route for children to be heard. In some cases, this independent service appeared more acceptable to families, and it was hoped that in time, it could serve as a bridge to more constructive engagement with social work staff.
4. Lessons from the advocacy pilot

In this chapter, we consider suggestions for the future of the advocacy service in RBKC put forward by children, parents, social work professionals and the advocate herself.

4.1 Content, frequency and timing of meetings

Although none of the children we interviewed wanted their advocate to do anything differently during their meetings, some thought seeing her more often, or at different times would be helpful. Some children said they would like more sessions simply so that they could talk about ‘different stuff’ or have her ‘explain more’. Some felt that it would be ideal if they could have two meetings, rather than one, before each conference: the first, a week beforehand to plan what to say, and then another a day before the conference to ensure the advocate’s presentation was up to date. In addition, sometimes there could be quite a gap before a post-conference meeting – one child said a three-day wait was fine, but nine days had felt too long to wait for feedback.

From the advocate’s perspective, it would be beneficial if she met with children more often. She suggested every three months, rather than every six, to build and maintain relationships, and allow for more regular input from the child into the monitoring of the family situation and to report on progress with agreed actions (e.g. to offer advocacy to children for core group meetings18 as well). Particularly for younger children (e.g. 7-10 year olds), she suggested, the long gap between meetings was sufficient for them to forget all about the previous occasion, meaning that she had to start again to build up trust and encourage them to share their thoughts and feelings with someone who had effectively become a stranger.

4.2 Ensuring conferences are child-friendly and family-friendly

There was a suggestion that other media could be made accessible to children, for example, to enable them to contribute via recorded video presentations. Another suggestion was to have a photograph of the child shared by the advocate to help introduce them, if they chose not to attend. Both of these options could provide professionals with a picture of a child they might not otherwise meet – and a picture potentially selected by the child.

Some professionals suggested that the experience could also be more enjoyable if facilities were more child and family-friendly. For example, a more comfortable waiting area could be provided, as could childcare for pre-school children and primary school children. Some children also stressed that it was

18 Core group meetings gather key professionals and family members to work on the detailed implementation of the child protection plan, refine the details of the plan as needed and monitor progress against planned outcomes set out in the plan (DfE, 2010).
important that conferences were as child-friendly as possible. One suggested having snacks available; another said how much she had enjoyed sitting in a 'swingy chair'. One child said they should not allow swearing in the room, highlighting parents’ part in determining whether the meetings are a positive experience for children.

The advocate also noted that, in her experience, some parents appeared in desperate need of advocacy themselves – both to improve their understanding of the conference process, and to help put their views across in a coherent way. This was echoed by one of the parents, who stressed that professionals needed to make the meetings and their language accessible, not just at the start, if children make a brief appearance, but for parents who stay throughout, particularly those who were less able to understand the issues or terms discussed.

## 4.3 Continuing the service and widening access

Children we spoke to thought every child whose family was attending conferences should have access to an advocate, and would recommend that they used one.

‘People have different situations, but for ANY situation it’s good to have an advocate.’

‘They should keep it going, because it’s good for children to go to conferences, and it helps express feelings that are inside of you.’

Child

Asked what type of person RBKC should look for, if they needed more advocates, one child said that they should be like her own advocate, which meant that:

‘The most important thing they should look for would be kind people, who love children and who’re really good at helping them express their feelings and who’re really good at talking at conferences!’

Child

Some of the parents we interviewed felt equally strongly that advocacy should be offered to every family going through child protection proceedings. Another parent, who was grateful for and complimentary about the support received from the advocate and social workers, nevertheless felt that the having social services involved was intrusive and stressed the need to respect parents by always seeking their permission before an advocate spoke to the child.

All professionals we spoke to were in favour of continuing the advocacy service, and ideally ensuring that more children were able to benefit. For some, this meant encouraging more parents to accept the service. In addition, the advocate and other staff felt that, resources permitting, the service could be helpful not just at child protection conferences, but at other meetings, such as core group meetings and family group conferences, where the child’s views were equally relevant. It was also suggested that it could be helpful if the
advocate could continue working with children who come off child protection plans but continue on child in need plans, where the family faced continued challenges and where it could be helpful for the child to have that ongoing support and mechanism to voice how things were going. It was argued that children considered ‘in need’ could benefit as much from advocacy as those who are looked after or under child protection plans.

One professional stressed that it was important, however, to avoid undue blurring of roles. It was important to ensure that the advocate’s role was focused on eliciting the child’s views for specific purposes, rather than becoming as involved in the child’s life as the social worker.

4.4. Increasing awareness and understanding of the service

Some social work staff pointed out that having a child at a conference was a new experience for many professionals, and that there was probably scope for more of those round the table to prepare more and engage more meaningfully with the child. One was keen to learn more about advocacy arrangements in other local authorities, to inform their own thinking.

Some professionals stressed that while all children’s views should be sought, ideally via advocacy, children’s attendance at conferences should continue to be carefully considered on a case-by-case basis. Some noted the risks of the child being distressed, exposed to negative information they might otherwise not be aware of, or subject to pressure from parents to say certain things. These concerns were less of an issue for those who had experience of children attending briefly at the beginning of the meeting with the advocate, to give their views and receive positive feedback.

The advocate suspected that some parents who had refused to let children attend conferences failed to appreciate that they could attend briefly, rather than for the whole meeting. In response to this, she felt that if parents and children were presented with a ‘menu of choices’19, it could be easier for them to distinguish between the option of the child being present throughout; attending for a specific slot to communicate and clarify their views; or having the advocate attend in their place. For social work staff encountering advocacy for the first time, this could also be helpful.

4.5. Summary

Looking to the future, there was a strong consensus in favour of continuing the advocacy service, and – resources permitting – making it accessible to more children; not only for their child protection conferences, but also for core group meetings and even when moved on to children in need plans. It was a common view that children could benefit from support to contribute to these meetings, which would allow for more regular input from the child into the monitoring of

19 The ‘menu of choices’ have now been developed by YAB.
the family situation, including their perspectives on progress with agreed actions. Post-conference feedback sessions were seen as a very important element of the advocacy service but it was considered that these should be held within a few days of the conference to ensure that children do not wait too long for feedback.

There was consensus that all children should have access to advocacy and their views should be presented and addressed at child protection conferences. It is necessary to ensure that all professionals are aware of the distinctions between the roles of advocate and social worker, and that these distinctions and the benefits of advocacy are clearly communicated to parents.

In contrast, professionals thought that children’s attendance at conferences (as opposed to representation of their views by the advocate) should continue to be carefully considered on a case-by-case basis. It was vital to ensure that the conferences were child and family-friendly in order to make the experiences more pleasant for both children and parents.
5. Conclusion

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989) enshrines the right of children to be involved in all decisions that affect their lives. In England there is also national legislation and guidance stressing the importance of involving children in decision-making, including specifically in child protection cases (Children Act 2004; DCSF, 2010). The literature has also consistently shown the need for the voice of the child to be heard in the child protection process to ensure they are properly safeguarded. One way of ensuring the child’s voice is heard in child protection is to provide an advocacy service, which should enable children to put across their views and ensure their rights are protected. Through Involved by Right – an EU grant-funded programme, RBKC has implemented an advocacy service for child protection conferences with the aim of incorporating children’s views in the decision making process.

Our research into the implementation and effectiveness of the RBKC advocacy pilot has provided some important learning in relation to:

- the key features of an effective advocacy service
- involving children in child protection conferences and enabling them to make a meaningful contribution
- the benefits of advocacy from the perspectives of children, their parents and professionals, and the challenges of providing an appropriate service to all children who can benefit from it
- the need for further research to fully evaluate the impacts and added value of an advocacy service.

Our conclusions in relation to the above issues are discussed in turn below.

5.1 Key features of an effective advocacy service

Our research revealed that successful implementation of the advocacy service was dependent on several factors:

- Ensuring all those involved (children, parents and professionals) have a clear understanding of the role of the advocate and the service provided to children, including the extent of the child’s involvement and presence during the child protection conference. The research has shown some confusion initially about what advocacy involved. This suggests that better information needs to be provided to professionals and parents when the service is first introduced, evidence and examples from this research could be used to provide a better idea of what advocacy looks like and what it can achieve. Having better information about advocacy and a child’s involvement during the child protection conference might lead to greater confidence in the process for both professionals and parents, and greater take-up rate of advocacy service.

- Good working relationships between the advocate and social services and clarity about the respective roles of the advocate and social workers. Again the research shows some uncertainly at the start of the pilot, and clear
information to social workers about the role of advocacy can help to start the new working relationship based on a shared understanding of respective roles, and how the advocate and social workers can effectively work alongside each other. We have seen that the advocate’s role involved tasks and responsibilities that were unique to the advocate (e.g. reporting children’s views unmediated). However, to some extent the advocate’s job overlapped with what social services should be doing if they were properly resourced (e.g. gathering detailed evidence from children before a case conference). It is particularly in relation to the latter that clarity and shared understanding about respective roles is important from the start. This can be done through offering information sessions (e.g. an advocate attending team meetings) or training to social workers.

The skills of the advocate were essential to the success of the service, including ability to be sensitive in working with children of different ages and abilities, providing them with various options for expressing their views and reassuring them if they have any concerns about the advocacy service or social services involvement in general. As well as recruitment of staff with these skills, monitoring and supervision by a line manager with safeguarding experience is essential to ensure the advocate is suitable for what is an extremely sensitive job.

5.2 Involving children in child protection conferences

The key aim of advocacy is to ensure children’s views are heard and taken into account when formulating the child protection plan. This can be achieved by the advocate representing the child at the child protection conference or by supporting the child to be directly involved in the conference and present his/her own views. In order to choose the best way to present the child’s views, one needs to be guided by children’s wishes, taking also into account professionals’ advice.

Both professionals and parents had valid reservations about children attending child protection conferences, predominantly due to perceived risks of them getting upset or witnessing conflict between parents. In order to successfully include children who attended the child protection conference, the structure of the meeting was tailored according to their individual needs and wishes. The majority of children presented their views first and then left the room. This avoided them witnessing any further adult discussions, the content of which might be inappropriate for them to hear. However, some children, who tended to be older, wanted to hear the social worker’s report first before presenting their views and this was allowed on an individual basis.

It was also important that children were supported by both the advocate and the chair of the conference to feel able and confident to attend and express their views. Our findings indicated that on the whole children were successful in presenting their views during the child protection conference if supported by an advocate.
However, children should always be consulted about whether they want to attend the child protection conference since some children might be reluctant to do so for various reasons, such as not feeling comfortable at formal, adult meetings or not wanting to miss school. Some of these issues can be addressed by making sure the child protection conferences are made child-friendly and, potentially, by offering child protection conferences during out of school hours so children do not have to miss lessons.

5.3 The benefits of advocacy and challenges going forward

While our research was limited to only interviewing families who agreed to advocacy, the available evidence suggests that it offers positive benefits to children and their parents. We found evidence that children’s views influenced plans and led to actions to address their contribution, including targeted services. Our research suggests that advocacy can empower children, enable them to better understand the process and influence decisions, and result in better targeted services for children and their families when children’s wishes and views are addressed. Similarly, having children’s views presented by children themselves or advocates appeared beneficial for parents as well, since it provided new insights into children’s views and wishes.

Having children’s views clearly presented at the beginning of the child protection conference was said to have improved the atmosphere of the meeting and facilitated a constructive dialogue by ensuring that the focus remained on the needs of the child. This led to a child protection plan which addressed children’s views and wishes.

Meeting the child after the child protection conference and providing detailed information on how their wishes and views were considered was one of the important aspects of the advocate’s role. During these meetings children got a better understanding of the child protection process as they received clear explanations of how their wishes had been considered, addressed and incorporated into child protection plans. It appeared that if they had no advocate, some of these children might not had the opportunity to have someone explain to them how the child protection plan is put together and how their views might influence the plan.

One limitation of the service relates to some parents refusing to provide consent for children to be supported by an advocate. Parents who refused advocacy tended to be those who generally did not engage with other professionals either, and who were most resistant to social workers engaging with their children. One way of ensuring that more children can be supported by an advocate is to provide detailed information to parents about the service and how the child will be involved in the child protection conference. Offering advocacy to parents could also lead to a higher level of consent to children having the same service. An evaluation of an advocacy service for parents offered by Family Rights Group when their children were subject to child protection showed that advocacy helped parents to better understand the law and child welfare process, as well as what they needed to do to make things better for their child (Featherstone & Fraser, 2011).
While the suggestions above could improve the take-up of advocacy, it is likely that some parents will continue to refuse the service on behalf of their children and other ways need to be considered to gather these children’s views and wishes, particularly as these are potentially among the most vulnerable children. In addition, it is also important to address the issue that more boys than girls refuse or withdraw from the service. Besides the issue of parents not enabling children to access the advocacy service, it is still worth exploring children’s views on whether a male advocate might make a difference to how comfortable they feel with the idea of sharing their views. However, more generally, it would be beneficial to explore with all children who refuse or withdraw from advocacy why they chose to do so, in order to ensure the service is accessible to all children, and to address any barriers to take-up relating to fears or misapprehensions about the support provided.

RBKC piloted Viewpoint to gather views from all children. The aim was for the social workers to use the tool to help them ascertain and explore child’s views which could be useful when creating decisions during child protection conference, especially if the child did not engage with advocate. However, the evidence suggests that in its current format, and when not being used properly, this is not adequate to capture children’s views especially when compared to the more substantial contribution advocacy can make. Further research should be conducted in order to explore to what extent Viewpoint, when appropriately administered, could be sufficient to meaningfully involve children in the child protection process and allow them to have an input in decisions affecting their lives, particularly in cases where advocacy is not taken up.

5.4 Further research on advocacy

Our research has provided some evidence of the benefits for children and parents when the advocacy service was used. However, it cannot provide conclusive evidence of impact due to the lack of an appropriate control group of interviewees (i.e. those who refused advocacy and those who were not given an option to have an advocate). Further research is needed to assess the impact of advocacy by comparing cases where children received the service with cases where advocacy was not offered or taken up. This research would need to be based on a higher number of cases than the pilot evaluation, to ensure a wider range of groups and circumstances were adequately represented.

Further research would also need to refine and develop further a set of outcomes from advocacy, which could be quantified and objectively observed and recorded, to assess if advocacy leads to better outcomes for children. This evidence would provide the basis for an analysis of added value, of whether any savings can be made by investing in an advocacy service. In the current economic climate, an added value analysis could be used to make a very powerful case for advocacy in child protection.
6. References


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7. Appendix A – Details of research method

7.1. Review of anonymised records

We addressed the research questions with respect to all child protection cases in the period covered by the research; i.e. following the introduction of the advocacy service pilot at the end of September 2011 up until end of June 2012. Anonymised paperwork for 26 family cases, relating to 41 children, was provided to the research team by the social services project lead. Two cases involving three children did not receive advocacy service at any point in time but children attended the child protection conference to express their views themselves.

Only relevant records were supplied and reviewed; specifically, those containing information about the child’s views and wishes, use of advocacy, conference attendance, and the extent to which their views were aired at the conference and addressed in the resulting child protection plans. For the most part, the paperwork consisted of full or partial copies of child protection conference minutes, reports prepared by social workers for initial and review child protection conferences, and copies of material children had prepared with the advocate. Overview sheets were also provided which summarised key details of the case including the gender and age of each child in the case family and the duration of their current and any previous involvement with social services.

Information from these records was analysed systematically using the Framework method (Richie & Lewis, 2003) which involves summarising data in a series of thematic charts to explore emerging themes and topics. Some basic quantitative analysis was also carried out, but this was limited by the small numbers involved.

7.2. Interviews

Interviews with the advocate, social workers and conference chairs were arranged directly and carried out by telephone and, in a few cases, face to face.

Parents were initially approached by social workers who provided a brief outline of the study and sought their permission to pass their contact details to the research team at NCB Research Centre. A researcher then wrote to each family with separate information describing the study and what participation would mean for them and separate consent sheets for parents and children. An accompanying letter stated that the researcher would call them in a week’s time to find out whether they would like to take part, and to answer any questions they might have.

The sample

It was originally hoped to involve eight families in the interview stage of the study. For a number of reasons, it proved impossible to recruit the intended total: in some cases, we were unable to make contact, including where child protection plans were no longer in place. In one case, it was not feasible to
arrange an interpreter within the time available; in two other cases, parents initially agreed to take part, but then repeatedly cancelled appointments or withdrew due to difficult personal circumstances. It was also recognised that families who agreed to take part might differ in important ways from those who did not, including in relation to their satisfaction with the services they had received. As a result, it was decided to conduct additional interviews with relevant professionals, including the advocate, social workers and conference chairs, to gather more in-depth information about a broader range of cases. These interviews focused on their experience with the advocacy service and obtaining children’s views with regard to families other than the four who participated in interviews.

In each case where a family consented to take part in the second stage of the study, interviews were conducted with a child (or in one case, two siblings); the advocate; the social worker and the chair of the most recent child protection conference. It was hoped to interview at least one parent in each family. In one case, both parents elected to take part, in two cases one parent was interviewed, and in one case, the parent chose not to participate in a formal interview, but did provide some information and views over the telephone. In all four cases, parental consent as well as the child’s own consent was obtained in writing for the child’s interview, and parents also provided written consent before taking part themselves.

The total number of interviews in each category are set out in Table 1 below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interviews conducted</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social workers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conference chairs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advocate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
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*Note: some professionals were interviewed more than once, regarding different cases, and the advocate was interviewed 5 times. Altogether we spoke with 22 individuals.*

**The interviews**

Interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim. The topics discussed with each group are described below.

**Interviews with children**

Interviews with children took place in family homes or in meeting rooms provided by RBKC, according to the preferences of those taking part. The researcher reiterated the aims of the research, ensured they understood what participation would involve with reference to the information sheet, and asked the child to sign the consent form if they were happy to go ahead. Children were reassured about confidentiality, and that they could choose not to answer
any question, or stop the interview at any time. Each interview lasted around half an hour and covered the following topics:

- How and why they had started working with the advocate
- What it was like to do so, and the kinds of things they talked about
- The extent to which they had felt able to express their views to the advocate, and for the conference
- Whether the point of the conference had been explained to them and whether they had had a choice about taking part
- Whether they had attended the conference(s), and why
- If they had attended, what it had been like
- Whether they or the advocate had been able to express their views, and whether others listened
- Whether they felt their views were included in the child protection plan
- The content of their post-conference feedback meetings
- Support from other people around the conference
- Satisfaction with the advocacy service and any suggestions for the future.

**Interviews with parents**

Like those with children, interviews with parents took place in their homes or in RBKC meeting rooms. The researcher went through the same procedure as with children, checking parents understood the purpose of the research, and the nature of the interview, and collected their signed consent form. Interviews lasted between half an hour and an hour and a half, and covered the following topics:

- How they had first heard about the advocacy service, and what they thought it would mean for their child and for them, as parents
- Any concerns they had had about the service
- Their experiences of conferences with/without the advocate, and with/without their child in attendance
- The extent to which they had felt their child’s views were expressed at the conference and whether others listened
- What impact their child’s views – and if applicable, attendance – had had
- Whether their child’s views were considered and reflected in the plan
- Their assessment of the benefits of advocacy for their child, and for them
- Support for their child from others at the conference
- Whether they felt they, personally, had been able to express their views at the conference, and whether they felt listened to
- Support provided for them, as parents, attending the conference
- Satisfaction with the advocacy service and any suggestions for the future.

**Interviews with social workers and conference chairs**

Telephone interviews with social workers and conference chairs lasted between half an hour and 45 minutes and covered the following topics, in relation to specific families, and/or their experience more generally:

- The advocate’s role, and if applicable, the child’s role, at the conference, and any changes required to the conduct of the meeting
- How far, and in what ways, the advocate and/or child was able to express the child’s views
- The impact of the child’s views, and if applicable, attendance
• Other sources of information about the child’s views (including Viewpoint)
• The extent to which the child’s views were reflected in the plan, and why
• The impact and benefits of the service for the child/other family members
• Satisfaction with the advocacy service and any suggestions for the future.

Additional interviews with social workers and conference chairs also explored their views of child protection conferences where advocacy was not offered or taken up by a family and the difference in experience of child protection conferences with advocacy and without advocacy service.

**Interviews with the advocate**

The advocate was interviewed separately about each child taking part in the second stage of the study, and once more with respect to her experience with other families. These interviews covered similar topics to those with professionals in relation to processes and impact, and, in addition explored:

• How the service was introduced to families, and their responses
• The practicalities of arranging meetings with children and liaison with social services staff
• The nature and content of her pre and post-conference visits to children
• How far she felt able to elicit children’s views and express them, or support the children to do so – and the factors which influenced this.

**7.3. RBKC conference feedback forms**

As an additional means of gathering feedback on experiences from parents and professionals, copies of anonymous feedback forms completed after child protection conferences were obtained via the RBKC project lead. Forms were distributed at 68 conferences over four months, between February and May 2012. Altogether, 17 forms were received from parents and 135 from professionals. As these were completely anonymous, it is not possible to establish to what extent the sample was representative of all those attending child protection conferences. For example, parents who chose to complete forms may be among the most able, satisfied and/or compliant. Nevertheless, recognising these limitations on the data, a brief review of the forms was undertaken, as three questions in particular – posed to parents and professionals - were of direct relevance to their experience of the advocacy system, covering:

• The helpfulness of having the child express their own views by attending the conference (if applicable)
• The helpfulness of having the child’s views shared by the Advocate
• Whether they thought the child’s views were taken into consideration when deciding actions for the plan.