Partners in Advocacy provide independent advocacy for children & young people with any additional support needs – with projects specifically for children & young people using mental health services. We have offices in Edinburgh, Dundee & Glasgow.

Independent advocacy helps ensure that children & young people have a voice in decisions that affect them. We currently support children & young people on a wide range of issues such as social or health care, housing, education, transition, legal issues, training & employment. We can support children & young people to prepare for or attend meetings, reviews or tribunals, make phone calls, write letters, make sure that things that are agreed are followed up, encourage people to advocate for themselves, help people make plans and support them through changes.

As you will know, improved access to independent advocacy services was an important reform brought about by the Mental Health (Care & Treatment) (Scotland) Act 2003, however there are currently few services offering independent advocacy for children & under 18’s making access to services limited in practice.

Children & young people are often referred to our additional support needs service in particular due to difficulties at school, family breakdowns, periods of transition, difficulties accessing appropriate support etc. Many of these children are not currently using services but are arguably at risk of further problems developing if not given access to appropriate support at this stage. In terms of early intervention our experience is that the more children are included in this process the more likely it is that they will get the care and treatment that is right for them – and the more they will feel valued & empowered as individuals. In this sense it seems that schools have an important role to play in identifying vulnerable children at an early stage, however greater awareness of mental health generally amongst staff & pupils is urgently needed. Greater openness and discussion around mental health in schools could also contribute positively to reducing the stigma around mental health that we know still prevents many young people asking for help or approaching services when they need it.

While there are certainly many issues at a strategic and national level, which we hope the committee will be addressing, we also know that at a much simpler level children & young peoples experiences of mental health or other services can often be greatly affected either positively or negatively by the quality of interaction with staff. Again & again we find that staff who demonstrate a consistent, honest, open & interested approach can impact very positively on a child or young persons experience of a particular service and help to reduce the stress, fear and confusion that may be being experienced. While there are many staff to whom this will seem a very obvious statement, unfortunately it is not always the case. In addition, better
communication between staff both within and between services is crucial if children & young people are to be supported consistently.

In terms of transition from child to adult services children & young people are often unaware of who is responsible for the handover to adult services. If receiving in-patient care young people are commonly very unsure and unclear about where they will be placed next, often causing great anxiety. Again the need for clear communication, ensuring children & young people are aware and assisted to attend hand over meetings if they wish, visits to possible areas of treatment, opportunities to familiarise themselves with new staff are all very obvious, yet sometimes neglected, ways in which transition between services can be eased. Disruption to services, for example psychological input where a good relationship has been built up over a period of time is also of concern.

Partners in Advocacy would also raise concerns over the numbers of children who continue to be admitted to adult in-patient services.

Pauline Bell
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Partners in Advocacy