

Do 'looked after' children with communication impairments need an advocacy service in Leeds?

A Research Consultancy for *Save the Children UK*

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Initial Analysis of Questionnaire Returns – October 2000

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Introduction and background

This is a small-scale, focused piece of work relating to a particular group of young people who may have very specific yet diverse individual needs.

The development officer for disabled children from Leeds social services department designed a questionnaire for parents, in consultation with the Leeds Children's Rights Service (LCRS). This was distributed to all parents in the authority known to have a disabled child and thought to have used, or be waiting for, looked after services. In all, 415 questionnaires were distributed.

The questionnaires were sent with a covering letter (outlining the way in which an advocacy service might work) and a prepaid return envelope.

This short initial briefing provides a first analysis of those questionnaire returns. The emphasis at this stage is on a broad statistical analysis, highlighting specific issues for further qualitative investigation. This statistical interpretation will be supplemented in subsequent stages of the research by qualitative data about specific needs and preferences.

Questionnaire returns

Completed questionnaires were received from 56 parents or guardians, relating to 58 children, covering a range of ages. Approximately half were female and half male. Of these, at least 50 were identified as having some form of communication impairment. It was not possible to establish from the questionnaires alone which of these children use 'looked after' services.

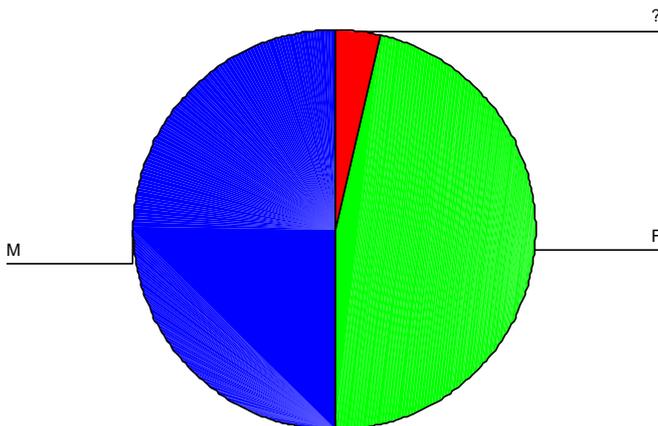
Gender

The questionnaires did not include any specific question on sex or gender. However, it was possible to positively identify the gender of all but two of those identified, using children's given names and parents' responses to other questions. This information suggested that the proportion of girls and boys identified was roughly equal, with a slight bias towards boys.

This would be consistent with the general population of disabled children and young people under 18, which includes a larger proportion of males than females (about 60% and 40% respectively). The gender balance amongst the general population of young people who are 'looked after' is also weighted in favour of young men. However, there is some evidence that the proportion of disabled girls and young women who are also 'looked after' may be higher than these figures would suggest, and the questionnaire returns may support this view.

Gender of children identified in the questionnaire returns

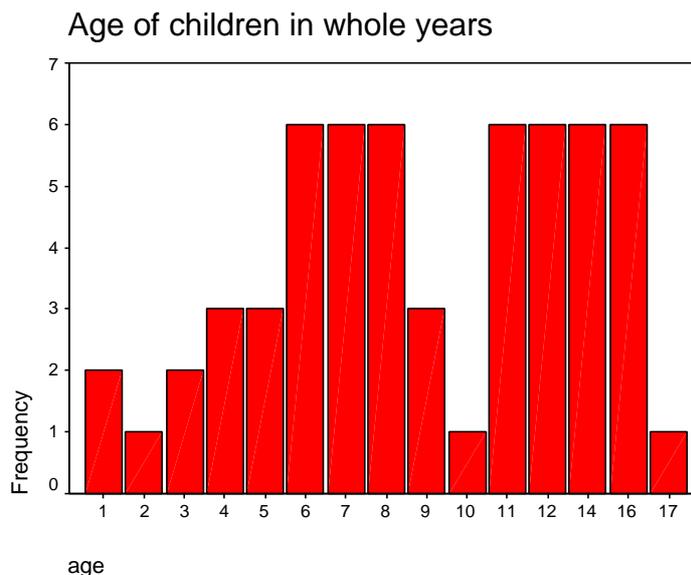
	Frequency	Percent
Unknown	2	3.6
Female	27	46.6
Male	29	50.0
Total	58	100.0



Age

The questionnaire returns identified children across a wide age range. The youngest was less than two years old; the eldest was more than 17 years old. There was a fairly even spread of ages amongst those of compulsory school age (with fewer returns from younger children). The average age of those identified was about 9 years.

Number	Valid	58
	Missing	0
Mean Age		9.22



Race and Ethnicity

No question on ethnicity was included in the questionnaire. However, initial observation of family names suggests that the number of responses received from parents of South and East Asian origin was very low (possibly 3-4%). Research evidence suggests that children of South Asian families are less likely to use 'looked after' services than their peers of white, African, Caribbean, or mixed parentage. It is worth noting that advocacy services may be particularly relevant to children with complex communication impairments from South Asian families who do not currently make much use of respite services.

Communication impairments

Although we had anticipated a higher overall response rate from the initial survey (in the region of 100 questionnaires), we had also anticipated that only a minority would identify their child as having communication impairments. We therefore hoped to receive between 30-80 questionnaires relating to children who might be eligible for the service.

Amongst the population of children labelled as having 'special needs' we would estimate that around one third might be identified as having a communication impairment (although this proportion is likely to be higher for those using social services and overnight stays).

Despite the lower than expected overall return rate, the proportion of parents identifying children with communication impairments was very high. Out of the 58 children identified in the questionnaires, more than 86% were considered by parents to have a communication impairment (in answer to Question 1).

Q1 'Does your child have a communication impairment?'

	Frequency	Percent
No response	1	1.7
No	7	12.1
Yes	50	86.2
Total	58	100.0

The number of children identified as having communication impairments was therefore well within our anticipated range (50). The questionnaire therefore seems to have been well targeted at the most relevant group of parents - those who perceived their children to have communication impairments. Such parents were evidently highly motivated to respond (perhaps because they also perceived an opportunity for additional resources to help their child).

Use of looked after services

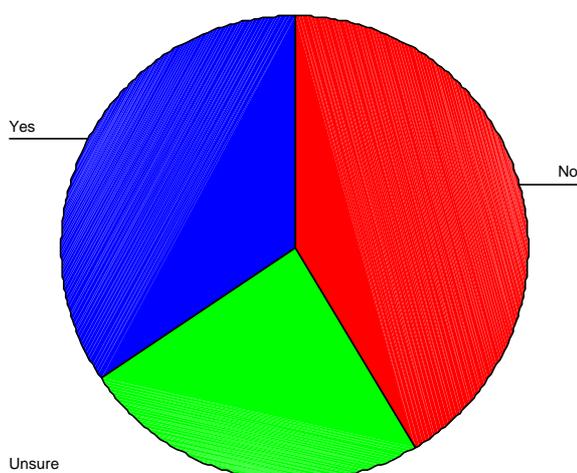
It is important to note that the questionnaire did not include a question about children's current use of 'looked after' services. At this stage, it is therefore difficult to confirm how many of the 50 (or 51) children identified as having communication impairments would be considered to be 'looked after'. Parent comments in response to other questions provide some clues about this and it would presumably be possible to establish the use of such services from the local authority if necessary. We will look into this further.

Initial interest in an advocacy service

The initial questionnaire responses suggest that the demand for a specialist advocacy service may be hard to predict, without more information and communication with parents and children. Significantly, only a minority of parents indicated that an advocacy service would definitely help their child (a larger minority indicated that it would not). However, a significant proportion was unsure or did not answer the question. Some did not want a service because their children do not have communication impairments.

Q5: 'Do you think your child would benefit from an advocate to help them communicate how they feel about their needs and their placement?'

	Frequency	Percent
Unsure	14	24.1
No	24	41.4
Yes	20	34.5
Total	58	100.0



These initial figures are considerably complicated by the kind of comments added by parents on the questionnaires, which require a more in-depth analysis.

Initial analysis of need

Unless otherwise stated, the analysis presented here is based on the 49 children who we believe have been identified as having a communication impairment (rather than the 58 children identified overall).

Looking only at these children, the immediate positive interest in an advocacy service is still uncertain. Exactly equal numbers of parents answered 'yes' and 'no' in identifying a potential benefit from such a service for their child (37.3%). Again, the number of parents who were uncertain about the benefits remained high (at 25.5%).

Q5: Children identified as having a communication impairment and potentially benefiting from an advocacy service

	Frequency	Percent
No	19	37.3
Unsure	13	25.5
Yes	19	37.3
Total	51	100.0

If these figures are indicative of those parents who did not return questionnaires, then we might expect there to be around 90 children with communication impairments whose parents might see the immediate benefit of an advocacy service. However, such an estimate is highly speculative – and the actual number might be lower, given that those who recognised a benefit may have been more likely to return the questionnaire in the first place.

More significantly, it is important to focus on those parents who were unsure about the potential benefits of advocacy. This needs more investigation. However, the main reasons given relate to their concerns that (a) their child would be too young to benefit at the present time, and (b) they doubted that an advocate could easily learn to understand and convey their child's communication to a third person.

It is worth noting that if these concerns were to be allayed then the proportion of parents expressing an interest in the service would rise dramatically (potentially as high as 63.8%, and, hypothetically, as high as 150 children in the local authority area). Again, such an estimate should be treated with considerable caution.

More realistically, at this initial stage, we might expect positive interest in an advocacy scheme to be in the range of 20-50 parents of children with communication impairments.