

Could advocates build community capacity?

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According to John McKnight¹, years ago, when someone died, everyone in the community helped the grief-stricken get through. One day, someone went off to train as a bereavement counsellor and returned to set up a practice. With a new fear of 'getting it wrong', the townspeople promptly lost confidence in their traditional responses. A few even abdicated responsibility for their contribution and deferred entirely to the new professional. So, is there any possibility that the appearance of skilled advocacy has generated a similar response? If so, do we need to redress the balance and how?

Some advocacy services are rethinking their relationship with their local communities and the emerging positions have a combination of three exciting components.

First, they are helping community members hone their values, attitudes and skills. These are the simple foundations of any advocacy relationship – listening out for preferences, even where people are unable to express them clearly; supporting the choices people wish to make; and getting alongside people who are standing up for their rights. Anyone can do these things and everyone should be encouraged to do so. In this way, advocacy becomes a core aspect of community life, whether or not particular individuals identify it as “advocacy”. Like with listening, helping people learn the basics will reduce demand for specialists. So we search for ways to equip people with these practices in the shop, the church, the factory and Neighbourhood Watch. A handful of these citizens are already appointees, RPRs, executors of wills or hold lasting power of attorney -and they want to do the best they can for the person and so they eagerly devour any support on offer.

Second, advocacy organisations that are building community capacity help local citizens to understand when their friend may need the services of a qualified advocate. Instead of feeling frustrated by inappropriate referrals, they explicitly value the advocacy-related abilities of neighbours and social workers, care home staff and family carers, whilst helping them to see where these invaluable skills run out and the person needs an expert. It's like those [Mental Health First Aid](#) courses where work colleagues and friends learn how to provide informal mental health support and also how to recognise when to call in a mental health professional. Only by placing their own skills on a map and recognising the difference that a professional advocate brings, can members of the general public, health or social care workers and people using services know why and when they might need to refer to the advocacy service.

For example, [SAtA](#) has been supporting a group of people with learning disabilities. When one of their number died of breast cancer, they investigated and found several reasons for this avoidable death. Since then, the group have helped nurses respond better, presented to student nurses and taught other learning disabled people to self-check and access screening services. Such empowered citizens may not call their achievements 'advocacy', but they are surely close kin.

Third, some advocacy organisations are renegotiating their relationships with local community organisations. Community groups, and especially those formed of traditionally marginalised people, are not an empty vessel that needs filling up with facts about how amazing the advocacy service

¹ <https://www.amazon.co.uk/Careless-Society-Community-Its-Counterfeits/dp/046509126>.

happens to be. They are not targets for briefings about referral mechanisms. Instead they are valued partners in the task of shaping, improving, coproducing and ultimately delivering advocacy, and the multi-skilled community within which it sits. Perhaps the advocacy service can help neighbours offer each other a level of advocacy that challenges injustice and nips some issues in the bud. Perhaps citizens can develop their skills until they listen carefully to one another and act on what they hear. Perhaps advocates can gather proper evidence on what works in equipping people to advocate for themselves.

Take, for example, some work undertaken by [Advonet](#). They connected with a number of autistic adults who previously would only make contact in times of crisis. Together, they co-developed a new service that focused on self and peer advocacy, that was led by a steering group made up of people with autism and staff with lived experience. In response, people have used services appropriately, built skills and influenced the activities of generic services. The clear ambition is that people learn to live and self-advocate independently.

What else might this look like? Advocacy organisations joining hands with [Asset-Based Community Development](#), with coproduction activities, with [community-led support](#). The re-energising of peer advocacy, group advocacy, citizen advocacy, but not much of this through starting new projects or groups. Instead, advocacy organisations build the capacity of existing groups and networks so that they do what they do, with a new sparkle. That sparkle is advocacy. Imagine the darts team demanding that the pub regulars become dementia friends. The priest attending an immigration hearing with an asylum seeker. The neighbourhood reclaiming its relationship with residents in the local care home. The toddler group learning Makaton.

This disrupts the process by which statutory advocacy services chop up community into a series of binary encounters. It insists that most support runs through informal networks, not across a desk. It will revitalise these approaches through dialogue in which the community coaches the advocate. It might evolve into a new Board of Trustees made up of unexpected people. It might become a strategy to commission only local organisations. It might lead to the rediscovery of non-statutory advocacy. It might require recruitment of staff who have skills in community education.

If we are going to engage, then we need to start by listening and see where it goes.

At the end of George Orwell's dystopian fantasy, [Animal Farm](#), it is impossible to tell the difference between the men and the pigs, the old power holders and the new, while the other animals remain outside. Have advocates been stolen from the Civil rights movement and co-opted into the professional health and social care world? Some pioneers are dreaming of a realignment with their communities.