Community-Embedded Peer Advocacy Report Centred on Refugee and Asylum seeking women

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Executive summary

Advocacy services aid people who are making important decisions about their life, not by providing advice, but rather advocates provide thorough information on the choices available and articulate their advocacy partner's views to relevant people.

Advocacy often takes place in formal, professional independent advocacy organisations. The 'Our Rights, Our Communities' project is about exploring how advocacy can work at a grassroots level within the New Scots community. Its focus is specifically on peer advocacy, a mode of advocacy where the advocate and advocacy partner share a similar life experience or background. Peer advocacy is especially suited for New Scots communities because it allows the advocate and advocacy partner to better understand each other due to shared language and culture which in turn can allow for trust to build more organically.

This report details how community groups can successfully implement a grassroot peer advocacy support network. Since this project is centred on asylum-seeking and refugee women, the suggestions reflect the needs of this specific community but may be extrapolated to other groups.

Section 1 details acknowledges the importance of in-depth training for peer advocates and details how facilitators of these training sessions can make their work more accessible to the New Scots community.

Section 2 establishes the key values that the design and delivery of the training sessions should be underpinned by in order for the sessions to have the maximum benefit to participants.

Section 3 examines the systemic barriers community-embedded peer advocacy support networks face while acknowledging the fundamental importance and added value that they offer within the wider advocacy sector.

Section 4 details tangible considerations community groups should make when establishing a community-embedded peer advocacy support network.

Introduction

What is advocacy?

Advocacy services are centred on ensuring that people making important decisions about their life are supported in making their views heard. Advocates help enable their advocacy partner to access a range of information, explore the choices available to them, and articulate their views on the matter. It is important to note that the role of the advocate is not to give advice but rather to support their advocacy partner by providing information but ultimately allowing them to come to their own decision.

Advocacy can come in many modes, including independent advocacy, collective advocacy, peer advocacy, and citizen advocacy. These are often provided either by professional advocacy services or by more informal, grassroots methods. Independent advocacy, peer advocacy, and citizen advocacy all fall under the umbrella of individual advocacy whereas collective advocacy is focused on groups.

Independent advocacy typically takes place within professional advocacy services whose sole activity is providing independent advocacy services. Independent advocates use their skills to support their advocacy partner in navigating systems and voicing their thoughts. Independent advocacy services typically pay their advocacy workers.

The work of peer advocacy is similar in scope to independent advocacy but with the addition that the peer advocate and advocacy partner share similar life experiences or backgrounds. For example, they may be of the same ethnicity, both have substance abuse issues, or have the same medical diagnosis. By sharing a background, peer advocates and partners may have more mutual empathy with one another. Furthermore, this relationship may lessen any power imbalance between the peer advocate and advocacy partner. Some independent advocacy services will include a designated peer

advocacy service within the organisation. Peer advocates may be paid or unpaid depending on the formality and resources of the organisation.

While similar, peer advocacy differs from peer support in significant ways. Peer support involves both giving and receiving support by drawing on one's own experience and common ground. While peer advocates may find that their work helps them better understand themselves, it is not the sole focus of their work, which is centred on acting as an advocate for their advocacy partner. Furthermore, peer support can involve advice giving, mentoring, or befriending, none of which are within the remit of peer advocates.

Citizen advocacy involves an ordinary citizen without formal advocacy training supporting a person within their community. Citizen advocacy relationships typically come from an organic, long-term relationship between the citizen advocate and advocacy partner. This role is voluntary and unpaid.

Unlike the previously mentioned modes of advocacy, collective advocacy is group-oriented. Its aim is to foster a space where people with a common interest gather to support one another and discuss shared issues in order to find a collective voice and drive change. This often manifests in advocating for legislative change, policy formulation, and strategic planning. Collective advocacy groups will often collaborate with an independent advocacy organisation to draw from their expertise and skill set.

Independent advocacy organisations will typically subscribe to guiding principles or a code of practice. In Scotland, the best example of this is the Scottish Independent Advocacy Alliance's (SIAA) Independent Advocacy Principles, Standards, & Code of Best Practice.[1] These sorts of documents aim to safeguard the practice of independent advocacy by clearly defining its standards and best practice so that independent advocacy can be delivered consistently sector-wide and to its highest standard.

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[1] https://www.siaa.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/SIAA-Principles-Final-2nd-print-run-with-ISBN.pdf

The SIAA's Independent Advocacy Principles, Standards, & Code of Best Practice details three core components of independence needed for independent advocacy: structural, financial, and psychological. These components are useful in the analysis of community-embedded peer advocacy as they highlight the differences and similarities between them. In turn, these similarities and differences explain the tension between community-embedded peer advocacy and independent advocacy, which will be explored in Section 3.

The structural independence asserts that an independent advocacy organisation must be a separate organisation which is separately structured from other sorts of organisations or services. This means that the only type of work the independent advocacy organisation does is independent advocacy. Financial independence means that the independent advocacy organisation has its own funding source which is free from any conflicts of interest. Psychological independence means that those working in the independent advocacy organisation are aware that they are limited in scope by the resources available and the principles of independent advocacy.

In Scotland, those covered by the Mental Health (Care and Treatment) (Scotland) Act and have a mental health issue, learning disability, autism, or dementia have a legal right to independent advocacy.[2] However, those falling outside this statutory criteria may still access advocacy services.

There are a range of independent advocacy service providers throughout Scotland. These services usually target a specific geographical area and/or group of people. The most common target groups for advocacy services include those with mental health disorders, learning disabilities, drug or alcohol abuse, dementia, and children. In terms of specific peer advocacy services, the majority of services operate within an independent advocacy organisation and are focussed on mental health, dementia, drug or alcohol abuse, and learning disabilities. For the purposes of this report, it is important

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[2] https://www.mygov.scot/advocacy#:~:text=People%20who%20are%20covered%20by,restricted%20to%20mental%20health%20situations.

to note that there are no existing advocacy services in Scotland specifically for New Scots women. Obviously, New Scots women may access advocacy services on a basis not related to them being New Scots.

Peer advocacy in the refugee and asylum-seeking community

This report focuses on community-embedded peer advocacy specifically targeting New Scots women. This type of advocacy encompasses some of the principles and modes of advocacy as discussed above. Most obviously, it is modelled on peer advocacy services offered within independent advocacy organisations. However, it can be distinguished on the basis that community-embedded peer advocacy emerges from the community in a more organic, informal manner. Community-embedded peer advocacy may also relate to collective advocacy given its focus on spurring wider change within the community.

The 'Our Rights, Our Communities' exemplifies why peer advocacy is especially beneficial for New Scots women. New Scots are people of any background who have immigrated to Scotland, thus including students, people moving for work, people moving for family reasons, refugees, and asylum-seekers. As the 'Our Rights, Our Communities' is composed of mostly refugee and asylum-seeking women, this will be the focus of the report, but many points are still applicable to other types of New Scots women as well. Peer advocacy can be particularly beneficial when interacting with individuals who experience multiple disadvantages, for example New Scots women may be marginalised due to gender, sexuality, ethnicity, and religion. Moreover, it can overcome issues of trust which are derived from culture, belied and previous experiences, particularly in regards to male-female interactions in advocacy settings.

The first reason is trust. Many asylum-seeking and refugee women have experienced trauma either in their home country, while en route to the UK, or within the UK.[3] Once in the UK, they face a hostile immigration system which often necessitates that these

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[3] See https://www.refugeewomen.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/WRW-Will-I-ever-be-safe-web.pdf

women disclose these traumatic events in order to successfully claim asylum. This process may affect their ability to trust and open up to others. This is relevant as advocacy partners often must disclose personal matters in order to receive the proper help from their advocate. Peer advocacy may help overcome this issue given the already established common ground between the peer advocate and their advocacy partner. By going through the same lived experience, peer advocates are better able to gain the trust of their advocacy partner who may then feel more comfortable opening up and sharing their story. By having a fuller understanding of the situation, the peer advocate can then offer more tailored, relevant advocacy support.

Shared language is also an important consideration. Knowledge of the English language varies greatly within the asylum-seeking and refugee community. Even if the advocacy partner knows English well, she may feel far more comfortable expressing herself in her native language. Thus, if the peer advocate and advocacy partner can communicate in a shared language other than English, better advocacy support may be provided due to clearer communication.

Similarly, a shared cultural and ethnic identity between the peer advocate and advocacy partner may aid in the relationship. It may be easier for the advocacy partner to open up to their peer advocate if they come from the same culture as there is a mutual understanding of cultural nuances that a UK-native advocate will lack. This is particularly true in regards to the shared cultural understanding of language beyond just words themselves, such as body language, inflection, tone, and gestures. Across all modes of advocacy, a key difficulty for advocates is ascertaining their advocacy partner's full situation and story so that they are best able to advocate for them. A shared cultural background may make this task exponentially easier.

Finally, independent advocacy organisations can be difficult for New Scots to navigate and access. For example, there may be language barriers, transportation issues, or lack of access to technology. The more formal setting of an independent advocacy service may also be intimidating and off putting to asylum-seeking and refugee women. In

comparison, peer advocacy may operate in more informal spaces which makes it far more likely to reach New Scots women.

Section 1: Accessibility

This section seeks to identify the more practical challenges women may face when trying to access advocacy sessions and workshops. Ensuring that facilitators identify and address these potential barriers will enable women to show up and take part in the advocacy sessions and workshops.

Language considerations

Facilitators should consider the level of English the women communicate at, including their oral, written, and listening comprehension. Facilitators should try to speak at a slow, clear pace to ensure that participants understand what is being said. The use of translators and copies of already translated materials may be beneficial to ensure fuller participation. Facilitators should ask the participants in advance if this would be beneficial so that the material can be prepared.

Transport considerations

Facilitators should ensure that the participants have a reliable and affordable means of transportation to get to sessions. If using public transportation, can the participants access and understand the timetables so that they can arrive on time? Live timetables are often only accessible through the use of phone apps. Many participants may not have reliable access to wifi or data and are unable to view live updates to timetables. Facilitators should ensure that participants' travel expenses are reimbursed in a timely manner. Facilitators should keep receipts of these expenses in order to evidence them to funders.

Childcare considerations

It is likely that many participants will be the main provider of childcare within their family. Thus, facilitators should ensure that session dates, times, and locations are posted well

in advance so that families may make arrangements for childcare. Facilitators may also consider if they are able to provide on-site childcare free of charge.

Intra-family considerations

Facilitators should consider how participants' families as a whole are coping with their move and experience living in the UK. Consider how taking part within peer advocacy interplay with the participant's role in her family and does her family support her in this role.

Section 2: Session Delivery

This section seeks to identify how community-embedded advocacy sessions can best be designed and delivered so that they have the maximum benefit to refugee and asylum-seeking women.

Culturally-sensitive and culturally-competent training

Facilitators should consider how participants' lived experiences and cultural background may affect the sessions. Perhaps there are specialised areas, for example access to health care, which differ greatly from their home country and will require greater in depth training than topics participants may already be more familiar with. Facilitators should also reflect on the specific challenges asylum-seeking and refugee women may face when navigating these systems when compared to the general public and incorporate any relevant advice on this within the sessions.

Building support networks

Peer advocacy networks may form organically. Thus, it is worth considering how formal organisations can foster the support networks that arise within them. Tools like group chats, either on Whatsapp or Facebook Messenger, may be more useful for informal communications while formal communication can be through email or the post. Communication tools should be accessible for participants. To find out what is accessible, the facilitators should ask the participants what methods work best for them.

Access to support networks may be widened by utilising a mix of in-person and virtual activities to ensure greater participation. Facilitators should get a sense of how many participants have reliable access to the internet. Facilitators should also include a mix of smaller, more intimate events and larger community-based events so that the participants have the opportunity to engage with one another in a variety of settings.

Building confidence and empowerment

Facilitators should consider what tools will help refugee and asylum-seeking women so that they feel confident and empowered to advocate for themselves and their community. These tools will likely be highly individualised to every individual woman. For example, if a woman struggles with English, then gaining language skills may be the first step to helping her become more confident advocating for herself and her community. Empowering participants should be a central aim of the sessions as it goes to the root of community-embedded peer advocacy. By empowering participants, they feel encouraged to advocate for their community and spur change.

As our [peer research](#) findings show, most of our participants expressed that their environment impacts how confident they are, particularly who they are surrounded by. It was also shown that women gain confidence through positive life experiences, gaining useful knowledge and
being more integrated into their communities. This can be done through provisioning information and support, and creating opportunities to feel valued. Barriers for confidence included a fear of judgement, lack of support, language barriers.

Presenting complex topics

The topic of human rights can be a very academically dense and complex subject. Thus, it is important for facilitators to find ways to present human rights materials in a way that is clear and comprehensible to women who have varying levels of English language ability or who have little prior knowledge on the topic, while still covering the key learning outcomes.

One way of ensuring this may be to take a rights-based approach to the sessions. This approach to learning ties all the sessions back to the baseline of understanding that people deserve to be treated with respect and in line with the rights set out in the international conventions that the UK has committed itself to as well as domestic legislation. In the Scottish context, the Human Rights Act 1998, European Convention on Human Rights, Hate Crime and Public Order (Scotland) Act 2021, and the Equality Act 2010 are especially important.

Section 3: Systemic Barriers

This section seeks to examine the systemic barriers community-embedded peer advocacy faces. This includes potential tension with traditional independent advocacy organisations, cross cultural approaches to human rights, and empowerment.

Community-embedded peer advocacy's relationship with the independent advocacy sector

The relationship between traditional independent advocacy organisations and community-embedded peer advocacy is complex. As discussed in the introduction, independent advocacy organisations operate in a more formal way and follow clear protocols. Furthermore, while having a formal qualification in advocacy is not strictly required, many organisations will prefer to have their caseworkers obtain a qualification prior to working as an advocate. These qualifications are often very expensive and formal. In this sense, community-embedded peer advocacy offers a lower cost, more informal way to practise advocacy, which pushes back against the traditional way of doing things. However, it should be noted that advocates need extensive, in-depth training in order to do their job effectively and a formal qualification is a robust way to ensure this. Therefore, funding for training should be prioritised by the Scottish Government and funder providers.

Groups like the Advocacy Project, an independent advocacy organisation, have been keen to work with and support the 'Our Rights, Our Communities' project by providing training and aiding in the formation of the advocacy support network. Despite this, the

'Our Rights, Our Communities' remains unable to join the SIAA, which represents advocacy organisations in Scotland, due to the project not fulfilling its membership criteria, namely that it is not structurally and financially separate from other services.

Through discussions, it is clear that the SIAA sees the value that the 'Our Rights, Our Communities' brings through targeting an underrepresented group in advocacy, but due to rigid guidelines is unable to offer membership to its organisation. It is worth reflecting on why exactly this is. If peer advocacy is especially well-suited to particular groups of people, then perhaps it is worth considering how peer advocacy groups could find a place within the SIAA in order to receive their support, development opportunities, and formalise the role that community-embedded peer advocates fulfil within the advocacy sector.

Projects like Our Rights, Our Communities promote the engagement with participants at various levels, supporting empowerment through what participants determine as necessary and aspirational. There is no value, from the participants' perspective, to dissociate their basic needs from their advocacy needs and rights.

A prominent obstacle that the 'Our Rights, Our Community' faced when attempting to join the SIAA relates to the topic of bias and conflicts of interest. A fundamental principle of independent advocacy is that the advocacy partner is 'protected from undue pressure, advice or others' agendas.'[4] This is reflective of the idea that an advocate's purpose is to advocate rather than provide advice. However, many participants in the 'Our Rights, Our Community' project have found it difficult to separate their personal experience as an asylum-seeker from their role as an advocate for other asylum-seekers. This tension in the role is inherent in peer advocacy, and when functioning within an independent advocacy organisation the two must be completely separate in order to comply with the independent advocacy principles.

Despite this, the Wise Women in the 'Our Rights, Our Communities' project found that drawing from their prior experience, and in a sense being 'biassed', better helped them

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[4] https://www.siaa.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/SIAA-Principles-Final-2nd-print-run-with-ISBN.pdf, pg. 16

in their role as a peer advocate as it helps build trust their advocacy partner, which is essential in advocating for them through a difficult situation. This positive must be balanced against potential negatives, however. For example, the peer advocate must recognise that no two situations are exactly alike. A peer advocate must recognise when her personal situation and her advocacy partner's situation are different enough to require different advice or a different type of help than what the advocacy partner received. This does not negate the positive aspects of 'bias' but recognises that there is a difference between using one's prior experience in a positive way, such as building trust with their advocacy partner, and being biassed in the sense of thinking what worked in her own personal circumstances will automatically work for someone else. This concept should be discussed and explored in the training sessions so that the peer advocates understand this distinction.

It should also be noted that avoiding too much bias is also important in safeguarding the mental health of the peer advocate. By being too invested in the peer advocate role, the lines between their personal life and professional life may begin to blur when ideally they are kept separate. There are many strategies community-embedded peer advocacy groups can take to avoid this situation and safeguard the peer advocates' mental health, which are discussed in Section 4.

Due to the grassroots origins of community-embedded peer advocacy, there is a concern that there are too many people within the network attempting to exert influence, and thus diluting its impact. Independent advocacy organisations will have a more traditional management structure, with advocates being supervised and managed by more experienced caseworkers. As registered charities, they will also have a board of directors which oversees the effective governance of the organisation. This structure is not innate in community-embedded peer advocacy. Thus, to avoid disorganisation, it is important for community-embedded peer advocacy support networks to devise a clear management structure within the network in order to overcome this issue.

Cross-cultural differences in human rights and empowerment

Asylum-seeking women come from a vast variety of cultures where Western ways of thinking do not necessarily match up with their way of doing things. This raises the

question of how organisations and institutions can gain the trust and understanding of these women so that they can in turn empower themselves. One way of overcoming this within the 'Our Rights, Our Communities' project was to begin the training sessions with informal introductions and catch-ups between the advocacy providers and the Wise Women before commencing the formal training. This way, trust is formed organically as over time both groups get to know each other. Discussing personal examples related to the specific training topic is also a beneficial way to build trust. Furthermore, ensuring that facilitators cover key systems that participants are interested in, for example the NHS, the Home Office, advocacy organisations, the school system, the Council, the legal system, can help map the concept of human rights onto tangible systems, thus making the concept less abstract.

A more systemic way of ensuring that cross-cultural differences are overcome is to have the goal of empowerment of participants as a central goal to the project. The 'Our Rights, Our Communities' emphasises that its participants, Wise Women, are existing valuable assets in their community and are people that others already go to for help. Thus, by equipping them with formal advocacy training, they are better equipped to advocate on a wide range of pertinent issues that their community faces. Through this process, advocacy training providers are equipping these women with knowledge which bestows a sense of power upon them. The goal is that with the knowledge, the participants are able to utilise it and thus empower themselves to help others. In the asylum context, this sense of empowerment is especially important given that asylum-seekers are often disempowered through events in their home country and through the UK's hostile treatment of asylum seekers.

Advocacy session facilitators must realise and address the potential power imbalances that empowerment can fall into. Facilitators should be aware that it is not their role to empower the participants as this transactionalises empowerment as something that is conferred on others. Rather, empowerment is a process which comes from within the individual themselves.[5] Conceptualising empowerment in this way helps avoid the

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[5] See https://www.scie.org.uk/advocacy/commissioning/inclusion

participants feeling tokenized throughout the learning process, which has the potential to alienate the participants from participating in advocacy. Thus, it should be the facilitator's role to create a safe environment where knowledge can be passed on and utilised by participants in their day to day lives.

Section 4: Tangible steps in creating a peer advocacy support network

This section focuses on generating concrete ideas on how collaborative projects including multiple organisations should go about implementing a community-embedded advocacy support network. This research is greatly informed by observing the 'Our Rights, Our Communities' participants throughout the process of their advocacy training and early stages of developing an advocacy support network. The research is also informed by discussions with participants in other peer-led services.

The peer advocacy participants, with help from advocates at the advocacy project, devised the following tangible considerations for organisations wishing to implement a community-embedded peer advocacy support network:

- **Participants must identify the specific service they wish to implement**. Creating an advocacy support network that spans a huge range of topics may not be feasible when just starting out as this would require a large number of staff members and intensive training. Thus, it is important for participants to decide on the specific issues they wish to cover. This could be around housing, accessing medical services, accessing education services, immigration support, or other topics. Participants should keep in mind what services already exist that their target community can access so that the advocacy support network they create fills a gap in the already existing service provisions.
- **Participants should identify a specific target community**. In the context of the 'Our Rights, Our Community' project, participants discussed asylum-seeking women in Glasgow, all asylum-seekers in Glasgow regardless of gender, and New Scots women in Glasgow as potential target communities. Note how each of

these groups widens the number of potential users of the advocacy support network. This is important to keep in mind as casting too wide of a net may be too overwhelming for a smaller support network that is just getting started. These groups also may be more likely to need advocacy services in specific topics which intertwines this consideration with the previous.

- **Participants should also consider further training opportunities and continued professional development for their peer advocate**s. It may be beneficial to assign this role to a designated member of the team. Participants can also network with other organisations to gain further training opportunities or collaborations.

- **Participants should consider securing a physical location to base the advocacy work.** This is especially important for confidentiality reasons as well as widen access to the advocacy support network. They must also create a dedicated phone number and email address for the network so that the peer advocates are not using their personal contact details as this would be unsafe and non-confidential.

- **Participants should implement appropriate consent forms and screening questionnaires.** The questionnaire will be particularly useful in identifying the specific concern and whether the advocacy partner would need an interpreter. This will ensure that the advocacy partner receives advocacy support that is best-suited to their specific needs.

- **Participants should consider the benefits and downsides of having an appointment system, a drop-in system, or a mix of both.** They should also consider whether they will take appointments over the phone or handle advocacy support over email. Participants should identify what would best serve the target audience as well as be reasonable for the peer advocates.

- **Participants should implement a schedule and rota system for the peer advocacy workers.** This will be especially important if it's a voluntary support network as it would be unfair to the peer advocates to commit a high number of hours for unpaid work. It is also crucial in ensuring that peer advocates have

adequate time away from their role as a peer advocate in order to safeguard their own mental health.

- **The peer advocates must ensure that adequate resiliency measures are put in place.** As peer advocates, they will have shared experience with many of their advocacy partners, which can bring about strong emotions and potentially be retraumatizing. Policies should be implemented that set out the expectations for the peer advocates and allow for adequate time off if the peer advocate is struggling emotionally with the role. Measures like a support group for the peer advocates could be helpful as it provides a safe space to discuss the work they are doing and the challenges they are facing as peer advocates.

Conclusion

The 'Our Rights, Our Communities' project clearly illuminates the need for grassroots initiatives focused on peer advocacy for New Scots women alongside more traditional modes of advocacy. Shared cultural and ethnic backgrounds, as well as similar lived experiences and ways of communicating, allow for New Scots peer advocates to more deeply engage with their advocacy partner. Trust is built more organically, which allows the advocacy partner to be more open about their situation. This is a critical part of advocacy because advocates must know the full extent of their advocacy partner's situation in order to best advocate for them. For many New Scots women, this means disclosing highly personal and intimate details about their lives, which they may be hesitant or even unwilling to share with a non-peer advocate. The grassroot nature of the initiative may also help overcome accessibility issues New Scots women may face when seeking help from a traditional advocacy organisation meaning that more people are reached.   In this way, the 'Our Rights, Our Communities' project demonstrates how grassroots initiatives can fill a gap in the provision of advocacy services in Scotland so that all New Scots can utilise the help of advocates in navigating their new life in Scotland. To achieve community-embedded peer advocacy there needs to be some flexibility in the existing advocacy system which will allow peer advocates to support and empower each other.