Making your Advocacy Service Accessible

Introduction

Independent Advocacy, like any other type of service, has to be easy to use by the people who want to use it. It is imperative that advocacy is welcoming to people who need it because at the point many people want an advocate, they may have been let down by other services and might have a mistrust of organisations.

Advocacy must communicate that it is person led and on the person's side right from the beginning.

In this information booklet we will explore:

- what accessible advocacy looks like
- barriers that people from seldom heard groups often face
- responding to diverse needs of people

Seldom heard groups

The term 'seldom-heard groups' refers to under-represented people who use or might potentially use services and who are less likely to be heard by professionals and decision-makers.

The phrase 'hard to reach' groups has been used in the past, however this term has been criticised for implying that there is something about the group that makes their engagement with services difficult. 'Seldom- heard' places more of the emphasis on agencies to engage with people rather then suggesting they are hard to reach.

Seldom heard groups

Examples of seldom heard groups could include:

- Particular ethnic minority groups
- Carers
- People with disabilities
- Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer people
- Refugees/asylum seekers
- People who are homeless
- Younger people
- People with language barriers

It is anyone who is under-served.

References:

https://network.healthwatch.co.uk/sites/network.healthwatch.co.uk/files/20200727%20How%20to%20coproduce%20with%20seldom%20heard%20groups.pdf

Iriss.org.uk Effectively engaging involving seldom heard group

Being Accessible

Developing an accessible service means thinking about how easy it is to contact your service. If you haven't done a secret shopper experiment on your own service - we encourage you to do one! Ask a friend to try and refer themselves to your service and find out from them just how easy (or hard) it was to get an advocate.

Some things to think about:

- How accessible is your website? Does it have high contrasting colours, screen readers, choice of text size?
- Are phone calls answered quickly? Answer machines are very off putting to people so try to avoid them unless absolutely neccessary.
- Where do people get information about your service? Traditional routes mostly involve leaflets and posters but more creative ways could include pop up stands in the community or getting involved in community events
- Who do people get information from? Remember, that word of mouth and recommendations from people who have used your advocacy service is much stronger then any organised activity.

Being Local

Being accessible often equates to being local. Think about how your service is embedded in the community. What links do you have with other local community based groups? Do you go to where the people are - or do you wait for them to come to you?

If you do have a national helpline, make sure the people answering the calls are brilliant at talking to people. Its not a good start to be asked a lot of questions about your postcode and name just to be passed off to someone. Make sure it is person friendly.

Being diverse

Any service working in the community needs to reflect the local population and have a thorough understanding of cultural needs in your community.   Make sure you understand your local community and its needs.

Being diverse does not mean recruiting a specialist advocate to work in specific communities, but you could think about how your services recruit and support people from under represented groups or minoritised communities to apply for positions.

Being responsive

Being responsive can be interpreted in two ways:

Firstly you need to be responsive to the initial request for advocacy support (ie the referral). This means being clear about when the advocate can visit, meet or call the individual and then follow up quickly.

Secondly, being responsive means responding in a caring, compassionate and human way to people. Services need to see people as people - not clients or cases. Seeing people as people means valuing individual needs too: think about how your referral service responds to people who might find it difficult to talk on the phone, meet new people or express their ideas.

Improving Accessibility for People with Sensory Impairments

People with sensory impairments include those who are partially deaf and profoundly deaf, those partially sighted and blind and those who are deafblind.

The next few pages will explore the potential accessibility needs for people with sensory impairments.

Improving Accessibility for Deaf People

There are an estimated 9 million deaf and hard of hearing people in the UK. The number is rising as the number of people over 60 increases. Being deaf or hard of hearing can mean different things to different people. Some people will feel more comfortable with particular words to describe their own deafness. The RNID uses the following terms:

- Deaf people. We use this term in a general way when we are talking about people with all degrees of deafness.
- Hard of hearing people. We use this term to describe people with a mild to severe hearing loss.
- Deafened people. People who were born hearing and became severely or profoundly deaf after learning to speak are often described as deafened.
- The deaf community. Many deaf people whose first or preferred language is British Sign Language (BSL) consider themselves part of the deaf community. They may describe themselves as 'Deaf', with a capital D, to emphasize their deaf identity.

Improving Accessibility for people with sight loss

Sight loss can affect anyone, and each person's experience is individual to them. Many people with sight problems lead full and independent lives. Some may need assistance with certain tasks and may have to adapt their daily lives, although this is possible and very often achieved with success. Sight loss is one of the commonest causes of disability in the UK, and is associated with old age more than any other.

There are around two million people in the UK with a sight problem. Among these two million people, over 370,000 are registered as blind or partially sighted. There could be an additional 20 per cent who are eligible for registration but have not yet done so.

Improving Accessibility for people with sight loss

Being blind does not always mean that a person is living in total darkness. Forty-nine per cent of blind people and eighty per cent of partially sighted people can recognise a friend at arm's length. Other people will be affected by eye conditions in different ways: some will have no central vision or no vision to the sides; others may see a patchwork of blank and defined areas, or else everything may be seen as a vague blur.

** Information from the RNIB*

Improving Accessibility for people who are Deafblind

People are deafblind "if their combined sight and hearing impairment cause difficulties with communication, access to information and mobility". Deafblindness is sometimes called dual sensory impairment, dual sensory loss or multi-sensory impairment.

Deafblindness is a unique disability. Two sensory impairments multiply and intensify the impact of each other creating a severe disability which is different and distinctive. The term deafblindness describes a condition that combines, in varying degrees, both hearing and visual impairment.

Improving Accessibility for people who are Deafblind

Many people will not be totally deaf and totally blind but will have some remaining use of one or both senses. Others will also have additional physical and/or learning disabilities as well. All deafblind people experience problems with communication, access to information and mobility. However, their specific needs vary enormously according to age, onset and type of deafblindness.

Improving Accessibility - checklist

Does your service:

- provide information in large font?
- have a website that is compatible with screen readers?
- provide a range of information sources?
- include BSL interpretation where video's are used
- support and train advocates in understanding Deaf culture and Deaf Awareness

Improving Accessibility for people with a learning disability

Despite people with a learning disability often needing the support of a great advocate, they often miss out on advocacy support. This could be because:

- they rely on others to refer who don't always
- the advocate needs to be able to use non instructed advocacy well
- there can be confusion over the role of the advocate when family members are supporting/advocating with/for the person
- the advocate does not understand their preferred communication style
- the advocate needs to be skilled in using a range of communication styles

Improving Accessibility for people with a learning disability

Effective communication is important for all of us; not being able to communicate effectively can cause all kinds of problems for the individual, and can be an obvious threat to effective advocacy work if we don't understand the individual or they don't understand us.

Improving Accessibility for people with a learning disability

Before you meet with a person, try to find out how their learning disability impacts their life. The learning disability may mean that the person needs information provided in a particular way - for instance in pictures, or in simple language. If this is the case, make sure you follow this and enable the person to make their own choices.

If the person has more difficulty in understanding information or communicating you may need to work closely with their carers to find out the best way to provide information and understand how to interpret the person's response.

Improving Accessibility for people with a learning disability

Factors which play an important role in effective communication include:

- Knowing how the person expresses happiness and sadness
- Knowing how the person communicates yes, no or unsure
- Chunking information down into small bits of information
- Asking straight forward questions
- Being and showing interest in the person
- Smiling (if appropriate)
- Using pictoral information (or technology)
- Thinking if the person needs to experience something in order to make a choice or decision (for instance visiting a new home if a move is being proposed)

Improving Accessibility for people from minoritised communities

For Independent Advocacy to be relevant and accessible for people from minoritised communities it is important to understand what accessible advocacy looks like. This will include:

Understanding minoritised communities

When a community has faced discrimination on the basis of colour, race, religion or spiritual belief, the consequences can be far reaching. Health inequalities, further discrimination and trauma need to be understood and addressed.

An effective advocate is one who can not only support the person in single advocacy issues but one who can adopt a more holistic approach, appreciating that many advocacy issues are connected to discrimination and racism.

Improving Accessibility for people from minoritised communities

Understanding cultural needs

Advocates need to deliver the service in a manner that acknowledges cultural, racial, religious and spiritual needs. This requires advocates who are understanding and can relate to the experiences and needs.

Knowing when religious festivals are taking place, dietary requirements, food preparation or special times for prayer, can lead your service to delivering a sensitive service which values important traditions.

Improving Accessibility for people from minoritised communities

Avoid stereotyping

If you are an advocate working with people from different cultural and religious backgrounds, you need to be aware of stereotyping.

Grouping people together or making assumptions can have a distorting impact and can lead to misunderstanding, discrimination, or even persecution. Advocates need to meet people as individuals with open minds.

Improving Accessibility for people from minoritised communities

Being embedded in communities

A key criticism of advocacy services that are not culturally aware and responsive to diverse needs, is when it operates in a way where it is 'parachuted' into peoples live to 'fix' an issue and then it leaves as quickly as it enters.

You can avoid this by being embedded in the communities where people live and contribute to the community (through participation in festivals and community organised events). You can also do this by nurturing relationships with other third sector organisations so they are confident in referring people to you (and vice versa).

Making it better

In the next section we will look at some simple strategies to improve accessibility

Go to where people are

A key way to increase the advocacy services accessibility is to raise awareness of the service. How to do this will often depend on the setting. If your audience is relatively contained (e.g. in a prison, hospital or residential setting) then the advocate will have opportunity to engage in a relatively high amount of direct face to face promotion work, whether through personal introduction to new residents or through group/education settings (e.g. running an advocacy group). However if the target group are people in the community, then the strategy to advertise the advocacy service is likely to be very different. Pop up stands in shopping centres and hospitals, radio or local paper interviews are also highly effective.

Go to where the people are!

Professionals and carers are your allies!

Providing clear information to professionals and carers on what advocacy is, what it does and what it doesn’t do, is the starting point in developing positive relationships with referrers and likely referrers. The provision of information that enables professionals to understand advocacy, especially in relation to their own roles and other services is critical to breaking down barriers created by attitudes and lack of awareness.

Offer a choice of access routes

People have a range of access needs: some prefer face to face communication and may wait until they see you visiting a care home or hospital before approaching you. Others may find it easier to make a phone call to your service or complete a request for advocacy form. Others may like to research your service on the internet and would prefer sending you an email.

By offering a range of choice to people, you are more likely to offer strategies that appeal to the broadest number of potential advocacy users.

Data

Keeping, monitoring and analysing data is a critically important part of ensuring your service is accessible.

Think about keeping information on:

- equalities data (for instance when people with a protected characteristic access your service)
- which settings people are receiving advocacy in (for instance which hospital wards, which care homes, which safeguarding team)
- who refers (is the person themselves, a professional, a family or friend
- where they found out about advocacy
- if the person can instruct you or not

If your data tells you who uses your service, it will also tell you which groups, or which services, are not accessing advocacy. This knowledge will give the power to address the gaps.

Thank you for reading.
Please return to the
e-learning for the next
section of learning

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