National Care Service: Independent advocacy – seldom heard voices co-design work

August 2025

Scottish Government
Riaghaltas na h-Alba

Working with people to improve social care, community health and social work

The Scottish Government is working with people and organisations across Scotland to improve:

- social care support
- community health
- social work

People have told us that the system needs to change. We want to improve the care experience for everyone in Scotland. We want to make sure these services are delivered in a way that fulfils people's human rights and supports them to live full and independent lives.

Engagement with people who have experience of receiving and delivering these services is key to this work. This creates opportunities to share understanding, ideas and potential solutions. This is what we mean by co-design

Introduction

We have been working with organisations who support people from groups and communities who often have barriers to engaging with government.

We wanted to engage with these groups as they have not been as involved as other groups in our previous co-design work.

This work will help us make sure that we are co-designing social care support services in a way that will help everyone across Scotland.

The findings from this co-design work will be shared with the interim National Care Service Advisory Board. The interim board met for the first time in May 2025. The membership is diverse and was informed by co-design findings.

The interim board is helping to drive improvement and make sure services are consistent, fair, and high-quality across Scotland by exploring issues and making recommendations for improvements across the sector.

The full board, once appointed, will continue the work of the interim board. The board will use information we have learned from co-design to inform their decisions about social care, social work and community health across Scotland.

We will continue to collaborate with the people of Scotland throughout the development of the National Care Service Advisory Board. This will help us to make sure we deliver what the people of Scotland want.

About independent advocacy

We are committed to improving access to independent advocacy services. This is so that we can empower people to participate fully in decisions about their social care support.

Independent advocacy services can help people to:

- understand their rights
- get and understand information about their support
- express their views before, during and after an assessment for support
- raise any concerns they might have about their support
- be more involved in the process if their support is being reviewed or changed

Independent advocates do not provide advice or make decisions for the person they support.

Co-design sessions

We ran 13 co-design sessions on independent advocacy with people from different backgrounds and communities. The people who took part had experience of accessing social care support services or supporting someone who has.

At the sessions we discussed:

- barriers to accessing independent advocacy support
- ideas to make independent advocacy easier to access
- what good examples of independent advocacy would look like

Our sessions were held in:

- Aberdeen
- Edinburgh
- Glasgow
- Livingston

We also held some session online for people who could not travel.

To run these sessions, we worked with:

- Action for Children
- Age Scotland
- Alzheimer's Scotland
- Council of Ethnic Minority Voluntary Organisations (CEMVO)
- Glasgow Disability Alliance
- Minority Ethnic Carers of People Project (MECOPP)
- Scottish Commission for People with Learning Disabilities

What we learned

Many people do not know about independent advocacy or understand how it could help them

We heard that many people do not know what independent advocacy is or how it could help. They think it should be promoted more to make it easier for people to get advocacy support when they need it.

Other points around this included:

- information about independent advocacy should be made more accessible
- independent advocacy services should be actively promoting themselves in local communities
- members of the social care workforce should be signposting people to independent advocacy support early in the process

Here are some of the things people said during our discussions:

“It’s not something that’s very well advertised. Social worker got in touch with advocacy for me because I didn’t know about it.” – person with a learning disability from SCLD

“There needs to be a clear definition of what advocacy is and criteria for who and how to access advocacy." – participant from Age Scotland

“It should be promoted more and they should do sessions with people in the community to help them understand it.” – participant from CEMVO

How we will use this

We agree that more can be done to help people find out about independent advocacy. One way we will try to improve this is including information on independent advocacy in the NCS Charter of Rights and Responsibilities. This will include an explanation of how independent advocacy can help people and how they can find out what services are available in their local area.

People want independent advocacy to help them navigate a social care support system they think is too complicated

Some people said that they find the social care system complex and difficult to navigate. Support to navigate the system was the main thing people told us they want independent advocacy to help with. People told us it would be easier to speak up for themselves if the system helped them.

Other points around this included:

people find that navigating the system on their own to be very challenging and disempowering
people would value a single point of contact as they deal with different services
more services should adopt a person-led and trauma informed approach

Here are some of the things people said during our discussions:

“One thing these high-level organisations should do is reduce the need for advocacy. Make the system simple, accessible, approachable and person friendly.” – participant from Age Scotland

“You can’t really count on a bad service telling you about a service that will make them accountable” – parent participant from Action for Children

“Helped guide me because I wasn’t aware of what services were available.” – person with a learning disability from SCLD

How we will use this

We plan to introduce new funding for independent advocates to support people navigating the social care support system. This should ensure more people have local support to help them navigate any systems they find to be too complicated.

People want their independent advocacy support to be long term and there when they need it

People generally felt that independent advocacy should follow a no ‘case closed’ model, where they can quickly get their support again whenever they need it. This was particularly important for people to feel more confident and secure, knowing there is a ‘safety net’ of support available to them if they need it.

Other points around this included:

people do not want their independent advocacy to be limited to a single issue
knowing the support is there, if required, can help people feel more confident to speak up for themselves

Here are some of the things people said during our discussions:

"There needs to be a place for advocacy on long term basis to allow people to elevate their lives through independent advocacy because there is that anchor there." – person with a learning disability from SCLD

“I still have her [advocate] phone number so if there’s ever any need in future she’s at the end of a phone for me.” – person with a learning disability from SCLD

“Stopped having advocacy but you could come back when you needed it” – person with a learning disability from SCLD

How we will use this

We will explore if new funding for independent advocacy could be used to help more independent advocacy providers support people for longer. This will be done by having discussions with providers of independent advocacy, including those who currently provide long-term advocacy support.

Advocates should focus on building trust with the people they support

Trust was often highlighted as the most important part of an effective advocacy partnership. People noted that trust can take time to build, especially for people who have had negative experiences with professionals or services in the past.

Other points around this included:

people find it easier to trust when an advocate shows an understanding of their unique situation and circumstances
people also find it easier to trust an advocate who is knowledgeable of the issues and services they are facing
more choice and control of when and where a person meets an advocate will help them feel more comfortable

Here are some of the things people said during our discussions:

You should be able to “should meet them before you need them, so they know you and you’re comfortable with them before going to big meetings” – young person participant from Action for Children

“It’s important to have someone that can read between the lines and really understand what you mean.” – unpaid carer of person with dementia from Alzheimer’s Scotland

“There is clearly a relational aspect that needs to be built into advocacy.” – person with a learning disability from SCLD

How we will use this

We will work with providers of independent advocacy to set out service standards to give people a clear idea of what quality independent advocacy support looks like, in relation to social care support.

Different types of independent advocacy should be made available to support people

People highlighted that different types of independent advocacy and support exists, and that no approach will be right for everyone. People felt that they should have enough choice to pick the type of advocacy support that best suits their needs.

Other points around this included:

- each type of advocacy has its own unique value and benefits
- some people will require support from an advocate because they cannot or do not want to rely on family or friends for support
- sometimes people will turn to organisations and people they already trust to help advocate on their behalf

Here are some of the things people said during our discussions:

“My wife was not expressing my feelings in the way I wanted to express them… It’s how I feel, how I was feeling at the time… It’s my experience and it shouldn’t be filtered, I have no embarrassment or shame about it.” – person with dementia from Alzheimer’s Scotland

"Noted advocacy takes many forms (professional/peer/self/citizen) and that people may need different types at different times. It was accepted advocates will not need to know everything about everything but will have skills or expertise in specific areas!" – participant from Age Scotland

“Sometimes it could be a family discussion so it wouldn’t be my family I need as an advocate. I would look into somebody who knows in depth about it.” – participant from CEMVO

How we will use this

We will look at how we can improve information so people can understand the different models of independent advocacy. By working with providers of independent advocacy, we will see if there are ways to give people more choice in the type of advocacy support they receive.

What’s next

The Scottish Government remains committed to improving quality, fairness and consistency across the social care system.

The Care Reform (Scotland) Bill (formerly known as the National Care Service (Scotland) Bill) passed Stage 3 in the Scottish Parliament in June 2025. This is the final stage in the Parliament process. The Bill has also got formal agreement from the King, called Royal Assent, and has now been enshrined in law as an Act.

This work is a part of the wider, meaningful changes we are bringing to strengthen social care services across Scotland. Helping to improve the lives of those who access care, their loved ones and our valued workforce.

We will be doing extra work with people from groups we know are currently underrepresented in our work so far.

We have established an interim NCS Advisory Board which met for the first time on May 2025. This means that we can work on improvements quicker.

Soon a permanent board will be formed. A fair and open appointments process will be designed to recruit an independent chair and individual members for the full board to continue the work of the interim Board. This process will be informed by the outputs of the co-design work that we carried out. We will ensure that the right support is available to ensure that all members can take part equally.

All members will be responsible for making sure that people with experience of integrated health and social care services inform the Board's work.

What's next for independent advocacy

We will use what people have told us to help inform our approach for £500,000 of funding for independent advocacy services in the financial year 2026 to 2027. We want independent advocacy to be a way for people to have their voices heard and participate fully in decisions about their care. This funding will help increase independent advocacy provision to support more people in relation to social care support.

We will continue to work with existing providers of independent advocacy to learn about their work and explore how advocacy can support people when they use public social care services. We will share these co-design findings with them to work together to identify gaps in provision and develop practical solutions to address these.

Getting involved

We want to hear from as many people as possible as we try to improve social care, social work and community health. If you would like to share your experience or views, you can join our Lived Experience Experts Panel. If you join the panel, you'll be invited to take part in different things like:

- surveys
- interviews
- helping come up with ideas about what the NCS could look like
- helping us understand what our research is telling us
- helping us make sure we're designing the NCS to meet everyone's needs

For more information about social care, community health and social work reform, visit gov.scot/ncs.

This publication is available at **www.gov.scot**

Any enquiries regarding this publication should be sent to us at

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