



## A right to know, A right to be involved

A survey of the views of people with mental health problems who were parents or those in a parental role experiencing Local Authority Statutory Children's Services.



## Executive Summary

Mind in Croydon has been providing innovative, award winning mental health services in Croydon for more than forty years. The Parenting Advocacy Service specifically worked with parents (or those in a parental role) who had mental health problems living in the borough of Croydon. The project was a three year service funded by Comic Relief.

## Survey Background

In February 2015, Mind in Croydon's Parenting Advocacy Service conducted an anonymous survey of the views of parents with mental health problems who had been involved with Local Authority Statutory Children's Services under the Children's Act. We were concerned that parents had been telling us that they did not understand these procedures and what their rights were and found the processes difficult to cope with.

The survey targeted:

- a) People who were parents (or those in a parental role) experiencing mental health problems; and
- b) Professionals working in statutory and legal settings. e.g. Local authority staff and solicitors.

During the life-span of this service, a focus group was facilitated with parents to promote discussions and obtain feedback to identify what support they felt they needed in relation to dealing with Local Authority Statutory Children's Services. Parents identified a gap in independent support when facing:

- Child Protection procedures
- Child in Need procedures
- Looked after Children procedures
- Legal Care proceedings



The feedback from the focus group formed the basis of '*A right to know, A right to be involved*' survey.



## Who answered the Survey?

Twenty three people participated in the survey. All participants had previously been in contact with the Parenting Advocacy Service.

Fourteen were parents and nine were professionals working in statutory and legal settings.

These included:

- Children's & Family Social Workers
- Independent Reviewing Officer (Quality Assurance & Safeguarding Service)
- Family Resilience Service
- Integrated Community Mental Health Services
- Specialist Solicitors in Children and Family Law

## Main Findings

- 64% of parents identified that they were not signposted to an Independent Advocacy Service
- 93% of parents said that Independent Advocacy made a difference to their experiences when coming into contact with Local Authority Statutory Children's Services.

**"The advocate was very professional, clear and unbiased"** - Parent

**"This is a very good service and shouldn't close"** - Parent

- 89% of professionals thought that Independent Advocacy provision should be made available to all parents going through Local Authority Statutory Children's Services and Legal Care proceedings.

**"I would like to have information on the service that I can send to my team to ensure they are all aware of the service"** - Quality Assurance & Safeguarding Service.

- 100% of professionals working in statutory and legal settings said that they would either recommend or signpost parents to Mind in Croydon's Advocacy Service in the future.

**"The Advocacy project has been an excellent service and has supported my parent immensely"**  
- Social Worker Children's Services.

### Did parents feel listened to?

Parents reported that having an advocate to listen to their views gave them the confidence to speak up and put forward their views to statutory agencies.

**"The presence of an advocate in the room boosted my confidence and I was able to say things on my behalf that I had forgotten"** - Parent

**"The advocate listened to me, put my points and views across, and explained my rights. Just being in the room made me feel like I was being treated differently and fairly"** - Parent

## Administration of the Survey

A total of 108 people were approached to participate in the survey.

39 parents were identified as potential participants. Of those approached fourteen parents completed the survey through 1:1 telephone interviews.

69 professionals were approached as potential participants in this survey. Of those approached nine professionals responded through an online survey.

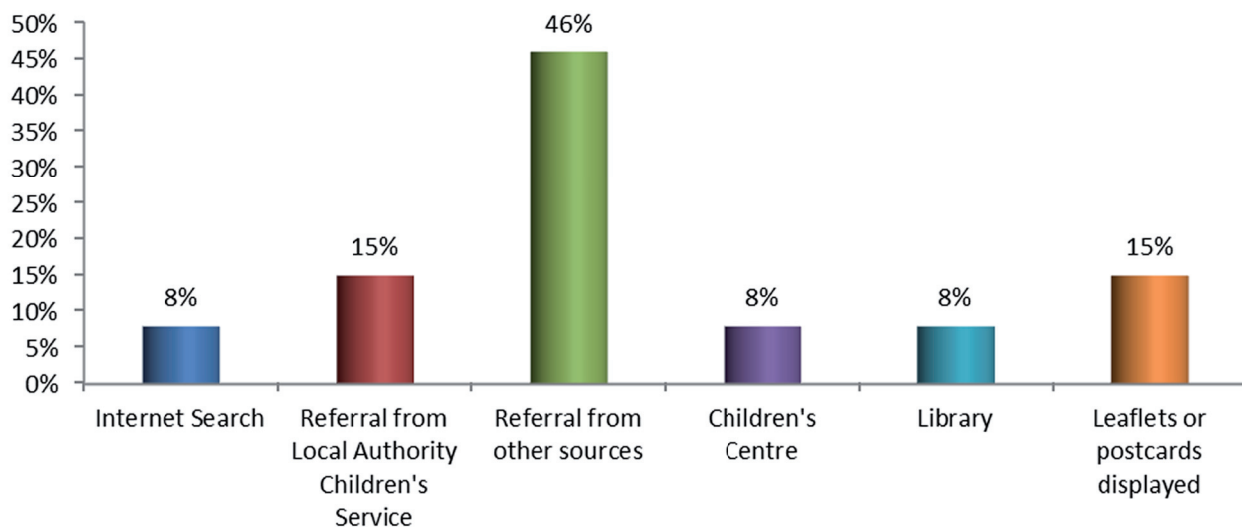
## The Results

23 people responded to this survey (14 parents and 9 professionals).

The findings are listed below and are presented in two parts – Parents and Professionals.

### Parents Responses

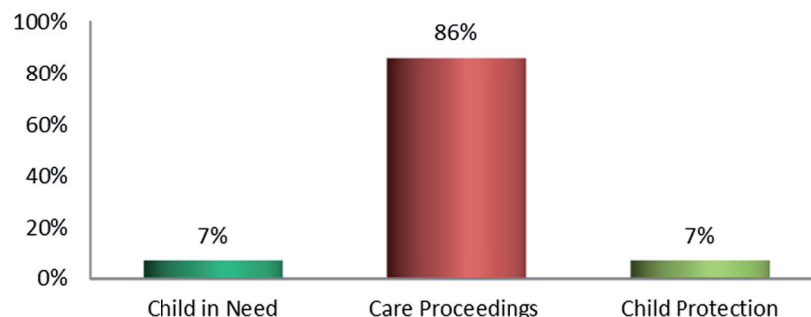
When asked the question, “How were you made aware of the Parenting Advocacy Service?”



15% of parents were made aware of the Advocacy Service through the Local Authority compared to 46% who identified other sources.

When asked the question “What were the main issues that you needed Independent Advocacy support for?”

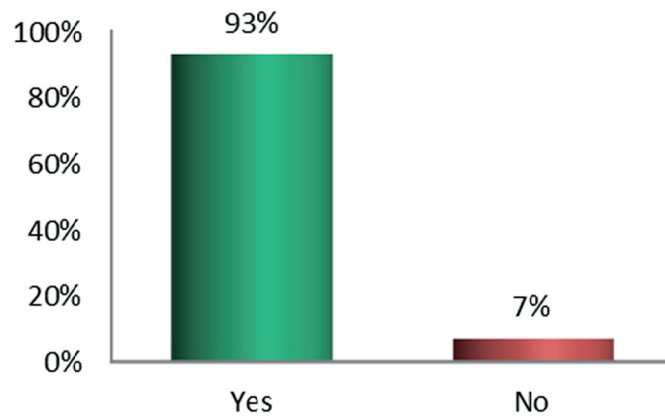
The data illustrates that a high proportion of parents did not access our service until Legal Care





proceedings had been initiated. Parents may be at their most vulnerable and isolated at this point and it may have been the case that they would have benefited from earlier support and representation through an Independent Advocacy Service.

When asked the question “Did having an Advocate make a difference to your experience?” Of the parents that participated in the survey, nearly all identified that having an Advocate made a



difference to their experience.

The answers included the following feedback from parents:

**“I felt like none of the professionals I was coming into contact with were understanding me or giving me the benefit of the doubt about my son’s care and my time spent in a parenting assessment. I felt I wasn’t respected enough or given enough support. I felt more confident since contacting the Parenting Advocate”**

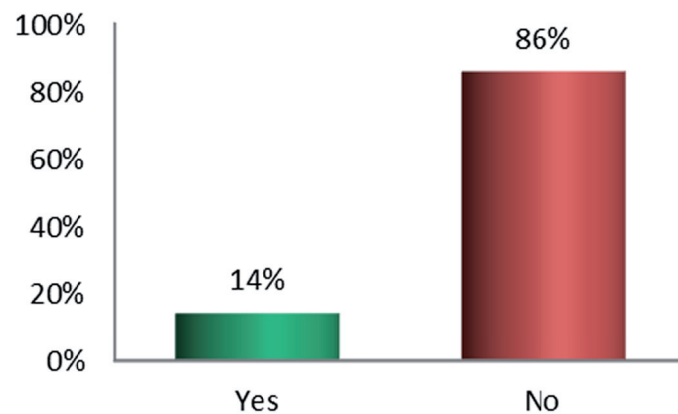
**“I felt that I had someone on my side who explained the process, on my rights and helped me voice my views and wishes”.**

When asked the question “What do you think could have been in place to make the process easier to understand?”





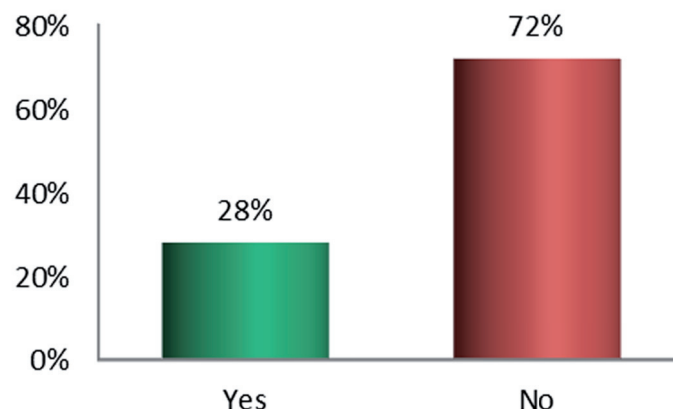
When asked the question “Were you involved in the decision making process when coming in to contact with the Local Authority?”



86% of parents stated that they did NOT feel involved in the decision making process with the Local Authority.

**“I felt the Local Authority had a bad attitude. I was not listened to, and the decision was taken away from me. I feel that the Local Authority won’t care that the Parenting Advocacy Service will not continue as they will have fewer obstacles and challenges”.**

When asked the question “Were your views and wishes taken in to account when coming into contact with the Local Authority?”



The above data illustrates that 72% of parents did NOT feel that their views and wishes were taken in to account.

The answers included the following feedback from parents:

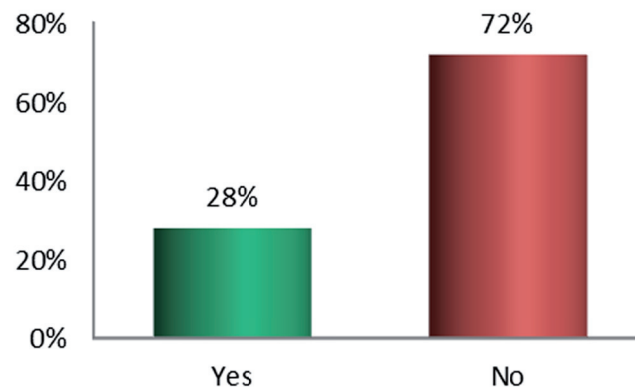
**“The Advocate listened to me, encouraged me and explained things to me. They attended meetings with me, kept me informed and updated in a timely manner. They wrote letters on my behalf and I felt that I was taken more seriously with the Advocate supporting me”.**

**“The Advocate made me feel empowered and listened to. They helped me to express my views”.**



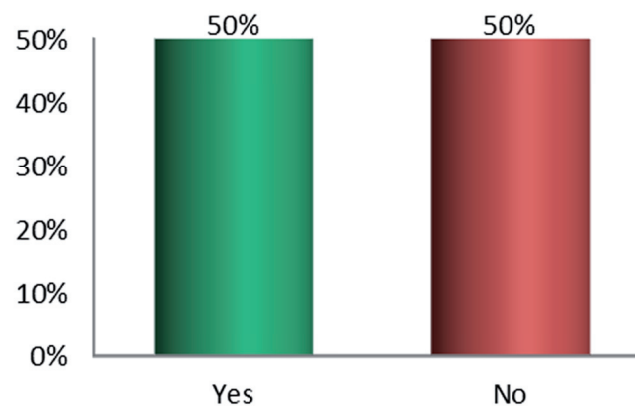


When asked the question “Was the process explained to you in a way that you understood?”

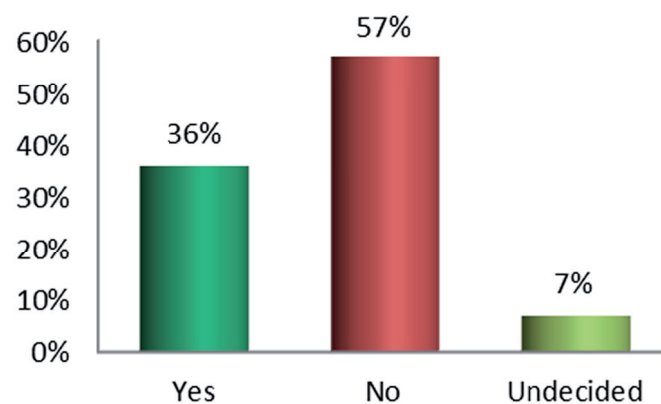


Approximately three quarters of parents identified that they did NOT understand Local Authority processes.

When asked the question “Were you provided with written information e.g. minutes or reports during the process?”



From the data we can establish that only half of parents were provided with the relevant documentation. Good Practice guidelines suggest that the Local Authority should follow fair processes. (ref: Department of Education draft statutory guidance on court orders and pre proceedings for Local Authorities April 2014)



When asked the question “Were you treated with respect?”

The data reflects that over half of parents identified that in their opinion they were NOT treated with respect by the Local Authority.



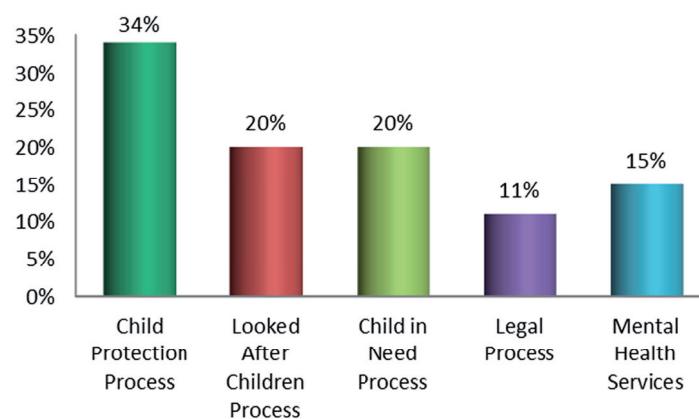
The answers included the following feedback from parents:

**By the Advocate “.....just being in the room made me feel like I was being treated differently and fairly”.**

**“The presence of an Advocate in the room boosted my confidence and was able to say things on my behalf that I had forgotten”.**

## Professionals' Responses

When asked the question “In what capacity did you come in to contact with the Parenting Advocacy Service?”

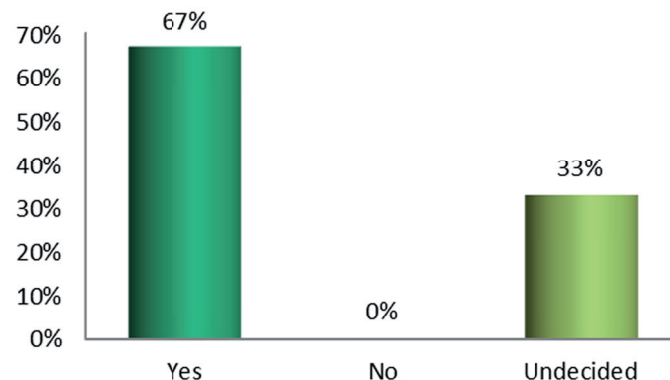


There was a broad range of areas where professionals came into contact with the Parenting Advocacy Service. The main area being Child Protection processes.

The answers included the following feedback from professionals

**“Advocacy professionals (staff) were very approachable and supportive during the referral process and proactive in making contact with my client..... I experienced the Parenting Advocacy Service to be good for me to signpost parents to” - Family Resilience Service.**

When asked the question “Do you think having an Advocate supporting the parent to express their views and wishes made a difference?”

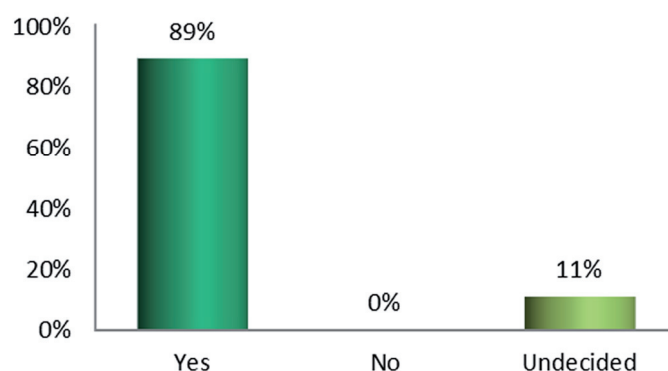


Over two thirds of the professionals that participated in the survey reported that it was beneficial to the parent to have an Independent Advocate present. This is reflected in the data obtained from parents, where 93% identified the same.



**"I respected my client's privacy here and left them to it once both parties made contact" -**  
*Family Resilience Worker*

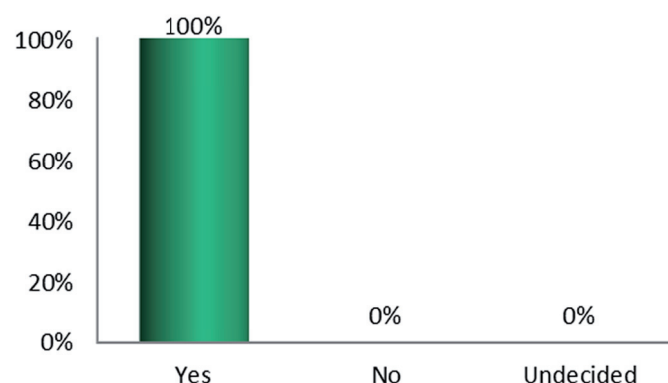
When asked the question "Do you think Independent Advocacy provision should be made available to all parents going through Local Authority and Legal/Care Proceedings?"



A high percentage (89%) of professionals identified that Independent Advocacy provision should be made available to all parents going through Local Authority and Legal/Care proceedings.

When asked the question "Would you recommend or signpost parents to Mind in Croydon's Advocacy Service in the future?"

100% of professionals said they would recommend or signpost parents to the Mind in Croydon



Advocacy Service. This is reflected in the feedback from parents where 75% requested an Automatic Signposting to Independent Advocacy.

The answers included the following feedback from professionals:

**"Yes I would and have done!" - Family Resilience Worker.**



## Challenges in conducting the survey

Of the people we approached as potential participants, only a small cohort of parents and professionals participated. However, although the sample was small, the results were consistent. Parents clearly identified areas where they felt there were concerns.

1. That their views and wishes were NOT taken into account (72%)
2. That they did NOT feel listened to (78%)
3. That they were NOT offered choices (72%)
4. That they were NOT provided with written information (50%)
5. That they were NOT treated with respect (57%)
6. That they were NOT involved in the decision making process (86%)

## Conclusions

We conclude from this survey that there is a need for the provision of Independent Advocacy for parents. This service would be specifically aimed at parents, or those in a parental role, experiencing mental health problems, when facing Local Authority Statutory Children's Services and Legal Care proceedings. These processes can result in the child or children being removed from the family permanently. Given the serious potential outcomes of these processes, we were very concerned that the majority of parents who took part in the survey did not understand the statutory and legal processes to which they were subject.

In other areas where people are subject to statutory processes e.g. the Mental Capacity Act 2005 (IMCA), Mental Health Act 2007 (IMHA), and Care Act 2014, there is a statutory requirement to provide Independent Advocacy. There is statutory advocacy provision available to children in receipt of Social Care Services who wish to make a representation (or complaint); and for Looked after Children whose care and progress has been reviewed. However there is no duty for the Local Authority to provide Independent Advocacy to parents facing Local Authority Statutory Children's Services and Legal Care proceedings.

## Findings and Recommendations

### Finding

89% of responses from people working in statutory settings said that Independent Advocacy should be available to parents going through the Local Authority process.

### Finding

93% of parents said that having an Advocate made a difference to their experience.

There is no requirement under current legislation to provide an Independent Advocate in these circumstances.

### Recommendation 1

Dedicated funding for an Independent Advocacy Service, available to parents who are subject to Local Authority Statutory Children's Services and/or legal care proceedings under the Children's Act 1989, should be provided.



#### Finding

72% of parents identified that the process was not explained to them in a way that they understood.

#### Finding

78% of parents did NOT feel listened to

#### Finding

72% of parents were NOT offered choices

#### Finding

50% of parents were NOT provided with written information

#### Finding

57% of parents felt they were NOT treated with respect

#### Finding

86% of parents felt they were NOT involved in the decision making process

#### Recommendation 2

The Local Authority should work with parents and relevant advocacy providers to ensure that parents understand statutory processes, feel involved and are provided with accessible information.

#### Recommendation 3

The Local Authority Statutory Children's Services should consider an independent audit of their services specifically aimed at the quality of the service provided to their clients.

#### Finding

Only 15% of parents were made aware of the Advocacy Service through the Local Authority.

#### Recommendation 4

A dedicated display of accessible information on Independent Advocacy services should be made available within Croydon Council settings, including their website and staff intranet.

#### Finding

Of the 108 people that were approached to participate only 21 % provided a response.

#### Recommendation 5

In order to collate robust data, consideration should be given to undertaking a survey with a much larger cohort of people.



## What Parents said they needed



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