



Recognising quality
in independent advocacy

QPM Assessment Report

Vocal Advocacy

Date of Site Assessment: 8th March 2016

Contents

	Page
1. Executive Summary	3
1.1 Overview	3
1.2 Areas of good practice	3
1.3 Areas for improvement	4
1.4 Assessor's recommendations	5
1.5 Vocal Advocacy's response to report	5
2. Summary of the Assessment	6
2.1 About Vocal Advocacy	6
2.2 The Assessment Team	6
2.3 Approach to Site Assessment	6
3. Summary of achievements	8
3.1 Independence	8
3.2 Clarity of Purpose	8
3.3 Confidentiality	9
3.4 Safeguarding	9
3.5 Empowering and putting people first	9
3.6 Equality, accessibility and diversity	10
3.7 Supporting Advocates	10
3.8 Accountability and complaints	10
4. Further information and relevant links	12
5. Get in touch	12

1. Executive Summary

1.1 Overview

The Advocacy Quality Performance Mark (QPM) is a robust, quality assessment and assurance system for providers of independent advocacy in England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

Working towards and achieving the QPM:

- Enables independent advocacy providers to demonstrate and promote their commitment and ability to provide high quality advocacy
- Helps people who need advocacy services to identify organisations in their areas which will be able to support them well
- Offers commissioners of advocacy services some reassurance that a QPM-accredited provider is robust and focused on ensuring delivery of quality services.

The QPM assessment process involves four stages, including a review of policies and processes, completion of the QPM Assessment Workbook, examination of anonymised case records, and a series of interviews with key stakeholders. A draft report is then submitted to the Award Manager for approval.

1.2 Areas of good practice

Vocal is a small organisation with strong advocacy principles at its core. Staff and trustees take their roles seriously and value and respect the advocacy relationship, working hard with and for individuals. This was evident in every interaction the assessor had with the organisation. It shone through in the desktop assessment as well as when meeting people.

It's fantastic to see such a strong commitment to people and their rights. The website and information Vocal provide is great – person centred, easy to understand and uses a range of communication styles and media. Vocal work hard to ensure each person they work with has as much choice and control as possible and that they have the information they need in formats that work for them.

People who have used the service are really at the heart of the organisation and are strongly involved at all levels. This is to be commended. Staff, Trustees and members all communicated an equality of value of all those engaged in the organisation that few organisations manage to achieve in practice and it's a joy to see that people are so strongly involved in the organisation.

Vocal are committed to learning and evolving with the times and are embracing the current commissioning climate and challenges to the delivery of statutory advocacy for the first time.

Vocal is committed to working in partnership and see the strengths that this approach brings.

Most of all, Vocal is truly person centred and person led, this is evident in its policies and procedures and case files, as well as throughout all interaction the assessor has had with the organisation.

1.3 Areas for improvement

A number of areas for development were identified at the desktop stage of the assessment:

- Gifts and hospitality: To be updated. Actioned
- Confidentiality policy: To be updated. Actioned
- Non-Instructed Advocacy Policy: To be updated. Actioned.
- Safeguarding Policy: To be updated. Actioned.
- Whistleblowing policy: To be updated. Actioned.
- DBS checks: We except policies to show that DBS checks are repeated every 3 years. Actioned

It should be noted that Vocal took the feedback from desktop stage of their assessment with a really positive attitude and showed great commitment to making the changes required and to use the opportunity as a learning one for staff, trustees and members alike. The assessor was pleased to hear that the ethos of co-production within the organisation meant that changes to policies needed to be developed and ratified with members (people who use the service) and with trustees.

Vocal have made all necessary changes as requested and now have a solid set of policies and procedures that are Mental Capacity Act 2005 and Care Act compliant. Well done!

The only remaining recommendations for improvement would be to really embed the Non-Instructed Advocacy Policy and develop the understanding of the place for making Best Interest decisions in the course of the advocacy relationship. The assessor is sure this is something Vocal will have been doing as a team.

Vocal provides a highly person centred advocacy service and it would great to see the organisation grow and respond to the needs of more people. However, the Assessor appreciates the huge efforts put in by all staff and volunteers in fundraising and in keeping Vocal alive and strong.

1.4 Assessor's recommendations

The Assessor is very pleased to recommend that Vocal Advocacy be awarded the QPM for a period of 3 years from April 2016.

1.5 Vocal Advocacy's response to report

Vocal welcomes the opportunity to reflect on our work, review and update in order to provide a better service. Completing the QPM workbook and preparing for the site visit enabled us to take time to ensure that the quality of what we were providing was maintained and improved upon. It provided opportunities for in depth discussion across the organisation, shared learning and for good practice to be highlighted.

We constantly seek opportunities to learn from our work and adjust to ensure that what we do evolve. The recommendation made regarding developing the understanding of best interest decisions in the course of the advocacy relationships has begun at our team meeting which took place on 12th April – we will keep this on the agenda to ensure that understanding is embedded.

All of the people involved in the assessment process were really happy to help out and keen to share their experience of Vocal with the assessor. It has been incredibly beneficial, not only in terms of external perceptions of the organisation and the work we do but for members, staff, volunteers and trustees alike to have the quality of our work and relationships validated in this way.

Vocal is immensely proud to achieve this award.

2. Summary of the Assessment

2.1 About Vocal Advocacy

Vocal is a small independent advocacy organisation operating in South and West Devon that helps adults with communication difficulties to understand and exercise their rights and make informed choices and speak up for themselves. This includes people with learning disabilities, brain injuries, dementia and mental health issues.

They are contracted by Devon and Torbay to provide statutory advocacy (The Care Act) and general advocacy about health and social care issues. They also offer a more extensive advocacy service through other grants and fundraising.

2.2 The Assessment Team

Gail Petty – QPM Manager and Assessor

Gail has worked in the Community and Social Care Sectors for the last 27 years, ten of those delivering and managing Independent Advocacy services across London and the South East of England. At NDTi, she leads on Advocacy and Rights, including the Advocacy QPM. Her work is underpinned by an unerring belief in individuality, community, reciprocity, rights and the importance of each person's voice. She supports Local Authorities, community sector organisations and private providers to translate policy and legislation to best practice, using co-productive approaches to enable individual's to have increased choice and control in their lives. She has previously focused on the implementation of Personalisation, asset based and outcome focused commissioning, Self-Directed Support, the role-out and innovative use of Personal Budgets and MCA Compliance.

2.3 Approach to Site Assessment

The QPM Assessor visited Vocal Advocacy on 8th March 2016 and met with the Manager, Administration officer, two Trustees, including the chair, a number of people who access the advocacy service and a number of advocates.

As part of the evidence-gathering phase of the review, the Assessor reviewed a sample of 5 case files and the following documents:

- Completed QPM workbook
- Partnership Working Policy
- Non Instructed Advocacy Policy (updated version as well as original)
- Confidentiality Policy (original and updated)
- Gifts and Hospitality Policy (original and updated)
- Data Protection Policy

- Prioritisation Policy
- Prioritisation Flow Chart
- Safeguarding Adults Policy (original and updated)
- Safeguarding Children Policy
- Watching Brief – 8 domains
- Conflict of Interest Policy
- Contracts and Disputes policy
- Vocal Code of Practice
- Whistleblowing Policy
- Alleged Abuse and vulnerable adult at risk policy

Throughout the desktop phase the Assessor and Advocacy Manager spoke frequently to ensure requirements and amendments needed were understood and that the Assessor had correctly interpreted information submitted.

3. Summary of achievements

This section provides a summary of some of the achievements against each of the eight quality areas of the Quality Performance Mark. It does not seek to comment against all of the quality indicators that sit beneath each standard.

Please refer to Appendix 2 for a description of each standard and Appendix 3 for the QPM workbook, which contains the quality indicators.

3.1 Independence

Vocal take their independence very seriously and staff and trustees value their independence and work hard to protect it. They are constituted as an independent charity and this, along with their Business Plan, Contracts and Disputes Policy and the Code of Practice, Conflict of Interest Policy and Gifts and Hospitality policy, provide a solid base to work from.

Advocates clearly articulated the importance of being independent and impartial to enable them to be effective in their role.

The website and publicity materials also clearly state their independence and the people we spoke to who use the service also had a real appreciation of this. They were able to tell the assessor that advocates are on their side and not part of social services. People valued the relationships they had with their advocate and understood the importance of independence within this.

One founder trustee had previously been employed by the NHS to set the charity up, however this has changed (19 years ago). Vocal and all trustees have ensured that no potential conflict of interest could occur and all are independent.

3.2 Clarity of Purpose

All staff and Trustees were extremely clear about the role and remit of Vocal. This was further reinforced by people we spoke to who use the service who were able to explain to the assessor what Vocal does and what their advocate is and isn't able to do.

Vocal's website and written materials are excellent and provide information in a variety of formats, including mixed media. The use of video and photographs and alternative communication strategies within the advocacy relationship is excellent and means each person gets a truly person centred service and advocates work really hard to ensure that people have as much choice and control as possible. They also have robust approaches to working with people who don't use words to express themselves and advocates were able to articulate the principles of Non-Instructioned Advocacy well.

3.3 Confidentiality

All staff were able to articulate Confidentiality as being one of the core advocacy principles. This was confirmed in conversation with people who have used the service. People understood that their advocate kept things confidential, unless they had to breach confidentiality.

Advocates also had a clear understanding of when and how they may need to breach confidentiality in Safeguarding scenarios.

Vocal have updated their policy to reflect the requirements of the Mental Capacity Act and Data Protection legislation.

3.4 Safeguarding

Vocal have worked hard to develop a new Safeguarding policy that reflects the principles of their practice and is compliant with the Care Act. This revised policy is easier to understand and sets out a straightforward approach to safeguarding.

It was clear in conversations with staff and trustees that there is a good awareness of child and adult protection issues and the advocate's roles and responsibilities within these. This was particularly evident when talking about the advocacy provided to parents with a learning disability who have children going through care proceedings. The newly revised policy now reflects Vocal's good practice.

3.5 Empowering and putting people first

This is where Vocal really stand out as an organisation. Principles of empowerment and putting people first run throughout the organisation and are evident in policies and procedures and in the way advocates, staff and members talk about the service.

This is both generally and in specifics in terms of actual advocacy delivery.

Members are involved at all areas of the organisation and there is a real sense of true co-production and shared ownership of Vocal as an organisation.

Vocal actively seek feedback from people who use the service and everyone who uses the service is invited to become a member and attend bi-monthly members meetings.

Informal support and formal Supervision are other routes to ensuring advocates continue to think about how to empower people to make and communicate their own decisions and staff were able to explain this clearly in discussion.

3.6 Equality, accessibility and diversity

Vocal have an Equal Opportunities Policy in place, which supports good recruitment processes of both staff and volunteers.

The staff team does reflect the local population and there is a recognition that the part of the country Vocal work in isn't hugely diverse in terms of ethnicity.

Vocal's person centred approach means that any specific cultural, faith, sexuality needs would be addressed person by person.

Vocal work as part of a consortium in Devon and report their EO figures back for central monitoring and reporting. The consortium approach also means that there is a broader pool of advocates for Vocal to draw on, if they needed to in order to respond to the needs of a particular individual.

3.7 Supporting Advocates

Vocal is a small organisation with all staff working part time. Despite this, the manager and advocates are well supported through formal and informal means.

There are regular Team Meetings and supportive group reflective sessions as well as supervision and appraisal systems. The organisation uses PATH, a person centred planning tool, as its way of drawing up staff development plans. This again reflects the ethos of person centred practice within the organisation.

Staff know each other well and are able to call on each other for support if needed. The manager has an open door policy and it's clear that supervision is not the only route to discuss issues or concerns.

Staff (and trustees) have a thorough induction and there is ongoing access to a range of training programmes.

Vocal have updated their DBS policy and DBS checks will be refreshed on a 3 yearly basis.

3.8 Accountability and complaints

Vocal work hard to be accountable to members and commissioners. There is a complaints procedure in place and the Manager is able to demonstrate good appropriate responses to complaints received and show that the organisation uses complaints as learning and development opportunities.

There is a culture of reflective practice within the organisation and responses and attitudes to complaints highlights this.

Vocal undertakes regular monitoring and review and is thinking about how it further demonstrates its impact through recording and reporting on outcomes.

Reports are produced in a variety of formats and are inclusive of members.

4. Further information and relevant links

Further background information about the QPM and the resources and key documents noted in this report can be viewed on the Advocacy QPM website www.qualityadvocacy.org.uk.

You can use the download tool in the Resources section of the website to view:

- Advocacy QPM Information Sheet
- QPM Assessment Process Chart
- QPM Assessment Workbook
- Code of Practice
- Advocacy Charter

5. Get in touch

Should you wish to discuss this report in further detail, please contact:

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