



Evaluation of Covid -19 Residential Visiting Advocacy Project

JULY - NOVEMBER

2020

12 North Road • Cardiff • CF10 3DY
T: 029 2039 6974 E: admin@tgpcymru.org.uk
tgpcymru.org.uk



On request this information will be available in different languages and formats. Please contact communications@tgpcymru.org.uk

TGP Cymru is the working name of Tros Gynnal Plant. Registered Charity No. 1099878. Registered as a company limited by guarantee No. 04422485 (England and Wales).
Registered Office: 12 North Road, Cardiff, CF10 3DY.

INTRODUCTION

TGP Cymru has been the leading independent provider of advocacy for children and young people, throughout Wales, for the past 19 years. We provide statutory advocacy in 13 of Wales' local authorities and each year we support over 2,000 children and young people to get their voices heard. We also provide visiting advocacy services to a number of local authority and private residential homes.

This report is the evaluation of a short-term project, funded by the **WCVA VOLUNTARY SERVICES EMERGENCY FUND**, to provide an independent person with whom young people in residential care could engage to ensure their voices were heard at a time when others could not reach them due to reduced activity brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic. Restrictions imposed upon society to prevent the spread of the virus have negatively impacted young people who were already somewhat hidden from society. We are also aware that visiting advocacy and the benefits it affords are little understood. It is for these reasons that we seized the opportunity to seek emergency funding and to embark on the sizeable task of contacting Wales' residential homes.



EVALUATION

This evaluation elaborates on the achievements of a short-term project to reach out to young people, in residential homes across Wales, who may not have previously accessed or are not currently receiving advocacy. It confirms the need where there was no provision and exemplifies the successful outcomes praised by home managers and ongoing, formal arrangements which have resulted from this project.

THE REASON

In 2019 TGP Cymru facilitated an independent review into advocacy in residential homes which identified that many young people living in private residential homes across Wales do not have access to advocacy services. Therefore, when the Covid-19 pandemic emerged we quickly recognised that young people in residential homes might experience more challenges than most as a result of decreased mobility and less face-to-face contact with professionals than usual.

We know that isolation is difficult and felt that supporting this group of young people through this period, could be key to avoiding placement tensions, improving relationships between young people and professionals, enabling communication and ultimately keeping young people safe.

Moreover, we are passionate about advocacy. We understand the impact and outcomes it can achieve which not only include conflict resolution but also prevention, and were keen to ensure that all young people who could benefit from advocacy during this unprecedented time, had the opportunity to try it.

OUR AIM

Advocacy provides access to an independent, impartial advocate who can support a young person to raise issues, ask questions and obtain the information they need. It can provide a climate of trust and hope at times of confusion, stress and despair and facilitate their voice to the wider audiences in their lives, ensuring their voice is heard in all situations, from the everyday decisions to formal decision-making processes.

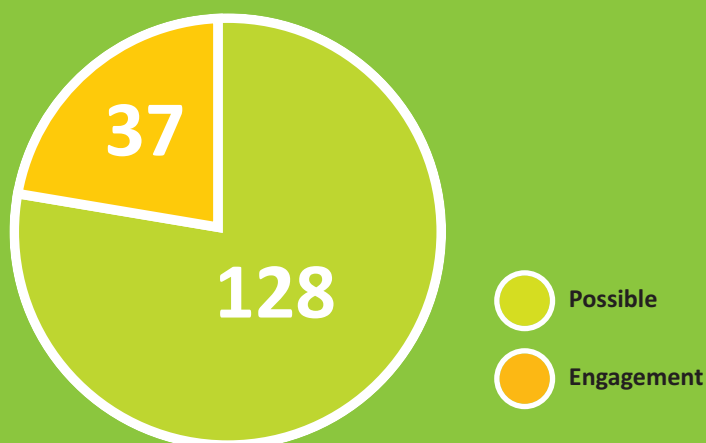
The aim of this project was to harness our services and offer support to some of Wales' most vulnerable young people, identified as potentially at additional risk during a very uncertain time.



OUR APPROACH

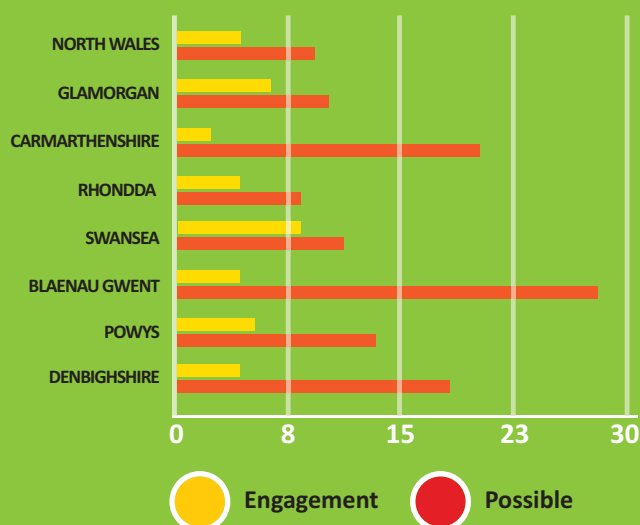
We took the message to private residential homes across the length and breadth of Wales, offering them a free period of 'virtual' visiting advocacy by our independent, professional advocates. Our initial approach to 128 residential homes resulted in 37 homes coming on board. We engaged from Anglesey to South Glamorgan; from Flintshire to Swansea and were mostly able to appoint advocates to all areas from within our regional teams. Our advocates embraced the additional work for the Project and established regular monthly contact to communicate with young people via Zoom, WhatsApp, Microsoft Teams, Face Time and telephone calls. Pre-arranged 'visiting' times were agreed and methods of communication adapted to suit the varying needs and facilities available within the residential homes.

PROVISION



“Be good to get some meetings in place soon, as our oldest is 17 and making steps to semi independence – our youngest is leaving us in November. Please let me have some dates and times and we can get some booked in.”
(Home Manager)

RVA ESTABLISHED

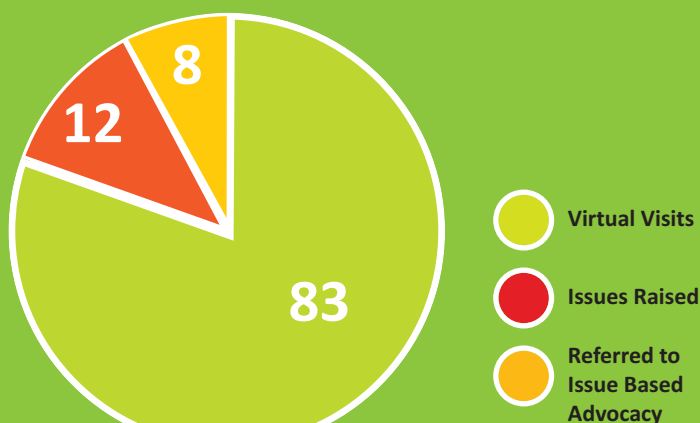


The stop-start of Covid-19 pandemic restrictions brought many emotional and logistical pressures on residential homes and their staff too; decreased staffing because of self-isolation and positive Covid-19 test results, absence of visitors, reduced contact between residents and their families to name but a few. But despite the challenges, the residential staff were committed to facilitate the needs of their young people, working with the advocates to ensure safe access to the available technology, at times best suited to everyone and our advocates brought reliability, flexibility and imagination to engagement with their young people.

WHO RECEIVED THE SERVICE?

The project allowed TGP Cymru to focus on an identified gap at this crucial time and all young people who engaged, of any gender, disability, nationality, with or without any issues, were offered the opportunity to speak to an advocate in confidence, during a monthly virtual visit. Not all homes and not all residents wanted to engage; some not feeling a need or already had an advocate, but of the 83 visits carried out we were able to ensure young people's voices were heard and respond to 12 issues raised and refer a further 8 cases to Issue Based Advocacy, either internally or across other agencies. And – we know that many homes whose young people did not want to engage, displayed our literature as a reminder that we may be able to support in the future, should they feel a need for our services.

WORK COMPLETED



“ 'A' doesn't usually engage with professionals at all but she has got such a lot out of the Visiting Advocacy Service. I have shared the monthly reports with her social worker who is more than pleased.

(Home Manager) ”

THE SUPPORT WE PROVIDED

Visiting advocacy is about the opportunity to engage. It ensures young people accommodated in residential homes have access to someone independent who can advise them of their rights and entitlements, and support them, by listening to their concerns and assisting them to resolve difficulties, ultimately ensuring they can have a voice in decision making that affects their lives.

Via this Project:

- we were able to engage with young people who knew about advocacy and those who did not. Where a young person already had an advocate but seized the opportunity to speak to a TGP Cymru advocate, we were able to gather wishes and feelings to communicate with existing advocates and social services professionals
- we supported a wide range of issues including contact, placement and the return of young people to their families
- we shared young people's wishes and feelings at social services meetings and in court processes
- we referred young people to specialist support, including legal advice
- we communicated with young people through a diverse range of communication methods, from signing and Makaton, reading and sharing story books, to engaging the services of a translator for non-English speaking young people
- we provided brief, anonymised reports to all home managers following monthly visits. Any issues identified were confidentially taken forward, as needed, on behalf of the young people
- we impressed social workers and home managers with how quickly we dealt with issues raised

LESSONS LEARNED

Due to the time limit attached to this project, coupled with the potential scope of it, we allowed only minimal time to reach out to the 128 residential homes across Wales in order to offer the free service. While this enabled us to manage the level of interest and take up, it did not necessarily provide ample time to build relationships with the correct individuals, either to set the service up or to establish a good monthly routine. A longer project would enable us to build on this.

We have also learned that virtual visiting advocacy cannot replace face-to-face delivery. We know from experience that it can take time for young people to build a relationship with an advocate, especially when they see each other just once per month. While we knew virtual engagement could not improve this, it was nonetheless a positive opportunity to reach out to vulnerable young people at a challenging time.

The project also confirmed that the concept of visiting advocacy among residential homes and their staff was little known. Some homes were familiar with advocacy as their residents had previously had the support of an advocate, but none were aware of the availability of visiting advocacy services.

CONCLUSION

We are extremely grateful to have had the opportunity to bring additional support to young people in many of Wales' private residential homes during what will have seemed like a period of great uncertainty in their lives.

The level of engagement from young people in the project suggests that advocacy is a much-needed service – we saw one advocacy issue raised and dealt with for every four contacts made, which is above the average level of take up of such services.

We have been delighted to receive such positive feedback from partners and will continue to work with residential homes across Wales to ensure children and young people are aware of, and benefit from, advocacy as and when they require it.

“ It's great to have an opportunity for our young people to have this advocacy service. I shall look forward to hearing from you soon to arrange a date/time. (Home Manager) ”

“ The service has been great and I know young people from both homes have benefitted from it. We were recently inspected and CIW were very pleased to hear we had a Visiting Advocacy Service in place for our young people. (Home Manager) ”



We recently participated in the residential visiting project being run by TGP Cymru. This was a positive experience for our children, especially at such a difficult time. The friendly and welcoming approach from the advocates made our children feel at ease and allowed them to explore and speak freely with confidence. The children were offered the chance to chat individually or as a group with all the calls being a suitable length to ensure the children remained engaged.



Matt Greening - Manager of two residential homes within the Priority Childcare group

From my experience working in a residential setting with young people from all Authorities, it has been difficult to source a reliable Advocacy service. However this has been a great service. The young people are aware that they have this option even if they don't choose to use it. As a Manager, knowing that all the young people in our care have this option is great and I feel that the communication has been good too.



I'm aware that the interaction from the young people in placement hasn't been high, however the fact that they have the access to this service is fantastic and we look forward to continuing to use it.

Jodie Banks - Service Manager Teresa House - Care4Children

Our experience with TGP Cymru has been positive. Since the initial service to arrange for advocacy to be supplied to our residents, we have been met with enthusiastic and supportive members of your team.



The young people have benefited from the option of having someone independent to speak to and knowing that they are going to have this chance frequently.

This service allows us to demonstrate our transparency as an organisation and confidence to provide the young people with independent advocacy. This shows that we promote the voice of the young people and are confident that our practice is child centred.

We look forward to continuing this new relationship and working with you in the future.

Jamie Lucas - Registered Manager - Fairways, Birch Grove

Dafydd Davies - Senior Registered Manager - Fairways, Ty Rhos Bach

12 North Road • Cardiff • CF10 3DY

T: 029 2039 6974 E: admin@tgpcymru.org.uk

tgpcymru.org.uk

On request this information will be available in different languages and formats. Please contact communications@tgpcymru.org.uk

TGP Cymru is the working name of Tros Gynnal Plant. Registered Charity No. 1099878. Registered as a company limited by guarantee No. 04422485 (England and Wales).
Registered Office: 12 North Road, Cardiff, CF10 3DY.