"It's coming together... we are all part of something special and are valued":

The Development of the
Parent Advocacy Network
in West Glamorgan

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January 2022

Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I would like to thank the wonderful members of the PAN steering committee (The PAN People), who enabled me to join their journey in such a welcoming manner and learn from their unique knowledge. Each one of them deserves recognition and respect for the work and effort they are investing in PAN. The members are, in alphabetical order, Aaron, Anna, Belinda, Fiona, Gaia, Kim, Leanne, Maggie, Manja, Sana, Sian and Taliah (named with their consent).

I want to express particular thanks for the collaborative efforts of Sana, Fiona, and Anna, who supported the evaluation at every stage, commented on earlier drafts of the report, and made a significant contribution to the study. In addition, I want to thank Prof. Anna Gupta for her critical input and help throughout the different phases of the study.

Contents

Executive Summary

There is a growing recognition worldwide that child protection systems are failing to meet the goal of promoting a better and safer society for children and their families. Accordingly, there have been calls for child protection policy and practice to return to the core values of social work, move beyond the focus on parent participation at the interpersonal level, and advocate for the ethical and practical importance of the participation of parents with lived experience in child protection systems at a wide organizational and political level. Initiatives that are part of this trend include parent advocacy programs (also known as peer-to-peer mentoring programs), peer support groups, and parent advisory boards.

This report, which is part of a wider study on parent advocacy and activism in child protection, focuses on the development of one such program—the West Glamorgan Parent Advocacy Network—in Wales. The project, which began as an independent collaboration between parents with lived experience of the child protection system and social workers, evolved throughout the last two years and is now supported by the Neath Port Talbot (NPT) and Swansea local authorities and backed by the West Glamorgan Safeguarding Board. Although it is still in its initial stages of development, the group has made significant achievements since its establishment.

The report begins with a detailed description of PAN's development and the actions it undertook in the last two years, followed by a brief review of the research on parent advocacy programs and the relevance of such initiatives to the Welsh context.

By conducting 60 hours of participatory observations, 12 in-depth qualitative interviews with steering group members (six parents with lived experience and six allies), and on-going reflective discussions with the group, the study aimed to:

1. document and conceptualize the development of PAN,
2. explore the experiences of parent activists and allies in the development process,
3. learn about the challenges and opportunities facing the group and the individuals in it,
4. prompt reflective dialogues on the process, and
5. establish the theoretical and practical foundations necessary for future development.

Findings

The report consists of three sections. The first introduces three main themes that explore group members' motivations, experiences, and challenges. The second presents the main questions and dilemmas the group encountered throughout its development, each followed by a description of the group's current answers and solutions to them. Last, conclusions and plans for future developments are outlined.

Motivations for joining PAN

All group members expressed a shared understanding that the child protection system in its current form is not fit for its purpose. Accordingly, the overarching motivation for joining PAN is an ethical commitment and desire to reform the child protection system and the way it works with children and families. More specifically, the data pointed to six motivations that underlie members' participation in the project: influencing child protection policy at the national level; helping others; amplifying parents' voices; challenging stigma; influencing individual social workers; and engaging in personal development. A summary of the ways in which each of these motivations came into play in practice is presented.

The experience of being part of PAN: What helps and what hinders

Group members described their participation in the project as meaningful and exciting and the dominant experience of being part of PAN as a very positive and empowering one. An in-depth analysis pointed to five features that prompt positive experiences and three features that hinder them.

Features that prompt positive experiences
PAN members described the essential importance of the close and informal relationships that evolved within the group. Other features that were mentioned as helpful were meetings with parents and allies who have some previous experience in the development of parent advocacy, the effort made to assist group members to receive what they require to take part in the project (e.g., computers and an internet connection), presenting PAN in various professional and public forums, and conducting activities that move beyond the online meetings.

Features that hinder positive experiences
Participants referred to the difficulty of being part of the project while it is still in its infancy. For example, they pointed to what they experience as its slow pace of development and the difficulty of working in a somewhat uncertain context in which plans and actions evolve and change over time. In addition, all participants described a gap between the amount of time required for them to be active in the group and the actual amount of time available to them.

Collective challenges

Whereas the above section described individual experiences and needs, this section addresses the challenges that the group faced as a collective: establishing the group during the pandemic without being able to meet in person for significant periods of time, working without having a known source of funding for the near and distant future, recruiting parents and creating a stable and committed group of members who can attended activities regularly, the complexities of working collaboratively and challenging the power imbalances between parents and allies, and, last, supporting the parents in the group in light of the specific challenges they encounter as part of their activities in PAN.

Open questions, dilemmas, and current answers

This section includes three general questions that required the group's attention at both the practical level and the fundamental and ethical levels. Each of these is comprised of three more specific, derivative questions and followed by a description of the group's current answers and solutions.

The first question was, *What are we?* This question addresses fundamental issues regarding PAN's self-perception and group identity. Specifically, is PAN's only goal to develop a direct peer mentoring service or rather a wider movement that works to change the child protection system? Should PAN be part of the establishment or an independent collective? And what kind of collective should they aspire to become (e.g., a charity? an advisory board?). The answers to these questions point to the group's intention to become a wide movement that acts independently to reform the child protection system. The organizational implications of this intention are presented in the final section of the report.

The second question was, *Parent professionals or parent activists?* It concerns the way in which the group perceives the role of parent activists in relation to questions of professionalism and different kinds of knowledge. Specifically, what kind of knowledge and training do parent advocates need? Should there be criteria for being a parent advocate? Should parents' participation be paid or voluntary?

Answers to these questions involve striking a balance between aspiring to enable parents to work as professionals and acknowledging their unique knowledge and position.

The last question was, *What will the parent advocacy service look like?* This question is very future-oriented and relates to the group's vision of the future service. The main dilemmas that arose in this context were who will receive the service and what will the criteria for referral be? What will the nature and the mandate of parent advocacy be? And what kind of support and resources will parents need to work as advocates? The answers to these questions are mainly open and will require further exploration in the future.

Conclusion and plans

The process detailed in this report is a unique and innovative one. Based on bottom-up, grassroots development, PAN has solidified its identity as a group that is working together to change the child protection system in multiple ways, mainly through the establishment of a peer-mentoring service led by parent advocates. Although challenging and confusing at times, the report indicates that the group now has solid foundations upon which to build. The report ends with a description of PAN's current plans for development, which include three strands of action: 1) The development of a parent advocacy service in collaboration with a third-sector organization, 2) The development of a specially tailored training programme, and 3) The development of PAN as a regional and national hub for the promotion of parent advocacy and participation.

In order for these strands to advance, PAN should continue and strengthen its building blocks: an ethical commitment to reforming the child protection system, collaborating and involving a range of stakeholders in the community, bolstering parents' power, knowledge and leadership, and nurturing relationships within the group and with others.

Introduction

In February 2020, Sana Malik, a mother with lived experience of the child protection system, and Fiona Macleod, an independent review officer, drove together from Wales to Birmingham to attend a conference titled Reforming the Child Protection System: Parents and their Allies Together. Recalling this journey, Sana reported the following:

When we were driving back, Fiona and I spent the whole time just talking about what we wanted. And we just, I guess we just had this natural decision made. That, actually, this is a route that we want to go down, to develop parent advocacy. Yeah, we both agreed and discussed [the fact] that, actually, what we wanted was to give parents a bigger voice and to build bridges [with SW].

At around the same time, Gaia Bell-Davies, a parent with lived experience of the child protection system, had a similar conversation with Anna Collins, her social worker at the Swansea Council.

These conversations comprised the first step in the establishment of the West Glamorgan Parent Advocacy Network (PAN), a collective of individuals interested in promoting the participation of parents with lived experience in child protection policy and practice. Specifically, PAN aspires to develop a peer mentoring service for parents involved with children's services. Two years later, PAN has 16 active members (eight parents – seven mothers and one father – with lived experience of the child protection system and eight allies[1]), including two allies who are seconded by the Neath Port Talbot (NPT) and Swansea local authorities for the development of PAN (Fiona and Anna), and the support of the West Glamorgan Safeguarding Board.

Despite the challenges involved in developing this project during a pandemic, throughout the last two years, Sana, Fiona, Gaia, Anna, and the members who joined them managed to establish a steering committee that meets once a month. This group has conducted various activities (See Table 1): consultation meetings with parents, presentations at conferences and in different professional forums, and two social events for parents in NPT and Swansea. Additionally, the entire group underwent Systemic Modelling and Clean Language training[2] with the aim of unifying the group and developing the communications skills of its members, and eight parents received Level Two advocacy training at Gower College.

The main aim of developing a peer mentoring service may take some time to achieve but several activities that are in the final stages of planning will begin soon. These include parent café[3] training for the whole steering committee and other interested community members and the establishment of parent support groups in both NPT and Swansea.

What has been done	
The activity	**What it involved**
Establishment of the steering committee	A year-long process that began with an action group that evolved into the steering committee when parents joined. The group meets every month, and its members are the driving force of the project.
Parent consultations	To learn about parents' needs, the group initiated three parent consultation sessions. At these meetings, parents involved in the child protection system across WG were invited to share their experiences with social services and voice their needs and expectations from parent advocacy.
Conferences and webinar presentations	Representatives of PAN—at least one parent and one ally— presented the group at four national seminars that involved hundreds of people overall.
Audio recordings	Together, Ian Rees, an ally, and the parents of the steering committee created two audio recordings[4] in which parents shared their experiences of the child protection system. These recordings support the groups' presentations.
Presentations in professional forums	The group members met with a range of social work teams and presented its current work and plans. The group also presented itself at the West Glamorgan Safeguarding Board and to the NPT social work consultants.
Meeting with national policy makers	Six parents and allies met with Welsh government Head of Family Justice and Looked after Children Ms. Natalie Avery Jones and Mr. Henry Vaile, senior policy advisor.
Social events	The group initiated two social events for parents and families involved with children's services. The social events included special activities for children (e.g., a circus activity and a storytelling activity) and an introduction to PAN. Despite a low turnout, families that participated gave very positive feedback.
Systemic Modelling and Clean Language training	The group received Systemic Modelling and Clean Language training (12 sessions total)
Advocacy training	Eight parents received Level Two advocacy training at Gower College
Development of a service Specification	Based on the consultation sessions and a collective learning process about different models of parent advocacy, a detailed service specification was developed.
Plans for the near future	
Parent café training	PAN received funding from the Transformation Fund to promote the development of the parent café model. As a first phase, 15 PAN members and 15 community members will take part in a four-day (29 hour) training course.
Establishment of parent support groups	Following the clean language training, the group decided to open two parent support groups (one in NPT and one in Swansea).

[1] The term ally refers to people involved in the project who do not have experience with children's services as parents. Specifically, the steering group includes allies from social and health services.

[2] Systemic modeling and clean language is an approach for supporting groups to use clean questions and metaphor models to better understand one another and develop the skills and capabilities needed to collaborate meaningfully. Retrieved from https://cleanlearning.co.uk/
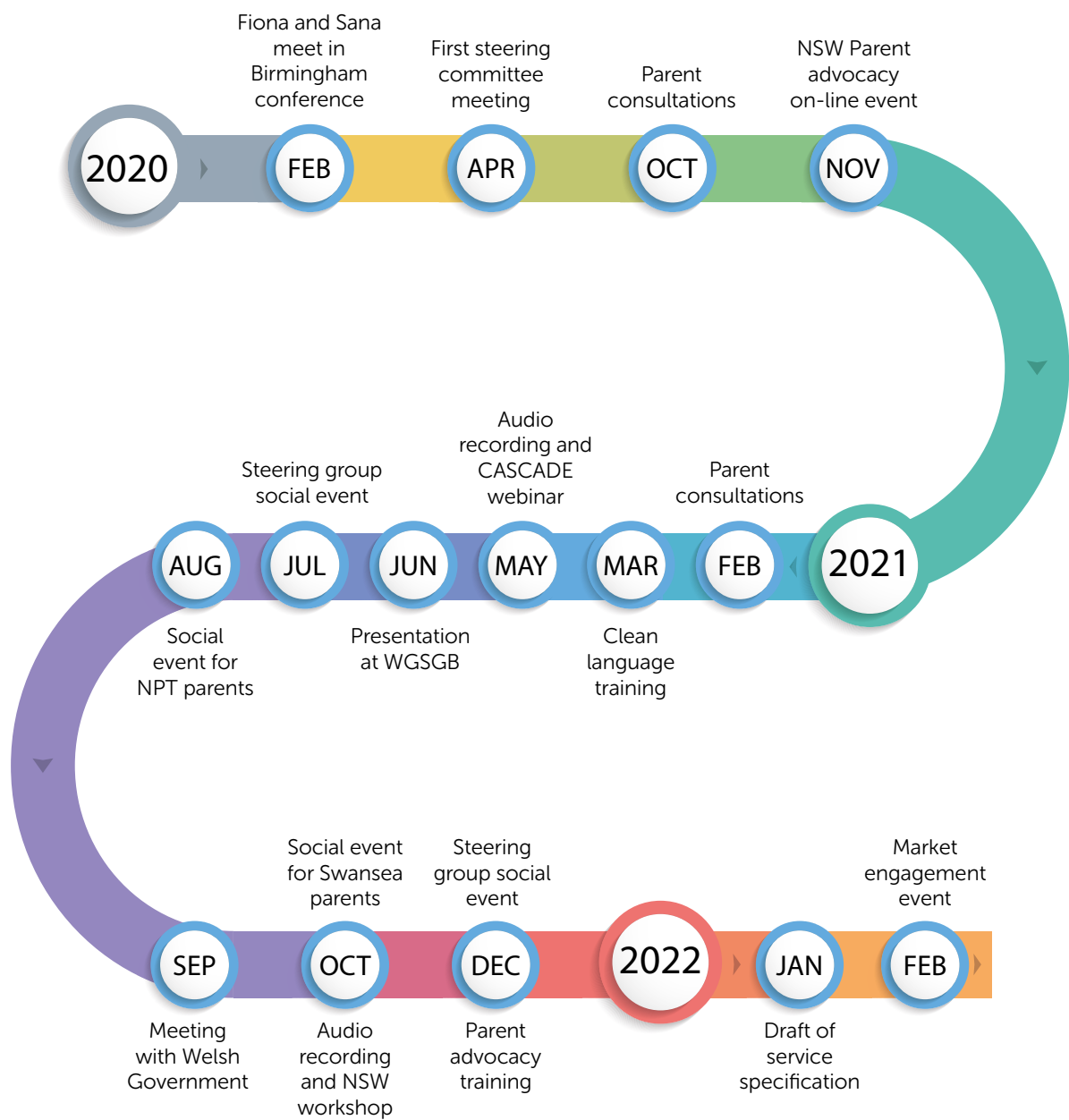
[3] The parent café model (developed and run by Be Strong Families, an American organization) is a parent engagement strategy that uses small group conversations to facilitate self-reflection, peer-to-peer learning, support, and education on protective factors to reduce child maltreatment. Retrieved from: https://www.bestrongfamilies.org/

[4] ???

PAN is currently standing at an important crossroads in terms of its activities; on the one hand, a stable foundation is in place, while, on the other, the development of a peer mentoring service, which is considered by the steering committee one of PAN's ultimate goals, is still in its early stages.

PAN in milestones

2020
- FEB — Fiona and Sana meet in Birmingham conference
- APR — First steering committee meeting
- OCT — Parent consultations
- NOV — NSW Parent advocacy on-line event

2021
- FEB — Parent consultations
- MAR — Clean language training
- MAY
- JUN — Audio recording and CASCADE webinar
- JUL — Presentation at WGSGB
- AUG — Steering group social event / Social event for NPT parents

- SEP — Meeting with Welsh Government
- OCT — Social event for Swansea parents / Audio recording and NSW workshop
- DEC — Steering group social event / Parent advocacy training

2022
- JAN — Draft of service specification
- FEB — Market engagement event

Background: Parent advocacy in child protection

Despite the broad consensus regarding the ethical and practical importance of promoting parents' participation in child protection policy and practice at both the interpersonal and societal levels, studies have found that the voices, needs, and experiences of families involved in the child protection system are often excluded and ignored by both policy makers and social work practitioners (Smithson & Gibson, 2017; Buckley et al., 2019). In response to these findings, there has been increasing interest in family inclusion policies and practice. Parent advocacy programmes, also known as parent mentor, peer mentor, or parent partner programmes, are examples of the kinds of programmes being developed to support family inclusion at the practice and policy levels.

Parent advocacy programmes can operate at one or all of three levels: case advocacy, programme advocacy, and policy advocacy (Tobis et al., 2020). At the case and programme levels, the core component of these programmes is the provision of peer mentoring, support, and advocacy services for newly involved parents by parents with previous child protection experience. Parent advocates usually interact with families in a much less structured and hierarchical way than child welfare workers, with no decision-making power over their cases, and play a unique role somewhere between friend and professional (Berrick et al., 2011, Lalayants, 2014, 2021; Featherstone & Fraser, 2012). That is, case level parent advocates are supposed to support parents in navigating the child protection process, inform them as to their rights and responsibilities, refer them to appropriate social services, and support them emotionally throughout their involvement with children services (Cohen & Canan, 2006; Tobis, 2013). At the policy level, a less-explored domain, parent advocates also serve as parent representatives in various decision-making contexts and policy forums.

Early evaluations of case-level parent advocacy programs are demonstrating positive effects in terms of both proximal outcomes such as parental empowerment and engagement in services (e.g., Berrick et al., 2011; Summers et al. 2014) and distal outcomes such as reunification and permanency (e.g., Enano et al., 2016; Lalayants et al., 2021). A recent systematic review of 13 experimental studies on parent advocacy interventions in the United States found that research outcomes are "mainly favorable, specifically for reunification rates, subsequent maltreatment incidences, utilization of resources and services, and parenting practices" (Acri et al., 2021, 19).

Despite the promising evidence, family inclusion policies and parent advocacy programs are still an evolving field in child protection policy and practice. Moreover, whereas in the USA and Australia they are increasing in popularity, in the UK parent advocacy is still in its infancy, with a small number of disparate, fledgling parent/peer advocacy and support projects. PAN, alongside other organisations, is spearheading this important development in the UK.

In Wales, advocacy and the role of independent professional advocate (IPA) are ingrained in the statutory framework of the Social Services and Well-Being (Wales) Act 2014 (SSWA 2014). Currently, the IPA's role is purposefully differentiated from peer advocacy, with a focus on issue-based help that avoids befriending and mentoring elements (Welsh Government, 2019). However, parent advocacy is in line with the fundamental principles of the SSWA 2014, which include voice and control, prevention and early intervention, well-being, and co-production. Moreover, it fits with the Welsh government's most recent five-year plan and its stated commitment to "[p]revent families breaking up

by funding advocacy services for parents whose children are at risk of coming into care" (Welsh Government, 2021) (author's emphasis). These ethical foundations, alongside an ongoing national and regional aspiration to decrease the number of children entering care and improve services for families (Fiona MacLeod, private communication), have set the ground for a supportive environment, later solidified through funding, for the development of PAN.

The Evaluation

In line with PAN's current developmental stage, this evaluation focuses on all dimensions of the group's development until now while exploring the conditions needed for it to move forward. The aims of the evaluation are as follows:

1. to document and conceptualize the development of PAN,
2. to explore the experiences of parent activists and allies in the development process,
3. to learn about the challenges and opportunities facing the group and the individuals in it,
4. to prompt reflective dialogues on the process, and
5. to establish the theoretical and practical foundations for future development.

To achieve these aims, which involve both descriptive and explanatory aspects, I employed an in-depth qualitative case study approach (Yin, 2003) and conducted 60 hours of participatory observations (Shah, 2017) in a multitude of contexts (e.g., steering committee meetings, social events, presentations), 12 in-depth interviews (with six parent activists and six allies), and document reviews. The data included in this report was collected between June and December 2021. All the interviews were digitally recorded with the consent of the interviewees and then transcribed. Meetings were documented using field notes and digitally recorded with the permission of the specific participants at each meeting.

To analyse the data, I applied a systematic content and thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) that consisted of three phases. First, an in-depth, explorative holistic reading of the interviews and field notes led to the identification of an initial coding framework. Next, all transcripts were coded using the framework and recordings of relevant meetings were revisited and coded as well. This analysis produced five

overarching themes that are at the core of this evaluation. The last phase of analysis involved a collaborative discussion with the steering committee. During this meeting, I presented an initial outline of the findings, and we conducted a reflective discussion in which the group reflected on them, responded to some of the questions that arose from them, and added their point of view on the analysis. Moreover, once an initial draft of the report was written, several parents and allies provided feedback on it. Interestingly, the dialogue that evolved in relation to the report fed into the work of the steering committee and influenced the group's plans. This in turn, required me to amend the report so that it would reflect the dynamic development of the project.

Findings

Motivations for joining PAN

The data point to collective agreement that the system in its current form is failing to meet the goal of promoting a better and safer society for children and their families. Accordingly, the commitment of group members and their desire to take part in changing the child protection system was prominent in the data. The following excerpts exemplify this point:

It's a broken system. It's a rotten culture. There are social workers trying to do their best, there are social workers that want change… but they're massively overworked. And because they're so overworked, that really brings a problem to how they approach cases. So, the system, as I see it, is a broken one. And … it needs some sort of fixing. (parent)

Importantly, the data indicate that the motivation to bring about change is rooted in participants' past experiences in the child protection system. The parent activists pointed to two kinds of past experiences that underlie their motivation to become involved in PAN. The first of these is the lack of support they experienced during their traumatic encounters with children's services.

Parents described feeling isolated, lonely, and confused throughout their interactions with social services. They indicated that social workers did not respond to their emotional and practical needs, and reported that they had been required to navigate this complex process without any support from the system.

The second kind of experience that prompted parents' participation involved the oppressive nature of their relationships with social workers. Parents described their negative experiences of the way in which social workers used their power, as this excerpt demonstrates:

I know it's a strong word to use, but that's what it felt like. It was a lot of abuse. And so, essentially, there was a lot of bullying going on. A lot of "if you don't do this, we're going to take your kids …" And every time I tried to challenge it, and every time, they didn't do anything about it. (parent)

Similarly, allies attributed their participation to negative experiences of the system. Many of them described experiences of feeling morally distressed due to a gap between their values and the practices in which they were obliged to engage:

So, I felt that we had, you know, harmed the children in those decisions. We as a department harmed the emotional well-being of these children and made the family relationships far worse than they'd been. I just thought, "This is not for me, this is institutional harm. I don't want to be part of it". (ally)

On the other hand, the allies also described positive past experiences with service users that prompted them to search for alternative modes of practice. For example, one of the allies described how working in a team that supports strength-based practice motivated her to learn about parent advocacy and eventually led her to join PAN.

Based on the shared premise that the child protection system is broken and requires repair, participants noted six main motivations for participating in the group. The data pointed to a positive correlation between the members' motivations to join and the actual actions that the group carried out during the last year and a half (see Table 2).

First, several members of the group asserted that their main aspiration *was to influence child protection policy at the national level*, as this quote shows:

The mission is to improve how statutory services work and improve the outcomes for children and families, you know, so that's the aim, that's why I am here, I think. To change the way services work on a broad-base level. (ally)

Actions that reflect this aspiration included a meeting with two policy makers and the development of two large-scale events as part of Welsh National Safeguarding Week.

The second motivation to join PAN was the desire to *actively support families* going through child protection interventions. Although supporting families can mean many things, in this context it was mentioned mainly in relation to the peer mentoring aspects of the project. Moreover, all parents explicitly pointed to the desire "not [to let] anyone else go through what I went through alone" as a central factor that motivated them to take part.

Although this is a prominent motivation mentioned by all the members, given the phase PAN is currently in, only a small number of actions, namely the two social events, reflect its manifestation. Nonetheless, we are hopeful that the upcoming development of support groups, the parent café model, and the parent advocacy service will reflect this motivation.

Third, the importance of *amplifying parents' voices* was mentioned repeatedly in the interviews and observations. Moreover, parents and allies see serving as a platform for amplifying parents' voices and knowledge as a central role of PAN and a motivation for them to be part of the group. For example, one parent stated the following:

The fact [is that] parents get a voice; I mean I can influence just a little change in the system though and be heard. And … benefit a lot of people or even some and let them know what it's like. I think that's great, you know. (parent)

Another recurring motivation is the desire to influence the ways in which parents who have gone through the child protection process are portrayed in the public discourse and professional forums. Thus, members highlighted their aspiration to *change the stigma regarding parents* through their activity in the group:

And I think that's what spurred me on to keep trying to make a change. Because of all these perceptions that people have, because I've heard people say, "Well, if social services are with you, you must have done something wrong", and it's not always the case and plus, the general public's point of view is that if you've had social workers in your life, you're a really bad person. And the perception needs to change. (parent)

Fifth, while both parents and allies acknowledged the systemic elements that drive many of the shortcomings of the system, they also expressed their commitment and desire to *influence the ways in which professionals, as individuals, perceive the families* with which they work, the child protection system, and their role within it:

And I feel like that is also the key. Helping other professionals realize that there have to be policy changes in order for this to work, in order for children to have less [sic] adverse experiences in childhood. You know, the way that people that [sic] work with children and families have to change how they see children and families. (parent)

There are several actions that correlate with motivations related to discursive changes i.e., amplifying parents' voices, tackling stigma, and influencing social workers. Specific actions linked to these motivations included speaking with social work teams, presenting at webinars and conferences, and taking part in meetings with policy makers.

Last, participants detailed the personal benefits they hoped to gain by joining PAN. In general, the participants described their activity in PAN as an opportunity to do something meaningful and feel empowered. Some of the participants expressed their motivation to be part of a group and develop new relationships. On a more practical level, participants described PAN as an *opportunity to develop their personal skills*. For parents, developing personal skills can potentially set the ground for a future career, and for allies it can contribute to professional experience and networking.

In addition to serving on the steering committee and gaining experience in working as a group, developing services, and collaborating with a multitude of stakeholders, training is central to the members' personal development. The main action taken in this context was the initiation of the Systemic Modelling and Clean Language training that both parents and allies pointed to as valuable.

Motivations	Actions
Influencing child protection policy at the national level	- Meeting policy makers - Initiating two national webinars during Welsh National Safeguarding Week
Helping others	- Parent consultation - Social events
Amplifying parents' voices Challenging stigma Influencing individual social workers	- Attending social work team meetings and other professional forums (e.g., WGSB). - Presenting PAN at webinars and conferences.
Engaging in personal development	- Serving on the steering committee - Undergoing Systemic Modelling and Clean Language training - Undergoing Level Two Advocacy training

The experience of being part of PAN: What helps and what hinders

All members characterized their experience in PAN as positive, emphasizing the empowering and informal nature of the group. The data pointed to several features of the project that prompt this positive experience and some that hinder it.

Features that prompt positive experiences

Learning from others – Members described the benefits of meeting and learning from activists already involved in parent advocacy. Since PAN's inception, various guests have been invited to the steering committee meetings. These included a parent advocate from the Rise project in New York, a social worker from a London borough who developed a parent advocacy project, a health practitioner who developed a peer support training program, and a director of a parent-led parent advocacy organisation form Washington. These meetings were influential in several respects. First, they enabled members to learn about different advocacy models and reflect on the kind of model they would like to develop. Second, they demonstrated the potential of parent advocacy to help parents and promote change. Last, they inspired members and motivated them to move forward with the project. As one of the allies put it:

She [the American parent advocate] linked up with us on our meeting and she spoke, and I was just … wow she was so motivational, full of emotion! But the content of it was so inspirational, and I remember this moment I felt yes, it's great to be part of that. (ally)

Developing relationships in the group – A second helpful feature that was mentioned repeatedly was the development of positive relationships with other group members and, more importantly, the process of becoming a group with a friendly atmosphere and shared values.

I guess we've built up a relationship, and we work closely with each other. I think we've all gone through the training together, which has been quite fun and helpful. We enjoy working together. (ally)

Active response to group members' needs – Members mentioned the importance of acknowledging that being part of PAN and taking an active role requires several conditions that are not available to all. This is especially evident in relation to parent activists' access to technology. The fact that most activities take place online made a computer and a reliable internet connection essential for participation. Indeed, PAN provided parent activists with both.

Presenting PAN to others – As mentioned above, in the last year and half, parent activists and allies have presented PAN in multiple professional and public forums. Although taking part was a challenging and intimidating experience, all the presenters found it a very positive one. A central feature of this experience was that the parent activists were given a central role at these meetings. After one of these presentations, one of the parent activists described how the fact that, as she put it, "they are coming to us, they want to hear and learn from us, we have a place at the table" gives her hope that things can change. Another important outcome of these presentations is the recognition that parents receive for their struggles and pain, but, more importantly, for their strengths, abilities, and unique knowledge. For example, at a meeting with two senior government representatives, one of the parent activists facilitated a clean language exercise. The reactions of all participants to the exercise highlighted the parent's unique ability.

Thus, the parent received recognition as a whole person and not solely as a "parent with lived experience".

Conducting real life activities –The benefits of developing activities such as social events were emphasized in the data. Members described the importance of these events for reinforcing their feeling that PAN is a real entity with actual influence and a mission and for their sense of being part of a group of people who that work together:

It [the social event] was emotional and [it was] heart-warming to see parents' relief. [It] reinforced why we are doing this, why we should, and why we have too. (parent)

It cemented the bond to work together— everyone did everything. We evolved to a different position, a hybrid group. (ally)

In addition, the activities promoted a better understanding of parents' needs and wishes:

We've learned that parents want a balance of fun and positive social experiences as well as the opportunity to talk about emotive experiences and how to make a difference to other parents. (ally)

Features that hinder a positive experience

Alongside the features that facilitate positive experiences, the data also revealed four features that hinder positive experiences and impede participation in the group.

The slow pace – Perhaps the most prominent of these features is the slow pace of the project's development. While they acknowledged the reasons for the slow pace—an aspiration to work collaboratively and develop a sustainable service—members described feeling frustrated by the difficulty of progressing and making the leap from an idea to an actual service.

But it is a challenge, because it's, from my point of view, and I'm sure everybody else feels the same, it feels like it's dragging us because there's [sic] so many different aspects that we've got to think of and try to do. (parent)

Walking in the dark – Members of the group also described the difficulty of participating in the group with no clear vision of the steps required to develop a parent advocacy service or with a feeling that the plan changes frequently in response to the challenges posed in practice. Moreover, the metaphor of walking in the dark or in a fog appeared repeatedly in the interviews and observations, possibly reflecting the group's sense of insecurity regarding the next steps. On the other hand, in the group discussions on the findings, one of the allies suggested a more hopeful explanation for the fog metaphor:

It's about always being aware of opportunities that arise and taking advantage of them when they do. It's hard because we don't always know how things will manifest themselves, but we walk in a certain direction with confidence we are on the right path.

Limited time resources – The third feature that inhibited participation in the group is the significant time and attention participants were required to invest as active members. All active participants in the group described the difficulty of making time to reach all the meetings and various activities due to other commitments. Also in this context, a recurring theme was the difficulty of keeping up with the ongoing, massive email correspondence and the multitude of online meetings involved.

Collective challenges

Whereas the findings discussed above focus on various dimensions of members' individual experiences in the group, the data also pointed to collective challenges that faced the group as a whole and impacted on its intentions to develop and grow.

Funding

Although the group succeeded in obtaining significant funding for the initial stages of its development, the foremost challenge, mentioned by all participants as a significant barrier, is the difficulty of moving the project forward without funding. This point arose in relation to carrying out current activities but mainly regarding the development of an advocacy service. Some asserted that funding was the only barrier to developing the service:

My main thing is the funding. I think if you had funding, we could put things in place and recruit and train. That's the main challenge … I would feel really relieved if that [was] sorted and … we [could] get off the ground. (ally)

Since such services are dependent on the funding allocated to them, members felt that the issue of funding was also a major factor that contributed to the sense of uncertainty that dominated their experience in the group.

COVID-19

Another external challenge is the difficulty of developing the project during the COVID-19 pandemic. The main challenge that arose from the data was the creation of close and warm working relationships within the group in the absence of face-to-face meetings.

I feel very much like, because nobody has ever met face-to-face with them … the first time that I met some of the parents was the social event. But it's been going on for quite some time. I really do feel that that brings a massive disconnect to the whole thing. Because I am [skeptical], when it comes to how far … people's engagement can go via Zoom, when you've not really got a relationship with these people, because you've never just had a coffee with them or been to the pub or something like that … I'm not even really a drinker. But it's … what brings people together, and then you feel you can speak more freely. (parent)

Recruiting parents

Throughout the last two years, the first topic of most of the steering committee meeting's agendas—the recruitment of parent activists— has remained unchanged. This fact highlights the group's difficulty in locating parents who are interested in joining the group and willing to commit to at least three hours a month. This issue is critical because of the group's explicit commitment to maintaining an equal balance between parent activists and allies. Explanations for this predicament varied. Many members attributed it to parents' reluctance to revisit their traumatic experiences with social services:

I think some parents are saying, "I really don't want to go down that road. That was the worst time in my life. I don't want to think about it anymore". I don't want to … so I've had a couple of parents say, … "… it will just bring back the worst memories". (ally)

Other explanations point to parents' inability to commit to contributing the time resources required to take part in group activities or a failure to adequately publicize the group and reach out to parents. Last, some of the group members pointed to the uncertainty regarding the future of the project as a pivotal challenge in terms of recruitment. As one parent, put it, "It's going to be difficult to get people. I think one of the problems is to join and give time if there's no guaranteed job at the end". Happily, in the last two months, three new parents joined the steering committee with the aim of undertaking advocacy training. This may imply that once parents benefit in a concrete way by joining, they find it easier to commit.

Stable participation

Closely linked to the difficulty of recruiting new parents to the group, ensuring parents and allies remain in the group is also challenging. Throughout the last year, two allies and four parents joined the steering committee but struggled to continue and eventually left the group.

We've had members drop off and new people joining and so I suppose it's been a bit chaotic in terms of that. (ally)

The data pointed to several reasons for this instability. The work done in the group is voluntary, so people carry it out it in their free time; people struggle to allocate the necessary

hours demanded of members; regular life circumstances (e.g., health problems, parental obligations, crises) hinder people's ability to participate, and some people join without fully understanding what is expected of them. While these reasons apply to both allies and parent activists, it is important to emphasize the difference between the two groups: while most of the allies in the group are employed by the local authority and have stable jobs, most parent activists are employed in unstable jobs in an unjust labour market.

Working collaboratively

Based on the shared ethical commitment described above, all group members expressed an aspiration to construct the group as a participatory space in which the distinctions between parents and allies could be challenged. Yet developing such a stance and translating it into practice is a complex endeavour. The findings point to three main challenges in this context. First, despite the wish to blur the distinctions between parents and allies, there is also a need to acknowledge the differences between the two groups in terms of social positioning and past experiences. As one of the parents explains in the next excerpt, this is a delicate balance:

Although we're working together, there still needs to be this understanding that the parents aren't professionals, you know, and I feel most of the time we don't feel it but actually we need to work on what we're trying to do with each other. Because it is parents, and it is professionals. (parent)

A second challenge is the practical implementation of collaborative principles. That is, how can power be shared? How can decisions involve both parents and allies? How, in practice, can the power shift from allies to parents? It is worth remembering that two allies (Fiona and Anna) are seconded and paid for leading the

group and therefore have much more time and ability to develop PAN. Clearly, the members of the group, and specifically Fiona and Anna, are aware of this challenge and making an active effort to respond to it.

The most prominent example of how this challenge is manifested is the decision regarding the chairing of the steering committee's monthly meetings. Although the group agreed that there was a need for "sharing the chairing" between parents and allies, in practice, the issue has been on the group's agenda for more than three months and the group has clearly struggled to take this decision forward. The explicit explanation for the delay was the group's reluctance to put excessive pressure on individuals. But the data also pointed to parents' hesitation to take on the role, on the one hand, and, on the other, the allies' confusion regarding how such changes would work, especially when many of the responsibilities are in the hands of the two leading allies.

The last challenge to collaborative work involves the external context in which PAN operates and specifically the challenge of presenting PAN collaboratively. Throughout the observations I conducted at meetings with professionals, it was clear that the group was aware of the challenge of presenting PAN collaboratively. Each of these presentations involved both a preparatory meeting and a follow-up meeting after the presentation. The preparatory meetings focused on detailing the structure of the presentation but also, more importantly, on the distribution of roles and power. For example, despite an agreement regarding the importance of parents leading meetings, often the role of introducing PAN and chairing meetings was taken on by allies.

The reflection of this challenge can be seen in professionals' reactions to these presentations. At the end of one of them, one of the professionals complimented an ally for the impressive work

she was doing. At the follow-up meeting five minutes later, one of the parents remarked to the ally, "you are so crucial for this thing, and you deserve this because you are so much at the back of this, but to be honest it's frustrating that they look at it as your project". While the worker's reaction reflected the challenge of presenting collaboratively, the parent's remark points to the importance of voicing such tensions. Indeed, this encounter led to a dialogue between the parent and the ally that ended with a decision to emphasize the egalitarian nature of the work when presenting it.

Supporting parents

The data pointed to the kinds of support parents may need and the challenge of providing such support, which is closely linked to the challenge of working collaboratively while acknowledging the different contexts involved and the different needs of parents and allies. Group members mentioned three types of circumstances that could require allies to stand alongside parents and support them: times of crisis, current involvement with children's services, and coping

with difficulties related to being involved with PAN. While the understanding that parents need support was shared, now the main type of support provided consists of relationships with allies. In addition, the parents have established a well-being group of their own to address their needs but are currently struggling to maintain it. As the next excerpt demonstrates, while relationships are immensely important, they cannot replace organisational attunement to parents' needs.

> *I don't know whether the parents feel supported, because they asked to set up their own group to support each other, which is great. But is that enough?* (ally)

As part of the effort to better support parents, members' well-being was addressed as the first issue on the agenda at the last four steering committee meetings, providing members the opportunity to share their need for support with the committee.

Open questions, dilemmas, and current answers

Given that the group is in the initial stages of its development, there are many issues and dilemmas that require its attention and, more importantly, its decisions. In this regard, one of the allies asserted, "At the moment, I've got more questions than answers really". Although some of these issues can be tackled practically, there are several possible ways to address them that reflect a range of ethical stances and professional considerations. Parallel to the writing of this report, the group worked on the development of a service specification that will facilitate applications for funding. Doing so required the group to face many of these questions and attempt to answer them. In the following section, I detail three prominent dilemmas that permeate the data and portray a range of possible answers, some of which have already been given by the group.

What are we?

"At the moment we are not a thing. Just a collective of individuals".

PAN is an independent initiative established with the aim of developing parent advocacy in Wales. Since parent advocacy is a broad term with multiple interpretations, questions regarding the nature of the group, i.e., its aims, structure, and actions, are still arising through dynamic negotiations within the group and outside of it. Currently, there are three derivative questions that stem from the general question "What are we?"

The first question derives from the multiple meanings of parent advocacy: *Are we a service or a movement?* While parent advocacy can be a specific case-level support service for families currently involved with child protection, it can also be a broader concept that refers to the development and promotion of parent participation at all levels of policy and practice. Indeed, participants addressed both ends of this continuum. Some described PAN's main mission and end goal as the establishment of a peer

advocacy service (questions regarding the nature of such a service are presented below). According to this perception, the role of the group will end once such a service has been established and is running. On the other hand, some viewed PAN's mission more broadly and described it as an umbrella movement for an array of activities and actions aimed at changing the child protection system through the collective initiatives of parents and allies. Visions in this vein include, alongside the provision of parent advocacy services, the development of peer-to-peer support groups, the involvement of parents in social work education, the establishment of parent-led parent café groups, the involvement of parents in influencing and designing policy, and, ultimately, the establishment of a national parent advocacy network.

Current answer: The analysis of the data alongside the group's concrete actions, i.e., the intention to establish support groups and the funding received for the development of parent café training, clearly point to the group's decision to comprise more than an individual parent advocacy service.

The second question concerns the group's perceptions regarding the organisational position of PAN: *Change from the inside or the outside?* One of the most important conclusions from the parent consultations was that developing an in-house parent advocacy service within the LA could intimidate parents and create the impression that the advocates are an extension of the LA. Most of the group's members agreed that this was a risk and believed that for the service to be truly independent and stand by parents, it must develop outside of the system. Nevertheless, all the members questioned the feasibility of developing an independent service, mainly due to funding issues but also because some believed that an in-home service would make the work more efficient, as the following excerpt shows:

> *There's been a lot of reluctance in the steering group when [the issue of in-house service] has been raised before, because people have questioned how independent it would feel for the parents if it's a service commissioned by the local authority in-house. But [the way] I look at it … it's probably the easiest way to get funding, get it sorted and have it connected to one department that got your name and they just make a referral to the advocacy department who then act independently. And even though they'd be employed by the local authority. I think there's a question mark over how independent you can be if you're employed by an authority … but I think it would work better to have it in-house and [provide] in-house service, because I just think it's the quickest way to get it set up and commissioned.* (parent)

Current answer: There is a growing recognition in the group that the most favourable option is to position the service outside of the local authority i.e., under the auspices of a third-sector organisation[5].

The next question addresses the organisational and practical structure that will enable the group to best achieve its aims: *What kind of collective?* This question builds upon the answers to the first two questions. Specifically, there are three main organisational options for the group. The first is to integrate into the local authority both as a peer mentoring service and as a family advisory board. The second is to develop a service specification that would then be commissioned by a third-sector organisation. Members expressed concern that choosing the latter route would lead to a sole focus on individual peer advocacy features and insufficient attention to wider issues and practices. Moreover, they fear that once such a service is commissioned, the group will have no influence over it. A third organisational route would require the group to establish PAN as a charity. In such a case, the group would operate as an independent advocacy service that involves various forms of advocacy, e.g., peer advocacy and support, social work training, policy advocacy, and campaigning. Although this option would enable PAN to become an independent service and a movement, it was the one the least mentioned by the group members.

Current answer: In line with its intention to become a movement and not only a service, the group is currently aiming to develop two entities. The first is a direct parent advocacy service that would be commissioned by a third-sector organisation. The second is a parent advocacy hub that would be supported by the LAs and focus on system and policy-level advocacy at the local and national levels.

[5] This conclusion is in line with the current framework for advocacy in Wales, according to which "[a]dvocacy services are funded and managed in a way which clarifies their independence from commissioners" (Welsh Government, 2019, p.16).

Parent professionals or parent activists?

Questions regarding the nature of parents' involvement in the group arose repeatedly throughout the study. Although these questions address different aspects of the group and various phases of its work, they all revolve around the construction of the role of parents with lived experience of parent advocacy. More specifically, they reflect a tension between a stance that differentiates parent advocacy from professional advocacy and one that aspires to encourage and assist parents to become professionals. Importantly, this is not a binary division, and parent advocates can take on complex roles that utilise their lived experience in professional frameworks. However, balancing this tension is a complex challenge and in practice, this broad question arose in relation to specific topics.

The first of these was the *kind of training* the group wants to provide to parent advocates. More than asking questions regarding the content of the training, the group discussed its nature and framework. In Wales, advocacy is regulated in statutory guidance[6] that requires advocates to undergo specific and accredited training in order to be permitted to work as advocates. The steering committee debated whether to strive for the implementation and provision of an accredited independent advocacy training qualification (not focused on parent advocacy) and discussed at what level of accreditation it should be.

The main concern was that conditioning being a parent advocate on undergoing accreditation training could create barriers that prevent parents from participating. For example, one of the parents mentioned that even attending the Level Two training could be difficult to manage with work. Importantly, in practice the training was very flexible and adapted to parents' needs. Others expressed concern that intensive studies that require writing assignments and/or undertaking a placement as part of the training would make it impossible for parents, who often struggle with multiple challenges and problematic employment conditions, to

participate. If becoming a parent advocate depends on parents meeting such qualifications, the training could easily become an exclusionary mechanism that tilts the balance towards professionalism and away from activism and the lived experience of parents. On the other hand, members of the group constantly pointed to the goal of providing parents with transferable credits to assist those of them whose goal is to develop careers as advocates. In addition, some of the participants argued that acquiring accredited training would add to parent advocates' credibility.

Another significant issue concerns the content required in the training. Level Two independent advocacy training is relatively narrow, and covers only basic concepts related to advocacy. Moreover, Level Four training does not address the context of child protection and does not refer to the peer element of parent advocacy. Clearly, there is a need for a unique and specific training programme. Thus, the team is currently developing a six-day induction training for the role of parent advocate. Fortunately, since parent peer advocacy has yet to be regulated in Wales, PAN has the opportunity to influence policy and practice by developing a specially tailored training program.

Current answer: The Level Two training and the development of a bespoke induction training reflects the group's decision to attempt to implement gradual training that would involve several phases, allowing parents to advance to more demanding training if doing so is feasible for them. However, the question of what level and type of training is required for a parent activist to become a parent advocate remains open.

This question leads to the second theme related to the construction of the parent advocate role, which is the *requirements for being a parent advocate* or, more specifically, whether there are thresholds that parents need to pass to become parent advocates. The most prominent

discussion in this context revolved around the timeframe during which a parent can become a parent advocate. In PAN's initial discussions and working plans, it was stated that a parent could be a parent advocate only if at least a year had passed since they were actively involved with child services.

After several discussions within the group, a more recent outline of PAN introduced a more flexible threshold for becoming an advocate: *The childcare situations for prospective candidates are settled—not conflicted/ongoing, preferably for a year or more.* Although this definition is less rigid than the previous one, it still raises several questions. What is a *settled situation?* Who can decide what a settled situation is? On the other hand, members also expressed concern that for some parents, engaging in advocacy too early may be detrimental. In this context, conducting application interviews (co-led by a parent and an ally from the steering committee) with new potential parent advocates to reflect together on the parent's situation, hopes, and current suitability for the role was suggested as a means of ascertaining whether they are ready to engage in advocacy.

Another question that arose from the data involved whether to involve parents who had criminal convictions. While some members voiced concern about this, the group's current answer to this issue is rather open: *Criminal convictions are to be appropriately/ proportionately explored, allowing for personal reflection, progress, understanding.*

As stated above, these are not procedural questions but rather essential ethical questions in which the group outlines its perception of parent advocacy on the continuum between an inclusive activist-oriented approach and an exclusionary, professional one. Of course, in practice this is not an either/or issue but rather a question of

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[6] Issued by the Welsh Ministers under Section 29 of the Regulation and Inspection of Social Care (Wales) Act 2016.

"finding the balance that will open possibilities to any parent that will wish to be part of this" (ally)

All members agreed that this is a very complicated and delicate task that requires flexibility and cannot be solved by applying rigid criteria.

I've got mixed emotions about it because I don't feel like you should say no to people, but they need to be in a certain place. Yeah, I think it's very complicated, I do think we need to have some sort of screening process. But it's really tricky. (parent)

Current answer: Interestingly, the answer given by the group to this question is that creating a unified and rigid criterion is impossible. By acknowledging the inability to set a criterion, the group pointed to the need for genuine dialogue with parents interested in becoming advocates.

The last issue that concerns the tension between parents as professionals and parents as activists is the matter of payment to parent activists in the present and future. In relation to the future, there is a collective consensus that the aim of the group is to develop a service in which parent activists are employed and paid. However, until such a service exists, there is a question regarding parents receiving payment or reimbursement for current activities. Whilst the allies are also involved voluntarily in PAN, their participation is related to their (stable) jobs and receives their superior's support. Parents, on the other hand, are required to take part in more meetings and are not acknowledged in any other context for their work with PAN.

Current answer: Parents are reimbursed for taking part in presentations and meetings that are not part of the group's regular activities.

What will the parent advocacy service look like?

Alongside the broad questions regarding the group's future, the data also contained a range of ideas and visions regarding the possible features of a future case-level advocacy service. Analysis of these visions revealed three main questions participants have about the nature of the service. The most basic question of these is *what the criteria for referral will be*. While it is clear that the service will serve families involved with children's services, ideas regarding referral criteria varied. Some of the members suggested that the service should include any parent who has any kind of contact with children's services. Hence, they suggested that social workers should be obliged to offer parents a referral to the peer advocacy service. Others, however, claimed that referral to the service should occur at other points in the involvement, e.g., when a strategy meeting is set, when a Section 47 is initiated, or when court proceedings begin. Broadly speaking, advocates of each of these entry points perceived them as the most crucial junctions in terms of the need for practical guidance and emotional support.

Still an open question

The second question regarding the future service is *what the mandate of advocates will be*. This question puts the nature of the relationship between advocates and the families with which they partner under the spotlight. The discussions around this question produced a range of views on a continuum from taking a supportive, somewhat narrow role that involves not activating or directing parents but rather

"be[ing] in their corner" (ally)

to a very active role that involves mediating the relationship with social services, being involved in court proceedings, voicing families' concerns in wider forums, and even providing parental guidance. Importantly, all participants agreed that whatever the boundaries of the role are, the
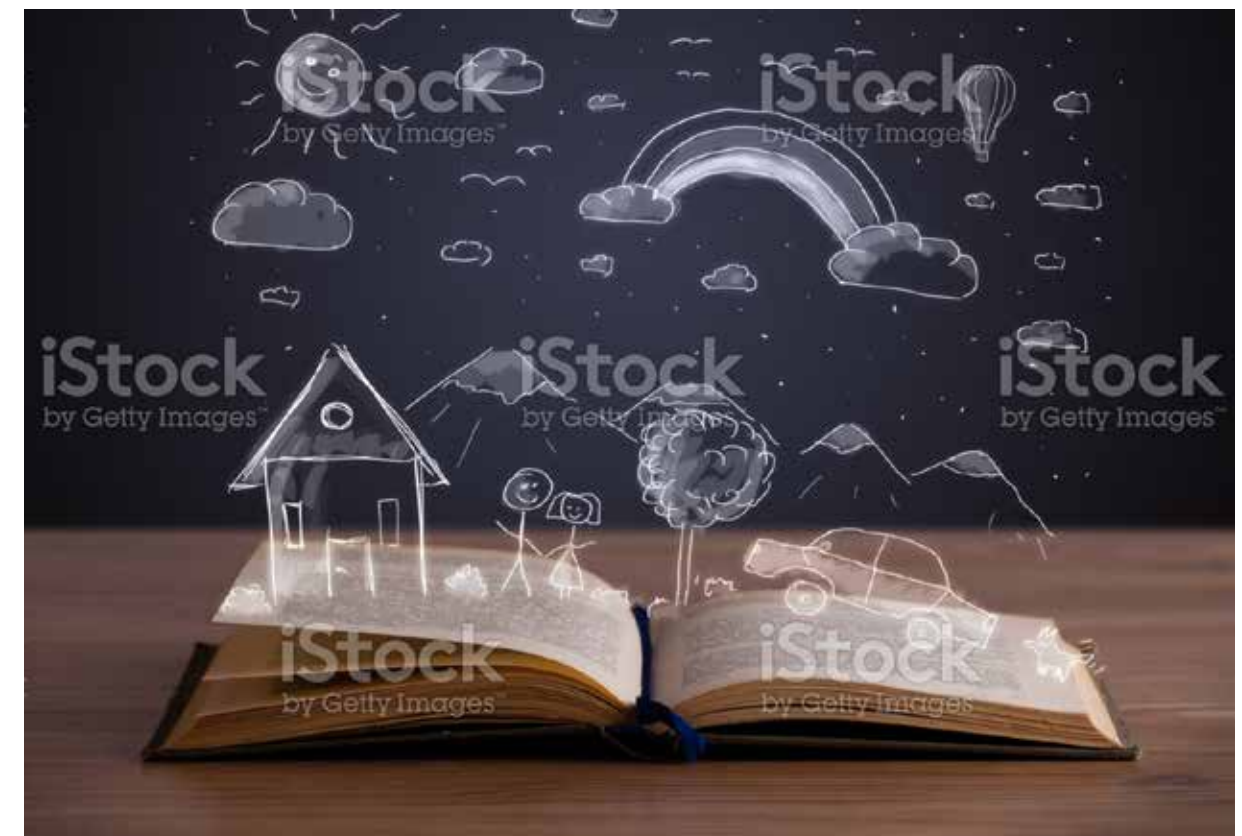
creation of close relationships with the families will be key.

Still an open question

The third question concerned *what parents will need to be advocates*. This question evoked one major response in all the interviews that was also frequently mentioned in observations. First, parent advocates will need support. By support, members meant a steady, reflective supervision framework as well as ongoing responsive assistance and backup, as one of the parents described:

It's a lot to put on one person. And I think that's why we need a body of support behind us. So, we could come and ask, "What do you think of this?" Or so I could say, "I can't manage this anymore". These kinds of things. Really, because it is a lot to put on one person, and even more for [some] of us that have traumatic experiences with the system. It can be triggering.

Members also pointed to the importance of training and providing parents with relevant knowledge (e.g., on safeguarding issues, rights, relational skills) and the necessity of protecting parents from burnout by keeping caseloads low.

Last, members highlighted the importance of giving parents the feeling that they have strong backup from the organisation. The issue of backup arose especially in relation to children's safeguarding issues and the fear of parent advocates being accused of not preventing or at least identifying risk of harm to children.

Current answer: The group agrees that future parent advocates will need: a. regular weekly supervision, b. low caseloads, c. ongoing training and development, and d. a direct route of communication with key figures in the LA.

Conclusion and plans

Nearly two years ago, PAN was an independent initiative with a very general vision, no active members, and no recognition from local government. Since then, it has evolved into a solid collective of committed parent activists and their allies that is supported by both NPT and Swansea social services and carries out a range of activities. All members of the group described their participation in PAN as a positive, exciting, and satisfying experience. Although group members expressed some frustration with the slow pace of the development, it nevertheless enabled a meaningful, bottom-up process that created the following building blocks:

- Developing a shared ethical commitment to reforming the child protection system
- Collaborating and involving a range of stakeholders in the community
- Bolstering parents' power, knowledge, and leadership
- Nurturing relationships within the group and with others.

Based on these principles, the group is establishing the foundation for both a parent advocacy service and a wider platform for the promotion of parent participation in the design and delivery of child protection policy and practice in Wales.

Importantly, the report focuses on the development process of PAN and does not aspire to assess outcomes, especially when the group has yet to deliver interventions, but rather to capture the challenges and opportunities facing the group during the development process. Whilst this line inquiry will continue, it is essential for the delivery of services, i.e., support groups and training, to be evaluated using quantitative and qualitative methods.

The writing of an evaluation report while the project is constantly changing is a challenging endeavour. Since I first presented the initial findings to the steering committee, many of the group's plans have changed and evolved

significantly. Some of these developments clearly corresponded with the inputs of the research and reflected a bidirectional process of reflection and action. Recently, this process has involved the development of a service model outline in which the group presents its vision for the near and distant future. The core component of this plan is its differential nature, which opens several routes through which parents can be active and involved. It includes three strands of development and action:

1. The development of a **parent advocacy service** in collaboration with a third-sector organisation. The aspiration is for parents to be directly employed in different capacities (full-time, part-time, and freelance) by the organisation.

2. The development of a **specially tailored training programme** to be delivered to parent advocates while they are already employed as parent advocates. Ideally, such training would involve a two-week introductory phase and continue with ongoing training at work and support over the course of a year. The steering committee asserts that the training program should be developed and delivered separately from the service itself in order to reflect the unique features of peer-to-peer advocacy.

3. Further development of PAN as a **regional and national hub for the promotion of parent advocacy and participation**. In line with the

aspiration to go beyond the development of a service, the group can potentially serve as an advisory board for the project as well as a leading force in parent involvement in social work education, knowledge development, and policy practice. Ultimately, the group hopes to influence the work of WGSB and take on a strategic role in stimulating and promoting a national parent advocacy network.

In sum, PAN is part of an international trend that aspires to develop innovative practices of meaningfully involving parents in promoting more humane and socially just child protection systems. Given the short time that has passed since the group's first steps, the current situation (e.g., a stable and committed co-led steering group, exposure to a multitude of stakeholders, parents who have received initial training) reflects significant and promising progress.
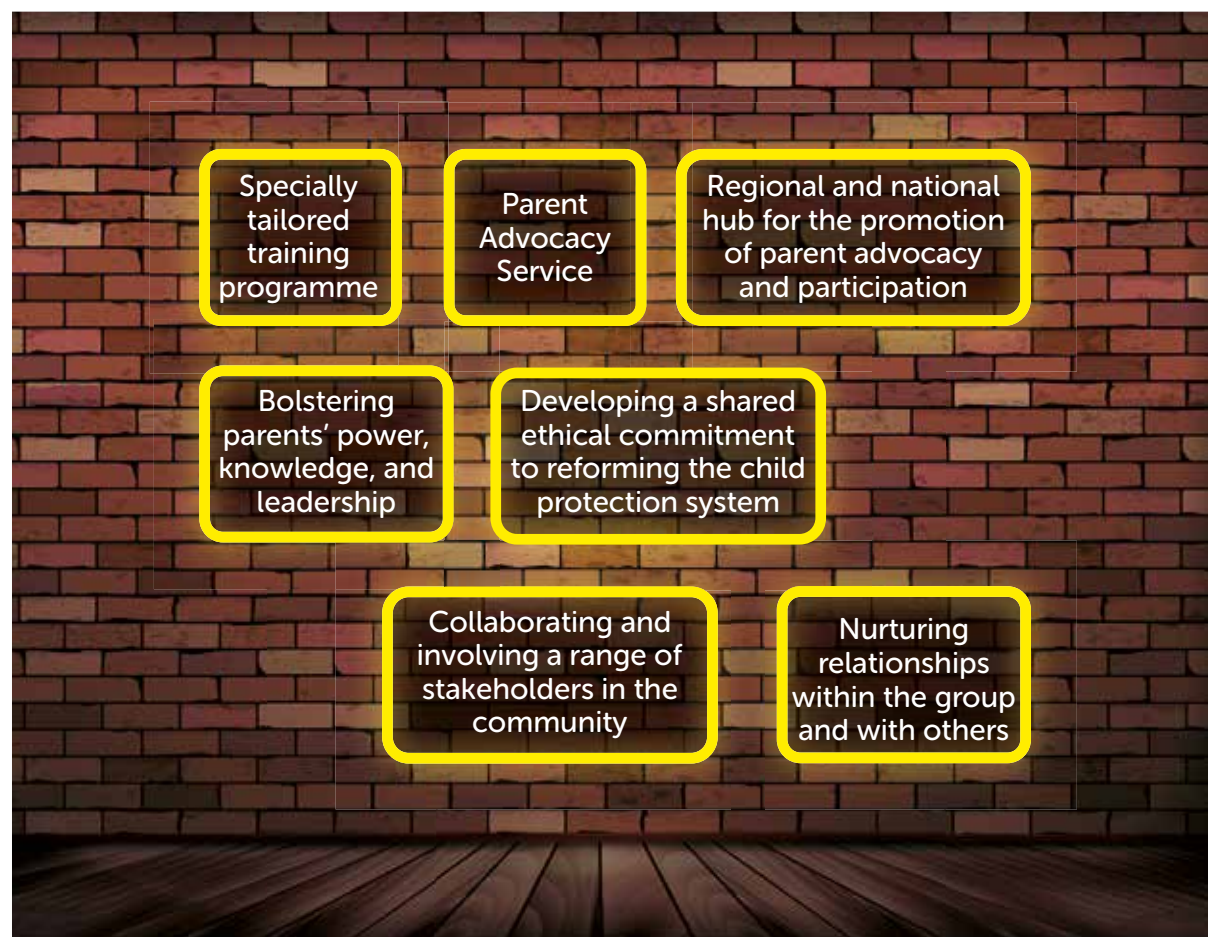
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WHEN

WILL THINGS CHANGE?