

## About Hear Me children's rights and advocacy service

"Hear Me" is the name given to this service, which is a confidential and independent support service for children and young people, in receipt of services from Herefordshire Council's Children's Services. Advocates support children and young person with a particular issue, difficulty or complaint. The service is opt-in, child-led and issue based.



The Children's Rights & Advocacy Service was originally a service run in partnership with Connexions from 2004-2012, it was then commissioned out to NYAS until the end of July 2018 when it was brought back in-house under the remit of the Information Compliance and Equality team in August 2018. It was then restructures in 2023 to provide a wider service to the children of Herefordshire.

In 2018, when the service originally came back in-house, the service provided advocacy to children and young people who have a specific issue with the local authority and need representation, or support to speak up, and who are:

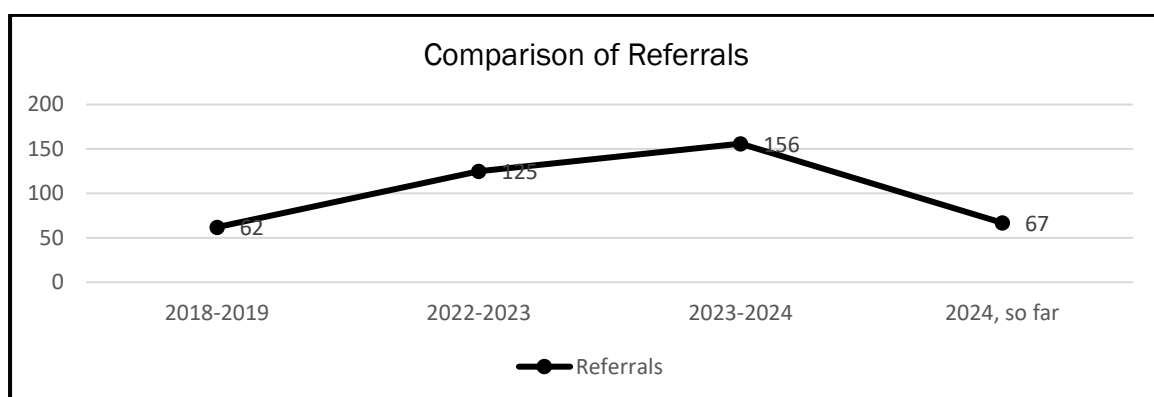
- a young person placed in foster care by Herefordshire Council
- a care leaver aged under 19 (or under 25 years if they have a learning disability)
- aged 10-19 years old (or under 25 years if they have a learning disability) - this is specifically for representation or support at a child protection conference

Since the restructure and further development of the service in early 2023, 'Hear Me' now provides advocacy support to;

- Any child in care
- Any unaccompanied asylum seeker child
- Homeless young people, aged 16-17
- Children and Young People on a child in need plan and need support making a complaint against the local authority. We can also support you at their first child in need meeting
- Any care leaver under 25 years of age
- Children and Young People on a child protection plan from age 5
- Any child or young person receiving support from the children's with disabilities team

In addition to the above, Hear Me has recently, and continues, to develop the service to include non-instructed advocacy, to ensure those children without a voice, have a voice.

The below chart shows the vast increase in referrals to the Hear Me service from 2021 – present day. We work closely with our colleagues in children's services to receive referrals for children and young people who meet the service criteria.



However, with the pressure of social work we, as a service, wanted to ensure the service was accessible to children and young people without the need for them to request the service through their social worker. This year we have successfully developed a website, with the help of the children and young people, and created a self-referral form allowing children to request advocacy support for themselves. In addition to this we have been working with schools in and around Herefordshire to ensure the schools know how to support the children, who meet the service criteria, by referring them into Hear Me.

The sole purpose of Hear Me is that whilst there are so many different adults whose views control and influence the lives of children and young people, their voice is not lost and is at the centre of any and all decision making. Hear Me work with children and young people to make sure their voice is heard and listened to, they work with them to empower them to find and share their voice, and understand their rights and entitlements. Our aim is that once we have worked with a child and young person for some time, they will no longer need our support and that eventually they feel comfortable and strong enough not to need us and to self-advocate.

Children's Rights and Advocacy Officers (CRAO) can help find information the child or young person might need, attend meetings, in a supportive role, write letters on their behalf, or speak for them in situations where they don't feel able to speak for themselves. We can also help make complaints against the local authority.

There is a bottomless demand for this service and despite resource restrictions the services works tirelessly to ensure the voices of children are heard by children's services. We have long term goals for this services which include, but are not limited to;

- Being an opt-out service
- Offering non-instructed advocacy to all children that require it by providing a full-time service
- To have an independent office / meeting space for young people
- To expand the team to include more diversity
- To offer a commission based service to other Local Authorities who have placed children in Herefordshire
- To have a children and young people board
- To have apprenticeships for our Care Leavers to train to become advocates
- Outreach work to be completed in schools/residential homes/GP surgeries/clinics/youth hubs etc to make the service more accessible
- Reduce response time from 5 working days to 48 hours for allocating and visiting a young person

A priority for the Hear Me service, is ensuring all children's voices are heard, and a large part of that is being able to provide a non-instructed advocacy service to allow children to be heard, considered and appreciated. In August 2023 it became concerningly apparent that there was a significant shortage of non-instructed advocates who can provide this vital part of any advocacy service, not just in Herefordshire. As such, one of our currently employed instructed advocates has recently qualified as a non-instructed advocate and has started working with children who may require non-instructed advocacy. In addition to this, the Hear Me service is learning BSL and are hoping to learn Makaton next, we are also supported by the Language Network to ensure those children's who's first language is not English feel they have been heard.

Below are direct quote from the past 6 months from some of the children and young people we have worked with and case studies from some of the children and young people;

"They are able to help with any issues such as contacting a social worker about problems you have with family time, we talk out any issues before a meeting and discuss what to do in the meeting like what we would like to say do and who we would like to be involved with the meeting and my feeling towards is etc..."

"Brilliant support and the opportunity to speak to the Chief Exec to resolve issues"

"Someone who can be my voice and help support me"

"She tells me what might happen and listens to me"

"That she keeps me safe"

"Really helpful"

“Listens to me and puts my points and worries across”

“It helps me get my words across”

“they can speak for me and advocate for me”

“it is just perfect”

“There is not any way that improvement should be involved.”

“I don't think you can change anything In the services”

“I now get listened to”

“I can say stuff to him and he will listen”

“It makes me happy”

“Them saying what I don't feel comfortable saying myself.”

“It helps me open up more”

“They listen to me when I say something”

Please note, the real names and physical features of the young people below have not been used.

### **Jimmy (aged 10)**



Jimmy was attending a specialist school for children and young people with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties. Jimmy had been attending the school for most of his primary years, however, felt that the environment wasn't right for him and didn't promote his education. Jimmy found it difficult to concentrate and found his peers disruptive to his learning.

With our support, Jimmy was able to express his views regarding a move to 'mainstream' education and, after visits and taster sessions, plans were put in place for Jimmy to move to a school of his choice.

### **Gemma (aged 19)**



Gemma (aged 19) was a care leaver with a baby of her own. Her baby was on a child protection plan despite Gemma and professionals feeling that she was looking after her child extremely well. Her baby was on the plan because of concerns about the child's father and because of false claims made about Gemma from people from her past.

With our support, Gemma was able to show to social services that the claims made about her were false and the concerns about her baby's father were misplaced. Gemma's baby was moved off a child protection plan and her baby continues to thrive.

### **Hannah (aged 12)**



Hannah (aged 12) was on a child protection plan due to concerns about her parents arguing. Hannah didn't understand what child protection meant and found it confusing. An advocate explained to Hannah what the process meant and who the various people will be attending her meetings were. She was supported to go, share her views, wishes and feelings and ask any questions that she had.

Hannah grew in confidence over the months and nearing the end she was able to speak for herself and play an active role in her meetings. She eventually came off the child protection plan because her parents worked with her social worker to reduce their concerns.

### **Thomas (aged 21)**



Thomas was a care leaver who felt he had been let down by social services during his time in care. Also when he became a care leaver, a significant event happened in his life where again he felt let down and unsupported by the care leaver service who were acting as his corporate parents.

Thomas was supported to make a complaint against the local authority which resulted in an apology from the service director.

### **Anthony (aged 18)**



Anthony asked for an advocate because he had had many social workers and felt he did not get the chance to get to know any of them. He wanted more support while a solicitor was involved in a court case for him. He particularly wanted information about the legal process, such as how long it might take, whether his family would be involved, who would help him at any meetings, and what might be a possible outcome.

The advocate was able to follow it through with him, passing on and explaining all correspondence, attending meetings with him, supporting him to get the answers to his questions and regularly keeping in contact.

### **Melissa (aged 9)**



Melissa was living with foster carers when she first asked for advocacy support. She was very shy and anxious when attending her six-monthly care reviews. The person in charge of the meetings, her independent reviewing officer (IRO) would ask her about her home life, her friends, school, her health and family time. Melissa found it very difficult to speak up and did not want to attend the meetings any more.

The advocate was able to help her by chatting with her before and after the meetings as well as attending with her and by being her voice and ears at the meetings.

Melissa has had the same advocate for four years, and with their support she attends and also enjoys her meetings. Now Melissa takes charge of her meetings and decides what she wants the people attending to talk about and what questions she wants answered. She is in regular contact with the advocate and asks for answers from her social worker whenever she has a query.