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Evaluation of the Parental Advocacy and Information Service

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Executive Summary

Overview

The Parental Advocacy and Information Service (PAIS) delivered by Barnardos was established in 2022 as a pilot initiative, to support parents navigating child care proceedings in Ireland. A professional advocacy service, grounded in the principles of empowerment, participation, and rights-based practice, PAIS aims to amplify parents' voices and ensure their perspectives are meaningfully considered in decision-making about their children's safety and wellbeing.

The project's genesis came about after a need for a parent advocacy support service was identified by Tusla. This was followed by a scoping review undertaken by the Children's Rights Alliance (CRA) in 2021. This review substantiated the needs of parents navigating care proceedings and recommended establishing independent parental advocacy pilot models. Tusla agreed to fund a pilot service and in June 2022, following a competitive tendering process, Barnardos was awarded the contract to deliver the pilot service. The service is fully funded by Tusla, the Child and Family Agency, but maintains operational independence through contract oversight delegated to the CRA via a multi-stakeholder Project Oversight Group.

The service became operational in October 2022, with key milestones including full staffing by January 2023 and an official launch in July 2023. The PAIS operates across three locations – Dublin North City, Waterford, and Wexford¹ – with a dedicated team including a Head of Service, Information and Advice Officer, Content Developer, Administrator, and four Advocates distributed across the pilot sites.

Service Delivery Model

PAIS delivers support through multiple channels to ensure accessibility and comprehensive coverage. The core service comprises face-to-face advocacy in all three pilot sites, where advocates provide one-to-one support, attend key meetings, liaise with professionals, and work to ensure parents' rights and wishes are represented. This is complemented by a national information and advice service which is available to all parents and relevant professionals and operates via helpline and email, providing guidance on navigating the care system and accessing supports.

¹ Two Tusla Areas: Dublin North City and Southeast

The service accepts referrals from diverse sources including parent self-referral, Tusla social workers, legal aid solicitors, probation officers, and various support services. Advocates support parents across multiple contexts including court appearances, child protection conferences, child in care reviews, and pre-birth assessments. Additionally, the PAIS has developed a range of multi-media information materials, workshops, and drop-in clinics to enhance accessibility and engagement.

Empirical Context

The service development was informed by international evidence suggesting that parents involved in child care proceedings often report feeling disempowered, judged, and excluded from decision-making processes that profoundly impacted their families. Research from the United States demonstrates that parental advocacy services may improve relationships between professionals and families, assist parents to find a meaningful voice in decision-making processes, and potentially contribute to better outcomes for children and families (Tobis, 2013).

Historically, Ireland's child protection system was characterised by institutional care, with industrial schools and Mother and Baby Homes playing a dominant role. However, this has moved towards a transparent, rights-based, participatory approach and recent policy and practice initiatives have increasingly focused on supporting parental engagement and involvement in child protection decision-making. This shift towards accessible, evidence-based support is exemplified by initiatives such as the Area-based Childhood Programme, the HSE Nurture Infant Health and Wellbeing Programme, and Tusla's Prevention, Partnership and Family Support, with greater emphasis on prevention, early intervention, and strengths-based family support to promote child and family protection and wellbeing.

Research Design and Method

A realist-informed, mixed-methods evaluation was conducted and aimed to understand how the PAIS works, for whom, in what circumstances, and why. The research drew upon multiple data sources collected between June 2022 and October 2024, including:

- **Service delivery statistics and reports:** Five Project Oversight Group reports spanning the service's first year of operation, service data from January to October 2024, and "Tracker" data from July to September 2024
- **Semi-structured interviews:** Twenty-eight semi-structured interviews were conducted across two streams. Fourteen interviews were conducted with parents to gather direct

service user experiences. A further fourteen interviews were conducted with professionals across the service network, comprising four Advocates, one Head of Service, one Information and Advice Officer, four Social Workers, three Guardian Ad Litems, and one Tusla Child in Care Reviewing Officer.

- **Surveys:** Three distinct surveys were developed targeting parents, social workers, and solicitors respectively. In total, 37 surveys were completed and analysed (Professionals N=25; Parents N=12).
- **Case studies:** Documentary analysis included examination of detailed case studies (N=7) provided by Barnardos, offering rich illustrations of advocacy support pathways and outcomes.

Findings

Service Delivery Statistics

The PAIS has demonstrated significant growth since its inception. Total referrals increased from 33 in February 2023 to 98 by December 2023. By December 2023, the service had worked with 107 parents, with active cases growing from 28 in February 2023 to 82 by June 2024, alongside 17 parents on waiting lists.

Between January and June 2024, the service conducted 1,226 sessions with parents (419 face-to-face and 807 online/phone), attended 19 child protection case conferences, participated in 100 child-in-care review meetings, and supported 195 court attendances. The Information and Advice service handled 374 enquiries through multiple channels, with telephone contact predominant (60.4%), followed by email (31.8%), drop-in visits (4.5%), and online consultations (3.2%)

Demographics and Intersectional Analysis

Demographic analysis revealed distinct patterns across the three pilot sites. Dublin North City accounted for the largest proportion of cases (36.6%), followed by Waterford (34.4%) and Wexford (28.0%). The age profile showed a strong concentration in early to mid-adulthood, with the largest group aged 31-40 years (31.2%), followed by 26-30 years (25.8%) and 41-50 years (24.7%).

Gender distribution showed a clear majority of female service users (79.6%) compared to male

users (20.4%). The ethnicity profile revealed White Irish (including White Irish/Muslim) as the predominant group (79.6%), with Irish Travellers forming the largest minority group (7.5%). Family composition analysis showed a striking predominance of lone parents (80.6%), with smaller proportions either co-parenting (11.8%) or married (7.5%).

Case Studies and Cross-Case Analysis

The seven detailed case studies provided rich insights into how the PAIS supports parents through complex child protection processes. Some examples of the supports provided and outcomes are outlined below:

- Case Study 1 demonstrated how an advocate supported a parent through pre-birth assessment and safety planning. The advocate provided consistent support, helping the parent to travel to access visitation with other children placed in care, as well as supporting the parent through multiple child protection case conferences and court hearings. The newborn baby remained in the care of the parent.
- Case Study 2 illustrated the advocates' role in supporting parents with significant care experience themselves, helping them request meetings with Tusla and develop a safety plan that prevented a care order. Through advocacy support, the parents demonstrated positive change. Reunification was achieved.
- Case Study 3 showed how advocacy support enabled a parent to effectively participate in a Child Protection Conference and develop a safety plan. The need for an Interim Care Order was avoided.

Cross-case analysis revealed four key themes in successful advocacy:

1. Emotional Support and Rebuilding Trust – advocates provided empathetic, non-judgemental support to help parents feel heard and validated
2. Advocacy and Participation – advocates helped parents access essential services and ensure their voices were heard by professionals
3. Navigating Complex Familial Dynamics – advocates supported parents to have their voices heard despite challenging family relationships
4. Tailored Approaches for Diverse Needs – advocates adapted their support to each parent's unique circumstances and capabilities

Parent and Professional Perspectives

Survey findings from parents (n=12) demonstrated overwhelmingly positive experiences and high satisfaction with the PAIS. All respondents rated their relationship with their advocate as “very good,” and between 90 – 100% of parents found advocacy supports to be “extremely helpful” or “very helpful” across multiple domains including providing support and guidance; explaining social work terminology; and facilitating communication with professionals.

Qualitative interviews with parents revealed five key themes: 1) Emotional Empowerment and Support; 2) Advocates Breaking Down Complex Information; 3) Changes to Relationships with Social Workers; 4) Enhancing Parents’ Knowledge of their Rights; and 5) Amplifying Parents’ Voice and Wishes. The qualitative findings from parents highlight how the PAIS supports and empowers parents involved in child care proceedings. In particular, parents emphasized the importance of emotional support and rights-based education provided by advocates and described consequent changes to their understanding and ability to engage in child care proceedings. For some parents, positive changes to relationships with social workers were also described. Overall, advocates were pivotal in amplifying parents’ voices and (re)building bridges between parents and child protection workers - Parents consistently described feeling more confident, informed, and able to participate meaningfully in decisions about their children’s safety and wellbeing.

Professional survey results (n=25) showed strong endorsement of the service, with respondents unanimously rating advocates as “extremely helpful” or “very helpful” in enabling parents’ meaningful participation in decision-making. The majority reported that advocacy had positively impacted their interactions with parents, facilitating better communication and more collaborative relationships. Overall, the survey findings suggest the PAIS is highly valued by child protection professionals and is seen as a crucial service in empowering parents, improving communication, and promoting better outcomes for vulnerable children and families.

Analysis of interviews with PAIS advocates revealed 6 main themes: 1) Advocate Background and Motivations; 2) Building Trust and Collaborative Relationships; 3) Impact on Parents; 4) Organisational Support and Relationships; 5) Advocate Challenges and Strategies; and 6) Recommendations for Improvement. Overall, the findings highlight how advocates, through a trauma-informed, collaborative approach, can catalyse a shift in parents’ ability to meaningfully participate in child care proceedings. Trust, transparency and empathy were emphasised as crucial ingredients in advocacy work and building positive, collaborative working relationships. The challenges of managing vicarious trauma and boundary negotiations also emerged as a key theme, highlighting the critical importance of robust supervision, self-care, and organisational

containment in facilitating sustainable advocacy practice. Addressing systemic barriers and resource constraints emerged as important for further development of the PAIS.

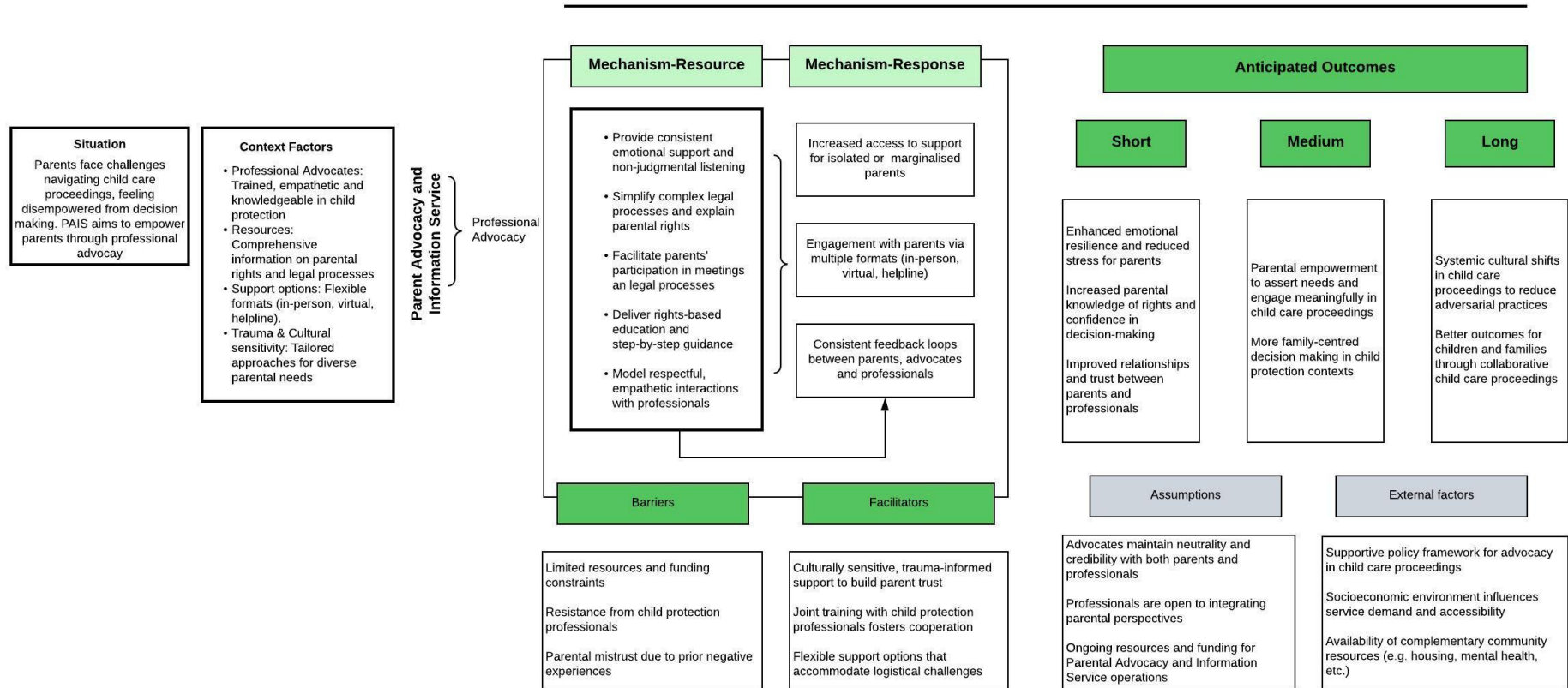
Findings from interviews with professionals are structured around six key themes: 1) Perceptions of the Advocacy Role; 2) Consideration of Parents' Voices; 3) Power Dynamics and Relationships; 4) Organisational and Contextual Factors; 5) Challenges and Collaborative Approaches; and 6) Perceptions of Advocacy Outcomes.

Professionals viewed the emotional support and guidance provided by advocates positively and perceived advocates as facilitating parents to participate more effectively in decision-making about their children. Concrete examples of improved parental engagement, more constructive working relationships, and enhanced child-centred planning were provided illustrating the transformative potential of advocacy. Additionally, the PAIS advocates' collaborative, solution-focused approach was identified as helping to foster greater inter-agency trust and openness. Organisational and contextual factors are key enablers and barriers to the impact of the PAIS service. Participants emphasized the need for adequate resourcing, geographical reach, and integration with wider service provision to meet the level of demand and provide a holistic support offer for families.

Logic Model

The evaluation developed a logic model capturing the core components and relationships within the PAIS. The model identifies key inputs (advocacy skills, organisational support), mechanisms (trust-building, knowledge transfer, practical support), and outcomes (enhanced parent participation, improved relationships). It emphasises how professional advocacy brings particular strengths through formal training, established credibility, and clear boundaries within the child protection system.

Parent Advocacy and Information Service - Logic Model



The Context-Mechanism-Outcome (CMO) configurations explore how the PAIS works across five themes: Relationship Building, Empowerment and Knowledge Transfer, System Navigation, Parent- Professional Interaction, and Operationalisation of Advocacy. Overall, the PAIS model reflects a comprehensive approach to addressing the complex needs of parents involved in child protection systems. By providing professional advocacy, emotional support, and practical guidance, PAIS empowers parents and fosters a more inclusive, collaborative approach to child protection decision-making. Through its short, medium, and long- term outcomes, the service seeks to reduce adversarial practices in child protection, improving outcomes for children and families by making the system more supportive and responsive to their needs.

Discussion and Recommendations

The evaluation demonstrates that PAIS is making a significant positive difference to parents navigating child care proceedings in Ireland. Through skilled, compassionate and trauma-informed advocacy, the service enhances parents' capacity to participate in decision-making, improves relationships between parents and professionals, and contributes to better outcomes for children and families.

Seven key recommendations emerged for strengthening, sustaining and scaling the service:

1. The evaluation demonstrates that the PAIS is making a significant positive difference to parents navigating child care proceedings. Current provisions should be sustained and extended nationally with adequate funding to ensure advocacy is accessible to all parents involved with child care proceedings.
2. The findings provide insight into parents' experiences, substantiating the need for parent advocacy support. Parents engaged in the service welcomed the support provided by advocates. A trauma-informed, collaborative approach was perceived as helping to support parents to meaningfully engage in child care proceedings. The operational independence and core principles should be maintained through the ongoing development of clear protocols and training.
3. Advocates were motivated, professional and effective in their role. Advocacy is a complex role with many challenges. To continue to provide high quality advocacy supports, the PAIS should sustain comprehensive training and support for advocates, recognising the challenging nature of their role.
4. The findings point to the need for advocacy services to be scaled up to ensure all parents in Ireland involved in child care proceedings have equitable access to advocacy supports. As the PAIS is rolled out to other areas, it is important to establish transparent referral pathways and eligibility criteria to ensure equitable access.
5. Positive, collaborative working relationships between advocates and other professions were important to ensuring success. Fostering further opportunities to enhance strategic collaboration while maintaining appropriate boundaries are essential to maximize the impact of the PAIS service.

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6. This evaluation identified resource constraints and barriers which can hinder the reach and impact of advocacy. Joined up thinking, interagency working and considered reflection on parent feedback are needed to further embed participatory approaches across the child protection system in Ireland. The findings from this evaluation – particularly the voices of parents – provide helpful insights that can be used to inform policy and practice development within child care proceedings in Ireland.
 7. There is limited research exploring parental advocacy in an Irish context. Ongoing evaluation and robust monitoring of the service is needed. Further research on impact and outcomes should explore the effectiveness and cost-effectiveness of advocacy supports for parents, children and professionals through longitudinal and comparative studies.

While challenges remain, including resource constraints and barriers to participation, the PAIS provides a promising model for promoting more participatory, rights-based approaches in child protection. By building on these foundations while addressing identified challenges, the service can continue evolving to meet families' complex needs and contribute to transformative change in child care proceedings.

Conclusion

This evaluation has demonstrated the positive impact of the PAIS in supporting parents involved in child care proceedings in Ireland. By providing skilled, compassionate, and rights-based advocacy, the PAIS is enhancing parents' capacity to participate in decision-making, improving their experiences and relationships with professionals, and contributing to better outcomes for children and families. The findings provide valuable insights into how parental advocacy works in practice, and the key ingredients and mechanisms that enable it to make a difference. The development of a logic model and exploration of realist questions offer a foundation for further theory-building and empirical investigation.

While the evaluation was limited by its scale and timeframe, it nonetheless offers compelling proof of concept of the PAIS model and its transformative potential. The voices of parents affirm the life-changing impact of feeling heard, understood, and supported during one of the most difficult and distressing experiences imaginable.

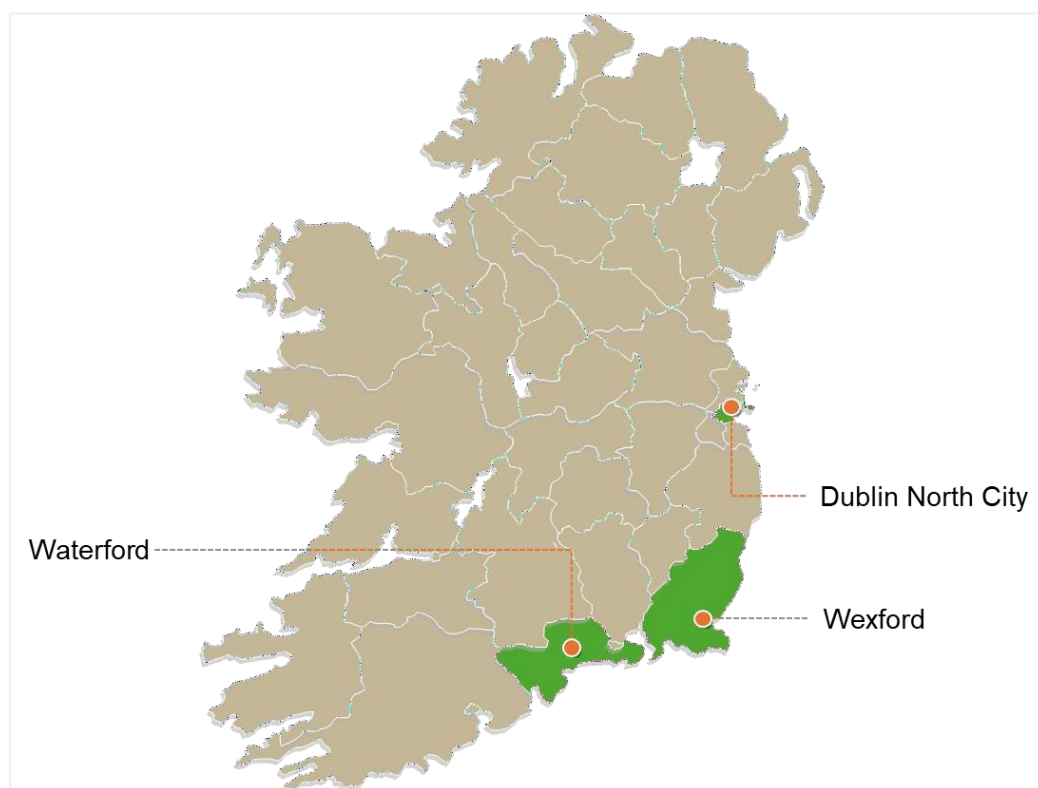
The evaluation also underscores the need for wider changes to the culture and practice of the child protection system to fully realise the benefits of parental advocacy. Shifting towards a participatory, and rights-based approach will require sustained commitment and partnership across policy, practice, and research domains.

Chapter 1: Introduction and Context

1.1 Background to the Parental Advocacy and Information Service delivered by Barnardos

The Parental Advocacy and Information Service (PAIS) delivered by Barnardos is an innovative five-year pilot programme launched in 2022, designed to support parents with professional advocacy, whose children are involved with child care proceeding in Ireland. The service operates across three locations: Dublin North City, Waterford, and Wexford (Figure 1)¹. This initiative was developed in response to research indicating that parents often find child care proceedings challenging, stigmatising, and at times oppressive (Children's Rights Alliance, 2021).

Figure 1. Map indicating location of the Parental Advocacy and Information Service (PAIS).



¹Two Tusla Areas: Dublin North City and Waterford/Wexford

Barnardos has been supporting vulnerable children in Ireland since the 1960s with a tripartite aim of: helping transform the lives of children, supporting parents, and challenging society where children are failed.

A pivotal moment came in 2021 when the then CEO of Tusla identified the need to develop parent advocacy supports. Subsequently, the Children's Rights Alliance (CRA) conducted a scoping review into the needs of parents with children in care. The report begins by establishing the existence of numerous PA services, namely EPIC (Empowering People in Care), The National Advocacy Service for People with Disabilities, Clare Care, Limerick Social Services Council, Three Drives, and Silverarch. It also engaged with parents and professionals to determine the needs of parents, barriers, or obstacles to accessing services, and the fundamentals of an effective PA service. The review substantiated the need for parent advocacy and highlighted significant gaps in support for parents, particularly around understanding their rights, navigating legal processes, and participating meaningfully in decisions about their children's care. This led to recommendations for establishing independent parental advocacy pilots.

Some of the key findings, consistent across both parents and professional included:

1. **Parents require:** a service which is empathetic and non-judgemental, as well as increased consistency and improved communication with social work teams.
2. **The key obstacles to support include:** a lack of specific support services, a lack of information or awareness regarding services, and practical concerns such as travelling long distances.
3. An effective PA service must be independent of Tusla, confidential and voluntary.

The report concludes with three distinct recommendations. Option B states: 'three areas selected around the country to establish independent pilot models' (Children's Rights Alliance, 2021).

PAIS services are intended to work alongside parents and families in order to identify emerging needs and address these according to a co-productive practice model. The parents who are supported by PA tend to be working with a number of statutory and voluntary agencies. The role of a PA service is to support these parents by helping their voices to be heard, facilitating increased involvement in decision making, and improving relationships between parents and social workers.

PA services emerge against a backdrop of research which suggests that parents find the child protection system to be difficult and at times stigmatising, authoritarian, and oppressive (Diaz

2020, Gibson 2017). Further research suggests that parents perceive child care social workers to be highly critical of them and find child protection processes to be disempowering and at times oppressive (Corby et al 1996, Cleaver et al 2007, Muench et al 2017, Gibson 2017, Diaz 2020).

The project is overseen by a Project Oversight Group (POG) and is funded through Tusla, the Child and Family Agency. A proposal for a pilot parent advocacy service was developed following a scoping review undertaken by the CRA in 2021, which identified the needs of parents with children in care and recommended the establishment of independent parental advocacy pilot models in selected areas around the country. Tusla agreed to fund this pilot and In June 2022, the CRA, on behalf of Tusla, invited organisations to tender for the delivery of a pilot National Support Service for Parents of Children in Care. Following a competitive tendering process, Barnardos was awarded the contract.

Key milestones in the service development include:

1. June 1st, 2022: Service level arrangement commenced.
2. June – September 2022: Recruitment and selection of staff team.
3. October 15th, 2022: Service became operational.
4. January 4th, 2023: Full staff team in place.
5. July 12th, 2023: Official launch of the service.

1.1.1 Core Objectives of the Service

The overarching aim of the Parental Advocacy and Information Service delivered by Barnardos is to empower and enable parents to meaningfully participate in child care proceedings in an informed and supported manner. The specific objectives of the service include:

1. Providing independent advocacy to assist parents in navigating the complexities of the child protection system.
2. Amplifying parents' voices and ensuring their perspectives are heard in decision-making processes that impact their families.
3. Promoting parents' rights and fostering their meaningful engagement with relevant services.
4. Enhancing communication and collaboration between parents and professionals involved in their cases.

-
5. Contributing to improved outcomes for children in care by providing support to their parents.

1.1.2 Resource and Funding

The Parental Advocacy and Information Service delivered by Barnardos is fully funded by Tusla under a service level agreement. However, to ensure the service's operational independence, contract oversight has been delegated to the Children's Rights Alliance (CRA). A multi-stakeholder Project Oversight Group (POG) has been established under the aegis of the CRA, to provide governance and guidance and reports to the board of the CRA. This governance structure, through the POG, aims to maintain transparency, accountability and mitigate potential conflicts of interest.

1.1.3 Service Delivery

The PAIS aims to provide comprehensive support to parents, ensuring they have a meaningful voice in decision-making processes concerning their children. The service model is multifaceted, encompassing:

1. Face-to-face advocacy in the pilot sites:
 - a) Delivered in the pilot sites by dedicated parent advocates.
 - b) Advocates provide one-to-one support to parents, attend key meetings (e.g. child protection case conferences, court), liaise with professionals and services, and work to ensure parents' rights and wishes are represented.
2. National information and advice service via helpline and email
 - a) Operated by a dedicated information and advice officer.
 - b) Provides guidance to parents on navigating the care system, accessing legal and practical supports, and self-advocacy strategies.
3. Development of informational materials and resources
4. Consultation with parents and key stakeholders
5. Collaboration with various organisations in the child welfare and protection sector

The service is staffed by a full team, including:

1. Head of Service
2. Information and Advice Officer (P/T)
3. Content Developer (P/T)

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4. An Administrator
 5. Two Advocates in Dublin North City
 6. One Advocate in Waterford
 7. One Advocate in Wexford

This structure ensures dedicated support across all pilot sites, with each role contributing to the overall effectiveness of the service. Advocates support parents in various capacities, including attending court appearances, participating in child protection case conferences; joining child in care review meetings; facilitating tri-party meetings with social workers; providing pre- and post-court support; assisting with communication between parents and Tusla and supporting parents involved in pre-birth assessments and planning.

The service has developed several channels for information dissemination:

- A helpline operational Monday to Friday, 10 am to 1 pm
- Email support
- Information leaflets and posters
- A website (launched in 2023)
- Workshops, webinars and drop-in clinics on topics such as parental rights

The PAIS actively engages with a wide range of stakeholders, including Tusla social workers, legal aid solicitors, family support services, addiction services, domestic violence support organisations, prisons and various community groups. This collaborative approach ensures a holistic support system for parents, recognising the complex web of services and agencies that parents often need to navigate.

Parent consultation is a key aspect of the service. Parents have been involved in various aspects of service development, including the creation of a video showcasing their experiences for the service launch and participating in semi-structured interviews for the development of a Communication Charter for Birth Parents.

1.1.4. Referral Criteria and Pathways

Referrals to the service are accepted from a wide range of sources, including:

1. Parent self-referral.
2. Tusla social workers and family support services.
3. Legal aid solicitors.
4. Probation officers.
5. Psychologists and mental health services.
6. Domestic violence and homeless services.
7. Drug and alcohol support services.

Key parental advocacy needs emerging from referrals include

1. Strengthening communication with Tusla.
2. Access to updates on their child.
3. Support regarding family contact and access arrangements.
4. Understanding care planning and reunification processes.
5. Assistance in understanding and engaging with court proceedings.
6. Help accessing legal representation and aid.

From its inception to September 2023, the PAIS has seen significant growth and impact. Total referrals increased from 33 in February 2023 to 98 by December 2023. By December 2023, the service had worked with 107 parents with active cases growing from 28 in February 2023 to 82 by June 2024, with an additional 17 parents on waiting lists.

In the period from January to June 2024 alone, the service conducted 1,226 sessions with parents (419 face-to-face and 807 online/phone), attended 19 child protection case conferences, participated in 100 child- in-care review meetings, and were present at 195 court attendances.

The service has also began developing a series of lunchtime webinars, with the first series agreed with the legal aid board. Plans are in place for similar series with Tusla, the Guardian Ad Litem service, and the Judiciary.

As the service has grown, it has faced several challenges, including managing increasing caseloads (exceeding the recommended 15 cases per advocate), addressing waiting lists in all three sites, balancing the need for face-to-face advocacy with information and advice services, and responding to information needs in areas outside the initial catchment areas.

Looking to the future, the PAIS continues to evolve, with plans for further development of online resources, expansion of the information and advice service, ongoing consultation with parents and stakeholders, and potential scaling up of the service nationally (dependent on funding).

This data demonstrates both the growing demand for the service and the extensive range of support activities provided to parents. The service has consistently exceeded its key performance indicators for parent sessions, professional contacts, and court attendance.

a. Empirical Context

Parents involved with child protection services often report feeling disempowered, judged and excluded from decision-making processes that profoundly impact their families (Tobis, 2013; Smithson and Gibson, 2017). In this context, parental advocacy has emerged as an important mechanism to amplify parents' voices and promote more participatory, rights-based approaches in child welfare (Tobis et al., 2020).

In Ireland, recent policy and practice initiatives have increasingly focused on supporting parental engagement and involvement in child welfare and protection decision making and processes (DCYA, 2018). The aim is to create a more integrated and coordinated system of services, that is responsive to the evolving needs of families. This shift towards accessible, evidence-based supports across the life course is exemplified by programmes such as the Area-based Childhood (Hickey et al., 2018), the HSE Nurture Infant Health and Wellbeing Programme (Gardner et al., 2019) and Tusla's Prevention, Partnership and Family Support Programme (Tusla, 2019). Central to these efforts is a greater emphasis on prevention, early intervention and strengths- based family support to promote child and family wellbeing (Hickey and Leckey, 2021).

This literature review aims to define parental advocacy, trace its theoretical and historical development, review evidence of impacts, and identify key ethical and implementation considerations to guide future practice and research.

i. Defining Parental Advocacy

Parental advocacy refers to the provision of support, advice and representation to help parents navigate the child protection system and ensure their perspectives are heard in decision-making. Tobis, Bilson and Katugampala (2020, p.20) define advocacy as principally peer-based: "*A form of peer advocacy where parents who themselves have had experience of the child protection system*

help other parents involved to navigate it. In addition, they also help to develop strategies to change the system". Three forms are identified:

1. *Case advocacy* to increase parents' participation in decisions about their own family's involvement with services;
2. *Programme advocacy* involves parent advocates working within agencies to assist families by facilitating access to services, offering practical support, and enhancing parent engagement in child protection decisions;
3. *Policy advocacy* encompassing parents' involvement in advisory roles, research, grassroots organising and political action to reform child protection policies and practices.

While peer advocacy remains central in parental advocacy models, other forms of advocacy also play a crucial role, such as professional and hybrid models (Powell et al., 2024). These models involve trained professionals or advocates with specialised skills and knowledge of the child protection system, which can enhance parents' engagement and navigation of services (Powell et al., 2024). In the Parental Advocacy and Information Service (PAIS), for example, advocates provide a professional approach designed to bridge the gap between parents and child protection professionals. By offering both practical guidance and trauma-informed and empathetic support, the PAIS works to empower parents while maintaining constructive relationships with the professionals involved in child care proceedings. At its core, parental advocacy aims to mitigate power imbalances that may disadvantage parents and limit their meaningful engagement with support services (Berrick et al., 2011). By providing guidance, bridging communication and advocating for parental rights and wishes, advocates create conditions for parents to be heard and treated as partners rather than subjects of state intervention. The overarching goal is to ensure that children are safe and protected and that their wellbeing is nurtured.

ii. Theoretical Underpinnings

Parental advocacy is grounded in several interrelated theoretical frameworks that together provide a rationale for its value in humanising child protection (Saar-Heiman et al., 2024). Empowerment theory and strengths-based approaches emphasize building parents' sense of personal agency, skills and resilience to take charge of their involvement with services (Berrick et al., 2011; Cohen and Canan, 2006). Advocacy aims to combat the disempowerment parents often experience in the face of child protection bureaucracies by supporting them to understand their rights, communicate effectively and influence decisions.

Critical theories, including anti-oppressive practice, radical social work and anti-racism, highlight the way child protection policies disproportionately surveill and separate poor families and ethnic minority families (Bilson, 2019; Featherstone et al., 2018). Advocacy grounded in critical frameworks asserts parents' expertise from lived experience should drive system change to redress inequities (Saar-Heiman et al., 2024).

Mutual aid and social network theories emphasise the relational aspects of advocacy in combating stigma, reducing isolation and building solidarity between parents (Cameron, 2002; Lalayants et al., 2015). Connecting parents with peers who have successfully navigated the system offers hope, practical guidance and a collective voice. While applied differently across models, these theories share a commitment to elevating parents as agents of their own lives and as catalysts for creating more just caring and effective child protection responses. Valuing parents' knowledge, needs and potential is central to advocacy's transformative aims.

iii. Historical Development

Parental advocacy in child welfare and protection first emerged in the United States in the 1990s, as part of broader shifts towards family-centred, community-based reforms to reduce skyrocketing foster care populations and improve outcomes (Tobis, 2013).

Pioneering initiatives such as the Annie E. Casey Foundation's Family to Family Programme and the Child Welfare Organising Project (CWOP) in New York City trained parents with prior child protection involvement to mentor families, participate in agency decision-making and mobilise for policy change (Tobis, 2013). CWOP was instrumental in building a "countervailing power" of parents and allies who successfully campaigned for increased preventive services, reductions in out-of-home care and improved legal representation over more than two decades of sustained activism (Tobis, 2013).

The early 2000s witnessed a rapid expansion of parent advocacy programmes across the United States. Key developments included the National Coalition for Parent Advocacy in Child Protective Services (NCPACS), which brought together parents and practitioners committed to advancing meaningful parent involvement, and the California Evidence-Based Clearinghouse rating parent partner programmes, as a promising practice based on early research (Frame et al., 2010). By 2020, Tobis et al. identified more than 100 parent advocacy programmes across a range of countries.

Notable international examples include: the Family Inclusion Networks in Australia, which integrate parent participation across all levels of child welfare operations (Ainsworth and Berger, 2014), and Parents Advocacy and Rights (PAR) in Scotland, which offers parent-led peer support, advocacy and campaigning (Tobis et al., 2020).

Despite growing prominence, the development of parental advocacy remains limited. Initiatives are often small-scale, precariously funded and concentrated in jurisdictions with histories of progressive family engagement policies (Capacity Building Center for States, 2016). Nonetheless, the increasing global interest reflects a paradigm shift towards collaborative, power-sharing approaches between child welfare and protection systems and the parents they serve.

The evolution of child protection and family support services in Ireland reflects a gradual shift from institutional responses toward more family-centred, rights-based approaches. Historically, Ireland's child welfare and protection system was characterised by institutional care, with industrial schools and Mother and Baby Homes playing a dominant role until the latter part of the 20th century (Harlowe et al., 2019). The revelations of historical institutional abuse and the subsequent investigations and reports (including the Ryan Report, 2009, and the Commission of Investigation into Mother and Baby Homes, 2021) have profoundly influenced contemporary child protection policy and practice, creating an imperative for more transparent, rights-based approaches that actively involve families.

The modern statutory framework (see Table 1) for child protection began with the Child Care Act 1991, which placed children's welfare as paramount and emphasised family support (Buckley et al., 1997). This was followed by the Children First Guidelines (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2011), which established national guidance for identifying and responding to child protection and welfare concerns. A significant milestone was the establishment of Tusla, the Child and Family Agency, in 2014 as Ireland's first dedicated state agency with responsibility for supporting and promoting the development, welfare and protection of children, and the effective functioning of families (Harlowe et al., 2019). The work of Tusla is grounded on the principal that where possible children are best brought up in their own families and only as a last resort Tusla recommends a child coming into alternative care

Table 1. Milestones in Irish Child Protection System Reform.



1991	Child Care Act	Modern statutory framework begins, placing children's welfare as paramount and emphasising family support.
1992	UN Convention Ratification	Ireland ratifies the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, committing to children's rights on a global scale.
2009	Ryan Report	Report highlighting the abuse in Irish institutional care, leading to reforms in child protection policies.
2011	Children First Guidelines	National guidance is established for identifying and responding to child protection concerns.
2012	Constitutional Amendment	Article 42A on children's rights emphasises the state's duty to support families and prioritise children's welfare.
2013	PPFS and ABC Programmes	Launch of the Prevention, Partnership, and Family Support Programme and Area-Based Childhood Programme.
2014	Tusla Established	Ireland's first dedicated Child and Family Agency is created,

		centralising services for child welfare and protection.
2021	Tusla identify need and CRA Scoping Review	Need for parent advocacy identified by Tusla. The CRA scoping review conducted which substantiates the need for parental advocacy services within the child protection system.
2022	PAIS Launched	Barnardos establishes a pilot parental advocacy service in child protection, supporting parents in care proceedings.

The rights of parents within child care proceedings have received growing attention, particularly following Ireland's ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1992). The constitutional amendment on children's rights in 2012 (Article 42A), while primarily focused on children's rights, also emphasised the state's duty to support families and only intervene when necessary. Recent policy frameworks, including 'Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures' (DCYA, 2014), First Five - the whole-of-Government strategy for babies, young children and their families (DCEDIY, 2019) and Young Ireland (DCEDIY, 2024), emphasise the importance of supporting parents and promoting their participation in decisions affecting their children (Children's Rights Alliance, 2017).

Research indicates that parents often feel marginalised and disempowered within child care proceedings in Ireland. The Listening to Our Voices study (HSE, 2010) found that many parents felt powerless and excluded from the child protection process, with this lack of involvement linked to poor outcomes for both children and parents. Parents reported feeling stressed and uninformed regarding procedures and decisions being made regarding their children (Roe and O'Brien, 2019).

The development of advocacy services in Ireland has evolved across different sectors, laying important groundwork for parental advocacy in child care proceedings. Initially emerging in healthcare and disability services, advocacy has gradually expanded into various domains including mental health, social care, and children's rights. In the child welfare and protection sector, children's advocacy has been a particular focus. The Guardian ad Litem service, formalised under the Child Care Act 1991, providing independent representation for children in care proceedings (Buckley et al., 1997).

Parents involved in child care proceedings often report feeling disempowered within District Court childcare proceedings, despite Ireland's Constitution providing strong protection for parental and family rights (O'Mahony et al., 2016). The evolution of child protection court proceedings in Ireland reflects a gradual shift toward attempting to achieve more participatory processes, though significant challenges remain in achieving this in practice.

Historically, social workers themselves report that child care proceedings have been experienced as highly adversarial, with social workers feeling "on trial" and that their professional expertise is given less weight than other experts (Burns et al., 2018). As one social worker described it: *"It almost feels like you're on trial, that's the experience I've had ... you'd have barristers asking you a question and then asking in a different way in the hope that you'll probably trip yourself up"* (Burns et al., 2018, p.115).

The Child Law Project's analysis shows several concerning trends over the past three years regarding parents' ability to meaningfully participate in proceedings. Of particular concern is that 29% of parents involved in childcare proceedings have some form of disability, predominantly mental health difficulties or cognitive disabilities. Despite this, only a quarter of these parents had access to an advocate to help them understand and participate in proceedings (Child Law Project, 2024). This suggests a significant gap between the theoretical protections afforded to parents and their practical ability to engage effectively with the process.

The first significant steps toward parental advocacy emerged through community-based family support services. The Family Resource Centre Programme, with over 120 centres nationwide, played a crucial role in providing informal advocacy and support to parents. The introduction of Meitheal, a national model for working with children and families, exemplified Ireland's commitment to collaborative, strengths-based practice (Gillen et al., 2013). Meitheal allows for

multi-agency collaboration to identify and address the needs of children and families in an early, non-stigmatising manner.

The recent development of advocacy services marks an important shift. Where advocates have been present in proceedings, participants were "overwhelmingly positive about the impact they have on parental participation" (Child Law Project, 2024, p.317). Advocates help explain proceedings, facilitate communication, and enable parents to better understand and engage with the process. However, access remains limited and inconsistent across jurisdictions.

iv. Documented Impacts

A growing evidence base suggests parental advocacy may positively impact parental engagement with key child protection agencies, decision-making processes and outcomes at both individual and system levels. Nonetheless, more rigorous research is still needed to definitively establish effectiveness.

Case-level advocacy has been associated with increased parental participation in case planning, improved understanding of and compliance with court orders, and more frequent visitation (Lalayants, 2013; Chambers et al., 2019). Parents receiving advocacy report feeling more informed, empowered and respected in their dealings with the child protection system (Bossard et al., 2014; Summers et al., 2012).

Several quasi-experimental studies indicate case advocacy may reduce entries into care, increase reunification rates and speed time to permanency (Berrick et al., 2011; Chambers et al., 2019; Enano et al., 2017; Gerber et al., 2019). For example, Gerber et al.'s (2019) study of interdisciplinary parent representation in New York found children spent on average 118 days less in foster care when their parents had access to advocacy. However, more longitudinal research is needed to confirm association with child and family outcomes.

At a programme level, parent advocates can help bridge strained relationships between parents and practitioners, model constructive communication and amplify parents' voices in agency operations (Leake et al., 2012; Lalayants, 2021). Qualitative studies suggest embedding parent advocates can promote more empathetic, collaborative organisational cultures (Berrick et al., 2011; Lalayants et al., 2015).

Policy advocacy has contributed to significant reforms in the United States, including increased investment in family preservation, reductions in out-of-home placements and enhanced legal protections for parents (Tobis, 2013). Parents' mobilisation was instrumental in securing the 2018 Family First Prevention Services Act, the largest reorientation of federal child welfare and protection funding towards prevention in decades (Tobis, 2020). Nonetheless, research on the processes and impacts of parent-led activism remains limited.

The emerging evidence for parental advocacy is promising but not conclusive. Further comparative research is needed to isolate the effects of advocacy from other reforms, specify which models are most effective for which groups, and determine longer-term influences on child and family wellbeing. Economic analyses could also help strengthen the case for investing in advocacy as a cost-effective improvement strategy.

v. Implementation Considerations

The inherent power dynamics of child protection ensure advocacy is not without challenges or risks that must be carefully navigated. Balancing parental rights, with child safety is a fundamental ethical tension (Collings et al., 2018). Parental advocates must remain child-centred and avoid any collusion that could compromise children's safety and wellbeing. Clear protocols for reporting safety concerns, close supervision and routine case reviews are critical (Tobis et al., 2020).

Maintaining parent confidentiality while still sharing essential information with the service system, is another delicate process, requiring clear policies and consent procedures (Burke et al., 2022). Building parents' trust, that their story will not be “used against them” is foundational to authentic engagement.

Power imbalances within the advocacy relationship itself must also be interrogated (Tobis et al., 2020). Advocates should be attuned to how differences in social identities and perceived expertise may lead to parents feeling disempowered. Reflexive practice, cultural humility and prioritising parents' self-determination are vital.

Sustainably funding and scaling parental advocacy remains a key challenge (Capacity Building Center for States, 2016). Short-term grants, insufficient staff positions and piecemeal implementation, limit the reach and consistency of advocacy supports. Securing dedicated streams of government and/ or philanthropic investment, is crucial to stability and growth.

Organisational climates, ranging from resistant to enthusiastically integrating parent advocates, may significantly impact their influence (Leake et al., 2012). Strong leadership commitment and re-allocation of power to ensure advocates have a meaningful voice in agency decisions, and joint training to build trust and role clarity, are all essential (Frame et al., 2006; Bohannon et al., 2016).

Supporting advocates themselves is also critical. Many peer parental advocates in particular have experienced trauma, poverty and oppression that can be retriggered by the nature of the work (Lalayants, 2021). Comprehensive training, reflective supervision and spaces for mutual aid are necessary to promote advocates' wellbeing and professional development (Corwin, 2012). Fairly compensating advocates for their expertise and creating opportunities for career advancement are also important workforce equity considerations (Diaz et al 2023).

Finally, parental advocacy's commitment to empowerment can sit uneasily within the inherently coercive context of child protection (Dumbrill, 2006). Even with an advocate, parents may still fear reprisals for dissenting and feel pressure to comply with agency directives. Initiatives must guard against inadvertently legitimising a family regulation system in need of transformation (Fineman, 2021). Keeping parents' liberation from oppressive surveillance, economic strain and family separation as the ultimate horizon is imperative.

vi. Conclusion

Parental advocacy represents an important innovation to reshape child protection around parents' lived expertise, rights and agency. By countervailing the dominant power of the state to intervene in families' lives, advocacy can promote more transparent, accountable and socially just practices. The reviewed literature suggests advocacy holds promise to improve parents' experiences, engagement and outcomes, while also planting seeds for deeper systemic change.

However, parental advocacy is not a panacea. Its potential is constrained by the enduring structural inequities and the paternalistic instincts of child protection agencies. Further research is needed to strengthen the evidence base for specific models and implementation supports to maximise advocacy's benefits while mitigating unintended consequences.

Fundamentally, parental advocacy is a powerful values statement about the dignity and wisdom of parents contending with extraordinary hardships. In a system predicated on "saving" children from purportedly deficient caregivers, advocacy insists that parents are in fact the foundation for

children's safety and wellbeing. As Tobis (2013, p.163) argues, "To improve the system, parents - children's strongest advocates - must have a powerful voice in shaping the policies and practices under which their families will live."

Chapter 2: Method/ Methodology

A realist-informed mixed methods approach was adopted for this evaluation of the PAIS delivered by Barnardos. The research design incorporates parallel collection of both quantitative data (administrative service data, performance indicators and evaluation framework metrics) and qualitative data (in-depth interviews with parents and professionals, observation of key meetings, survey data). These parallel strands will be followed by an integrative analysis process to develop comprehensive theories about what works, for whom, and under what circumstances. Each element of the research methodology is detailed below:

2.1 Aims and research questions

The research is guided by several key research questions:

1. What are the key ingredients of the PAIS service delivered by Barnardos in Ireland? How can they be described using a logic model?
2. In what ways and under which circumstances do the PAIS services support parents to play a more meaningful role in decision making when there are child protection concerns?
3. How does the PAIS services impact the experiences of parents and professionals?

2.1.1 Key Objectives

1. To understand how the PAIS operates and the interventions they provide:
 - a) Explore the availability, accessibility, and actual support provided
 - b) Develop a logic model describing key service elements
2. To explore if the PAIS assists parents to participate meaningfully in child care proceedings:
 - a) Understand how the PAIS helps parents engage in decision-making
 - b) Examine whether parents feel empowered during child care proceedings
3. To gather parents' and professionals' views and experiences of the interventions provided by the PAIS:
 - a) Conduct in-depth interviews with approximately 35 stakeholders across sites

b) Implement ongoing evaluation surveys to assess perceptions

4. To determine how the PAIS impacts child protection and legal systems:

a) Examine systemic impacts

2.2 Research Design and Methodology

This study employs a realist-informed mixed methods approach to evaluate the PAIS delivered by Barnardos. Realist evaluation seeks to understand not just whether interventions work, but how they work in different contexts and through what mechanisms they produce their effects (Pawson and Tilley, 1997). This approach enables the development of theories about the ways interventions are influenced by context, which in turn influence outcomes.

The research process is iterative in nature, with data collection and analysis occurring simultaneously. This allows tentative findings to guide and shape subsequent data collection, enabling the development of theories based on: Underlying causal mechanisms, patterns of outcomes associated with these mechanisms, ways context influences the relationship between mechanisms and outcomes

The mixed methods design comprised both quantitative and qualitative data collection across three distinct phases:

Phase 1: Desk-Based Research (2 months)

1. Literature review on parental advocacy and decision-making in child protection
2. Development of monitoring and evaluation framework.
3. Relationship building with key stakeholders across three sites.
4. Design of data collection tools (e.g., interview schedules, surveys).
5. Applying for ethical approval.

Phase 2: Data Production (9 months)

1. In-depth interviews with parents and professionals.
2. Dissemination of evaluation framework to capture ongoing feedback.

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3. Collection and analysis of administrative data from Barnardos.
 4. Concurrent analysis to inform ongoing data collection.

Phase 3: Analysis and Theory Development (2 months)

1. Final analysis integrating all data sources
2. Development of theoretical model emphasising contexts, mechanisms and outcomes
3. Mapping of care journeys to illustrate support pathways and outcomes
4. Production of findings and recommendations

This realist-informed approach allows exploration of the circumstances in which the PAIS effectively support parents and the means by which this support is provided and received. Additionally, the early evidence of service impact across different contexts.

2.3 Data Sources and Collection

This evaluation drew upon multiple data sources collected between June 2022 and October 2024 to build a comprehensive understanding of the PAIS. The research team reviewed five Project Oversight Group (POG) reports spanning the service's first year of operation. Additional service data from January to October 2024 and "Tracker" data from July to September 2024 provided comprehensive information concerning referral patterns, service delivery, and outcomes.

A total of 28 semi-structured interviews were conducted across two streams. Fourteen interviews were conducted with parents, by a Barnardos researcher, to gather direct service user experiences. A further fourteen interviews were conducted by Cardiff University researchers, via Teams, with professionals across the service network, comprising four Advocates, one Project Manager, one Information Officer, four Social Workers, three Guardian Ad Litems, and one child care review conference chairperson. These interviews explored operational perspectives, implementation challenges, and perceived impact of the advocacy service.

Three distinct surveys were developed using Microsoft Forms platform, targeting parents, social workers, and solicitors respectively. These were distributed via the Head of Service to relevant stakeholders across the service network (Professionals n=25; Parents n=12; total n=37). To

ensure accessibility and maximise participation, PDF versions were made available to parents where requested, with responses subsequently entered into the online system.

Documentary analysis included examination of detailed case studies (n=7) provided by Barnardos, offering rich illustrations of advocacy support pathways and outcomes. These case studies complemented the broader service data and POG reports by providing in-depth examples of how the service operates in practice.

2.3.1 Data Analysis

The analysis adopted a realist-informed approach, focusing on understanding the contexts, mechanisms, and outcomes across different data sources. Quantitative analysis of service data metrics, survey responses, and activity tracking data employed descriptive statistical techniques including frequency distributions, cross-analysis examining relationships between variables such as age and gender, and trend analysis across reporting periods.

Qualitative data from interviews and case studies was analysed thematically using NVivo software. This process involved initial coding of transcripts, development of a thematic framework, and identification of key themes and patterns. These themes were then cross-referenced across data sources and integrated with quantitative findings to build theoretical understanding of how the service operates in different contexts. The qualitative analysis draws upon the existing literature on parental advocacy, which highlights the vital role of advocates in bridging power imbalances between parents and child protection professionals (Tobis et al., 2020, Diaz et al 2023), providing emotional and practical support (Lalayants, 2013), and promoting parents' rights and engagement (Featherstone et al., 2011).

The realist-informed approach enabled examination of how different contexts influenced service delivery and outcomes, with mechanisms of change identified through integration of quantitative and qualitative evidence. This integrated analysis helped illuminate not simply whether the advocacy service was effective, but how and why it worked in different circumstances.

2.4 Ethical Considerations

Given the sensitive nature of child protection involvement and the potential vulnerability of participating parents, careful attention has been paid to ethical considerations throughout the research design. The research project was granted ethical approval by Cardiff School of Social Sciences ethics committee and Tusla.

2.4.1 Informed Consent

All participants received detailed information sheets explaining the study's purpose, methods, and intended uses of research data in clear, accessible language. Informed consent was obtained prior to any data collection. The voluntary nature of participation was emphasised, with participants informed of their right to withdraw at any time prior to data analysis without giving a reason.

2.4.2 Managing Potential Distress

A minor risk of psychological distress when discussing sensitive child protection issues was considered. Several steps were taken to minimise this:

1. Participants were able to pause or stop interviews at any time.
2. Researchers signposted local support services that participants may be referred to if required.
3. Interviews focused specifically on Parental Advocacy experiences rather than wider child protection experiences.

2.4.3 Data Protection and Confidentiality

Robust measures were implemented to protect participant data:

- All personal data was anonymised at the earliest opportunity.
- Digital data was stored on the university's secure server.
- Only the primary research team have access to the raw data.

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- Any data shared with third parties (e.g., transcription services) was subject to confidentiality agreements.
 - Anonymised data is retained for 7 years, in line with University guidance.

2.4.4 Safeguarding

Clear protocols were developed, should any safeguarding concerns arise during the research. If participants disclosed experiences of harm, unknown to practitioners, or if negligent practices were identified, these would have been reported through appropriate channels to relevant authorities in line with safeguarding procedures. In relation to this study no safeguarding concerns were raised during interviews or other forms of data collection.

2.4.5 Research Integrity

The research team adhered to Cardiff University's Research Integrity and Governance Code of Practice. Regular review of ethical issues was undertaken.

2.5 Evaluation Framework for the PAIS

This section presents the Evaluation Framework for the PAIS. Developed at the inception of evaluation, this framework is designed to aid the ongoing monitoring and evaluation of the service, ensuring its alignment with the research questions and objectives outlined in the study proposal.

2.5.1 Objectives of the Evaluation Framework

The objectives of the PAIS Evaluation Framework are directly linked to the key research questions and objectives of the study:

1. To understand the key components and interventions of the PAIS delivered by Barnardos:
 - a) Assess the availability, accessibility, and types of support provided by PAIS.
 - b) Develop a logic model that describes the key elements and expected outcomes of the service.

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2. To examine how and under what circumstances the PAIS support parents' meaningful participation in child care proceedings: a) Explore the ways in which the PAIS helps parents engage in decision-making processes. b) Assess whether parents feel empowered during child care proceedings with the support of the PAIS.
 3. To gather and analyse the experiences and perceptions of parents and professionals involved with the PAIS: a) Conduct in-depth interviews with a diverse range of stakeholders across the pilot sites. b) Implement regular surveys to capture ongoing feedback and assess the perceived impact of the service.
 4. To evaluate the impact of the PAIS on the child protection and legal systems: a) Examine any systemic changes or influences attributable to the introduction of the PAIS.

2.5.2 Key Performance Indicators (KPIs)

The KPIs are designed to measure progress towards the research objectives and answer the key questions:

1. Service Delivery:
 - a) Availability and accessibility of the PAIS across the pilot sites.
 - b) Types and frequency of support interventions provided by the PAIS advocates.
2. Parental Empowerment:
 - a) Changes in parents' ability to engage meaningfully in child protection decision-making processes.
 - b) Parents' perceptions of empowerment and confidence during child protection meetings.
3. Stakeholder Experiences:
 - a) Qualitative feedback from parents and professionals on their experiences with the PAIS.
 - b) Satisfaction levels and perceived benefits of the PAIS among service users and stakeholders.

4. System Impact:

- a) Observed changes in child protection and legal system practices and outcomes related to the PAIS.

2.5.3 Data Collection Methods

The Evaluation Framework employs a mixed methods approach to gather comprehensive data for assessing the performance and impact of the PAIS:

1. Service Data:

- a) PAIS service records on the number of parents supported, types of interventions provided, and advocate activities.
- b) Case study data for documentation analysis.
- c) Documentation of the development and refinement of the PAIS logic model.

2. Interviews:

- a) In-depth interviews with stakeholders, including parents, PAIS advocates, social workers, and legal professionals.
- b) Interviews will explore experiences, perceptions, and observations related to the PAIS and its impact on parental empowerment and system change.

3. Surveys:

- a) Regular surveys administered to parents and professionals to gather feedback on PAIS services and perceived outcomes.
- b) Surveys will assess satisfaction levels, perceived benefits, and suggestions for improvement.

4. System Data:

- a) Analysis of child protection and legal system data to identify any trends or changes in practices, outcomes, or rates of children entering care in areas with PAIS.

2.5.4 Data Analysis and Reporting

The data collected through the Evaluation Framework will be analysed using a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods:

1. Qualitative data from interviews and open-ended survey responses will be thematically analysed to identify patterns, experiences, and perceptions related to the PAIS and its impact.
2. Quantitative data from service records, surveys, and system indicators will be analysed using descriptive and inferential statistics to measure progress towards KPIs and assess the significance of any observed changes.

Findings from the data analysis will be synthesised and reported regularly to provide ongoing insights into the performance and impact of the PAIS. Reports will include:

1. Assessment of progress towards the research objectives and answers to the key questions.
2. Identification of strengths, challenges, and recommendations for enhancing the PAIS services.
3. Discussion of the implications of the findings for policy, practice, and future research.

2.5.5 Integration with Realist-informed Evaluation Approach

The Evaluation Framework is designed to support the realist-informed approach adopted for the PAIS study. The data collected through the framework will contribute to the iterative development and testing of programme theories, helping to identify the contexts, mechanisms, and outcomes (CMOs) that explain how and why the PAIS works in different circumstances.

The framework's emphasis on gathering diverse perspectives and experiences aligns with the realist evaluation's focus on understanding the complex interplay between context, mechanisms, and outcomes. The integration of qualitative and quantitative data will enable a nuanced understanding of the factors that influence the effectiveness of the PAIS in empowering parents and driving system change.

2.5.6 Conclusion

The PAIS Evaluation Framework provides a comprehensive approach to assessing the implementation, outcomes, and impact of the Parental Advocacy and Information Service. By aligning the framework's objectives and indicators with the key research questions and objectives of the study, it ensures that the evaluation will generate relevant and meaningful insights into the effectiveness of PAIS in supporting parents and influencing the child protection system.

The framework's mixed-methods approach, incorporating service data, interviews, surveys, and system indicators, will enable a holistic understanding of PAIS's performance and impact. The integration of the framework with the realist evaluation approach will further strengthen the depth and explanatory power of the findings, helping to identify the key contextual factors and mechanisms that shape the success of PAIS.

Ultimately, the insights generated through the application of this Evaluation Framework will inform the future development, refinement, and scaling up of parental advocacy services in Ireland, contributing to the evidence base on effective strategies and improving outcomes for children and families involved in child care proceedings.

Chapter 3: Quantitative analysis of the Parental Advocacy and Information Service

3.1 Introduction

This chapter presents a quantitative analysis of the PAIS, drawing upon data from three primary sources²: (i) the "Service Data" covering the period from January to October 2024; (ii) "Tracker" data (activities and referrals) provided by the organisation (Barnardos, Ireland) offering a snapshot for July to September 2024; (iii) and a series of five Project Oversight Group (POG) reports spanning the service's first year of operation (June 2022 to September 2023). By analysing these data sources, this chapter aims to provide a detailed and accurate picture of the service's reach, the characteristics of parents served, key service activities, and emerging trends.

3.2 Characteristics of Parents Served

The demographic characteristics of parents served by the PAIS are drawn from the "Service Data", which provides information on 93 parents engaged with the service from January to October 2024. This includes details on the ethnicity, gender, and age distribution of the parents, as well as insights into their family composition and background.

3.2.1 Service Overview and Demographics

According to the "Service Data" (January 24 to October 2024) the PAIS worked with 93 cases (parents) across three main locations. The distribution showed Dublin North City accounting for the largest proportion (n=34, 36.6%), followed closely by Waterford (n=32, 34.4%) and Wexford (n=26, 28.0%), with one additional case (1.1%) managed through the Information and Advice component of the service (see Figures 2 and 3).

² Data sources were provided by Barnardos, Ireland.

Figure. 2 Heatmap indicating Service Concentration for Parent Advocacy Service

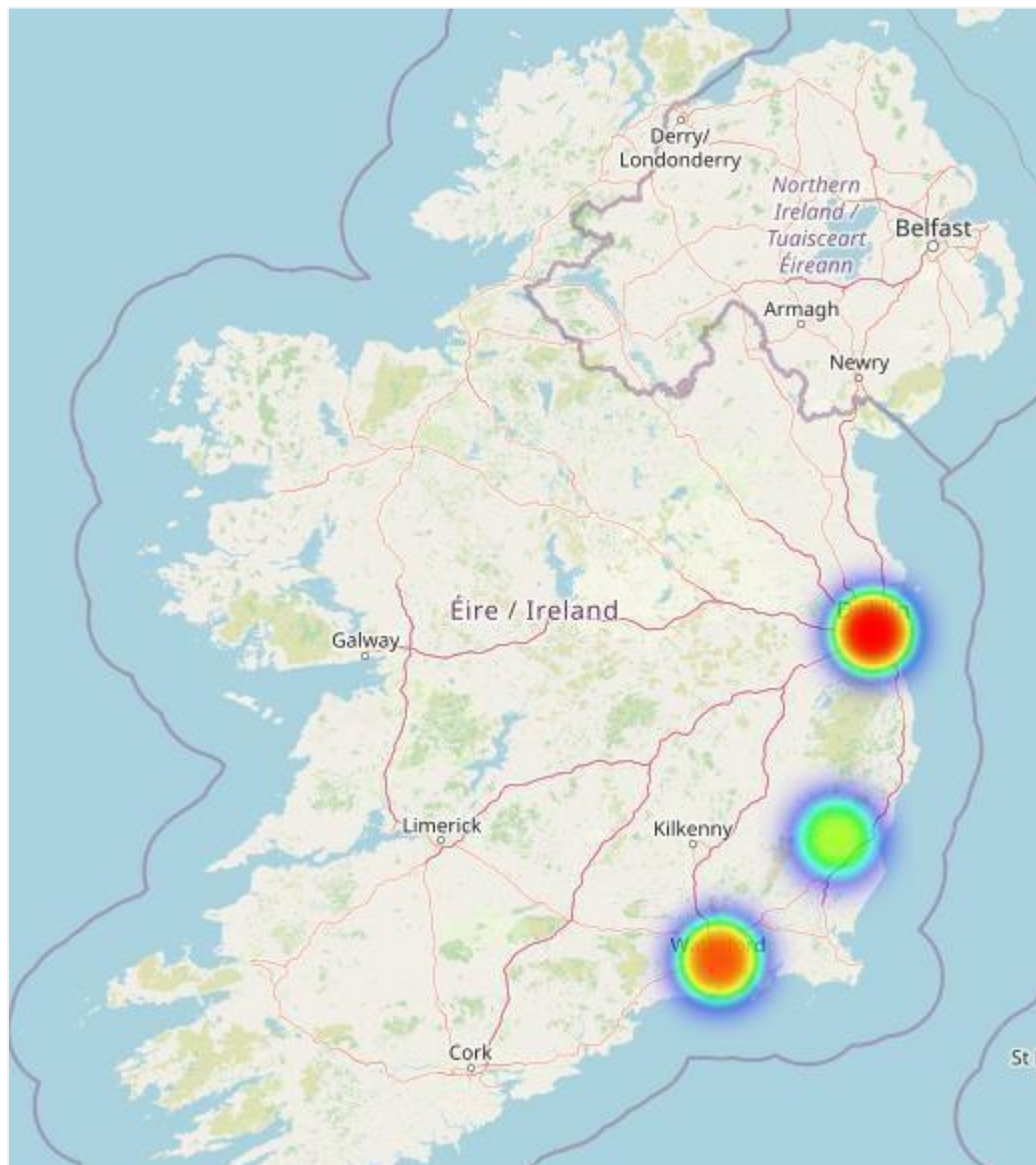
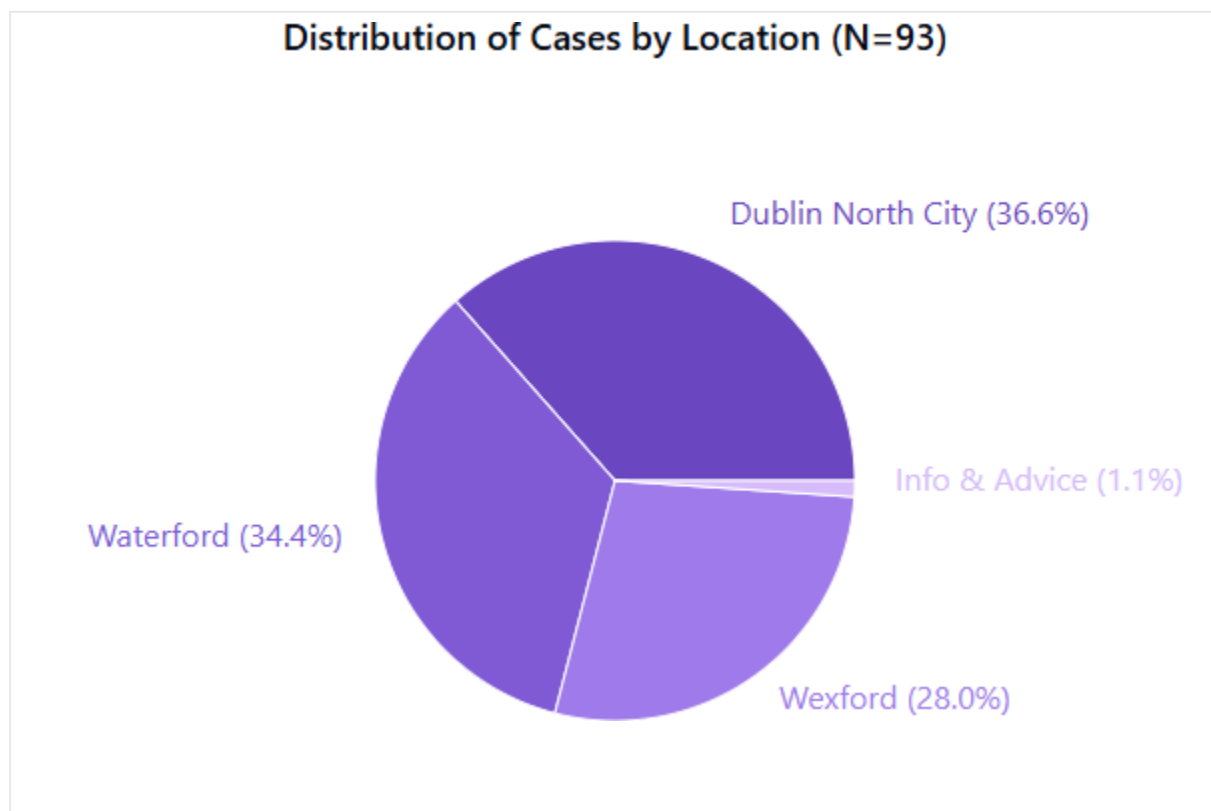
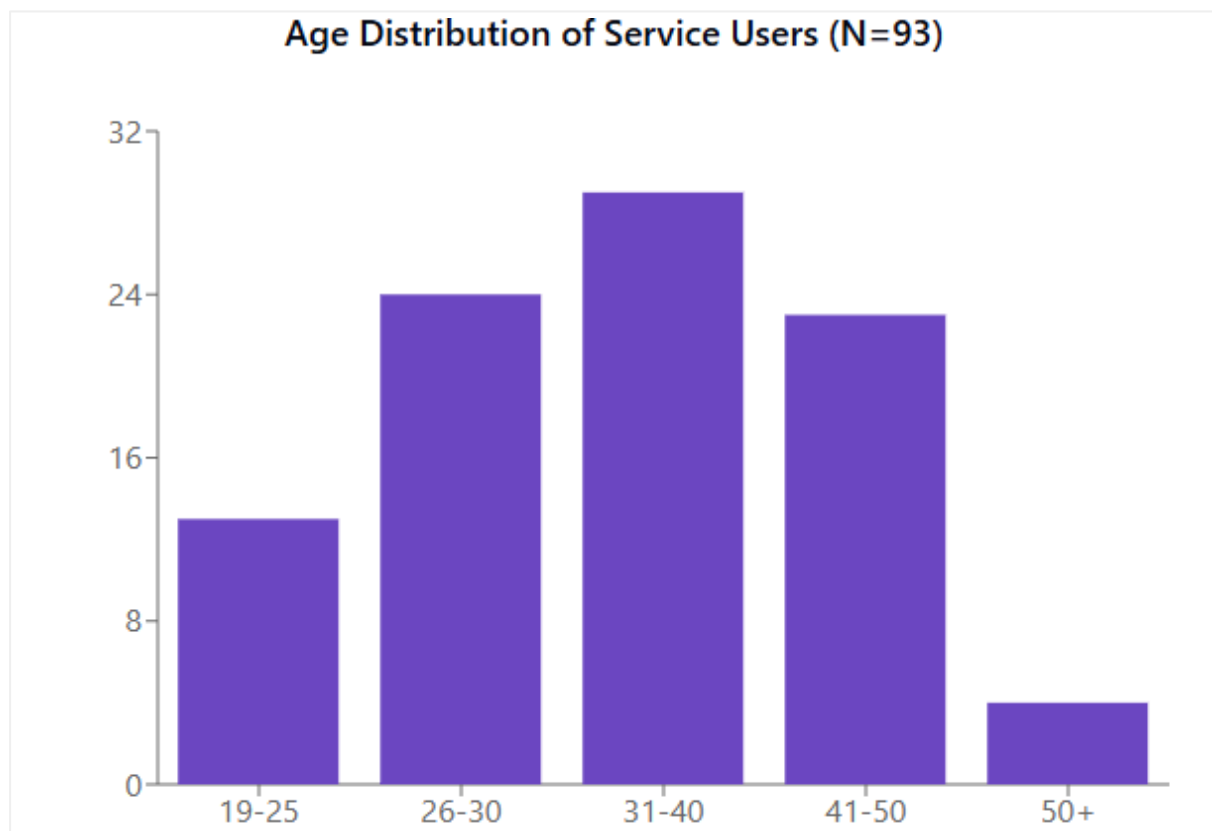


Figure. 3 Pie Chart Showing Distribution of Cases by Location (N=93)



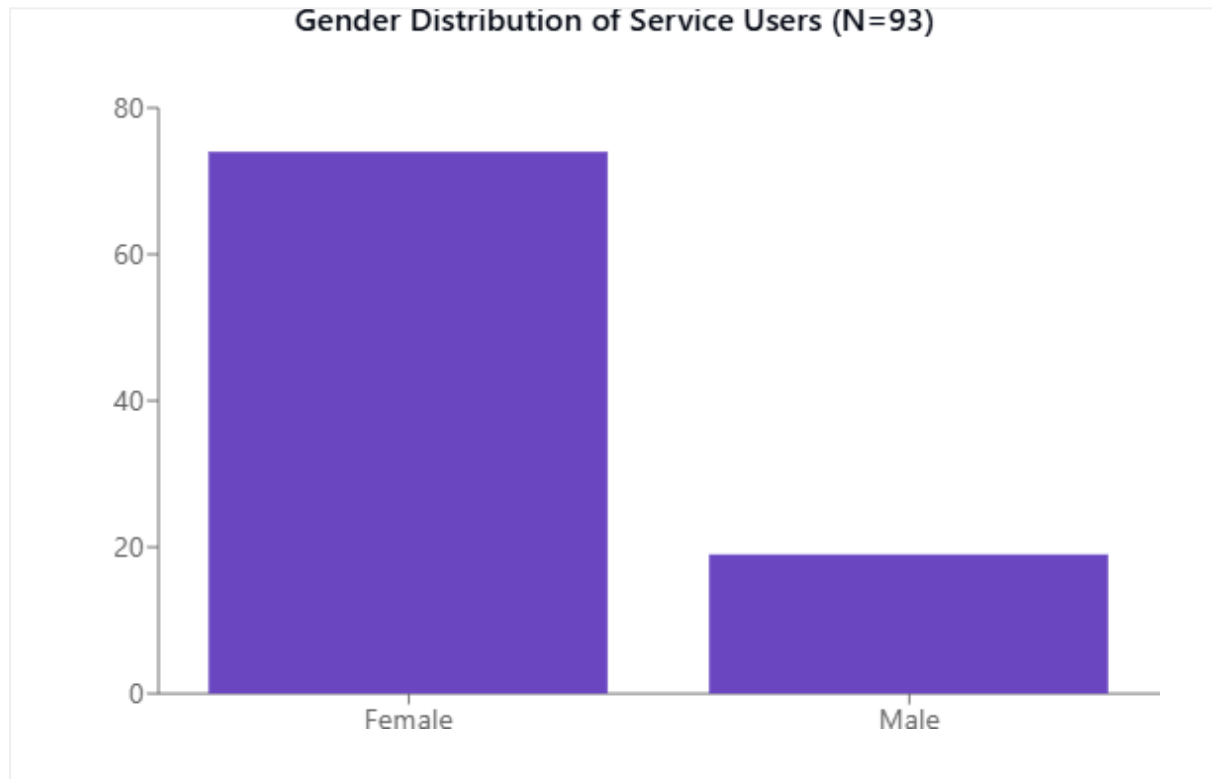
The service user age profile showed a strong concentration in early to mid-adulthood. The largest group aged 31-40 years (n=29, 31.2%), followed by those aged 26-30 years (n=24, 25.8%) and 41-50 years (n=23, 24.7%). Young adults aged 19-25 represented 14% (n=13) of service users, while those over 50 comprised just 4.3% (n=4). When grouped, core working age adults (26-40 years) accounted for 57% of all cases, with the combined under-30 group representing 39.8%. Looking at the age range distribution by location reveals distinct patterns. Dublin North City showed a concentration of younger service users with 10 of the area's 37 cases in the 19-25 age range, while also maintaining significant numbers in the 31-40 range (n=11). In contrast, Waterford's age distribution peaked in both the 26-30 (n=11) and 41-50 (n=12) ranges, suggesting a different demographic profile. Wexford showed a notable concentration in the 31-40 age range (n=11) with lower representation in other age groups (see Figure 4).

Figure. 4 Bar Chart Showing Age Distribution of Service Users (N=93)



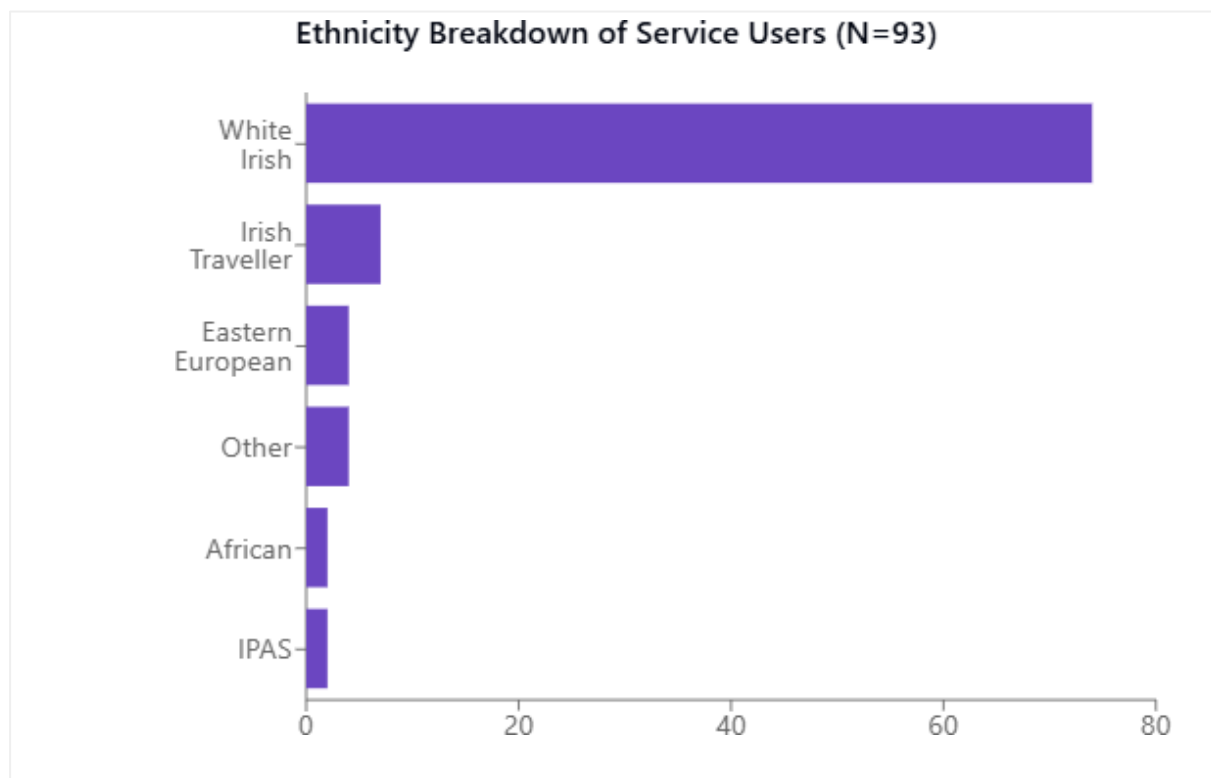
Gender distribution showed a clear majority of female service users (n=74, 79.6%) compared to male service users (n=19, 20.4%). This pattern was consistent across all age groups and locations (see Figure 5).

Figure. 5 Bar Chart Showing Gender Distribution of Service Users (N=93)



The ethnicity profile revealed White Irish (including White Irish/Muslim) as the predominant group (n=74, 79.6%). Irish Travellers formed the largest minority group (n=7, 7.5%), followed by Eastern European backgrounds (n=4, 4.3%). The remaining cases represented diverse ethnicities including African (n=2, 2.2%), and individual cases (1.1% each) of Afghan, Chinese, Welsh, Albanian, English and Slovakian backgrounds. Two parent cases (2.2%) were identified as International Protection Accommodation Services (IPAS) cases (see Figure 6).

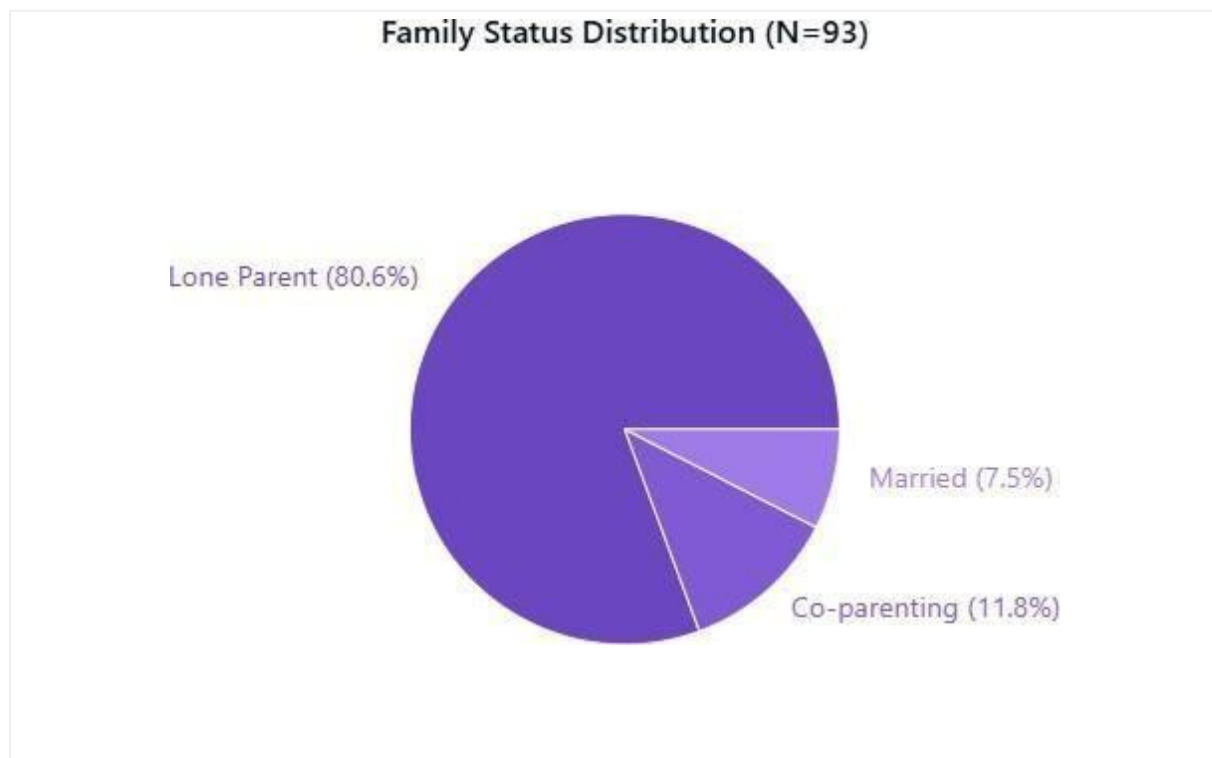
Figure. 6 Ethnicity Breakdown of Service Users (N=93)



3.2.2 Family Characteristics

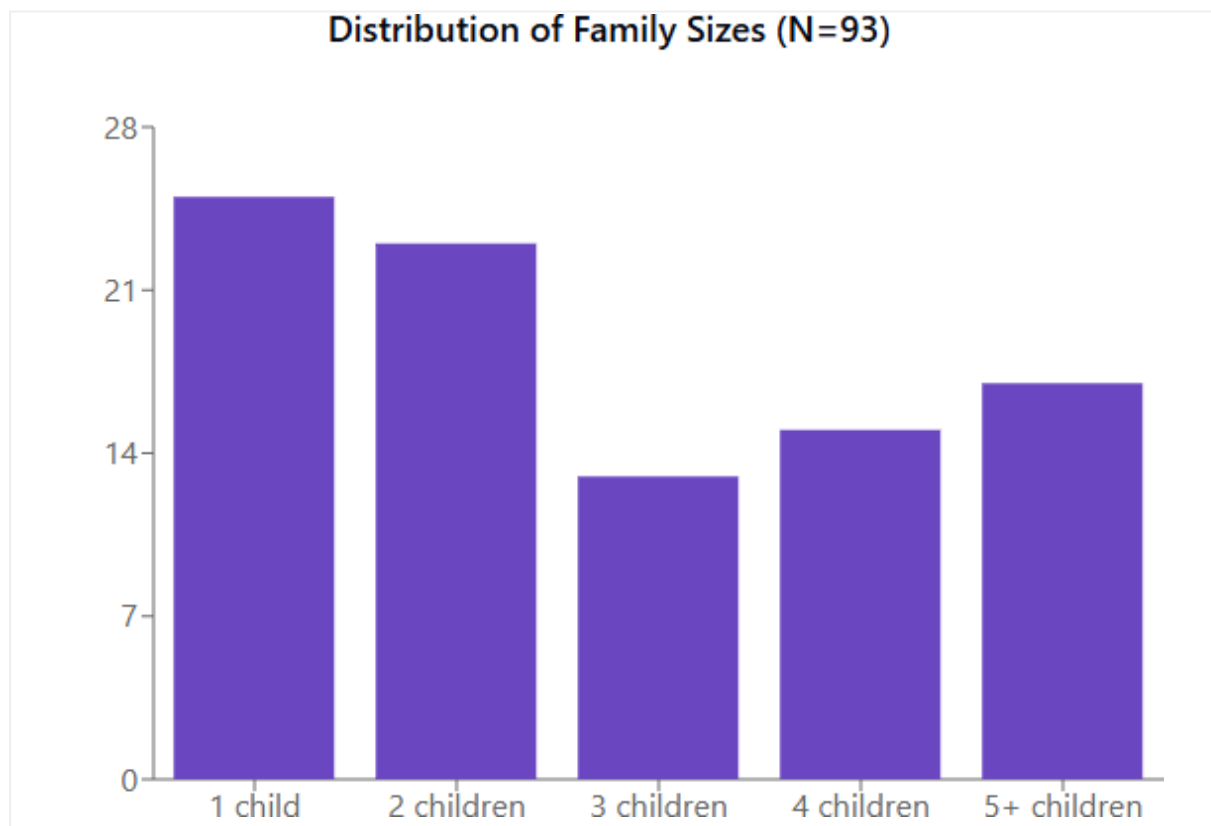
Family composition analysis revealed a striking predominance of lone parents (n=75, 80.6%), with smaller proportions either co-parenting (n=11, 11.8%) or married (n=7, 7.5%). This translates to a ratio of approximately 11:1 between lone parents and married parents, while lone parents outnumbered co-parenting arrangements by about 7:1. Lone parent and co-parenting - combined - accounted for 92.4% of all cases (see Figure 7).

Figure. 7 Family Status Distribution (N=93)



Family size showed considerable variation. The largest group had one child (n=25, 26.9%), closely followed by those with two children (n=23, 24.7%). Families with three children (n=13, 14.0%) and four children (n=15, 16.1%) were also common. Larger families with five or more children represented 18.3% of cases, including one case with twelve children. The median number of children per family was two, with over half (51.6%) having one or two children. Most families (81.7%) had between one and four children (see Figure 8).

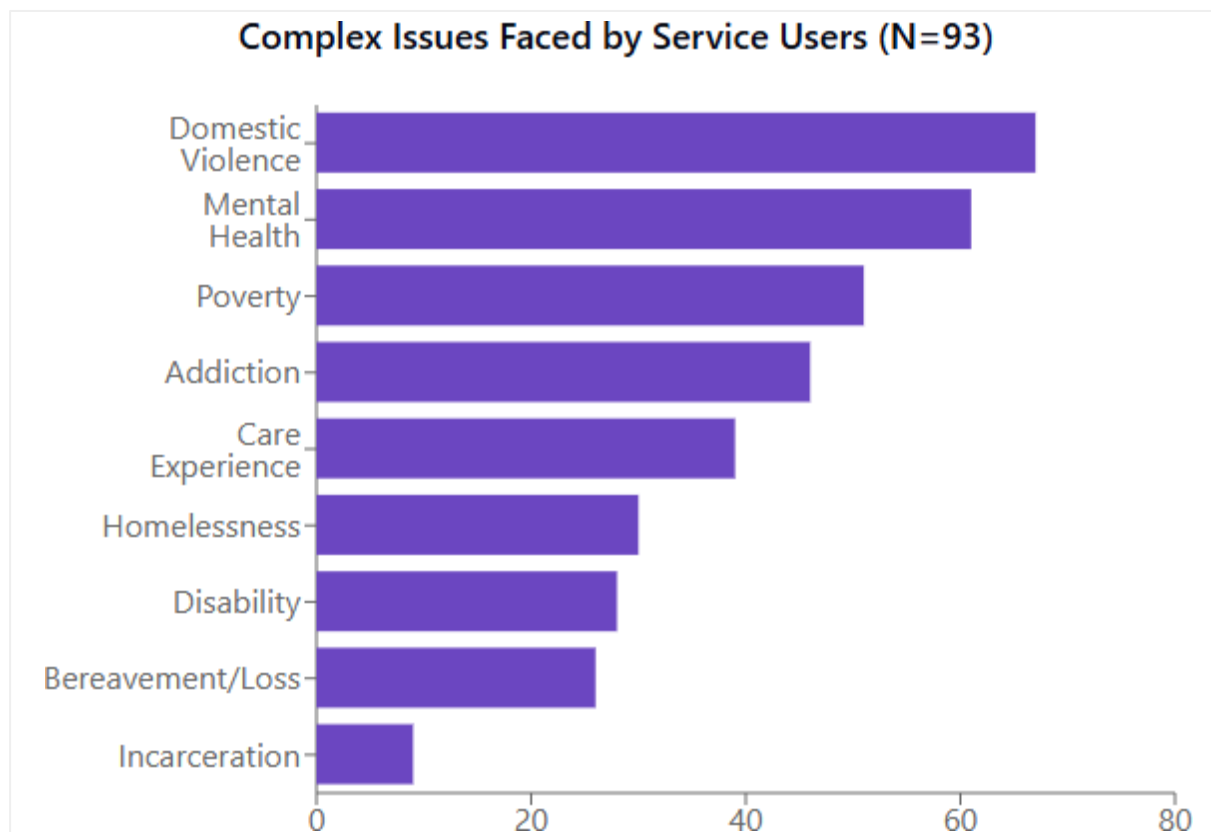
Figure. 8 Distribution of Family Sizes (N=93)



3.2.3 Complex Issues

The service user population presented with multiple, interconnected challenges (see Figure 9). Domestic violence emerged as the most prevalent issue (n=67, 72.0%), followed closely by parental mental health concerns (n=61, 65.6%) and poverty (n=51, 54.8%). A substantial proportion faced addiction issues (n=46, 49.5%) or had care experience themselves (n=39, 41.9%). Other significant challenges included homelessness (n=30, 32.3%), disability (n=28, 30.1%), bereavement/loss (n=26, 28.0%), and incarceration (n=9, 9.7%).

Figure. 9 Complex Issues Faced by Service Users (N=93)



These issues clustered into distinct groups. High prevalence issues (>50%) included domestic violence, mental health, and poverty, creating a "triple impact" that suggests interconnected core challenges. Medium prevalence issues (30-50%) comprised addiction, care experience, homelessness, and disability. Lower prevalence issues (<30%) included bereavement/loss and incarceration.

The distribution of addiction/ dependency across locations showed distinctive patterns requiring deeper analysis. Of the total addiction/ dependency cases (n=46), half were concentrated in Dublin North City (n=23), with Waterford (n=13) and Wexford (n=9) showing lower but significant numbers. Looking at the cases without recorded addiction issues (n=47), these were more evenly distributed across locations: Dublin North City (n=14), Waterford (n=20), and Wexford (n=13). This suggests that while addiction was a significant issue across all locations, its prevalence and/or identification varied notably by region (see Figure 10 and Table 2).

Figure. 10 Addiction/ Dependency Distribution by Location

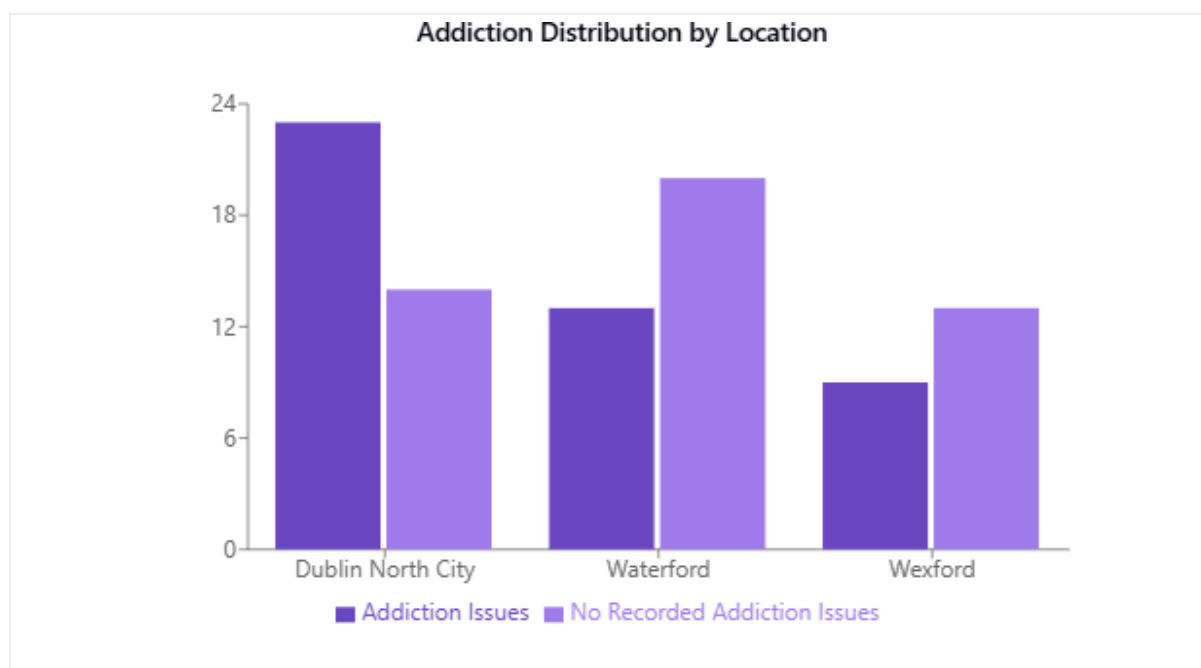


Table 2: Service Engagement and Outcomes by Location (January-October 2024)

Characteristics	Dublin North City	Waterford	Wexford	Total
Total Cases	34	32	26	92*
Addiction/ Dependency Status				
- Cases with Addiction Issues	23	13	9	46
- Cases without Addiction Issues	14	20	13	47
Closed Cases	17	2	12	31
Of which:				
- Fully/Mostly Met Needs†	5	1	5	11
- Non-engagement/Discontinued‡	7	0	7	14
- External Factors§	5	1	0	6
Reunification (among closed cases)	8	0	4	12

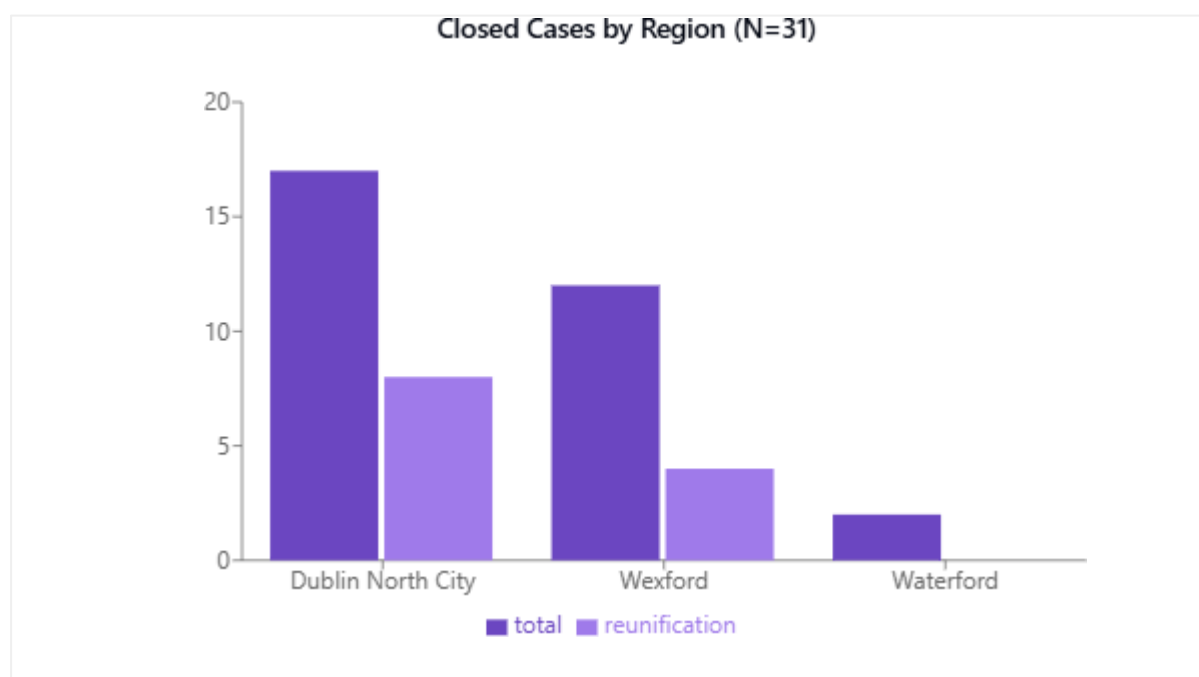
*Excludes 1 Information and Advice case †Includes cases where needs were fully met or mostly met ‡Includes both initial non-engagement and discontinued engagement cases §Includes factors such as legal aid, relocation, and child protection measures

The IPAS cases (n=2, 2.2%) added another layer of complexity, facing additional challenges including language barriers, cultural adaptation, immigration procedure navigation, and potential trauma from their home country experiences.

3.2.4 Service Delivery and Outcomes

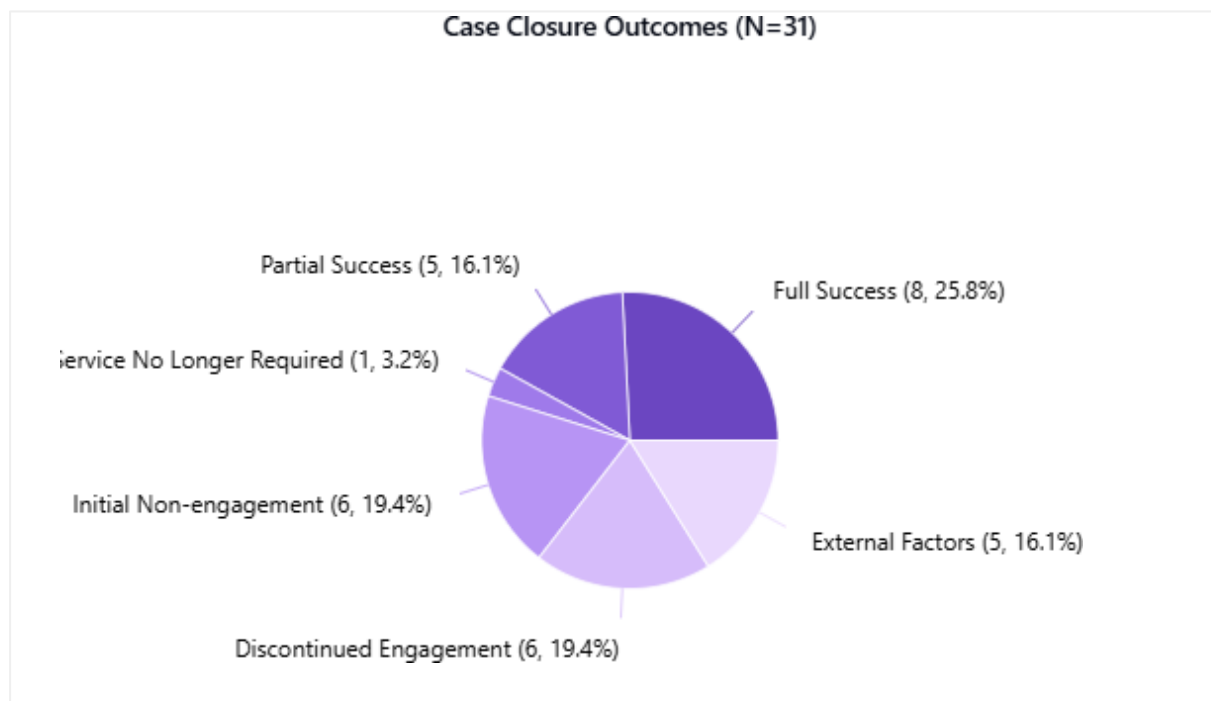
Of the 31 closed cases analysed, the geographical distribution showed more than half were from Dublin North City (n=17, 54.8%), followed by Wexford (n=12, 38.7%) and Waterford (n=2, 6.5%). The age profile of closed cases largely mirrored the overall service user population, with 64.5% aged 26-40 years (see Figure 11).

Figure. 11 Closed Cases by Region (N=31)



Success levels among closed cases showed encouraging results, with 45.2% (n=14) achieving positive outcomes. This comprised full success with needs met (n=8, 25.8%), partial success with needs mostly met (n=5, 16.1%), and cases where service was no longer required (n=1, 3.2%). Engagement issues accounted for 38.7% of closures, split equally between initial non-engagement and discontinued engagement (n=6 each, 19.4%). External factors such as relocation, legal reasons, or child protection measures accounted for the remaining 16.1%. Reunification featured in 38.7% (n=12) of closed cases, while 61.3% (n=19) did not involve reunification, suggesting a substantial role for reunification support services (see Figure 12).

Figure. 12 Pie Chart Showing Case Closure Outcomes (N=31)

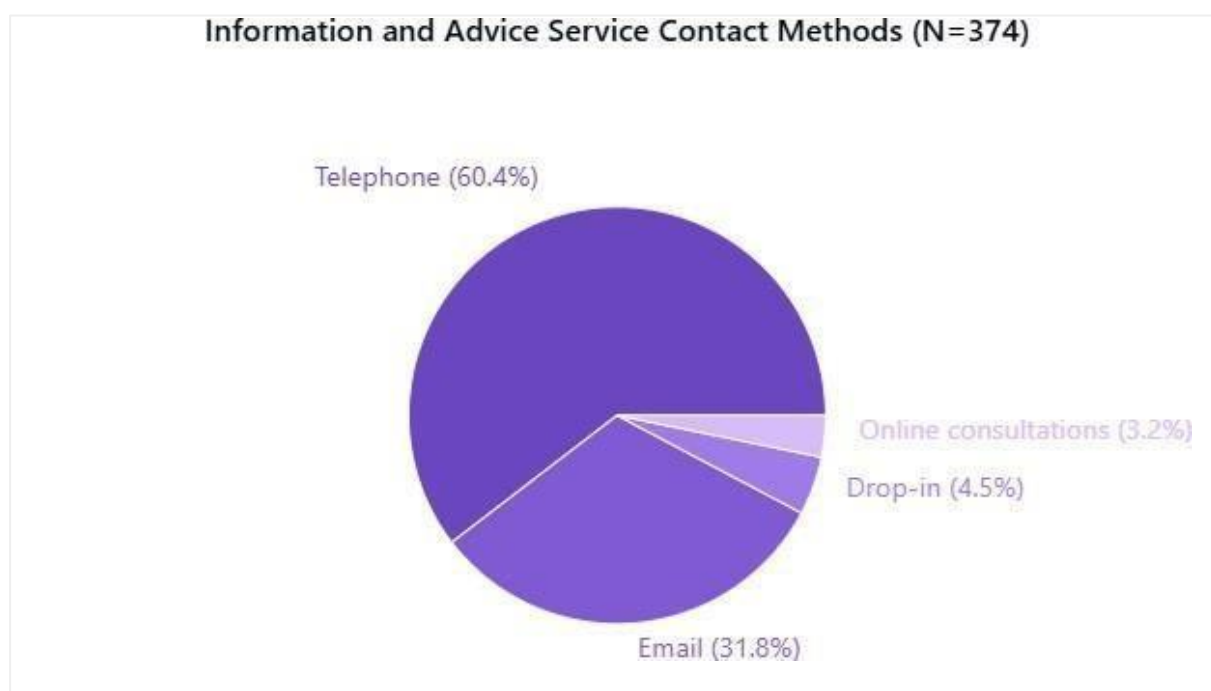


3.2.5 Information and Advice Service

The Information and Advice service handled 374 enquiries between January and October 2024 (see Figure 13) through multiple channels. Telephone contact was predominant (n=226, 60.4%), followed by email (n=119, 31.8%), drop-in visits (n=17, 4.5%), and online consultations (n=12, 3.2%). Key themes included access arrangements, communication with Tusla, legal issues, domestic violence, and disability/special needs support.

Professional engagement was substantial, with 82 consultations/information sessions conducted with organisations and professionals. This service use by professionals is noteworthy, given the focus was primarily for parent use. The service extended beyond its catchment area, reaching Dublin South, Sligo, and Louth Meath. Targeted initiatives included workshops at SAOL addiction service (15 participants) and drop-in clinics at Dochas (18 participants across 8 visits).

Figure. 13 Pie Chart Showing Information and Advice Service Contact Methods (N=374)

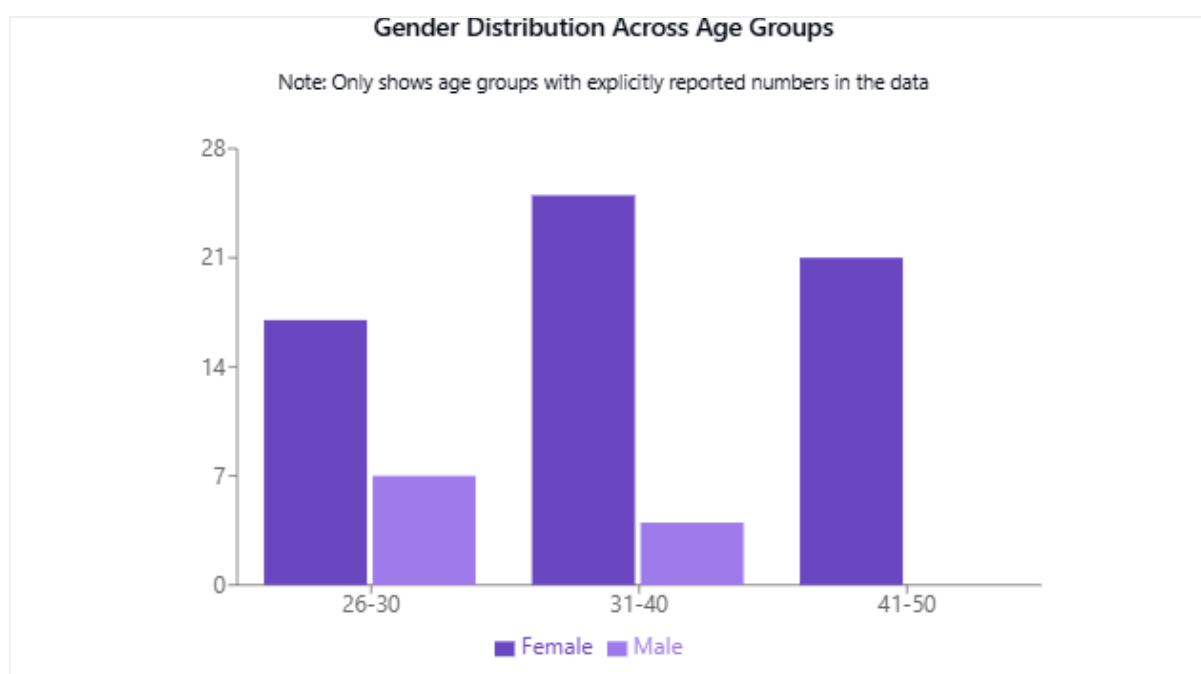


3.2.6 Intersectional Analysis of Service Use

3.2.6.1 Demographic Intersections

The intersection of gender and age shows clear patterns. Among female service users (n=77), the highest concentration was in the 31-40 age range (n=25), followed by 41-50 (n=21) and 26-30 (n=17). Male service users (n=16) showed a different pattern, with highest numbers in the 26-30 range (n=7), followed by 31-40 (n=4). This pattern held across locations, with Dublin North City showing 32 female and 5 male service users, Waterford 24 female and 9 male, and Wexford 20 female and 2 males. (See Figure 14).

Figure. 14 Gender Distribution across Age Groups



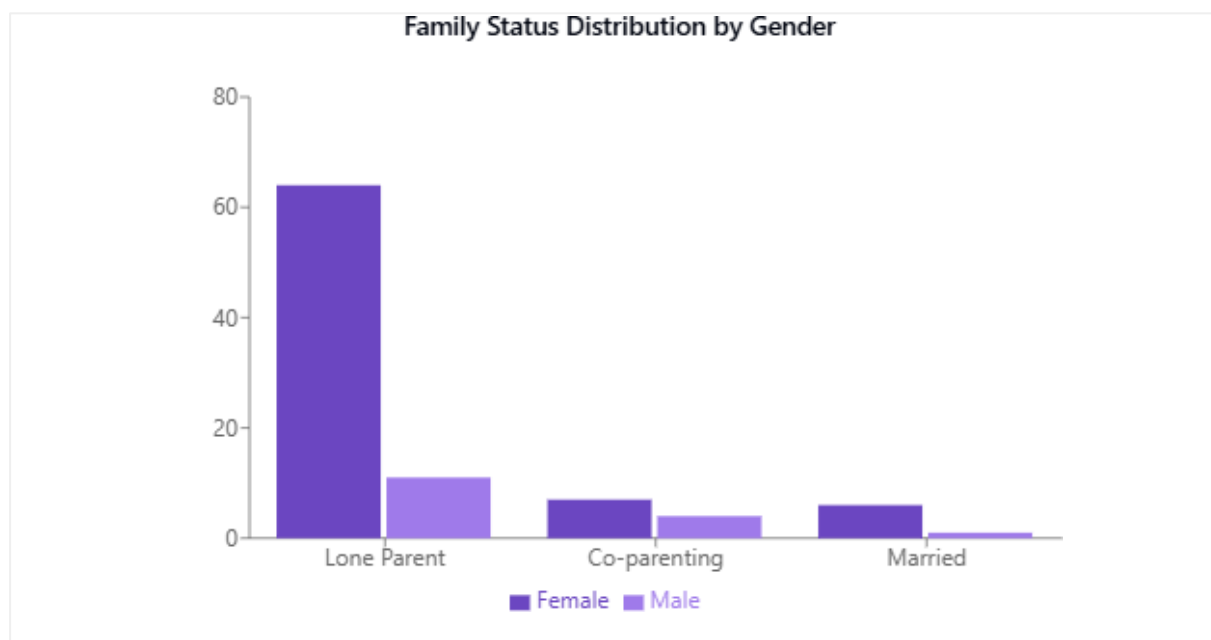
The ethnic distribution across genders revealed notable differences. Female service users represented a broader range of ethnicities, including African (n=2), Albanian (n=1), Chinese (n=1), Eastern European (n=2), English (n=1), Hungarian (n=1), Irish Traveller (n=7), Slovakian (n=1), Welsh (n=1), White Irish (n=59), and White Irish/Muslim (n=1). Male service users showed less ethnic diversity, with Afghan (n=1) and Polish (n=1) backgrounds alongside White Irish (n=14).

Ethnic diversity varied notably across age groups. The 19-25 age group (n=13) included mostly White Irish (n=11) with individual cases of Albanian and English backgrounds. The 26-30 cohort (n=24) showed more diversity, including Irish Traveller (n=2), Polish (n=1), Welsh (n=1), and White Irish (n=20). The 31-40 age group (n=29) included Afghan (n=1), Eastern European (n=2), Irish Traveller (n=3), and White Irish (n=23). The greatest ethnic diversity appeared in the 41-50 age group (n=23), comprising African (n=2), Chinese (n=1), Hungarian (n=1), Irish Traveller (n=1), Slovakian (n=1), White Irish (n=16), and White Irish/Muslim (n=1).

3.2.6.2 Family Structure Patterns

Family status showed distinct patterns across gender and age groups. Among female service users (n=77), lone parenthood was most common (n=64, 83.1%), followed by co-parenting (n=7, 9.1%) and married status (n=6, 7.8%). Male service users (n=16) showed similar proportional patterns but with different distributions: 11 lone parents (68.8%), 4 co-parenting (25%), and 1 married (6.2%), suggesting male service users were proportionally more likely to be in co-parenting arrangements (See Figure 15).

Figure. 15 Family Status Distribution by Gender



Age-related patterns in family status revealed evolving arrangements across life stages. Among young adults aged 19-25 (n=13), lone parenthood dominated (n=11) with a small proportion co-parenting (n=2). This pattern continued in the 26-30 age group (n=24), with 20 lone parents and 4 co-parenting. The 31-40 age group (n=29) showed more diversity in family arrangements, with 22 lone parents, 5 co-parenting, and the first appearance of married status (n=2). The 41-50 age group (n=23) showed the highest proportion of married service users (n=5) alongside 18 lone parents. All service users in the 51-60 age group (n=4) were lone parents.

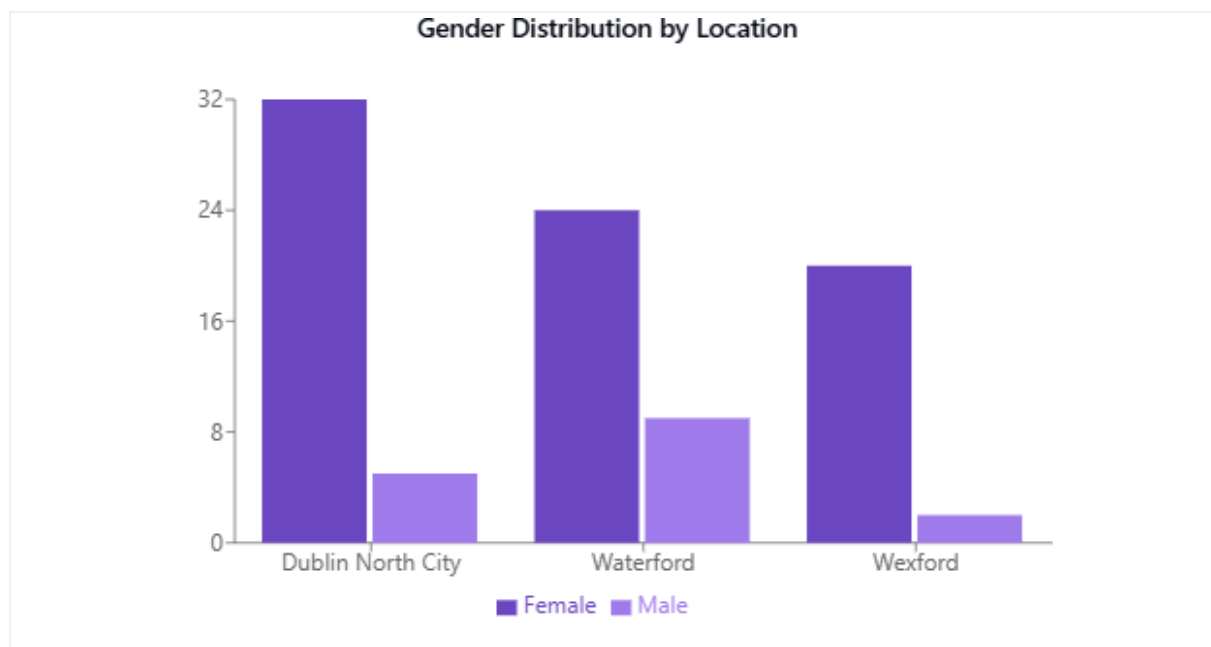
Analysis of family size across family status revealed distinct patterns. Lone parent families (n=75) showed the greatest variation in family size, ranging from one to twelve children, with the highest numbers having four children (n=52), followed by two children (n=34) and five or six children (n=30 each). Co-parenting arrangements (n=11) showed a concentration in families with two children (n=8) or five children (n=10), while married families (n=7) most commonly had three children (n=9), followed by equal numbers having two, four, or five children (n=4-5 each).

3.2.6.3 Regional Service Patterns

Each service location demonstrated distinctive demographic and family structure patterns. Dublin North City (n=37) showed a strong female majority (32 female, 5 male; see Figure 16), the highest proportion of young adults (n=10, 19-25 years), and a strong predominance of lone parents (n=33). The area also showed the most diverse ethnic profile, including African (n=1), Albanian (n=1), Chinese (n=1), English (n=1), and Irish Traveller (n=5) service users, alongside White Irish (n=28).

Waterford (n=33) demonstrated more balanced patterns, with a less pronounced gender ratio (24 female, 9 male), concentration in the 26-30 (n=11) and 41-50 (n=12) age ranges, and the highest number of married service users (n=4). The area showed considerable ethnic diversity with Afghan (n=1), African (n=1), Hungarian (n=1), Polish (n=1), and Slovakian (n=1) service users, plus White Irish (n=27) and White Irish/Muslim (n=1).

Figure. 16 Gender Distribution by Location



Wexford (n=22) maintained similar gender patterns to Dublin (20 female, 2 male) but showed distinct family structure patterns with the highest proportion of co-parenting arrangements (n=7). The area showed a notable concentration in the 31-40 age range (n=11) and had a more concentrated ethnic profile with Eastern European (n=2), Irish Traveller (n=1), Welsh (n=1), and White Irish (n=18) service users.

Family size showed distinct regional variations. Dublin North City demonstrated a relatively even distribution across family sizes, with peaks at three children (n=21), four children (n=20), and two children (n=18). One notable outlier was a family with twelve children. Waterford showed clustering at two and four children (n=24 each) and five children (n=20), with some larger families having seven children (n=14). Wexford demonstrated a pattern of larger families, with concentrations at five children (n=20), four children (n=16), and three children (n=12).

3.2.6.4 Complex Needs Analysis

The distribution of addiction issues (n=46), as an example of complex needs, showed marked regional variations. Dublin North City reported the highest number of cases involving addiction (n=23, 50% of all addiction cases), followed by Waterford (n=13) and Wexford (n=9). Cases without recorded addiction issues were more evenly distributed across locations: Dublin North City (n=14), Waterford (n=20), and Wexford (n=13), suggesting different patterns of identification or prevalence across regions.

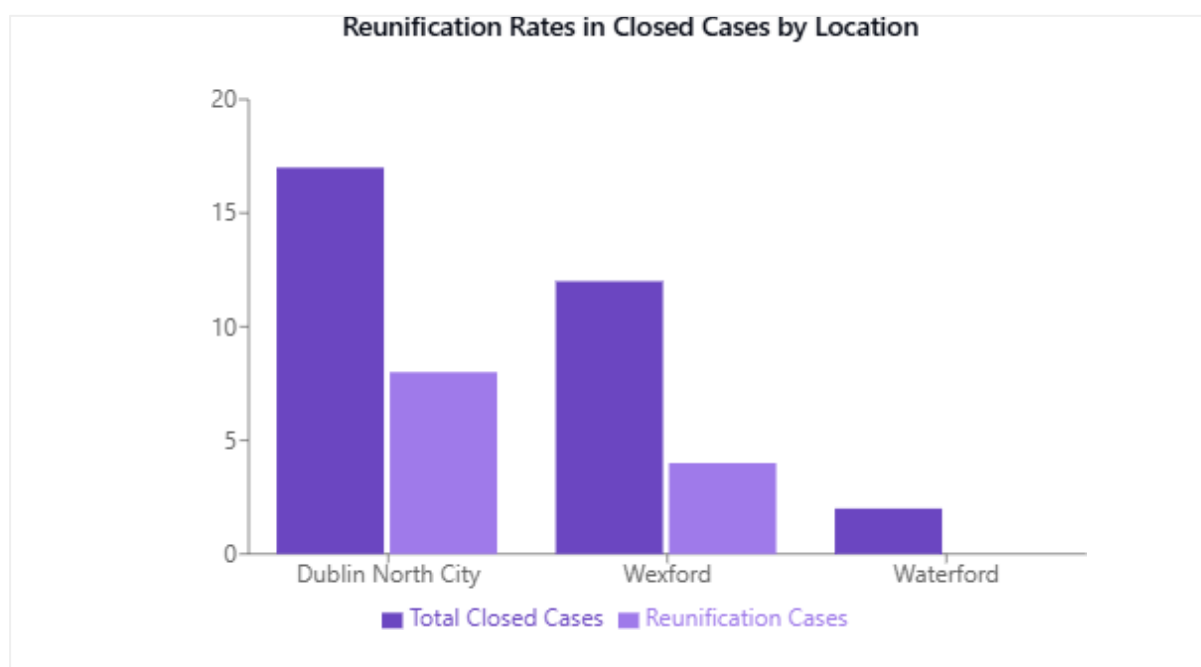
The distribution of complex needs showed distinct patterns across different demographic groups. Gender analysis revealed that women represented the majority of addiction cases (n=41) compared to men (n=5). Age-related patterns showed the highest concentration of addiction issues in the 31-40 age group (n=15), followed by equal numbers in the 26-30 and 41-50 age groups (n=10 each).

Family status analysis showed addiction issues were most prevalent among lone parents (n=39), with lower numbers among co-parenting (n=5) and married (n=2) arrangements. Ethnicity analysis revealed that White Irish service users represented the majority of addiction cases (n=40), followed by Irish Traveller (n=4), with individual cases among Eastern European and English backgrounds.

3.2.7 Analysis of Case Closures

Analysis of the 31 closed cases revealed distinct patterns across regions. Dublin North City accounted for the majority of closures (n=17, 54.8%), showing a concentration of cases in the 31-40 age range (n=8), followed by younger service users aged 19-25 (n=4) and 26-30 (n=3), with fewer cases in the 41-50 age range (n=2). The region showed diverse closure reasons: family engagement issues were most common, including five cases where families did not initially engage and two where engagement ceased. Successful completions included four cases where needs were fully met and one where needs were mostly met. External factors accounted for five cases: legal aid (n=2), relocation out of catchment area (n=2), and one case where the parent no longer needed the service. Of these Dublin North City closures, nearly half were following reunification (n=8, 47.1%; see Figure 17).

Figure. 17 Reunification Rates in Closed Cases by Location



Wexford represented the second largest group of closures (n=12, 38.7%), with a different age profile concentrated in the 26-30 range (n=5), followed by 31-40 (n=3) and 19-25 (n=2), with single cases in the 41-50 and 61-70 ranges. Engagement challenges were prominent, with four cases where families stopped engaging and three where initial engagement was not achieved. However, five cases achieved successful completion: two with needs fully met and three where needs were mostly met and parents could address outstanding issues. One-third of Wexford cases, closed during this period, resulted in reunification (n=4, 33.3%).

Waterford showed the lowest number of closures (n=2, 6.5%), involving one service user in the 31-40 age range and one in the 51-60 range. These cases had different outcomes: one involved child protection measures resulting in the child being taken into care, while the other achieved partial success with needs mostly met and parents able to address outstanding needs. Neither case resulted in reunification.

Chapter 4: Case Study Analysis

Parents engaged in the PAIS have experienced trauma and challenges which may have impacted their parenting in a manner where there is risk for their children and has resulted in the family being involved in child care proceedings. The role of the PAIS is to help the parent navigate that process in collaboration with other agencies, keeping child safety, wellbeing and best interests as a priority. This chapter presents an in-depth thematic analysis of seven case studies involving parents who engaged with the PAIS. The aim is to examine the individual journeys of these parents, identify key success factors and challenges faced, and draw out critical learning points to inform future practice development.

Each case study was analysed using a consistent framework, focusing on the support timeline, key interventions, outcomes achieved, engagement elements, effective approaches, barriers encountered, and resolution strategies. This structured, thematic approach allows for a comprehensive exploration of the parents' experiences, while also highlighting common patterns and unique insights across the case studies.

By grounding this analysis in the real-world narratives of parents, the chapter provides invaluable on-the-ground perspectives to complement the broader literature review undertaken earlier in the report. The aim is to shed light on the tangible impact of parental advocacy, as well as the complex realities faced by families navigating child care proceedings.

4.1 Case Study 1: Parent A

The PAIS advocate supported Parent A through a complex and protracted child protection process, beginning when they were referred by a family support service during their sixth pregnancy, due to concerns that their children were at risk of entering care. PAIS assisted Parent A in navigating two Child Protection Conferences (CPCs) and two CPC reviews - one for the older children and one for the unborn child. The advocate attended a range of Tusla meetings, including access reviews, Child in Care Reviews (CICRs), and trajectory discussions, as well as meetings with Parent A's family support service. PAIS also provided court support, helping Parent A update their solicitor and give instructions during numerous hearings and adjournments.

4.1.1 Key Interventions and Outcomes

The PAIS advocate played a crucial role in supporting Parent A's engagement with a pre-birth assessment and safety plan, which ultimately resulted in Tusla deciding the baby could remain in Parent A's care. The advocate also assisted Parent A in obtaining information about and connecting with essential services, including housing, post-natal health, and parenting supports. Additionally, PAIS supported Parent A to work with the reunification trajectory and ensured she had support at these meetings.

Parent A's positive engagement with the pre-birth assessment and safety plan led to her newborn baby remaining in her care. PAIS also supported Parent A to travel for access visits with her children who were placed in rural areas outside of Dublin. Parent A is currently working towards reunification with all of her children, with the ongoing support of the PAIS and other services.

The PAIS advocate provided consistent and reliable support to Parent A throughout the complex child care proceedings, offering a safe space for her to discuss her wishes, worries, and concerns about being treated fairly. The advocate also supported Parent A to understand and participate in the assessment process, ensuring her queries were answered, and helping her access accurate and relevant information to address any misinformation she had received from external sources.

Parent A had a history of being in alternative care and was mistrustful of Tusla due to her own experiences. She also faced practical challenges, such as traveling long distances for access visits while pregnant. PAIS supported Parent A to communicate effectively with Tusla and agree on a safety plan and necessary supports, including assistance in accessing services to address her housing needs, post-natal health, and parenting skills.

The case of Parent A highlights the importance of building trust and providing consistent support for parents with a history of care experience and mistrust towards child protection services. It also demonstrates how practical support, such as assistance with travel arrangements and access to essential services, can make a significant difference in parents' ability to engage in child care proceedings.

4.2 Case Study 2: Parents' B and C

Parents' B and C, both with significant care experience, were linked with PAIS when Tusla informed them they were seeking a care order for their two young children. The PAIS advocate supported Parents' B and C to request a meeting with Tusla and attended a series of meetings to develop a safety plan. The advocate also supported Parents' B and C at a CPC and two reviews, and assisted them in linking with essential services, including housing and addiction support.

4.2.1 Key Interventions and Outcomes

The PAIS advocate supported Parents' B and C to access legal advice and review their options, helping them consider the best next steps. The advocate attended all meetings with Tusla and the family network, supporting the parents to have their voices heard despite familial relationship breakdowns. PAIS also supported Parent B to link with Tusla and connect with mental health supports and financial assistance after Parent C left the home.

Tusla confirmed they would not proceed with the Care Order, and a reunification trajectory was finalised. The children returned to their parents' care after successful engagement with the reunification plan. Parent B continues to parent alone, with support from Tusla and PAIS, while Parent C completes their treatment.

The PAIS advocate played a pivotal role in supporting Parents' B and C to have their voices heard in a situation where familial relationships had broken down. The advocate also assisted Parent B in communicating with housing services and accessing support for her mental health and financial needs. Additionally, PAIS helped Parent B gather letters of support from relevant services to submit a housing transfer request and supported Parent B to access transport assistance from Tusla for their child's school, which remains in place.

Parents' B and C had fraught relationships with their own families and were fearful of Tusla and child care proceedings. They also faced housing instability and were isolated from family support after accepting housing in a different area. PAIS supported Parents' B and C to engage with Tusla and develop a safety plan, despite the challenges in familial relationships. The advocate also assisted Parent B in accessing mental health support, financial assistance, and communicating with housing services to address their needs.

The case of Parents' B and C highlight the crucial role of advocates in supporting parents to have their voices heard and navigate complex familial dynamics within the child protection system. It also demonstrates how assisting parents in accessing practical support, such as housing, mental health services, and financial assistance, may contribute to successful reunification outcomes.

4.3 Case Study 3: Parent D

Parent D, a single mother, sought support from the PAIS after her solicitor advised her to contact the service due to an upcoming Child Protection Case Conference (CPC). The PAIS advocate met with Parent D over several meetings to explain the social work concerns, the function of the CPC, and prepare her for attending the conference. The advocate, with Parent D's consent, spoke with the social worker and family support worker to understand the extent of the concerns and the steps Tusla would like Parent D to take to avoid a care order.

4.3.1 Key Interventions and Outcomes

The PAIS advocate supported Parent D to link with her addiction support service, reconnect with therapeutic supports, and agree to provide urine analysis. The advocate also helped Parent D identify appropriate people in her network who could provide support. The advocate accompanied Parent D to the CPC, where she was able to participate effectively and demonstrate her engagement with services.

At the end of the CPC, a safety plan was agreed upon, and Tusla withdrew an application for an Interim Care Order. Parent D's youngest child returned to her care. The PAIS advocate will continue to support Parent D while the safety plan is in place.

The PAIS advocate, built trust with Parent D over several meetings, explaining the social work process and helping her prepare for the CPC. The advocate also supported Parent D to identify her support network and link with relevant services. Additionally, the advocate facilitated clear communication between Parent D and the social worker, ensuring clarity on the concerns and steps needed to avoid a care order. The advocate's presence at the CPC enabled Parent D to participate effectively and demonstrate her engagement with services.

Parent D had a history of being in care herself and found it difficult to work with social workers due to her own negative experiences. Parent D initially felt reluctant to engage with services. The PAIS advocate took the time to build trust with Parent D and explain the social work process, helping her understand the concerns and the importance of engagement. The advocate also supported Parent D to link with her addiction support service and identify sources of support within her network.

The case of Parent D emphasises the importance of building trust and understanding when working with parents who have had negative experiences with the care system themselves. It also highlights how supporting parents to engage with relevant services and identify their support networks can lead to positive outcomes and avoid the need for more intrusive interventions.

4.4 Case Study 4: Parent E

Tusla referred the parent, who has a mild learning disability and mental health issues, to PAIS due to child protection concerns and the possibility of the children entering care. The PAIS advocate supported the parent during Tusla statutory visits with the child at home and attended monthly child in care reviews for the child already in care. The advocate also assisted the parent in attending case conference reviews, Tusla safety planning meetings, and helped them understand Tusla's plans for the child still at home.

4.4.1 Key Interventions and Outcomes

The PAIS advocate collaborated with Tusla to obtain important items for the eldest child when they were taken into care, ensuring a smoother transition. The advocate supported the parent to engage with and build their relationship with the residential unit caring for their child. The advocate also helped the parent make a plan with social work regarding what would happen if an Interim Care Order (ICO) was granted for the youngest child.

The parent felt they had some control and say in what was happening for them and their child when the youngest was taken into care. The parent is now working well with social workers and the Guardian ad Litem (GAL), participating in all Tusla meetings and monthly child in care reviews with the support of their PAIS advocate. The parent has a positive relationship with the residential staff, receiving daily updates on their children's well-being, and is maintaining a relationship through weekly video calls and access.

The PAIS advocate supported the parent to engage with social work and participate in Tusla meetings, despite their initial reluctance. The advocate also assisted the parent in building a positive relationship with the residential unit caring for their child. Furthermore, the advocate helped the parent make a plan with social work regarding the potential ICO for the youngest child, giving them a sense of control and involvement. The advocate also supported the parent to identify and request a parental capacity assessment in court.

The parent initially refused to engage with social services after their eldest child was taken into care. The parent had a history of being in care themselves and had older adult children who were also placed in care, with whom they have no relationship. The PAIS advocate provided consistent support and encouragement for the parent to engage with social work and participate in meetings, while also helping the parent understand Tusla's plans and concerns for their children, promoting a more cooperative approach.

This case highlights how consistent support and encouragement from an advocate can help parents with learning disabilities and negative care experiences engage more effectively with child protection services. It also demonstrates the value of assisting parents in making plans and understanding the child protection process, as this can give them a greater sense of control and involvement, leading to better outcomes for the family.

4.5 Case Study 5: Parent F

Parent F, who has a mild to moderate learning disability and struggled to read and write, was referred to PAIS by his solicitor. Parent F's daughter, aged 2, was in foster care under an Interim Care Order (ICO) when he connected with PAIS. The service supported Parent F at legal meetings, court attendances, Tusla meetings, access reviews, Guardian ad Litem (GAL) meetings, and Child in Care Reviews (CICRs). The PAIS also supported Parent F in receiving feedback regarding assessments and preparing for meetings.

4.5.1 Key Interventions and Outcomes

The PAIS advocate supported Parent F to consider various referrals and reports related to his daughter's health, helping him understand the concerns and receive feedback from clinicians. The advocate assisted Parent F in accessing information on supports for his own health and well-being, including mental health and safety. PAIS supported Parent F throughout a complex and protracted assessment process, ensuring he understood each step and had his queries answered.

The advocate also helped Parent F have challenging conversations with professionals regarding his parenting capacity, his child's support needs, and her future needs.

Parent F participated in every step of the assessment process, with the PAIS support. A Full Care Order (FCO) was granted until Parent F's child turns 18, but he feels reassured that she is with a loving foster family and that his role as her parent will be respected. Parent F and his wife have made the foster carers godparents of their child, and all parties are committed to maintaining a positive relationship.

The PAIS provided a safe space for Parent F to discuss his wishes, worries, and concerns about being treated fairly. The advocate also supported Parent F to access accurate and relevant information, addressing any misinformation he received from external sources. The PAIS advocate played a crucial role in supporting Parent F to understand and participate in the assessment process, ensuring his queries were answered, and helping him navigate challenging conversations with professionals about his parenting capacity and his child's needs.

Parent F initially felt excluded and talked down to by professionals, particularly due to his literacy difficulties. Significant turnover in social workers also hampered Parent F's relationship with Tusla and undermined his trust in the protections process. The PAIS supported Parent F to express his concerns productively and have his queries answered, ensuring his involvement as a parent.

The advocate became a consistent source of support for Parent F, helping him navigate the complex and protracted assessment process.

This case highlights the importance of providing consistent support and a safe space for parents with intellectual disabilities to express their concerns, as this is crucial for maintaining their engagement in child care proceedings. It also demonstrates the value of building positive relationships between parents, foster carers, and professionals, as this can lead to better outcomes for the child in terms of receiving appropriate supports and maintaining family connections.

4.6 Case Study 6: Parent G

Parent G contacted PAIS as she had not had access with two of her three children, who were in different care arrangements, for over a year. The PAIS advocate helped Parent G find out who their children's social workers were, what care arrangements were in place, and requested a review of the access plans. The advocate supported Parent G to meet with the social workers, explain her wishes for access, and prepare for and participate in Child in Care reviews. The advocate also provided Parent G with information about different types of care arrangements and Child in Care review meetings.

4.6.1 Key Interventions and Outcomes

The PAIS advocate contacted the relevant Tusla office and social workers on Parent G's behalf to establish contact and communicate her wishes for access. The advocate supported Parent G at access review meetings and helped her prepare for and participate in Child in Care reviews. The advocate also met with a key worker from Parent G's support service and provided them with information about Tusla to enable future support if needed.

Access between Parent G and her children has recommenced, with reports of positive and enjoyable time spent together. Parent G has gained a better understanding of her children's care arrangements and her rights as a parent of children in care. Parent G has information on how to contact the main Tusla office if she loses contact with social workers in the future, and her support service is better equipped to assist her if needed.

The PAIS advocate took the time to understand Parent G's situation, wishes for access, and confusion around her children's care arrangements. The advocate supported Parent G to communicate directly with social workers and participate in access review meetings and Child in Care reviews. The advocate also liaised with Tusla on Parent G's behalf to establish contact with the relevant social workers and convey her wishes for access. Additionally, the advocate provided Parent G with information about care arrangements and Child in Care reviews, empowering her to understand the system better.

Parent G had lost contact with two of her children's social workers and was unsure how to re-establish communication. This created a major barrier to understanding her children's care arrangements and advocating for increased access. Parent G was also confused about the nature of her children's care arrangements, including whether they were subject to court orders or voluntary placements. The fact that her children were spread across different social work teams

added further complexity.

With the advocate's support, Parent G was able to rebuild her relationship with social service (i.e., social workers) and establish open communication. Through the advocacy process, Parent G gained a better understanding of the different care arrangements in place for her children and her rights as a parent. Access was successfully re-established between Parent G and all three of her children, allowing them to rebuild their relationships. The advocate's involvement in preparing Parent G for and supporting her participation in the Child in Care review meetings was crucial in facilitating this positive outcome. Parent G now has a point of contact at the main Tusla office should she need assistance in the future, and her support worker also has a better understanding of the child protection system to aid Parent G going forward.

Overall, this case study highlights the critical role that advocacy can play in empowering parents like Parent G to navigate the complexities of the child protection system and restore meaningful connections with their children in care.

4.7 Case Study 7: Parent H

Parent H, who is currently incarcerated, was referred to the advocacy service by her support worker in the prison. Parent H's 13-year-old child has been in foster care since birth, and although Parent H previously had regular access, she has not seen her child in two and a half years.

4.7.1 Key Interventions and Outcomes

The PAIS advocate established a video call meeting with Parent H to introduce the advocacy service and an information and advice worker. During the call, it became apparent that Parent H had been informed by a Birth Parent Counselling Social Worker that there may be an application by the foster parents to seek adoption of her child, which Parent H strongly opposes.

The advocate planned to contact the Birth Parent Counselling Social Worker and the Adoption team at Barnardos to gather more information about the adoption proceedings and Parent H's rights. The advocate then met with Parent H to explain her rights as a parent, as well as her child's father's rights, and discussed how the potential adoption could be seen as a positive development for the child's legal standing with the foster family. The advocate also assisted Parent H in applying for an access order to see her son, by contacting her solicitor.

Through the support of her advocate, Parent H gained a better understanding of the legal processes involved and her options for challenging the potential adoption. The advocate's interventions helped to empower Parent H and provide her with information and guidance to navigate the complex child protection and legal systems. While the outcome of the potential adoption proceedings is still pending, the advocacy service was able to facilitate Parent H's application for an access order to see her son, which could help to restore their relationship.

The advocate established a trusting relationship with Parent H through the initial video call meeting, which allowed Parent H to openly share her concerns and challenges. The advocate demonstrated empathy and understanding towards Parent H's situation as an incarcerated parent, which likely helped to build rapport and encourage Parent H's engagement.

The advocate took a proactive and comprehensive approach, reaching out to relevant stakeholders to gather information and advocate on Parent H's behalf. The advocate provided Parent H with clear explanations of her rights and the legal processes involved, equipping her

with the knowledge and confidence to navigate the system. The advocate's facilitation of Parent H's access order application was a tangible, practical intervention that directly addressed Parent H's goals.

The advocacy service was able to empower Parent H and increase her understanding of the child protection and legal systems, which can help her to advocate for herself more effectively going forward. The potential restoration of access between Parent H and her child could have a significant positive impact on their relationship and Parent H's wellbeing.

Parent H's incarceration and the prison's determination that the facility is not suitable for her son's visits posed a major barrier to maintaining their relationship. The lack of clear communication and information from social services regarding the potential adoption proceedings left Parent H feeling confused, upset, and disempowered. The uncertainty around Parent H's legal rights and options as a parent whose child is in foster care, especially regarding the adoption application, was a significant challenge.

Through the advocate's interventions, Parent H gained a better understanding of her legal rights and options, which can help her to more effectively advocate for herself and her child. The advocate's assistance in applying for an access order has the potential to restore Parent H's contact with her child, which could be a crucial step in rebuilding their relationship. While the outcome of the potential adoption proceedings is still pending, the advocacy service's efforts have provided Parent H with the knowledge and support to navigate this complex situation.

4.8 Cross-Case Analysis

The seven case studies examined in this chapter provide rich and diverse insights into the experiences of parents engaging with the PAIS. Several overarching themes and patterns emerged across the individual narratives:

4.8.1 Emotional Support and Rebuilding Trust

A consistent theme was the importance of the advocates providing empathetic, non-judgmental support to help parents feel heard, validated and less alone in navigating child care proceedings. Many parents, such as Parent A, B, C and Parent F, had histories of negative experiences with social services or the care system themselves which had fostered deep mistrust. The advocates' ability to build trusting relationships and offer a safe space for parents to share their concerns was crucial in overcoming these barriers. The advocates' role in providing empathy, encouragement, and a consistent presence was transformative for parents who felt overwhelmed and disempowered by the child protection system.

4.8.2 Advocacy and Participation

The case studies highlighted the multifaceted practical support provided by advocates, from helping parents to access essential services (housing, mental health support, addiction treatment) to attending key meetings and advocating on their behalf. This was particularly evident in the experiences of B, C and Parent F, where advocates played a pivotal role in addressing families' concrete needs and ensuring their voices were heard by professionals.

Across the cases, advocates were instrumental in empowering parents by improving their understanding of child care proceedings, their legal rights, and how to effectively engage with professionals. This was exemplified in the experiences of Parent D, Parent E, and Parent G, who all reported feeling more informed and capable of participating in decision-making because of the advocacy support.

4.8.3 Navigating Complex Familial Dynamics

Several cases, such as those involving Parents' B and C, and Parent E, highlighted the advocates' role in supporting parents to have their voices heard and navigate challenging family relationships and power dynamics. This was crucial in enabling parents to advocate for their

needs and, in some instances, achieve reunification with their children.

4.8.4 Tailored Approaches for Diverse Needs

The case studies demonstrated the advocates' ability to adapt their support to the unique circumstances and needs of each parent. For example, the approaches used with Parent F, who had an intellectual disability and literacy challenges, differed from the support provided to Parent D, who was navigating addiction and challenging family dynamics. This flexibility and responsiveness were key to ensuring effective advocacy and positive outcomes.

Overall, the cross-case analysis points to the multifaceted and transformative potential of parental advocacy, while also underscoring the complex realities and barriers that families continue to face within the child protection system. The learning points gleaned from these case studies can inform ongoing improvements to the PAIS model and guide the development of advocacy services more broadly.

4.9 Conclusion

The in-depth case study analysis presented in this chapter provides compelling evidence of the impact of the PAIS in supporting parents involved in child care proceedings. The parents' narratives, illustrate the diverse ways in which advocates can empower and enable parents to navigate complex processes, access essential supports, and maintain meaningful connections with their children.

Key success factors that emerged across the cases include the advocates' ability to build trust, provide consistent emotional support, enhance parents' knowledge and participation, navigate intricate family dynamics, and deliver tailored, responsive approaches. These elements were instrumental in helping parents overcome significant barriers, such as histories of negative experiences with social services, practical challenges, and systemic issues like high caseloads and staff turnover.

While the case studies highlight the transformative potential of parental advocacy, they also underscore the persistent complexities and inequalities within the child protection system. Barriers such as lack of communication, potential biases, and the emotional toll on parents navigating the process remain pervasive. These insights point to the need for continued investment in advocacy services, as well as broader reforms to create more transparent,

collaborative, and family-centred approaches.

As the PAIS service continues to evolve, the learnings from these case studies can inform ongoing improvements to ensure the programme remains responsive to the diverse needs of parents. Potential areas for development include further enhancing advocates' skills in working with marginalised groups, ongoing strengthening collaborative relationships with Tusla, and exploring opportunities for collective advocacy to drive policy and practice changes.

Ultimately, the case studies presented in this chapter demonstrate the vital role that parental advocacy can play in empowering families, promoting meaningful participation, and ultimately securing better outcomes for children. By focusing on the lived experiences of parents, this analysis provides a testament to the transformative potential of the PAIS model.

Chapter 5: Findings from Parents' Consultation

The PAIS aims to empower and support parents navigating the complexities of child care proceedings. By providing dedicated advocates, PAIS seeks to amplify parents' voices, promote their meaningful participation in decision-making, and ultimately contribute to better outcomes for children and families. This chapter presents an exploration of parents' experiences and views with the PAIS, drawing on both survey data and a thematic analysis of qualitative data gathered from parents who have engaged with PAIS, offering insights into their experiences, perspectives, and recommendations for service improvement.

The survey, conducted with 12 parents receiving advocacy support in one of the three pilot sites, provides structured feedback on the helpfulness of the service, its impact on parent-professional relationships, and overall satisfaction levels. The qualitative interviews with 14 parents explore in more depth the experience of participation in the PAIS and advocacy support. Parents' voices are contextualised within the broader evidence base and overall, this chapter aims to shed light on the unique contributions and challenges of PAIS in supporting families involved in child care proceedings.

5.1 Parents Survey

As part of the PAIS evaluation, a survey was conducted with 12 parents who had received advocacy support from the Barnardos' service. The survey aimed to gather in-depth feedback on the parents' experiences and perceptions of the service.

5.1.1 Service Reach and Engagement

All 12 survey respondents (100%) were parents receiving advocacy support in the Waterford area. In terms of their involvement with Tusla, the majority of parents (83.3%, n=10) had prior experience with child care proceedings. A smaller number had been engaged with Tusla for family support (8.3%, n=1) or were unsure of the specifics of their involvement (8.3%, n=1).

The parents predominantly learned about the PAIS through referrals from social workers (75%, n=9). The duration of the support received varied, with 58.3% (n=7) of parents reporting between 1-2 years of advocacy, 33.3% (n=4) receiving support for 6 months to 1 year, and 8.3% (n=1) for over 2 years.

5.1.2 Perceptions of Advocate Support

All 12 parents (100%) rated their relationship with their Barnardos advocate as "very good", highlighting the strong rapport and trust built between families and the advocacy staff.

When asked about the main purpose of the advocate's role, parents provided a range of responses, with the most common themes emerging around:

1. Providing practical and emotional support and guidance to parents.
2. Assisting with parents engaging in Tusla processes and court proceedings.
3. Enhancing parents' understanding of social work involvement.
4. Supporting parents whose children are involved in child care proceedings .
5. Helping parents work towards family reunification.

5.1.3 Helpfulness of Advocate Support

The parents overwhelmingly reported that the PAIS advocacy support was "extremely helpful" or "very helpful" across a variety of areas:

1. Providing support and guidance (100% extremely/very helpful)
2. Explaining social work terminology and processes (91.7% extremely/very helpful)
3. Facilitating communication with professionals (91.7% extremely/very helpful)
4. Sharing information about Tusla and social services (83.3% extremely/very helpful)
5. Helping to address parents' worries and concerns (91.7% extremely/very helpful)
6. Ensuring meetings are accurately documented (66.6% extremely/very helpful)³

This feedback suggests the advocates played a crucial role in empowering parents, enhancing their understanding of the child protection system, and improving their ability to effectively engage with professionals.

³ The Child and Family Agency (CFA) are responsible for documentation of meetings. The PAIS advocates raise issues only where inaccuracies are identified.

5.1.4 Impact on Relationships with Social Workers and Decision-Making

In terms of their relationship with social workers, 10 parents felt that the advocates helped them better understand social workers, improved communication, and ensured they felt more included in discussions about their family. Two parents (N=2, 16.6%) indicated that the advocacy support had "*made it a little better*" or "*made it much better*". Ten parents elaborated, in the additional questions, that the advocates helped them better understand social workers, improved communication, and ensured they felt more included in discussions about their family.

All 12 respondents (100%) reported that their Barnardos' advocate was helpful when they attended court proceedings, with most parents (91.7%, n=11) expressing they felt that the advocate helped them feel more included when social workers discussed matters related to their family.

5.1.5 Overall Satisfaction

Finally, when asked to rate their overall satisfaction with the PAIS, 91.6% (n=11) of parents indicated they were either "very happy" or "happy" with the support received. Two parents (16.6%) reported being "very unhappy", citing a desire for more help in reuniting with their children.

The parent survey results demonstrate the positive impact of the Barnardos' PAIS in empowering families, improving their engagement with child care proceedings, and fostering more collaborative relationships with professionals. The qualitative feedback further highlights the critical role that advocates play in providing practical guidance, emotional support, and ensuring parents' voices are heard.

However, the survey also identified areas for potential improvement, such as ensuring parents feel fully included in discussions about their family and providing more targeted support in achieving reunification goals. Addressing these concerns can help to further strengthen the PAIS and better meet the diverse needs of the parents it serves.

5.2 Analysis of Parent's Interviews

The thematic analysis is structured around five key themes that emerged from parents' narratives: 1) Emotional Empowerment and Support; 2) Advocates Breaking Down Complex Information; 3) Changes to Relationships with Social Workers; 4) Enhancing Parents' Knowledge of their Rights; and 5) Amplifying Parents' Voice and Wishes.

Each theme is explored in-depth, drawing on a range of illustrative quotes to capture the diversity of parents' experiences. The analysis also identifies areas for service development and offers recommendations for strengthening PAIS's impact.

5.2.1 Theme 1: Emotional Empowerment and Support

A dominant theme across parents' accounts was the critical emotional support and reassurance they received from PAIS advocates. Many described feeling overwhelmed, confused, and powerless when first encountering the child protection system. Advocates offered a lifeline by providing empathy, encouragement, and a consistent presence throughout parents' often difficult journeys. Parent 4 powerfully articulated the impact of this support:

"It's the most painful, horrific experience, I've ever, I could ever articulate and to have someone there, even when I'm struggling, to ring her and say, you know, I'm struggling, how am I going to get through this? Like, she breaks things down that... look step by step, you know. And so much like, you know, and she rings me about everything that I know, like of their access what the kids are saying or doing and are worried about or concerned about, like, with their health or their mental health and stuff like, they put a... a GAL in, to help with the kids, but that's not in court yet, so wait for that to be put in. And she does all that, and she reminds {XXX}, to put the GAL in, and, you know".

This quote illustrates how advocates provide both emotional containment and practical guidance, helping parents to navigate the system step-by-step and ensuring their concerns about their children's wellbeing are heard. The advocate's proactive follow-up and reminders to other professionals were deeply valued by this parent during a time of crisis.

"She gave me hope. I sat with her, and I didn't have a solicitor at the time. I didn't know what was happening. I was very ill at the time as well, and I was so broken, and I don't know what to do. And she helped me so much, like, you know, with getting a solicitor... really late. They did it... she did it all for me. You know, and because I was so over... I was so overwhelmed, you know".
(Parent 4)

These excerpts highlight how advocates offer hope and take concrete actions to support parents with urgent issues, such as securing legal representation and addressing guardianship concerns (e.g., legal rights and responsibilities). The advocate's role in liaising with solicitors and the courts to resolve problems was greatly appreciated. Advocates' empathy and validation of parents' experiences was another key aspect of emotional support:

"How she spoke to me, how things were put across, her... consistently making sure I was okay, or if there was something she needed to do for me. As I said, she's very empathetic".
(Parent 10)

"I feel like, if {the advocate} didn't come to court with me, I wouldn't be going to court. Because it's very overwhelming, and you need someone there to help you, and you need someone there that understands court you get me where I wouldn't have a clue about court; never been to court in my life".
(Parent 13)

For these parents, the advocate's awareness to their emotional needs, demonstration of understanding, and non-judgemental stance were instrumental in helping them feel supported and able to participate in daunting child care proceedings, such as court hearings.

The importance of emotional support in parental advocacy is well-established in the literature. Tobis et al. (2020) argues that connecting parents with advocates who have successfully navigated the system themselves offers "hope for the journey ahead" and helps combat feelings of isolation and powerlessness. Similarly, Lalayants (2013) found that parents deeply valued advocates' empathy, encouragement and emotional support as they engaged with child protection services.

However, the intensity of emotional support required can place significant demands on advocates. Diaz et al. (2023) caution that while advocates' emotional presence is vital, their role can lead to emotional fatigue without proper supervision. They emphasise that advocates must have structured, regular support to prevent burnout, particularly as they help parents cope with the distress of child protection interventions.

Many parents described a growth in self-confidence through working with their advocates. They reported feeling more capable of navigating child care proceedings and asserting their needs:

"She's made me understand everything a lot more. Definitely made me a lot more confident to speak for myself".

(Parent 5)

Advocates helped parents move from feeling "out of the loop" to actively participating in discussions about their families. This confidence often extended beyond child care proceedings to other domains of life:

"Yeah, there is still challenges. But Barnardos... like {the advocate}, has given me, like more confidence in myself. I used to not leave my house. I wouldn't bring myself for a coffee. {The advocate} started to meet me outside the house, bring me for coffee".

(Parent 13)

The literature echoes the importance of advocacy in building parental self-efficacy. Powell et al. (2024) found that advocates significantly enhance parents' confidence, enabling them to engage more effectively with professionals and participate actively in decision-making processes. Similarly, Saeteurn et al. (2022) emphasise that advocates help parents feel more equipped to assert their rights and access services.

5.2.2 Theme 2: Advocates Breaking Down Complex information

Another salient theme was advocates' crucial role in translating the complex bureaucratic processes, legal language and professional jargon of the child protection system into accessible terms for parents. Participants repeatedly described feeling overwhelmed and confused by the deluge of information they encountered, from assessment reports to court orders. Advocates served as interpreters, breaking down this content and ensuring parents could understand and engage with vital decisions being made about their families.

Parent 2 explained how their advocate supported them to make sense of specialist reports:

"Yeah, now I've come over to {the advocate} with a lot of stuff like, what does this mean? What does that mean? {the advocate} has sent me on stuff about different terms we've gone through. I would have got reports like, OT reports, psychologist reports. We would sit down, would have broken them down, would have gone through the whole lot and would have highlighted what was really, really important, like, the whole process of the reports are all important, but highlight the specific... that would stand out for what's going on now or something".

This hands-on, personalised approach to interpreting dense reports was greatly valued by parents. The advocate took time to review the documents alongside the parent, drawing out the most relevant information and ensuring they grasped the implications for their current situation.

Parent 4 described the emotional impact of having an advocate explain distressing court documents:

"Yeah, because they're not, they're nasty, and I got an awful fright, you know, when I read, like... And I was like, I was never violent to my children. For each... one day I actually, like, I was vomiting and everything. I never hit my children. Why? I couldn't understand why this was, why they're saying this. And then {the advocate}... rang {the advocate} like, only for her... I would have lost my mind because. And they were like, no, she was explaining. So, I could breathe. If she hadn't have rang me. I honest to God that day, I don't know where I'd be today, because I talked to her saying I was physically violent, I was... yes, I know my addiction is a problem and I have to be sober, and I obviously know that that's the main reason. But what I heard like you're being abusive and physically violent and other wording and they use it's quite like... it makes you look or feel that small. It makes you look way worse than what you actually were. {the advocate} explained it to me, and then I was like, I want to fight my corner,

This quote illustrates the profound distress and confusion that legalistic language can cause parents, and the vital role of advocates in contextualising this information. By providing a more neutral explanation of the terminology used and refocusing the parent on achievable goals, the advocate helped avert a mental health crisis and empowered them to concentrate on making positive changes.

Other parents highlighted how advocates' support extended beyond one-off crises to an ongoing role in promoting their understanding of processes:

"Yeah, like she's... she's good with information, good with sending things on for me. On the matter of my son's situation, and... and to be on the care plan with me as well. Once a month, and sometimes, I don't be actually, once a month. Yeah, seldom. And yeah, she's there most of the time with me on that as well. So, I much appreciate that. You know what I mean?"

(Parent 12)

"Any forms that I need help, she would stay to fill them out with me, or send them off, or whatever I need to do she's there".

(Parent 13)

These excerpts demonstrate the multifaceted nature of advocates' informational support, from participating in regular care plan reviews to assisting with day-to-day paperwork. By consistently being available to explain issues as they arose, advocates helped parents to stay informed and engaged over time.

The challenges parents face in deciphering the complex child protection system are well-documented in the literature. Lalayants and Merkel-Holguin (2024) discuss how the overwhelming nature of child protection information often renders parents unable to engage meaningfully. They found that advocates may alleviate this barrier by simplifying jargon and enabling parents to actively participate in decision-making.

However, Tobis et al. (2020) highlight that explanation alone is insufficient; information must be tailored to parents' specific circumstances, learning styles and literacy levels. Saeteurn et al. (2022) further suggest that advocates' ability to tailor information to parents' literacy levels and emotional states is critical for effective advocacy. Underscoring that advocates should be trained to adapt information delivery, which may empower parents to make well-informed decisions for

their families. Some parents in this study alluded to the importance of advocates' clear, accessible communication style:

"She's explained thoroughly, thoroughly to me what they're saying, that... I can't understand what they're saying. If that makes sense, she's explained thoroughly the law part of... she's explained thoroughly, then what I have to do, in simple terms, to get my kids back into trajectory".

(Parent 4)

The PAIS should continue to emphasise the need for advocates to adapt their language and approach to each parent's needs. Regular training opportunities for advocates to enhance their communication skills may be beneficial.

5.2.3 Theme 3: Changes to Relationships with Social Workers

The positive impact PAIS advocates had on many parents' relationships and communication with their allocated social workers was evident. Parents frequently described strained or conflictual dynamics with child protection professionals prior to advocacy involvement. Advocates helped to break down barriers, facilitate more constructive dialogue, and ultimately improve collaboration between parents and social workers.

Some parents reported that having an advocate led to faster, more responsive communication from social workers:

"Yeah, they are. They're certainly like... I've had... been sent... I would send emails and phone calls and all that myself, and {the advocate} would follow up on stuff, and straight away, there's answers coming in, back and forth".

(Parent 2)

These parents perceived that social workers were more likely to promptly reply when the advocate was cc'd into emails or followed up on the parent's behalf. The reason for this was not always clear to parents, but some speculated that the advocate's involvement added a layer of professional accountability that compelled swifter answers. This points to the advocate's role in "lending power" to parents' requests and potentially mitigating biases that may lead professionals to minimise or ignore parents' direct communication attempts.

Other parents shared how advocates helped them regulate their emotional responses and communicate with social workers in a calmer, more constructive way:

"Yeah, there were, there was a time where we were talking about my second son being gone into care temporarily, and I don't think I would have got through that, because {the advocate} kind of prepared me...She said, just to have an open mind. And I feel she kept me going".

(Parent 11)

"Because I'm very emotional... when it comes to my kids. So she tries to make sure and calm, and that'll get my point across. Without me having anger in my voice".

(Parent 11)

"Yeah, well I would normally turn to drink or something normally, but instead I turn to my PlayStation and a box of heroes".

(Parent 13)

These extracts illustrate how powerful emotions such as fear, anger and despair may derail parents' interactions with child protection workers. Advocates played a crucial role in helping parents manage these intense feelings, whether by offering a space to vent safely, suggesting coping strategies, or modelling respectful communication. This emotional containment seemed to enhance parents' capacity to engage productively with professionals.

Over time, advocates' support appeared to foster a tentative sense of trust and openness to collaborating with social workers among some parents:

"I would say because, because of my previous experience, I didn't trust them, and we were even going to a court before the advocate came and we were at loggerheads...{the advocate} calmed me down an awful lot and just say that I need to be walking with Tusla for the kids...Like we talk more calm and I just don't trust Tusla, full-stop. But I do now".

(Parent 11)

"Yes, because I can talk to them now without feeling angry or upset like me. I know how they work now, and I understand it better. And hmm, and I know everything that I've done in the past, I am myself to blame because I put myself there and stuff, so I get over it".

(Parent 13).

For these parents, working with an advocate had supported them to reframe their involvement in a less adversarial light, and encourage parents to "work with" the system for their children's benefit. In some cases, advocates also seemed to facilitate parents' self-reflection, promoting changes to coping mechanisms and helping them to take ownership of past challenges while still asserting their present capacity to change. This balanced, forward-looking approach likely promoted more cooperative working alliances.

However, advocacy did not change all parent-social worker relationships. Another parent expressed continuing to feel unheard and frustrated:

"With Tusla? Erm. Can be unrelaxing, very impatient, very annoyed; very upset, you know. That's all really...No. {relationship not changed}"
(Parent 12)

This suggests that repairing fractured and/or maintaining, parent-professional dynamics is complex, multifaceted work, that may not always be possible through time-limited advocacy. As noted under the previous theme, more changes to child protection culture and practice are also necessary to make collaboration a consistent reality.

The literature echoes the potential for skilled advocates to act as relational bridges between parents and child protection workers. Featherstone et al. (2011) note that advocates' ability to facilitate respectful communication between parents and social workers can soften adversarial dynamics, promoting a collaborative environment conducive to better outcomes for children and families

However, the Lalayants and Merkel-Holguin (2024) caution that even with advocacy, some professionals may resist collaborative practices. They argue for ongoing joint training between advocates and child protection staff to address these barriers and foster mutual respect. The PAIS should continue to focus on building strong working relationships with Tusla teams to secure buy-in and discuss any issues that arise. Joint training for advocates and social workers could help to build shared understanding and solidify the PAIS's position as a valued partner in supporting families. Though this may diminish any perception of independence among parents.

Parents reported mixed experiences of how advocacy influenced their relationships with social workers. Some described feeling more heard and respected:

"I think, erm, we're heard... I'm heard more. I'm hearing more. My views are taken, and you have to take my views into consideration and listen to you".

(Parent 2)

Others noted improved communication and a more positive outlook on their chances of reunification:

"More positive now, anyway, definitely, that I have {the advocate}. They're giving me a more positive response that I kind of feel in some way, that I'll eventually have [XXX] back because I'm... I'm there".

(Parent 5)

However, challenges persisted for some parents who continued to feel a power imbalance or limited change in difficult meetings. One parent acknowledged that despite better understanding the social work process, they still felt compelled to comply rather than having genuine influence:

"I feel more now... I know that, where the system goes now, and unfortunately, I just have to do what they tell me to do. And I want to do it for my kids. It's not because I'm doing because I want... I want to tick the boxes, you know what I mean?"

(Parent 4)

The mixed findings align with the literature, which suggests that repairing strained relationships is complex, multifaceted work. Cooper Altman (2008) caution that while advocacy can increase parental engagement, it may be viewed suspiciously by some professionals. More changes to child protection culture are needed alongside individual advocacy (Diaz et al 2023).

5.2.4 Theme 4: Enhancing Parents' Knowledge of their Rights

A closely related theme was the PAIS advocates' impact on parents' knowledge and understanding of their rights within child care proceedings. Many participants reported feeling ill-informed and unsure about what they were entitled to prior to working with an advocate. Advocates played a key role in educating parents about their legal rights, empowering them to self-advocate and assert their needs more effectively.

Parent 2 described how her advocate expanded her knowledge of her rights, while respecting her autonomy in acting on this information:

"Yeah, I would not, and I always wouldn't... would sort of have known what my rights are, but yeah, {the advocate} would have said to me, Look, you know you can... you can do this, you can do that. I haven't gone down the road of really doing anything. But yeah, I know what's... I know it's all out there. And I even know there's different things out there for my son to access, like EPIC {advocacy and support service for young people in care} and all that, which I wouldn't have really known about. So yeah, the knowledge that my advocacy has, and that's passed on to me, is brilliant".

This quote suggests that the advocate struck a careful balance between informing the parent about their entitlements and available supports, while still allowing them choice and control over pursuing different options. The parent felt more knowledgeable and aware of avenues for help, but not pressured to take immediate action.

Parent 10 explained how increased knowledge of her rights bolstered her confidence to self-advocate in multiple domains:

"Drastically. Even for myself, with regards work, mental health, my own doctor. With court, I don't feel as stressed going to court. And considering I don't use a solicitor. I only go there fighting for what the kids need, especially with assessments and stuff. And she's been there every step of the way. They haven't made it easy, as in Tusla themselves haven't made it easy, and I've gotten very stressed, and it has been... I'd never not show to court, but knowing that {the advocate} was there, has made it easier. I had started to slip back into habits of not going down, because I didn't see the point. But, {the advocate}'s reassured me several, time and time again, that even if it is rocky now, that it is going to kind of pan out at some stage, and that we have to kind of do what we need to do for the kids".

For this parent, understanding her rights seems to have had a galvanising effect, increasing her determination to keep advocating for her children's needs even when faced with obstacles and setbacks. The advocate's ongoing reassurance and affirmation of the parent's rights helped to counter feelings of hopelessness and sustain her engagement.

Another parent stated:

"I suppose, gave me more knowledge of my rights and what, you know, what I can and can't do, you know, give you more confidence".

(Parent 9)

The advocates' support extended beyond one-off information provision to an ongoing role in promoting parents' legal literacy:

"Well, regards voluntary access and things like that, she's... she's helped with around that, that has changed since, but explain to me what I am entitled to, the information I'm entitled to, from social workers. If I didn't feel comfortable going to the social worker and asking, she'd ask for her, would she have consent for herself to do it".

(Parent 10)

However, not all parents reported increased rights-related knowledge through working with PAIS:

"No, it's just the same. She's just there to support me in any way that I feel uncomfortable, you know? And I do appreciate that. Do you know what I mean? Because I do need that while my child is in care, like".

(Parent 12)

This suggests that the service may need to be more consistent in proactively discussing rights with all parents. While other parents deeply valued the emotional support provided, this should arguably be balanced with empowering parents through rights-based education.

Research on parental advocacy underscores the importance of rights-focused advocacy for redressing power imbalances between parents and the state. Powell et al (2024), in their scoping review, emphasised evidence that rights-based advocacy is essential for redressing the inherent power imbalance between parents and child protection systems, particularly when advocates provide tailored information on parents' entitlements and avenues for redress.

However, an overly adversarial rights-based approach can sometimes escalate conflict between parents and child protection professionals (Dumbrill, 2006). The parent interviews suggest that PAIS advocates generally struck a considered balance between upholding parents' rights and maintaining collaborative working relationships:

"Well, regards voluntary access and things like that, she's... she's helped with around that, that has changed since, but explain to me what I am entitled to, the information I'm entitled to, from social workers. If I didn't feel comfortable going to the social worker and asking, she'd ask for her, would she have consent for herself to do it".

(Parent 10)

Here, the advocate ensured the parent knew what they were entitled to but also offered to liaise with social workers on the parent's behalf when they felt uneasy doing so directly. This diplomatic approach likely helped to diffuse rather than inflame tensions.

As PAIS expands, ongoing advocate training and supervision should aim to reinforce this nuanced balance between championing parents' rights and cultivating constructive collaboration with child protection professionals. Collecting more systematic data on parents' self-reported knowledge of rights before and after PAIS involvement would also help to evaluate the service's impact in this domain.

5.2.5 Theme 5: Amplifying Parents' Voice and Wishes

Many parents described how PAIS advocates empowered them to express their views and ensured their wishes were represented in child protection decision-making forums. Prior to working with advocates, parents often felt unheard, dismissed or reluctant to voice their opinions. Advocates' support increased parents' capacity and confidence to communicate their perspectives.

Parent 2 articulated how their advocate helped to amplify her voice:

"Yeah, to, like myself in general... send a lot of emails like and that, and we'd work together. We'd what's the word I'm looking for... Brainstorm together and then, like, we'd have a look at the email and like {the advocate} would, send her off and CC me, and it would to be my words or what have you. And just to have all that stuff, to be able to go back and say, right well, this is the way, it sounds worded. I wouldn't be great at. Sitting down and wording things. I need a lot of support. So, I've more confidence now available to go back and say, yeah, well, this is what I need to do. This is the way it needs to be said. If it's said this way, they're not getting... they're not listening to me, but if it's said this way, they're listening. So, I've learned a lot of it's how things are worded".

This quote suggests a process of co-production, whereby the advocate worked collaboratively with the parent to translate her concerns into writing, while still centring the parent's own language and goals. Through this scaffolded process, the parent developed a stronger sense of self-efficacy in communicating with professionals in a way that commanded attention.

Other parents reported that advocates' presence in meetings bolstered their confidence to speak up:

"Yes, definitely. You're just getting your point across speaking. I feel like, when you have and I'm only young as well. So, when I... when I communicate with the professional people, sometimes I feel like, okay, she's just a child because - I'm so much younger than them. But when I have {the advocate} there, it's kind of like, okay, they have to listen to me now and hear me out".

(Parent 5)

"I think, erm, we're heard... I'm heard more. I'm hearing more. My views are taken, and you have to take my views into consideration...".

(Parent 2)

For these parents, having an advocate by their side seemed to legitimise their right to be heard and taken seriously by child protection workers. The advocates' adulthood and professional status may have conferred a degree of credibility that made it harder for professionals to discount parents' views due to, for example, their age.

Advocates also played a key role in keeping parents' wishes on the agenda when they could not attend meetings in person:

"Absolutely. A hundred percent...the communication between myself and social workers broke down about a year ago, and {the advocate} has been kind of playing mediator in between. But she really listens. She takes everything on board. She'll make sure that she'll help get you the services, not just for the kids, but for yourself as well. We'll make sure to help push you, if needs be, to kind of get them...Some, some nights before meetings that... you just don't sleep. So, your brain is still racing. But she's been very good all around".

(Parent 10)

Here, the advocate acted as a crucial intermediary when relations between the parent and social workers had deteriorated. By listening closely to the parent, relaying their views, and "pushing" for needed supports, the advocate ensured the parent still had influence over decisions impacting them and their children.

The transformative impact of having their voices truly heard was palpable in some parents' narratives:

"Oh, definitely. Just being able to speak for myself. I always went in and listened to the social worker, and not the social worker... the solicitor. And kind of just let them speak for me, even though I didn't know what they were going to say at all. I didn't know I had the right to tell them that, like they're like... my voice, they're speaking for me. So, now I definitely feel like, I have the power to tell him what I want, and he has to say and ask for what I want and not what he wants".

(Parent 5)

This parent's journey from passively deferring to professionals, to actively instructing them, illustrates the profound shift in power dynamics that PAIS advocates can facilitate. By making parents aware of their right to set the agenda, advocates disrupt the paternalistic notion that professionals always know best and reposition parents as experts on their own families.

The importance of parental voice and participation is increasingly recognised in the literature. Tobis et al. (2020) argue that meaningful parental participation requires structural changes that validate parents as critical decision-makers in child protection processes. Effective advocacy ensures that parents' perspectives genuinely shape plans, counteracting traditionally paternalistic practices.

The parent interviews suggest that the PAIS advocates are playing a vital role in redressing this power imbalance and amplifying parents' voices. However, some parents' experiences also point to the limits of advocacy in effecting change when met with resistance from child protection workers:

"They are. But Tusla, aren't willing to work. You know, I see what I need to say. {The advocate} will help me get it out there. But... you know? So, the help is,... {the advocate} is helping, but Tusla, just... a full stop, if you get me".

(Parent 13)

Further exploration of the need for wider system change (e.g., a greater embrace of individual advocacy) may be beneficial. As Tobis et al. (2020) argue, parental advocacy is most transformative when it operates at multiple levels - empowering parents to self-advocate, shifting child protection organisational culture, and driving policy reform. PAIS could consider in collaboration with others expanding its work to target these structural obstacles to parental participation.

Many parents reported feeling unheard or silenced prior to advocacy involvement.

Advocates played a vital role in empowering parents to articulate their concerns and assert their right to influence decisions about their lives. They supported parents to find the right language and approach to command professionals' attention:

"More knowledge and how to talk and how to express my concerns, or how to express what I'm looking for".

(Parent 2)

This shift towards parents as active partners aligns with the literature on the importance of meaningful participation. Diaz et al. (2023) emphasise that true partnership in child protection requires advocates to empower parents, fostering active involvement rather than mere consultation. The transformative impact of having their voices truly heard was evident:

"So, now I definitely feel like, I have the power to tell him (the solicitor) what I want, and he has to say and ask for what I want and not what he wants".

(Parent 5)

One parent also noted how this newfound confidence in self-advocacy extended to more open communication with their children, highlighting the broader familial benefits. The quotes powerfully illustrate the journey from marginalisation to empowerment that advocacy can facilitate.

Some parents provided examples of how their advocates supported them to challenge social workers' decisions or actions they disagreed with:

"When a report has been written, kind of dates or times have been changed, you know, that's where, kind of me and the advocate would go in and challenge the social work. And, you know, why? Why does that keep changing?"

(Parent 9)

Advocates played an important role in seeking clarity and consistency when parents received mixed messages or incomplete information:

"Literally, just... just to get clearer answers. As I said, sometimes you'd feel like you're asking the same question and with the same question, the only the one way, but not actually getting a clear answer".

(Parent 10)

The literature emphasises the importance of advocacy in holding child welfare and protection agencies accountable and pushing for transparency. Tobis et al. (2020) argue that parental advocacy can disrupt unjust or discriminatory practices by amplifying parents' concerns. Demonstrating how advocates can help parents assert their rights and challenge decisions that impact their families.

5.3 Conclusion

International research has shown that child protection systems can marginalise parents (Tobis et al., 2020). The findings from interviews here illustrate how parents involved in the PAIS experience significant challenges engaging with child care proceedings and to have their voices heard. This thematic analysis has elucidated the diverse ways in which the PAIS advocates are supporting and empowering parents involved with the Irish child protection system/ child care proceedings, from the parents' perspectives. By providing emotional support, improving parents' knowledge of their rights, amplifying their voices, and facilitating more constructive engagement with professionals, advocates are chipping away at the power imbalances and helping to promote parents' meaningful involvement in child care proceedings. The testimonies shared by parents in this evaluation, illustrate the value of the PAIS model and point to a number of key strengths. The literature suggests that when parental advocacy incorporates both individual empowerment and systemic change, it can more fully realise its potential (Tobis et al., 2020; Powell et al., 2024). Sustained advocacy may therefore necessitate multi-level efforts that prioritise both parent-centred support and policy reform.

Advocates' attributes - the advocates' blend of empathy, compassion and pragmatic guidance shone through across parents' accounts. By offering a non-judgmental listening ear, acknowledging parents' emotions, and breaking down bureaucratic processes into manageable steps, advocates helped parents to feel understood, validated and equipped to navigate a deeply challenging and unfamiliar system. This combination of "being there" for parents and "doing for" them in concrete ways emerged as a central feature of the advocacy role (Diaz et al., 2023).

Parents greatly appreciated how advocates worked collaboratively with them and centred their expertise. Rather than taking over or imposing their own views, advocates brainstormed with parents, used their own words, and let them drive the agenda. This respect for parents' perspectives and right to make choices likely enhanced their sense of self-efficacy and ownership of the advocacy process. As Tobis et al. (2020) note, such participatory ways of working exemplify best practice in advocacy.

Advocates' ability to "translate" the complex language and requirements child care proceedings into accessible terms was invaluable for parents. By decoding jargon, explaining court procedures and orders, and elucidating parents' rights, advocates helped to demystify processes that felt overwhelming and opaque. This educational dimension of advocacy laid the foundation for parents to participate more meaningfully in decision-making about their children's lives (Syrstad and Slettebø, 2020)

Advocates were pivotal in amplifying parents' voices within a system that has historically discounted them (Burns et al., 2018). By empowering parents to articulate their concerns, relaying their input when they could not attend meetings, and "pushing" for their needs to be met, advocates helped to uphold parents' right to participation and shift practices and processes towards recognising parents as partners (Cooper Altman, 2008; Diaz et al., 2023).

Furthermore, advocates played a valuable role in (re)building bridges between parents and child protection workers. By modelling respectful communication, helping parents to regulate strong emotions, and encouraging a forward-looking, collaborative stance, advocates paved the way for more constructive working relationships. While not a panacea, this relational repair work is an important step towards establishing the trusting partnerships that are associated with better outcomes for children (Featherstone et al., 2011).

Despite these significant strengths, the analysis also points to some potential areas for growth and improvement within PAIS:

1. Ensure all parents receive proactive education about their rights. While some parents reported having a much clearer understanding of their rights, others did not perceive this as a major focus of advocacy. The PAIS should aim to consistently empower all parents through rights-based learning, while still tailoring their approach to each parent's priorities. Research by Bohannon et al. (2016) underscores that advocates who employ culturally responsive methods in rights education, foster greater trust and self-efficacy among parents. This approach respects each parent's unique experiences and may serve

to bridge systemic gaps in support.

2. Expand the service's capacity through additional resourcing. Some parents expressed concern that advocates were overstretched and lamented the lack of advocacy support in their area before PAIS. To maximise the programme's reach and impact, ongoing investment is needed to grow the staff team and establish the service in more regions.
3. Provision of regular training and continued supervision for advocates. Supporting parents in distress is emotionally demanding work that can vicariously impact advocates. The PAIS must continue to prioritise advocates' professional development and wellbeing through reflective supervision, peer support and skills-based training. Specific training on working with marginalised groups, such as ethnic minorities or parents with disabilities, could help the service better serve diverse families, if this is not currently being undertaken.
4. Strengthen collaborative relationships with Tusla. While advocacy improved many parents' communication with social workers, some continued to feel frustrated and unheard. To capitalise on the bridging potential of advocacy, PAIS should continue investing in building strong partnerships with Tusla teams. Joint training and protocols for information sharing could enhance mutual understanding and trust.
5. Consider expanding the service's systemic advocacy. Individual casework is crucial, but the analysis suggests that the structural barriers to parental participation also need tackling. The PAIS could explore opportunities to elevate parents' collective voice in child protection policy and practice reform, whether through parent councils, action research or awareness campaigns. Partnering with parents as change agents could amplify the service's impact (Tobis et al., 2020).

In conclusion, the analysis of parent's perspectives has highlighted the transformative potential of parental advocacy within child care proceedings in Ireland. By providing emotional, educational and practical support, PAIS advocates are helping parents to find their voice, assert their rights, and work collaboratively with professionals to keep children safe. While challenges remain, the parents' testimonies in this study offer compelling evidence of the service's value and point to exciting possibilities for development.

Chapter 6: Findings from Consultation with Professionals

This chapter presents an exploration of child protection professionals' experiences and perceptions of the PAIS, drawing on both survey data and thematic analysis of qualitative interviews. The survey was conducted with 25 professionals, including social workers, Guardians ad Litem (GALs), and other child protection staff, working across the PAIS pilot areas. The interviews provided more in-depth insights from 14 additional professionals (e.g., the PAIS' advocates and staff, social workers, GALs) on the impact, effectiveness, and areas for improvement of the advocacy service.

By contextualising the professionals' perspectives within the broader evidence base on parental advocacy, this chapter aims to shed light on the unique contributions and challenges of the PAIS in supporting families involved in child care proceedings. The findings offer valuable insights into how the advocacy service is perceived, the key benefits it provides, and opportunities to further enhance its effectiveness in empowering parents and promoting collaborative working relationships between families and child protection agencies.

6.1 Professionals' Survey

A survey was conducted with 25 professionals working across the child protection sector, including social workers, Guardians ad Litem (GALs), and other child protection staff. The survey gathered in-depth feedback on the professionals' perceptions of the advocacy service, its impact, and suggestions for improvement.

6.1.1 Service Reach and Engagement

The survey respondents were spread across the three main pilot sites for the PAIS - 7 from Wexford (28%), 8 from Waterford (32%), and 10 from Dublin North City (40%).

6.1.2 Perceptions of the Advocacy Role

When asked about the primary purpose of the Barnardos' parent advocates, professionals provided a range of responses. The most common themes were:

1. Supporting parents to engage with the social work department.
2. Helping parents understand processes, plans, and expectations from Tusla.

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3. Advocating for parents and promoting their voice and participation.
 4. Providing emotional and practical support to vulnerable parents.
 5. Ensuring effective communication between parents and professionals.
 6. Empowering parents to be involved in decision-making processes related to their children.

Other key purposes identified by professionals included representing parents' interests and feelings, ensuring a safe and supportive environment for parents, and helping parents make informed decisions.

6.1.3 Helpfulness of Advocate Support

The professionals overwhelmingly rated the Barnardos' parent advocates as "extremely helpful" or "very helpful" across several key areas:

1. Enabling parents to meaningfully participate in decision-making (100% extremely/very helpful)
2. Promoting a safe and supportive environment for parents (100% extremely/very helpful)
3. Representing parents' interests, wishes, and feelings (100% extremely/very helpful)

This feedback suggests the advocates are perceived by other professionals within the child protection and family justice systems as playing a critical role in empowering parents, giving them a voice, and facilitating their active involvement in child care proceedings.

6.1.4 Impact on Parent-Professional Relationships

The majority of professionals (72%) reported that the involvement of Barnardos' advocates had a positive impact on their interactions and relationships with parents involved in child care proceedings. Key benefits included:

1. Helping resistant or mistrustful parents engage with the social work department
2. Facilitating better communication and mutual understanding between parents and professionals
3. Reducing tensions and promoting more collaborative working relationships
4. Enabling parents to be better informed and supported
5. Improving the overall working relationship with parents

When asked to describe their level of collaboration with the Barnardos' advocates, 64% of respondents reported "very high" collaboration, 24% reported "high" collaboration, and 12% reported "moderate" collaboration. This suggests the professionals valued the advocates' role and worked closely with them to support families.

6.1.5 Perceptions of Advocate Qualifications

All respondents felt it was either "extremely important" (80%) or "very important" (20%) for the Barnardos' advocates to be trained professionals. The rationale centred around the need for advocates to have specialised knowledge, skills, and experience in areas such as:

1. Understanding child care proceedings and the legal system
2. Trauma-informed practice and supporting vulnerable families
3. Facilitating effective communication and collaboration with professionals
4. Providing information, guidance, and emotional support to parents

6.1.6 Improvements and Overall Perceptions

When asked how the PAIS could be improved, the most common suggestions were:

1. Increasing the number of available advocates to meet the demand (16% of respondents)
2. Expanding the geographic coverage of the service to other areas
3. Providing trauma-informed training for advocates to better support parents

The results of the survey with professionals demonstrate overwhelmingly positive perceptions of the PAIS and its impact on supporting parents, facilitating collaboration, and improving outcomes for families involved in child care proceedings.

Key strengths highlighted by professionals included the advocates' specialised expertise, their ability to build trust with parents, and their contribution to more constructive working relationships. The professionals also unanimously agreed (100%) that the advocates provided adequate support to their clients throughout the legal process.

The main areas for potential improvement centred on resource constraints, such as the need for more advocates and broader geographic reach, as well as enhancing advocates' trauma-informed skills to better support the complex needs of the families they serve.

Overall, the survey findings suggest the PAIS is highly valued by child protection professionals and is seen as a crucial service in empowering parents, improving communication, and promoting better outcomes for vulnerable children and families.

6.2 Analysis of PAIS Staff Interviews

This chapter presents a thematic analysis of interviews conducted with staff from the PAIS, including advocates, an information officer, and the Head of Service. Advocates working with the PAIS help parents who have experienced trauma and ongoing challenges. This has resulted in detriments to their parenting and child safety and wellbeing and set the family on a course towards navigating child care proceedings. The analysis aims to explore their experiences, perspectives, and insights into the service's operation, impact, and areas for improvement. By examining the staff's narratives, we seek to gain a deeper understanding of the key components, strengths, and challenges of providing parental advocacy in child care proceedings in an Irish context.

The analysis is structured around six main themes that emerged from the interviews: 1) Advocate Background and Motivations; 2) Building Trust and Collaborative Relationships; 3) Impact on Parents; 4) Organisational Support and Relationships; 5) Advocate Challenges and Strategies; and 6) Recommendations for Improvement. Each theme is explored in-depth, drawing on a range of illustrative quotes to capture the diversity of staff experiences and perspectives. The analysis also aims to situate the findings within the broader literature on parental advocacy, highlighting areas of alignment and divergence.

6.2.1 Theme 1: Advocate Background and Motivations

The interviews provided valuable insights into the professional backgrounds and motivations of PAIS advocates. Many had extensive prior experience in related fields such as family support, disabilities, and mental health advocacy, which equipped them with relevant skills and knowledge for their current role.

Advocate 1 shared:

" I worked a lot with young people who had a lot of emotional difficulties, and I worked with parents around parenting and children that were in care and that. I have a real interest in the parenting side of it because I believe... and I've also seen through my work when we impact the parent, it has knock on effects for the children, the family's generational outcomes".

This excerpt highlights the advocate's holistic, systemic perspective on the importance of supporting parents. By recognising the intergenerational impact of parenting interventions, the advocate demonstrates an understanding of the broader ecological context in which child protection issues arise (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). This perspective aligns with the growing evidence base on the effectiveness of parent-focused interventions in improving outcomes for children and families (Barlow et al., 2016; Furlong et al., 2012).

The advocate's prior experience working with emotionally vulnerable young people and parents also points to the relevance of trauma-informed approaches in parental advocacy. Given the high prevalence of adverse childhood experiences and trauma among parents involved with child protection services (Broadhurst and Mason, 2020), advocates' ability to recognise and respond to the impact of trauma is crucial for building trust and promoting resilience.

Advocate 2 highlighted a specific gap in support that motivated her:

"When I saw this project starting, I was actually interested just to speak with them about it and get the sense of what... what a service, a specific service for parents involved in the protection of welfare processes would look like... And I think one of the things that really struck me when I started to learn about this work was just, parents also didn't understand that there were little support available for them specifically".

This advocate's motivation stemmed from a recognition of the lack of dedicated support for parents within child protection proceedings. This gap in service provision has been widely documented in the literature, with studies highlighting the feelings of powerlessness, stigma, and isolation that many parents experience when navigating the system (Broadhurst and Mason, 2017; Featherstone et al., 2018). By seeking to address this gap, the advocate demonstrates a commitment to promoting parents' rights and ensuring their unique needs are met.

The advocate's emphasis on learning about the specific support needs of parents also reflects a strengths-based, person-centred approach. Rather than making assumptions about what parents require, the advocate seeks to understand their perspectives and tailor the service accordingly.

Advocate 4 shared a pivotal moment that sparked her interest in the role:

"I was working with parents and their child went into care... and the mother came home and she said to me, 'oh, I just consented in court' and I said, 'oh I didn't think you were all going to

consent' and she said, 'yeah, because that way, the judge doesn't hear the evidence' and I said, but the judge still gets the report. So, she actually thought by her just giving consent, the judge wasn't getting an update on what was going on. So, she thought that was going to be in her favour and it just really made me think, God, parents are making decisions without being really informed of... and these are huge decisions for them and their children without being really informed about their choice".

This illustrates the profound impact of the power imbalances and information asymmetries that characterise the child protection system. The parent's misunderstanding of the legal implications of consenting to their child being taken into care highlights the way in which the complexities of the system can disadvantage parents and undermine their ability to participate meaningfully in decisions that have far-reaching consequences for their families.

These examples illustrate the advocates' strong commitment to supporting parents and addressing the power imbalances and information gaps they face within child care proceedings. Their backgrounds in allied professions provided a solid foundation for understanding the complex challenges parents encounter and the critical importance of advocacy in promoting their rights and participation.

6.2.2 Theme 2: Building Trust and Collaborative Relationships

Building trust and rapport with parents emerged as a fundamental aspect of the advocates' role. Given the power dynamics and parents' often fraught relationships with child protection professionals, advocates emphasised the importance of creating a safe, non-judgmental space for parents to share their experiences and concerns.

Advocate 1 highlighted the value of face-to-face meetings and the service's independence:

"I think one of the things I definitely feel, is that the fact that it's independent, is a big thing for parents, you know. That it's separate from Tusla. That you're saying to them, it's an independent service. I think Barnardos has a very strong name in Ireland as well... But then in terms of working with the parents, just for me, that piece around being able to meet with them to sign consent, that they get a face with a name. So, I will always like when they make that initial contact over the phone, I'll, you know, I'll always offer that visit".

The advocate's emphasis on the independence of the service underscores the importance of establishing trust with parents who may have had negative experiences with statutory child protection agencies. By explicitly distinguishing the advocacy service from Tusla, the advocate seeks to create a safe space for parents to engage without fear of judgement or repercussions. This aligns with the literature on the role of independent advocacy in supporting parents' participation in child protection processes (Featherstone et al., 2012).

The advocate's practice of offering face-to-face meetings and providing a "face with a name" also reflects an understanding of the importance of building personal relationships with parents. By taking the time to meet parents in person and establish a human connection, the advocate lays the foundation for a trusting, collaborative working relationship.

The approach to meeting parents in their home environment represents a trauma-informed, person-centred strategy that reduces power imbalances often felt by parents within institutional settings. By creating a familiar and non-threatening context for initial meetings, the PAIS advocates help to build a foundation of trust and openness, essential for effective advocacy in sensitive, child protection matters:

"So, we meet parents where they feel most comfortable. So, we will do a lot of home work - in the parent's home... If we're worried about risk, we won't go to the home... So, nine times out of ten, the first visit always takes place in the home".

(Project Administrator)

The reference to Barnardos' strong reputation in Ireland also suggests an awareness of the role of organisational credibility in fostering trust. Parents may be more likely to engage with a service that has a track record of supporting families and is seen as a respected, reliable provider. This points to the importance of the advocacy service being embedded within a wider ecosystem of family support and having strong links with other trusted organisations.

Advocate 2 stressed the importance of transparency and meeting parents where they're at:

"I don't know about strategies, but I suppose at a very general level, I think, open about the role, the nature of the project, the nature of your role and the limitations of it as well... We're getting to know people, I think. It's to be mindful of their comfort, be mindful of the terrible situation they found themselves in and their own communication styles and preferences"

The advocate's emphasis on transparency about the role and its limitations reflects an ethical commitment to informed consent and clear boundaries. By being upfront about what the service can and cannot provide, the advocate seeks to manage parents' expectations and avoid misunderstandings that could undermine trust. This honesty lays the foundation for a more authentic, collaborative relationship.

The advocate's attentiveness to parents' comfort levels and communication preferences also demonstrates a person-centred, trauma-informed approach. By recognising the "terrible situation" parents find themselves in, the advocate shows empathy and validation for their experiences. This capacity to empathise, is as a key factor in building trust and engagement with service users who have experienced trauma and adversity.

The advocate's willingness to adapt their communication style to parents' preferences reflects a flexible, responsive approach that prioritises parents' needs and comfort. This aligns with the principles of effective engagement in child protection, which emphasise the importance of tailoring interventions to families' unique circumstances and cultural backgrounds (Maiter, Palmer and Manji, 2006).

Advocate 3 emphasised creating a safe, comfortable environment, for parents to express themselves freely underscores the importance of psychological safety in building trust and facilitating open communication:

"I think making sure that parents understand that and that they feel that it's a safe space to say all the things that they really would like to say to their social workers, who are outside dealing with that consequence if you like. You know, it's just safe for them to say those things and get that out and I think that's a big deal. I think having the space that we have in Barnardos is really lucky, that we have really nice spaces to meet people, which are kind of comfortable and non-threatening and not very institutional and are kind of designed to be comfortable and nice and I think that really helps".

By providing a non-judgemental, confidential environment where parents can voice their concerns and frustrations without fear of consequences, the advocate seeks to create conditions for more honest, productive engagement.

This approach recognises the power dynamics and emotional barriers that can inhibit parents from communicating openly with child protection professionals. Parents may feel silenced, judged, or disempowered in their dealings with social workers, leading to a breakdown in trust and cooperation (Smithson and Gibson, 2017). By offering a space where parents can "say all the things they really would like to say," the advocate provides an important outlet for pent-up emotions and unspoken needs.

Advocate 4 highlighted the importance of consistency, empathy, and meeting parents where they are at, placing emphasis on building relationships and meeting parents where they're at reflects a person-centred, empathetic approach that is well-suited to working with trauma-affected individuals:

"I think one of my biggest skills, has always been on building relationships with people, right, and I think meeting parents where they're at... I mean... I think this is really heavy work. Parents are... have lived huge trauma. They're experiencing that on a daily basis, so some of it is just being light-hearted. Greeting them with a smile, you know, the basic kind of stuff. Checking in; how is your week being...so, it's not all work focused. It's around, I suppose, being a person and meeting them where they're at. Showing empathy; being consistent, as much as you can with them".

By recognising the "huge trauma" parents have experienced and the ongoing challenges they face, the advocate demonstrates an understanding of the complex, often overwhelming nature of child protection involvement for families.

The advocate's use of "light-hearted" interactions, such as greeting parents with a smile and checking in about their week, reflects an attempt to normalize the relationship and create a sense of safety and predictability. These small gestures of warmth and interest can be powerful in building trust with parents who may be accustomed to more formal, impersonal interactions with professionals.

The advocate's focus on "being a person" and not just a professional also reflects an attempt to level the playing field and create a more equal, collaborative dynamic. By showing their human side and relating to parents as individuals rather than cases, the advocate seeks to break down the barriers that can inhibit engagement and communication.

These excerpts demonstrate the multifaceted nature of trust-building in parental advocacy. By offering an independent, confidential space, being transparent about the advocacy role, and demonstrating genuine empathy and respect for parents' experiences, advocates lay the groundwork for effective working relationships. The emphasis on meeting parents where they're at, both emotionally and logistically, reflects a person-centred approach that recognises the unique challenges and communication styles of each parent.

However, the excerpts also hint at the inherent tensions and challenges of building trust in a context where power imbalances and conflicting agendas can strain relationships between parents and professionals. Advocates must navigate a delicate balance between maintaining their independence and collaborating with statutory services, providing a safe outlet for parents' emotions and facilitating constructive communication, and offering empathetic support and maintaining professional boundaries.

Advocates also shared examples of how they navigated power dynamics and facilitated more constructive communication between parents and professionals. Advocate 1 described a situation where she mediated between a parent and social worker:

"I sat out with the social worker and said, okay, this is what you said, but this is what the parents heard. And I have been working with this parent as an advocate. And you know that I am there as an advocate. So, it really would be helpful going forward if, when meetings happened, that you can include me in them".

This excerpt provides a concrete example of how advocates can help to bridge communication gaps and misunderstandings between parents and social workers. By relaying the parent's perspective and clarifying what was heard, the advocate seeks to promote greater mutual understanding and empathy between the parties.

The advocate's request to be included in future meetings also reflects an attempt to formalise their role as a mediator and ensure that parents have consistent support in their interactions with professionals. This highlights the importance of advocates being recognised as legitimate stakeholders in the child protection process and having clear channels for communication and collaboration with statutory services.

However, the advocate's comment that "you know that I am there as an advocate" also hints at potential tensions or resistance from social workers in acknowledging the advocate's role. This may reflect feeling around power dynamics and professional territorialism that can hinder effective partnership working in child protection (Lalayants, 2013).

Advocate 3 shared her approach to supporting parents in challenging meetings, highlighting the emotional complexity of parental advocacy in the context of strained relationships between parents and professionals

"I'd say it's unusual to have parents that aren't in conflict with professionals they're working with. So, a lot of that is trying to support them to manage those meetings, those difficult meetings in a way that's going to be beneficial to them as parents. So, spending time with them before the meetings and explaining what the purpose of that particular meeting is... So, just making sure that they can focus on what's happening at this particular meeting so that those negative feelings don't get in the way of them achieving an outcome that's positive for them".

The advocate's acknowledgement that conflict is common reflects an understanding of the power imbalances, mistrust, and high stakes that can characterise child care proceedings. By spending time with parents before meetings to explain their purpose and help them focus, the advocate seeks to provide both practical and emotional support. This preparation work can be seen as a form of "emotion work", helping parents to manage their feelings of anger, fear, or defensiveness in order to engage more constructively with professionals.

These examples highlight the critical role advocates play in rebalancing power, facilitating clearer communication, and ensuring parents' voices are heard in a system that can feel overwhelming and oppressive. By acting as a bridge between parents and professionals, advocates help to create conditions for more collaborative, productive working relationships.

The advocate's focus on supporting parents to achieve a "positive outcome" also reflects a strengths-based, solution-focused approach. Rather than becoming entangled in past grievances or allowing negative emotions to dominate, the advocate encourages parents to focus on their goals and the steps needed to achieve them. This future-oriented, pragmatic stance may help to diffuse tensions and promote more productive communication.

6.2.3 Theme 3: Impact on Parents

The interviews provided compelling evidence of the transformative impact PAIS had on parents' sense of empowerment, participation in decision-making, and relationships with child protection professionals. Many advocates shared examples of parents growing in confidence and self-efficacy as a result of their support. Advocate 1 noted:

"Like I have one parent who I am working with and she has, like she'll often now come to me and say, I contacted social worker, I contacted a solicitor, whereas before all of that would have to come through me. So, she would now be making those phone calls, ringing the social worker to ask about access and is ready now to look at, 'I want to look at how my children can be returned'".

Advocate 2 shared a similar story of a parent taking charge of her own participation, providing an example of the long-term impact of advocacy in building parents' capacity for self-advocacy.

"I had a lovely call, actually, on Friday from [one of] my parents, whose case I've now closed. And she rang me... to tell me that she had just been to a child in care review meeting on one day and she prepared for it herself. She knew the questions she wanted to ask and she said she never ever would have been able to do that before".

The fact that the parent was able to independently prepare for and participate in a critical decision-making forum such as a child in care review meeting suggests a transformative shift in their ability to engage with complex child care proceedings.

The parent's reflection that they "never ever would have been able to do that before" underscores the significance of this change. It suggests that the advocacy support provided a scaffolding for the parent to gradually develop the skills, knowledge, and self-efficacy needed to take a more active role in shaping plans for their child's care. This echoes the literature on the importance of gradual, supported skill-building in promoting sustainable empowerment outcomes for parents (Lawson, 2004; Fraser and Galinsky, 2010).

These examples illustrate how advocacy support can catalyse a shift in parents' sense of agency and capacity to self-advocate. By providing information, guidance, and encouragement, advocates help parents to find their voice and take a more active role in shaping decisions about their families.

Having an advocate present in intimidating settings, such as court, serves as both emotional and practical support for parents. This presence not only helps parents understand complex legal processes but may alleviate feelings of isolation and disempowerment often experienced in these high-stakes environments. The advocates' role here directly enhances parents' participation, reinforcing their voice within critical decision-making frameworks:

"I think to have somebody with you, in going into court, like, and just even to have someone sitting with you. I think the court thing is really intimidating... so I think it's nice for them to have, to explain what's happening".

(Information Officer)

Advocates also reported seeing parents grow in their ability to engage productively in formal meetings. Advocate 1 shared:

"I have another parent as well who wouldn't have participated in the child in care reviews, and they were on teleconference and she wouldn't have rang in, she wouldn't have. And I think even like parents even knowing for the child in care review that they have an input, you know, I would say to them, did you get the form around health education ever? And they're like, Oh, I didn't. And even if it wasn't a form, let's sit down and write what you want".

By demystifying processes, providing guidance on how to contribute, ensuring appropriate supports are in place and helping parents to formulate their perspectives, advocates can bridge the information and confidence gaps that often inhibit meaningful involvement.

This hands-on, collaborative approach to empowering parents' participation echoes the literature on the importance of "assisted advocacy" in child protection (Featherstone et al., 2012). Rather than simply providing information or advice, assisted advocacy involves working alongside parents to build their capacity for engagement and self-expression. This may involve practical support with tasks like form-filling or letter-writing, as well as emotional support to manage the stress and anxiety that can accompany formal meetings.

This example demonstrates how advocates play a vital educational role in ensuring parents understand their rights and the opportunities available to them to provide input. By working collaboratively with parents to prepare for meetings and articulate their views, advocates help to disrupt the power imbalances that can leave parents feeling silenced and marginalised.

Over time, many advocates observed an improvement in parents' relationships and communication with social workers. Advocate 1 shared a powerful example:

"she now is able to communicate with Tusla herself. And, you know, she knows the advocacy service is there if she needs it. She's a good relationship with the foster carer as well, they communicate".

This suggests that advocacy support can be a catalyst for repairing strained relationships between parents and child protection professionals. The parent's ability to communicate directly and constructively with Tusla and foster carers marks a significant shift from a previous dynamic of mistrust and disengagement. By emphasising the parent's own capacity for change, the advocate avoids a paternalistic or rescue-based narrative of advocacy as a panacea.

The reference to the parent's improved relationship with foster carers is also significant, given the tensions that can often arise between birth parents and alternative caregivers. By supporting positive communication and collaboration between these key stakeholders in the child's life, advocacy can help to promote a more integrated, holistic approach to care planning and decision-making (Biehal, 2004).

Advocate 2 noted similar progress:

"And she understood that this was about security for her child, because her child had been in this placement for six years...She then consented to that".

These examples suggest that advocacy support can be a catalyst for repairing strained relationships between parents and child protection professionals. By modelling respectful communication, helping parents to regulate strong emotions, and facilitating a more collaborative dynamic, advocates pave the way for improved trust and cooperation in the long term.

However, advocates also acknowledged that progress was not always linear and some parents continued to face significant challenges in their dealings with the system. Advocate 3 noted:

"Most of them are pretty consistent. I suppose the people who are in court quite a lot and the people who have meetings with Tusla quite a lot and the people who have access quite a lot, and with their kids they are the ones who would stay most consistently involved with us and who would be linking in with us regularly. Where we find... where I find people drop off, a little bit, is if there's a full care order in place and they don't have that much contact with the children.

They might only come back to us when something happens. And then one of the other places where I see people dropping off from us, a little bit, is say when they suddenly realise after a process, that their children are probably going to stay in care until they're 18. That's the kind of a pinch time for parents I guess, for some parents and they can drop off the radar, a little bit, for a little while".

Advocate 4 echoed the ongoing nature of parents' support needs:

"That's one of the big issues I'm finding in this role is... I don't know how you close off advocacy parents, with advocacy... It's never ending. There's always advocacy needs".

This advocate's reflection on the "never ending" nature of advocacy needs underscores the complexity and chronicity of the challenges many parents face. The sense of open-endedness and uncertainty around case closure highlights the tension between the time-limited, crisis-oriented model of advocacy and the enduring, multi-faceted nature of parents' support needs.

This tension is not unique to advocacy services, but reflects a wider challenge in social care of balancing the desire for clear, measurable outcomes with the realities of working with complex, fluid family situations (McGregor, 2014). In a context of scarce resources and pressure to demonstrate impact, there may be an organisational and commissioning impetus to "close cases" and focus on short-term, crisis-oriented interventions.

These excerpts demonstrate the complex, nonlinear nature of supporting parents who are involved in child care proceedings. While advocacy can yield transformative outcomes for many parents, others may require longer-term, flexible support to navigate the enduring challenges and emotional toll of separation from their children. The "pinch points" identified by advocates, such as the realisation that reunification may not be possible, underline the importance of sustained, attuned advocacy to help parents process painful realities and stay engaged in their children's lives.

6.2.4 Theme 4: Organisational Support and Relationships

The interviews shed light on the crucial role of organisational culture, supervision, and multidisciplinary relationships in enabling effective parental advocacy. Advocates consistently emphasised the value of Barnardos' supportive ethos and structures.

Advocate 2 echoed the importance of managerial support and reflective supervision:

"our manager is very hands-on and very aware of the kind of level of trauma of the people that we're working with and the impact that we have on them... It's basically a space to talk through, well, how I use it to talk through kind of my case. What's working, what isn't working so well. Are there any cases that maybe need to be looked at differently or, you know, trying to manage it with me to face, you know, I have to try to consider closing it, you know, from my least favourite thing to do".

The advocate's appreciation of their manager's "hands-on" approach and awareness to the emotional impact of the work, suggests a high level of responsiveness. The description of supervision as a "space to talk through" cases and reflect on what is and isn't working well aligns with best practice principles of reflective supervision (Earle et al., 2017). By providing a regular, protected time for advocates to process their experiences, puzzle through challenges, and explore alternative approaches, supervision can play a vital role in promoting critical reflection and continuous learning.

The advocate's reference to their manager being "very aware of the kind of level of trauma of the people that we're working with" suggests a trauma-informed approach to supervision and support. This is crucial in a context where advocates are routinely exposed to stories of loss, harm, and adversity, which can take a significant toll on their own wellbeing (Knight, 2013).

By acknowledging the potential for secondary trauma and creating a safe space for advocates to process their emotional responses, the manager models a stance of self-care and reflective practice. This can help to normalise the challenges of the work and encourage advocates to prioritise their own wellbeing, rather than falling into patterns of overwork or self-neglect.

These examples demonstrate how regular team meetings, manager check-ins, and reflective supervision create a holding environment for advocates to process the emotional complexity of their role. The scattered nature of the team underscores the importance of creating intentional spaces for peer support and cohesion. Supervision emerges as a critical forum for reviewing cases, identifying challenges, and ensuring advocates feel contained and resourced in their practice.

However, advocates also identified areas for enhancement in organisational support, particularly around the management of waiting lists and caseloads. Advocate 1 noted:

"we've got quite a big case load at the minute and new referrals are coming in and you're one advocate".

This excerpt sheds light on the pressures advocates face in managing high caseloads alongside the unpredictable, drawn-out timescales of care proceedings. The example of a case taking over three years to reach a full care order hearing, with another potentially facing a similar delay, illustrates the slowness and complexity of the legal process.

For the advocate, this creates a challenging dynamic of trying to provide continuity of support to existing parents while also responding to new referrals. The sense of being a "one advocate" dealing with a mounting caseload, points to the resourcing constraints facing the service and the risk of advocates becoming overwhelmed or spread too thinly. This echoes wider concerns in the literature about the high workloads and emotional demands placed on practitioners in the child protection field (Antonopoulou et al., 2017). When caseloads become unmanageable, there is a risk that the quality and intensity of support provided to each parent may be diluted, leading to more superficial or reactive interventions.

Moreover, working with such high levels of need and demand can take a significant toll on advocates' own wellbeing, increasing the risk of stress, burnout, and compassion fatigue (Figley, 2002; Bloomquist, et al., 2015). This underscores the importance of organisations having robust systems in place to monitor and manage workloads, and to ensure that advocates have access to regular supervision, support, and opportunities for respite.

Advocate 2 echoed the challenge of managing long-term cases alongside incoming referrals:

"And you don't see how these parents would close, because even if things and parents are very different levels of need. And I have some that I would hear from every week and there's a lot of stuff going on; parents have a lot of like... there's a lot of dysregulation. So, they really struggle to manage anything".

These excerpts point to the systemic pressures and resource constraints that can impact advocates' ability to provide timely, sustained support to all parents who need it. The protracted nature of court proceedings, coupled with the high level of need among many parents, creates a complex dynamic of managing acute crises alongside long-term, open-ended casework.

Advocates' reflections suggest a need for further consideration of caseload weighting, allocation procedures, and pathways for closing or transferring cases to ensure the service can meet ongoing demand.

Advocates' accounts also provided insight into the facilitators and barriers to effective working relationships with other professionals. Many noted how their prior experience and reputation in their localities enabled them to forge strong connections. Advocate 1 shared:

"I deal a lot with the social workers that I would have already been dealing with in my previous role. So, I think that has helped. I think the thing... now, there was a little bit of a juggle at the start for them to, I suppose, understand advocacy and what, what were the limits of it"

Advocate 4 described how her background facilitated buy-in from other professionals:

"Yes, and I think initially, when I started, I was worried that people wouldn't refer, because they would be worried that it would create more work for them or they'd have to be really careful and cross their T's and dot their I's. But.. that hasn't been the case actually. I think the service has been really welcomed and I actually think it's reduced the workload of social workers in that they no longer need to go and meet the parent maybe to do the child care parents review forms. I now will dial into a teleconference with a parent, I will now prepare a parent for a meeting, whereas, they were trying to do that, on top of everything else before".

These examples suggest that advocates' prior connections and credibility within their professional networks served as an important foundation for establishing the legitimacy and value of the PAIS service. By demonstrating how advocacy could complement and even alleviate demands on other professionals, advocates were able to foster greater openness and collaboration. However, some advocates also encountered initial wariness or resistance from certain stakeholders. Advocate 2 noted:

"I think we've had resistance from maybe social work itself, from Tusla itself.. Usually it's okay, but we're not getting direct referral from Tusla. And my sense of it is that the Tusla officers, that we would link with here, are not informing families about our service".

Advocate 3 underscored the importance of clear role boundaries in fostering effective professional relationships:

" when you have a good working relationship, when people see that your work is of a good quality and that you understand the boundaries of your role I suppose, that really makes a big difference. There's an awful lot of people working on the peripheries with families where the courts are involved and because they don't really have an understanding necessarily of the child protection system here or the way the courts work, their involvement isn't always hugely helpful

because they're not always given the right advice or understanding the purpose of different meetings and things like that and it can lead to more conflict rather than less".

These contrasting experiences highlight the ongoing work of building understanding and buy-in for the advocacy role among professionals. Resistance from some social work teams may reflect concerns about the impact of advocacy on established power dynamics and ways of working. Advocate 3's reflections suggest that demonstrating professional competence, reliability, and clarity about the remit of advocacy is critical for assuaging such concerns and establishing advocates as valued partners within the system.

6.2.5 Theme 5: Advocate Challenges and Strategies

Advocates shared candidly about the complex challenges they encountered in their practice and the strategies they employed to navigate these. Maintaining clear boundaries with parents emerged as an ongoing area of negotiation. Advocate 1 noted:

"I mean, like I do have parents coming in that are homeless. I have parents coming in that have mental health issues, addiction issues. So, it is difficult at times to focus them on what their advocacy needs are... And I think, definitely, a learning curve for me has been my boundaries around... because you could get pulled into housing. You can get pulled into, you know, kind of other, you know, other... like a therapist, you know, that kind of thing. Housing is kind of the main thing really. And, you know, like a social welfare payment or that kind of thing, you know? And you could get pulled into that and just being about really clear about what your advocacy role is. And that just does take sometimes, a lot of repetition with a parent".

Advocate 2 echoed the importance of transparent limit-setting:

"I think once you're clear about the boundaries, parents do, I think that, you know, they do understand that, you know? And they will say, oh, that's fine".

These excerpts illustrate the complex web of needs and challenges that many parents involved with child protection services face. From homelessness to mental health difficulties to addiction, these intersecting issues can create a perfect storm of vulnerability and crisis that can quickly overwhelm both parents and professionals.

For advocates, there can be a constant pull to step in and try to address these wider issues,

particularly when they are so clearly impacting on parents' ability to engage with child care proceedings. The advocate's reference to feeling like they could get "pulled into" housing or social welfare issues points to the emotional and practical pressure to go above and beyond the remit of the advocacy role.

This pressure is understandable given the high stakes involved and the frequent lack of other supports available to parents. When faced with a parent who is struggling to meet their basic needs or maintain their mental health, it can feel impossible or even unethical to focus solely on their "advocacy needs" in relation to child protection.

However, the advocate's recognition of the need for clear boundaries and role definition points to the risks of over-extending or blurring the lines of advocacy. By taking on too many issues or straying into the territory of other professionals, advocates risk losing focus, clarity and credibility in their core role.

Moreover, by attempting to be all things to all parents, advocates may inadvertently disempower or deskill them in managing their own affairs. The advocate's reference to needing "a lot of repetition with a parent" about what advocacy can and cannot do suggests the importance of consistent, transparent communication to manage expectations and maintain boundaries.

This is not to suggest that advocates should simply ignore or dismiss parents' wider struggles, but rather that they need to be clear and strategic in how they respond to them. This might involve providing information, signposting or referrals to other services, while still maintaining a primary focus on the child protection issues at hand.

It may also involve advocating for a more holistic, coordinated approach to supporting parents across different domains, rather than trying to take on everything themselves. By highlighting the links between parents' wider needs and their engagement with child protection services, advocates can help to build a case for more integrated, multi-disciplinary support.

However, the advocate's acknowledgement that boundary-setting can be a "learning curve" also points to the emotional and practical challenges of this work. As such, there may be a need for more explicit training, guidance and supervision around boundary management in advocacy work. This could involve exploring common boundary dilemmas, role-playing difficult conversations, and providing a safe space for advocates to reflect on their own emotional responses and coping strategies.

Engaging with parents from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds also posed distinct challenges, as Advocate 4 shared. Illustrating the multiple, intersecting barriers that parents from minority ethnic and linguistic backgrounds can face in accessing advocacy and participating in the child protection system more broadly:

"Yes, yeah. So, I... yeah, so that's actually a huge challenge is working with parents who's English isn't their first language and because obviously we don't have interpreters, I'm working with one Hungarian lady and I'm so lucky that our administrator is Hungarian. So, she's my interpreter and a lot of the time, like, I suppose with advocacy, you'll have a parent text to you and they won't have English. You can't respond to that, because you need to start then and doing the Google translate you need an interpreter, and we don't have funding for interpretation in the service. So we've to try to get Tusla, the child family agency to fund the interpreter and I think it just limits... and how quickly you can respond to something with a parent... it's a huge barrier even in court. Like, I've one lady in court and she had said, 'I don't want that interpreter, I don't really understand them' and they were like well, that's the court interpreter, that's who you get. I thought, oh my god that's awesome because, like, yeah this is huge. It was a full hearing actually, for her children and she was saying because, I think where this lady is from in Hungary, there's different kind of dialect".

This example underscores the systemic barriers that can impede advocates' ability to provide timely, effective support to parents from diverse communities. The lack of dedicated interpreting resources within the service, coupled with the rigidity of court interpreting arrangements, created significant obstacles to meaningful communication and participation for this parent. Advocate 4's account highlights the pressing need for greater linguistic inclusivity and flexibility within both the PAIS service and the wider legal system to ensure equitable access and outcomes for all families.

Advocates also reflected on the emotional toll of supporting parents in such high-stakes, emotive circumstances. Advocate 4 shared:

"I think just... you are working with parents who are so traumatised and it's the type of job where there's very little happiness in, because it's all kind of doom and gloom. These parents have lost their children, or their children are about to go, you know. I find that difficult and it's really hard to sit with.... ,

This candid account lays bare the potential for vicarious trauma, as well as the emotional labour inherent in parental advocacy. Bearing witness to parents' profound loss, distress, and struggle on a daily basis may take a heavy psychological toll. Advocate 4's reflections underscore the critical importance of robust support systems – both within and outside the organisation – to help advocates process the pain they absorb and maintain their own wellbeing.

Moreover, the advocate's reference to working with parents with "bad mental health, addiction issues, criminality and the usual kind of stuff" points to the complex, multi-layered nature of the challenges many families face. These are not isolated or easily solved problems, but often the product of longstanding, systemic disadvantage and marginalisation.

For advocates, trying to support parents to navigate the child protection system while also grappling with these entrenched difficulties can be a daunting and sometimes overwhelming task. The emotional labour of holding space for parents' pain, while also maintaining hope and professionalism, can take a significant toll over time.

This points to the crucial importance of robust support systems for advocates themselves, to help them process and cope with the vicarious trauma they may absorb in their work. Regular supervision, debriefing opportunities, and access to counselling or other forms of self-care should be seen as essential component of advocacy provision.

Advocates shared how they sought to maintain boundaries and safeguard their own resilience in this emotive work. Advocate 4 explained:

"I'm very good. I don't turn my phone on till nine and I turn it off at five o'clock, on the button and... yeah, I'm very... boundary during that. Kids myself I have to go home. I have to switch off and be a mommy and [she's clean] and I cook and on all that kind... so it is hard around, you know. A lot of the time you might get a lunch break or something like that, that can be difficult and... but in general, nine to five is my hours on my days and Monday to Friday and that's it".

However, she also acknowledged the pull to remain responsive to parents in crisis:

"I think I waver or... like I suppose... and let's say I was booked in for annual leave and I had a parent whose child was being removed from the hospital into care, I would give up my annual leave day for that. You know, it depends because, I suppose in my experience, in this role, actually, that's one big challenge, is when babies are removed from the hospital from parents".

These contrasting examples encapsulate the constant negotiation of boundaries in advocacy work. While clear structures and limits around working hours and availability are essential for advocates' self-preservation, there can be times when the acute needs of parents in crisis take precedence. Advocate 4's account suggests that having the flexibility and autonomy to make these judgement calls, based on the specifics of each situation, is an important element of responsive, parent-centred practice.

6.2.6 Theme 6: Recommendations for Improvement

Advocates offered various insights into how the PAIS service could be strengthened and expanded to better meet the needs of parents and families. A dominant theme was the importance of greater awareness-raising and publicity to reach more parents who could benefit. Advocate 1 noted:

"I think. But, along with that piece of like... having, like, more people on the ground to the advocates. But, I also think, just that will... communication piece, you know, and just... I think getting the information out there to parents".

This highlights the advocate's view that increasing the visibility and accessibility of the service is just as important as expanding its capacity through additional staffing. The reference to needing "more people on the ground" suggests a recognition that the current team is stretched and that there is unmet need for advocacy support among the parent population.

However, the advocate's emphasis on the "communication piece" and "getting the information out there to parents" points to the crucial role of outreach and promotion in ensuring that parents are aware of, and able to access, the service. This aligns with research showing that lack of knowledge about available supports is a common barrier to engagement among marginalised families (Lalayants, 2021).

Indeed, the fact that the service is still relatively new and unfamiliar to many in the field underscores the importance of ongoing efforts to raise awareness and build relationships with potential referrers and service users.

Several advocates emphasised the need for greater geographical spread of the service. Advocate 3 shared:

"I wish we had bigger catchment area... We miss so many referrals from other catchments and it's real shame, so... yeah. I wish we covered more of an area and I know certainly social workers

and solicitors who are referring into us, get quite annoyed when we say, can I really contact that one... you know, I mean I just... Yeah".

These examples point to a significant unmet need for parental advocacy beyond the confines of the current service area. Advocates' experiences of having to turn away referrals underline the importance of strategic expansion to ensure equitable access for all parents who could benefit from support.

Advocates also highlighted the importance of embedding parental participation at every level of the service. Advocate 1 suggested:

"And I do think, while... While verbally, there's a lot of talk about kind of trauma being trauma informed and trauma, like, we're... we're seeing a lot of parents who have been care experienced in themselves. You know, it's... it's more unusual in our field that... that the parent hasn't gone through care. ...Within a couple of weeks, they're suddenly talking about, "I was in care or I was", you know, and...I just... we verbally talk about it, but I think, kind of, society... you know what I mean? And just like, things like... courts, things like. You know? Just that piece around being trauma informed and actually understanding what does that look like for a parent?"

This reflection suggests that integrating the voices and experience of parents with lived experience of the care system is essential for creating a truly trauma-informed service. By centring parents' perspectives in the design, delivery, and evaluation of the service, PAIS can ensure it remains responsive to the unique needs and challenges of this group.

Finally, advocates stressed the limitations of advocacy alone in meeting the complex needs of many parents and called for greater investment in holistic, therapeutic supports. Advocate 4 noted:

"I think advocacy is really important, but I think... it's a small drop in the ocean of what these parents need, you know. I think they need an entire therapeutic service built around them. A lot of them are parents, who have grown up in care themselves. Have experienced huge trauma and I think they see, I suppose, when a child goes into care, the child has a social worker, the foster parents have a social worker and they nearly see you as their social worker. But actually, my role is very limited".

Then expanded on her vision for a more integrated service model:

"I think it's... and I think it's really useful. I think I would... like additional services, I suppose for

parents, like... that whole support for these parents and I would like to broaden our role outside of advocacy. So, like, that kind of self-care stuff for the parent; emotional regulation stuff, you know? And it all feeds into advocacy, anyway, because you're preparing them for meetings; preparing them for access with their child, all that kind of stuff. So that would be my biggest thing. I would hope it's the start of a bigger journey".

These insightful recommendations point to the need for a more expansive, multi-faceted conception of parental advocacy that extends beyond crisis intervention to encompass longer-term therapeutic healing and capacity-building. By investing in parents' emotional resilience, coping skills, and self-care, alongside the more traditional remit of advocacy, PAIS could play a vital role in disrupting intergenerational cycles of trauma and system involvement.

6.3 Conclusion

This thematic analysis has focused on the experiences, challenges, and aspirations of the PAIS staff as they work to support parents within the child protection system in Ireland. Through their reflections, advocates have illuminated the potential of parental advocacy to amplify parents' voices, build their confidence and skills, and foster more collaborative relationships with professionals. The centrality of trust, transparency, and empathy in advocates' practice emerges as a golden thread, underlining the importance of relational, parent-centred ways of working.

However, advocates' accounts also point to the systemic barriers and resource constraints that can hinder the reach and impact of advocacy. The complex, intersecting nature of parents' needs – from housing insecurity to linguistic diversity – requires an adaptive, interdisciplinary service response that extends beyond the traditional bounds of advocacy. Advocates' calls for greater investment in therapeutic supports, alongside the core advocacy offer, suggest a reimagining of the service's remit and potential.

The challenges of managing vicarious trauma and boundary negotiations also emerge as a key theme, highlighting the critical importance of robust supervision, self-care, and organisational containment in facilitating sustainable advocacy practice. As the service expands and evolves, maintaining a reflective, relational organisational culture that prioritises staff wellbeing will be essential.

This analysis underscores the vital importance of parental advocacy within a system that has historically marginalised and disempowered parents. By bearing witness to parents' struggles,

hopes, and resilience, advocates play a crucial role in further humanising the child protection process and asserting parents' fundamental dignity and right to participation. As the PAIS service continues to grow and shape its identity, staying true to these core values of empathy, respect, and partnership will be key to realising its transformative potential.

Moving forward, integrating parents' own voices and expertise into every facet of the service – from design to delivery to evaluation – emerges as an continuing priority. By modelling the kind of inclusive, collaborative ethos it seeks to foster within the wider system, PAIS can lead the way in reshaping child protection practice around the lived realities and wisdom of those most directly affected. Embracing this participatory, rights-based vision of advocacy will be critical to achieving better outcomes for parents, children, and families across Ireland.

6.4 Analysis of Professional's Interviews

This chapter presents a thematic analysis of interviews conducted with various professionals, including social workers, Guardians ad Litem (GALs), and a child care review conference chairperson, who have experience working with the PAIS. The analysis aims to explore their perspectives on the role of parental advocacy, the impact of the service, and areas for improvement. By examining the insights of these professionals, we seek to gain a more comprehensive understanding of how PAIS operates within the broader child protection system and its potential to support vulnerable families.

The analysis is structured around six main themes that emerged from the interviews: 1) Perceptions of the Advocacy Role; 2) Consideration of Parents' Voices; 3) Power Dynamics and Relationships; 4) Organisational and Contextual Factors; 5) Challenges and Collaborative Approaches; and 6) Perceptions of Advocacy Outcomes. Each theme is explored in-depth, drawing on relevant quotes from the participants to illustrate key points. The analysis also aims to situate the findings within the broader literature on parental advocacy, highlighting areas of convergence and divergence.

6.4.1 Theme 1: Perceptions of the Advocacy Role

Participants shared their understanding of the key functions and responsibilities of PAIS advocates, as well as their experiences of working collaboratively with them. Many emphasised the importance of advocates in supporting parents to navigate the complex child protection system and ensuring their rights and wishes are represented.

Professional 7, described the advocate's role in humanising parents and mediating with professionals:

"And in both those cases, the parent advocate is really good at, in almost like a liaison now, not, not negotiator, you know, or mediator, but like she will come with the parent to meetings and make notes. And, you know, particularly one where the woman is actually quite mentally unwell. She's able to go back and say, well, actually what we agreed was X, Y and Z. But equally with the social worker and say, no, no, no, you didn't say that. This is what she said".

They also highlighted the advocate's role in supporting fathers, who may be marginalised in the process:

"In the other cases, one is a dad. And again, dads are often pushed out to the side still. And she's very good at supporting him in his role as a father who wants to have an involvement in his child's life".

Professional 3, emphasised the advocate's role in explaining processes and supporting parents:

"It's kind of, it's like social work for the parents. Sometimes they will know that's probably not what it should be. But like [XXX] is just brilliant. And we'll go through everything with that man. And come to all the meetings and things like that".

Another professional provided a concrete example of collaborative working with the advocate:

"And like with one case that we have together, we work quite closely. Dad and Mom is, she was in care herself and she's just had a completely raw deal. And [XXX] has helped this mom so much. She went, two of her children are in care and then she has one at home".

(Professional 3)

Professional 5, highlighted an advocate's role in empowering parents and facilitating their involvement:

"The strengths, as I said earlier, [are] the support to facilitate the mother to attend meetings with Tusla and feel a little bit more empowered... and ensuring that she was heard and that her views and her perspective was taken on board and respected".

Professional 5 also noted the importance of an advocate's independence:

"Even though I'm a very independent person of Tusla, it's difficult for a parent to sometimes understand that... they would view me very much as another power-wielding, state-appointed person".

These quotes illustrate the multifaceted nature of the advocacy role, which encompasses emotional support, practical guidance, and facilitating parents' participation in decision-making processes. The advocates' ability to build trust, explain complex information, and mediate between parents and professionals emerges as a crucial aspect of their work. Their independence from the statutory system is also seen as vital for establishing credibility with parents.

Professional 4, a child protection social worker, echoed the importance of advocates' flexibility and availability:

"Yeah, they're always available. My experiences have been that they've always been available, always been there to make the time and often we might say look are you around on such or such a day, no can we do this day instead, yes, we can. So, if they're not available it's just changing it up a few hours or an extra day and we made it work".

These insights point to the delicate balance advocates must strike between empowering parents and maintaining a child-centred focus. Maintaining clear boundaries and open communication with all parties emerges as vital for effective collaboration. The agility and responsiveness of advocates in meeting parents' needs is also seen as a key strength.

6.4.2 Theme 2: Consideration of Parents' Voices

The interviews explored the extent to which parents' views are incorporated into decision-making processes, and the impact of advocates in amplifying their voices. Participants shared mixed experiences, with some noting significant improvements in parental engagement, while others highlighted ongoing challenges.

Professional 7, described the transformative impact of advocacy on one mother's participation:

"In this conference, she did storm off, but the advocate went with her and she came back a minute later and apologised, and I think that was vital. It's vital that she was there to hear the

concerns all these professionals have. Actually, when the court ordered that the child go into care, she was prepared in a way that she wasn't the first time".

Professional 7 contrasted this with experiences in areas without parental advocacy:

"It is dependent on the chair. It's very much dependent on the chair, but I've been at these meetings because like, so most of my work ... they don't have a parental advocacy system at all. So in those areas, there's almost like a vilification at times of the parent, you know. And I think the advocate is really helpful in humanising the parent, you know".

Professional 5, echoed the importance of advocates in facilitating parents' attendance and contributions:

"So, to actually have the mother come to the table around planning meetings for her daughter was a major step forward in that case. Also, to even to get her to the table and get her to talk without shouting and to have somebody to support her to get across what she wanted to say in a coherent way".

Professional 1 highlighted the impact on parents' meeting attendance:

"I mean one is where a parent comes to meetings now and they didn't before so they wouldn't come to any meetings about their child and they will come now. That is, that is a really good outcome for a child. Does it mean the child will go home? Maybe not. Does it mean we have those parents, that child's parents' views, throughout the course of their child's life, hopefully so... and that's massive".

These examples demonstrate the significant difference advocates can make in ensuring parents' perspectives are heard and considered. As viewed by professionals within the child protection sector, by providing emotional support, practical guidance, and a consistent presence, advocates help parents to overcome barriers to engagement and assert their views. This can lead to more informed, collaborative decision-making that takes account of the family's needs and wishes.

However, some participants also noted ongoing challenges in fully incorporating parents' voices. One social worker acknowledged the inherent power imbalance that can still exist:

"100 percent... we do everything we can to consider parents' views... we have huge empathy for a lot of the parents we work with. "We're working with a lot of these families who are victims of years of government policy which has left them... with no infrastructure and with no ability to raise their children safely".

(Professional 2)

Professional 5 observed:

"I'd say it's mixed. I would say that some professionals don't see a place for parents or for advocates for parents in the care proceedings for children. I think it complicates the matter needlessly... It is probably an energy and a resource issue more than anything".

These reflections suggest that while advocacy can make a significant difference at an individual level, broader systemic and attitudinal changes may be necessary to truly embed parental participation. Historical marginalisation and resource constraints can create barriers to meaningfully consideration of parents' voices. Continuing to raise awareness of the value of parental involvement and ensuring the advocacy service is adequately supported to meet demand may help to address these challenges over time.

6.4.3 Theme 3: Power Dynamics and Relationships

Participants reflected on the impact of advocates in shifting power imbalances between parents and professionals, and in facilitating more constructive working relationships. Many noted the significant power differential that can exist, and the role of advocates in helping to level the playing field.

Professional 2 acknowledged the inherent power imbalance:

"There is a thousand percent a position of power because we have in many cases taken or... are threatening to take... their child".

They went on to suggest that advocacy can help to mitigate this:

"I think if an advocate helps parents perceive that they have an extra layer or feel a little stronger going into the meeting, that can only be a good thing".

Professional 3, described how the advocate's support had improved communication with a parent:

"But I do see, I do see the strengths in the cases with advocacy done with it. You know, and that's why I'm constantly pushing and trying to get the parents to get like involved with the Barnardos and the advocacy because, I could see how much it helps like... that. In that case that we work really closely with them. Things are going fantastic, right now and I do believe it's a lot to do with the advocacy".

Professional 6 emphasised the advocate's different relational approach:

"I think an advocate can approach it in a completely different way... I probably come across as the authoritarian person or whatever, whereas they have a different way to approach them and try and help them... so I think it's a positive".

Professional 4, noted how the advocate could mediate tensions:

"When the parent was... I'm not going to say blow up, but maybe getting a little bit aggressive a little bit annoyed, a little bit mad, the advocacy worker was able to maybe relieve the tension in the room".

These excerpts highlight the critical role advocates can play in rebalancing power and ensuring parents feel supported to participate on a more equal footing. By providing a consistent, independent presence and facilitating parents' understanding and engagement, advocates help to create conditions for more collaborative working relationships. Their distinct relational approach, grounded in empathy and respect for parents' experiences, can be a powerful complement to the statutory authority of social workers.

However, some participants also noted the challenges of managing complex relationship dynamics. Professional 7, shared an example of how the advocate had to assert clear boundaries:

"For a while I felt she was almost becoming like a mediator, and I felt that that shouldn't be, but actually she herself flagged it up and said, 'look, that's not my role. I am advocate, not a mediator'".

Professional 5, reflected on the tension advocates may face in navigating boundaries and supporting parents while remaining mindful of the child's safety:

"The advocate comes into the situation and is hugely supportive of the parent and can't give any indication, I'd say, of an opinion on the safety of the child. So... I think to get your head around that as an advocate... maybe you just have to work in that silo. I'm here for the parent and that's it".

These insights underscore the skilled relational work required of advocates in navigating competing needs and perspectives. Maintaining clear boundaries, both in terms of the advocate's role and professional relationships, is crucial for effective collaboration. Open, honest communication to address any tensions or misunderstandings that arise also emerges as vital. Some participants contrasted the PAIS approach with other advocacy models that could be more adversarial. Professional 7 shared:

"So there's a charity... and they have a parental advocate, but that person is very adversarial. [They] arrive into meetings, you know, talking about my clients' rights and stuff like that... And that's not to me what advocacy should be at all, you know".

This comparison highlights the importance of the advocate's stance and approach in shaping the tone of professional interactions. An adversarial or confrontational style may reinforce rather than disrupt power imbalances, whereas PAIS advocates' more collaborative, solution-focused approach seems to foster greater trust and openness.

Ultimately, the interviews suggest that skilled parental advocacy can be a powerful tool for rebalancing power dynamics and fostering more constructive alliances between parents and professionals. By modelling respect, transparency, and a willingness to understand all perspectives, advocates can help to humanise the system and centre parents' dignity. Ongoing reflection and dialogue to navigate the inherent tensions and complexities of the role will be vital as the service develops.

6.4.4 Theme 4: Organisational and Contextual Factors

The interviews shed light on various organisational structures and contextual factors that can support or hinder the work of parental advocacy. Participants highlighted issues of resourcing, service availability, and inter-agency working as key considerations.

Many emphasised the importance of adequate resourcing and staffing to ensure the advocacy service can meet the level of need. Professional 7, noted the limited reach of the current service:

"There's only one advocate, so it can only be spread so far. I mean, to me, it's something that should be rolled out and resourced".

Professional 5, echoed concerns about advocates' capacity:

"In terms of advocacy.....I think that the expectations of one worker in one county with the amount of children in care are.....huge".

Professional 4, also noted the need for more advocates to manage the workload:

"It would relieve a lot of the workload for that one worker who I know is busy and is doing a fantastic job, like, but obviously two hands are better than one, you know, so if there could be more resources and more advocacy workers available, then by all means yes, definitely have that in place".

These quotes underscore the need for the advocacy service to be scaled up and adequately staffed to meet demand.

Participants also highlighted the importance of clear referral pathways and processes. Professional 3, noted some confusion around how parents access the service:

"It's not clear to me. [The advocate] has given me the information, but I just haven't read itI just go... and give a leaflets to people. Because they'd be self-referable, like they have to want {the advocate's} help.....But they have to remain aware of that, I guess, in the first instance and I'm not too sure if they're made aware when their kids come into care".

Professional 4, described their understanding of the referral process:

"At our offices will be closely engaged with Barnardos as a service as an organisation. We would go to court quite a bit, Barnardos will be linked in with a lot of parents that we would work with as well. When we go to court they would offer their services to parents then we can send in a referral to the advocacy worker".

These excerpts suggest a need for greater clarity and consistency in how parents are informed about and referred to the advocacy service. Ensuring all relevant professionals are aware of the service and can confidently signpost parents may help to increase uptake. Formalising referral pathways and developing accessible information materials for parents could also support more

equitable access.

The importance of strong inter-agency relationships and communication also emerged as a key theme. Professional 4, described their collaborative working relationship with the advocate:

"If I was going out to the parents, I would tell the advocacy worker, I might call out to the parent once every two weeks and I'd tell the advocacy worker that I'm calling out there, are you around to be present as well?... And then they would attend the advocacy worker and that parent had a really, really good relationship and the parent would have liked the advocacy worker present at all times".

These examples illustrate the value of regular communication and coordination between advocates and other professionals. By keeping each other informed of developments and working together to support parents' participation, advocates and social workers can provide a more coherent, joined-up service. Establishing clear protocols for information sharing and collaborative working may help to embed this approach.

However, some participants also noted the challenges of inter-agency working, particularly around managing confidentiality and professional boundaries. Professional 7, shared:

"If I was to step back and just look at a service, a generic service without the personality involved, I would perhaps want to know if there was an issue, how, because I've no idea. But like if I had an issue with an advocate, what do I do with that? Who do I approach? I've no idea of the line management, complaints, procedures".

This reflection suggests a need for greater transparency around the governance and accountability structures of the advocacy service. Ensuring all stakeholders are clear on the advocate's role, the boundaries of confidentiality, and processes for raising any concerns could support more effective inter-professional collaboration.

Finally, some participants highlighted the importance of considering the organisational independence and ethos of the advocacy provider. Professional 7, noted Barnardos' positive reputation:

" ... we have our own issues around mother and baby homes, but Barnardos is not associated with that. So, I think it's held in high regard. And they also regularly come out and have a go at

the government around social policy. And that's beneficial as well".

This observation suggests that the perceived independence and trustworthiness of the advocacy organisation can lend credibility to the service. Barnardos track record of championing children's rights and challenging government policy seems to bolster confidence in the integrity of the PAIS model. As the service expands, maintaining a clear values-base and operational independence from the statutory system will be important.

6.4.5 Theme 5: Collaborative Working

Participants shared insights into the challenges they faced when working with advocates and parents, as well as strategies for effective collaboration. Managing complex family dynamics, maintaining role boundaries, and ensuring clear communication emerged as key issues.

Professional 7, shared an example of a particularly challenging case:

"So the only problem I'm aware of, and actually I think the advocate managed it well though, was a woman who had mental health problems, she had borderline personality disorder. So her situation kept on shifting in her mind, and she was very, very difficult to work with. And I could see the advocate trying to work very, very hard, but I don't think it was possible to meet this person's needs based on how ill she was, if that makes sense".

This excerpt illustrates the complex, unpredictable nature of some of the situations advocates and professionals must navigate together. It highlights the importance of advocates having strong relational and boundary-setting skills to manage these challenges effectively. Professional 7's observation that the advocate "managed it well" suggests skilful handling of a difficult dynamic. Participants also emphasised the importance of clear communication and information-sharing between advocates and other professionals. Professional 3, described how the advocate would keep them informed of developments:

"I would give {the advocate} a heads up. What I'm going to talk to mam about sometimes. If I can, or even if I get off the phone with mam, I might say, listen, I've had a really difficult phone call. And {the advocate} will kind of link in as well".

These examples demonstrate the value of proactive, transparent communication in coordinating support for parents. By keeping each other informed of developments and working together to plan interventions, advocates and social workers can provide a more coherent, responsive

service. Establishing clear protocols and expectations around information sharing emerges as an important enabler of effective collaborative practice.

Participants highlighted tensions that can arise when professionals and advocates have different perspectives on parents' progress. Professional 6 shared concerns about situations where advocates might present an overly optimistic view of parents' recovery from substance use issues, suggesting a disconnect between professional and advocate assessments:

"Some of my colleagues... get challenged... where I think maybe an advocate is saying, 'this person is clean... they're doing really well'... it can be a bit far-fetched maybe at times".

Professional 2 pointed to challenges around differing expectations when parents disengage, with advocates potentially maintaining more optimistic views than professionals about re-engagement possibilities:

"When you've got into a point where someone is disengaging, often the advocates have no more power to actually communicate with them. Then, I think at times their expectations are really unrealistic... not necessarily beneficial to any parent for a professional to enter a confrontation with the advocate".

These reflections highlight an important dynamic in advocacy work - the difference between professionals' assessments of absolute disengagement and advocates' ability to see continuing potential for engagement. While professionals may view certain behaviours as indicating definitive disengagement, advocates often maintain hope and continue seeking opportunities for re-connection. This difference in perspective, as evidenced in cases where parents maintain sporadic contact through advocates even when professionals have determined engagement has ended, points to the unique position advocates hold.

However, this also underscores the importance of ensuring all views are grounded in evidence, with clear documentation of both progress and challenges. Having protocols for professional dialogue about these different perspectives, supported by concrete examples and evidence, may help bridge these gaps in assessment while maintaining constructive working relationships.

Participants highlighted the complexities of maintaining service engagement with parents experiencing multiple challenges. Professional 1 noted:

"I have two parents who haven't formally disengaged, you know, when I meet them. No, no, I

want to meet them. I will arrange to meet, you know, they want to meet with their advocates, but they just are extremely chaotic and so I haven't had anyone who has declined the service. Like those parents still have not asked their advocates to come off record. And I know when we're next in court, they will want them there. But the problem is they don't, the parents don't turn up themselves at the time".

This example illustrates a common challenge in advocacy work - the tension between parents' desire for support and their capacity to maintain consistent engagement. While parents value the advocacy service and want to maintain their connection (as evidenced by not formally disengaging and wanting advocates present at court), their complex circumstances can make regular attendance and participation difficult. The quote reveals how advocates must navigate unpredictable patterns of engagement, requiring flexibility in their approach to supporting parents whose lives may be characterised by instability or crisis. This suggests the need for advocacy services to develop strategies for maintaining connections with parents through periods of inconsistent engagement, while recognising that formal disengagement may not necessarily reflect a lack of desire for support.

Professional 1 reflected on how success in advocacy should be measured, challenging the notion that reunification should be the only marker of positive outcomes:

"I think it's really unreasonable to expect that of the parents we are working with. Like, if your successful outcome is reunification, should a successful outcome not be safety for everybody involved? So maybe the best place we're going to get to is parents having an OK relationship with foster carers, which I've seen advocates support that because they can be present at meetings. Parents being able to have conversations with social work departments. I think someone needs to have done a huge amount of work to get to a place of being able to do peer support".

This reflection highlights several important points about defining success in advocacy work. First, it suggests that while reunification might be an ideal outcome, focusing solely on this goal may be unrealistic and potentially overlook other meaningful achievements. Indeed, given the complexities and challenges that parents may face, reunification may not be possible and the safety and wellbeing of children must always remain at the centre of decision making. The professional identifies alternative positive outcomes, such as: Parents developing workable relationships with foster carers; Improved communication with social work departments; Enhanced safety for all involved parties.

The quote also briefly touches on peer advocacy, suggesting that the journey from service user to peer advocate requires significant personal development and healing. This indicates that while peer advocacy may have value, it requires careful consideration of readiness and capacity.

These excerpts highlight the range of views on what constitutes effective advocacy practice. While the one professional clearly favours the more collaborative, solutions-focused approach taken by PAIS, the other suggests that both peer and professional advocacy could have a role depending on the desired outcomes. As the PAIS model develops, ongoing reflection on the core purpose, values, and approach of the service will be important to ensure a coherent, consistent offer for families.

Finally, participants emphasised the importance of investing in strong working relationships and taking a collaborative approach to problem-solving. Professional 2, expressed a desire for closer strategic partnership working:

"I would like to see a greater collaboration... at a more governance level so they (advocates) could feed into what they're actually seeing as problematic".

Professional 6, echoed the value of a joined-up approach:

"If we as social workers use them in the right way and include them and work with them... maybe it would be a better all-round service... I'm very... inclusive or open and I want everybody involved as much as I can".

These reflections suggest an appetite for more strategic collaboration between the advocacy service and the statutory system. By coming together to share learning, identify challenges, and co-produce solutions, there may be potential to influence wider systemic change. Establishing forums for regular dialogue and partnership working at both operational and strategic levels could help to maximise the impact of the PAIS service.

6.4.6 Theme 6: Perceptions of Advocacy Outcomes

Participants shared their views on the impact of advocacy for the parents, children, and families they worked with. While acknowledging the challenges of attributing outcomes directly to advocacy, many noted promising signs of improved engagement and more child-centred decision-making.

Professional 7, emphasised the indirect benefits for children when their parents are better supported:

"So, I think that's really important on an ongoing process... And indirectly the children are too... I worry if it wasn't for something like {the advocate} that this mother would drift away because she'd be too alienated by the process. Her children need her in their lives still, you know".

For example, Professional 3, noted the positive changes they had observed in one mother's communication:

"Things are going fantastic for right now and I do believe it's a lot to do with the advocacy... if you've seen even the notes from that woman that I dealt with at the very beginning of this, and how she's communicating now is just completely different. And that's down to the advocacy and [XXX] and knowing that someone has her back. Because no one in her life has ever had her back".

Professional 5, shared a powerful example of advocacy contributing to a reunification outcome:

"Oh, well, look, we're working towards reunification of this child with her family. So that's a huge outcome, positive outcome in my view, that doesn't happen very often... So, I think if the advocate hadn't been involved, that potentially we may not have had that engagement, positive engagement with the parent, which is allowed an exploration or facilitated an exploration of wider family supports that could offer a home to this child".

These excerpts highlight the ripple effect that parental advocacy can have on children's outcomes. By supporting parents to engage more consistently and productively with services, advocates can help to keep children's needs at the centre and promote more collaborative planning. Improved parental communication and participation create conditions for more creative, individualised solutions, including considering wider family networks.

Some participants also highlighted the wider impact of advocacy on court processes and professional practices. Professional 7, noted:

"Like in Waterford, the legal team who worked for Tusla raved about the parental advocate because they can see the difference in hearings where there is an advocate involved compared to hearings where there isn't. So like as people who aren't involved in child, in the psychological side of child protection, they're involved in the legal side, but even they can see the difference

between families who are supported by an advocate versus families who aren't".

This observation suggests that advocacy can have a positive influence on the tone and outcomes of legal proceedings. By supporting parents to participate more effectively and work collaboratively with their solicitors and to engage effectively in court-related proceedings, advocates may help to reduce adversarial interactions and delays in the court process. More research to examine the specific impact of advocacy on care proceedings could be valuable.

6.5 Conclusion

This thematic analysis has provided a rich, nuanced insight into professionals' perceptions and experiences of working with the PAIS service in the Irish child protection system. By capturing the perspectives of social workers, GALs, and a care plan chairperson, the analysis offers a multi-dimensional view of the role, impact, and challenges of parental advocacy.

The interviews highlight the vital contribution of advocates in humanising the system and amplifying parents' voices. Through a combination of emotional support, practical guidance, and legal assistance, advocates help parents to navigate the complexities of child protection processes and participate more effectively in decision-making about their children. Concrete examples of improved parental engagement, more constructive working relationships, and enhanced child-centred planning illustrate the transformative potential of advocacy.

However, the analysis also underscores the complex, skilled nature of the advocacy role and the importance of clear boundaries, communication, and support structures. Advocates must constantly navigate ethical tensions, power dynamics, and interpersonal challenges in their efforts to empower parents while keeping children's needs within focus. Ensuring advocates have access to robust supervision, training, and peer support emerges as crucial for their wellbeing and effective practice.

Organisational and contextual factors also emerge as key enablers and barriers to the impact of the PAIS service. Participants emphasized the need for adequate resourcing, geographical reach, and integration with wider service provision to meet the level of demand and provide a holistic support offer for families. Developing clear referral pathways, information-sharing protocols, and opportunities for inter-agency collaboration were seen as vital for maximising the benefits of advocacy.

The analysis also points to the importance of a values-based, relationally oriented advocacy model. The emphasis on respect, empathy, understanding the impact of trauma, and empowerment that characterises the PAIS approach seems to be a key ingredient in building trust with parents and fostering more humane, participatory practice. Maintaining a clear ethical stance and operational independence from the statutory system, while still working collaboratively, appears to be an important balance to strike (albeit, a challenging one).

In terms of outcomes, the interviews suggest that advocacy can contribute to a range of positive changes for parents, children, and the wider system. From increased parental engagement and more individualised care planning to improved court processes and a more compassionate professional culture, the ripple effects of advocacy are evident. However, measuring and attributing these impacts remains challenging, particularly for the more intangible relational and emotional benefits.

As the PAIS service develops, ongoing evaluation and reflection will be crucial to build the evidence base and refine the model. Participants' insights suggest potential areas for enhancement, such as increasing capacity, developing specialised resources, and deepening strategic collaboration with the statutory system. Piloting and testing these adaptations, in close partnership with parents and practitioners, could help to identify the most impactful avenues for growth.

Fundamentally, this analysis underscores the importance of parental advocacy as a vehicle for systems change. By including parents' lived experiences, and working collaboratively to dismantle barriers to their participation, advocates challenge the power inequities and prejudices that have long pervaded child protection practice. As aptly expressed by Professional 5: *"I think any system or service that empowers parents, communities, and lessons that divide of power... is certainly worthwhile"*.

While there are no easy answers to the complex dilemmas and tensions inherent in child protection work, this analysis suggests that parental advocacy offers a vital framework for a more inclusive, humane, and socially just approach. By investing in the PAIS model and the wider development of advocacy services, there is potential to drive transformative change for families and the professionals that support them. As the service evolves, maintaining a steadfast commitment to parents' rights, children's needs, and the power of partnership will be critical to realising this vision.

Chapter 7: Logic Model development

This section presents a realist informed analysis of the Parental Advocacy and Information Service (PAIS), drawing on key themes and insights from the data discussed throughout the report. Realist evaluations seek to understand "*what works, for whom, in what circumstances, and how*" by examining the complex interactions between context, mechanisms, and outcomes (Pawson and Tilley, 1997). Through this lens, we aim to develop a nuanced understanding of how PAIS operates and generates change for parents involved with the child protection system.

The analysis is structured in two main phases. First, we present the initial programme theory (IPT) for PAIS, which comprises a series of conditional "*If-Then*" statements across five core themes: Relationship Building, Empowerment and Knowledge Transfer, System Navigation, Parent-Professional Interaction, and Operationalisation of Advocacy. These statements capture the hypothesised causal pathways through which PAIS produces its intended outcomes.

In the second phase, we refine the IPT by developing more detailed Context-Mechanism-Outcome (CMO) configurations. These configurations explore how specific advocacy mechanisms interact with diverse parent contexts to generate a range of outcomes. By unpacking these complex dynamics, we aim to provide a more granular understanding of PAIS's impact and the conditions that shape its effectiveness.

Finally, we present a logic model that synthesises the key inputs, mechanisms, and outcomes of the PAIS, as well as the assumptions, barriers, facilitators, and external factors that influence its operation. This model provides a visual summary of the programme theory and a framework for ongoing evaluation and improvement.

7.1 Phase 1: Initial Programme Theory Development for the PAIS

Drawing on identified interview themes, survey data, case study analysis and service data, the initial programme theory (IPT) for the PAIS comprises 22 conditional If-Then statements across five core themes: Relationship Building, Empowerment and Knowledge Transfer, System Navigation, Parent-Professional Interaction, and Operationalisation of Advocacy.

As a professional advocacy service, the PAIS differs from peer advocacy by incorporating a structured, formal approach to advocacy, grounded in professional training, boundaries, and

organisational affiliation. Professional advocates operate with established knowledge of child protection processes, which allows them to serve as credible and neutral intermediaries between parents and professionals, strengthening both trust-building and system navigation capacities.

7.1.1 If-Then Statements

In this phase, we outline the initial programme theory (IPT) for PAIS, capturing the hypothesised pathways to impact through a series of conditional If-Then statements. These statements reflect the programme's intended mechanisms across five core themes and lay the groundwork for further refinement.

Theme: Relationship Building

1. If advocates provide consistent, non-judgemental emotional support, then parents will feel emotionally validated and develop trust, which encourages them to share insights and express concerns openly with professionals which in turn will enable them to receive the individualised support they need.
2. If trauma-informed advocates build rapport with parents through empathetic, active listening, then parents will feel less isolated and more confident, which increases engagement with advocacy and child care proceedings services.
3. If advocates actively demystify the role of child protection services through open and honest discussions, then they reduce fears that parents have in relation to child protection professionals removing their children, fostering a more positive perception of child protection professionals. This in turn will lead to parents being more honest with child protection professionals.

Theme: Empowerment and Knowledge Transfer

4. If advocates simplify complex child protection language and processes, then parents will better understand their rights and feel more empowered to participate in discussions and decisions about their children.
5. If advocates provide tailored rights-based education to parents about their legal roles and entitlements, then parents will feel better equipped to advocate for their family's needs within child care proceedings

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6. If parents are supported in understanding the "why" behind specific interventions and care arrangements, then they will be more likely to accept and engage with the intervention process because they feel informed and involved.

Theme: System Navigation

7. If advocates guide parents through the complex child care proceedings system by attending meetings, explaining court procedures and orders, and outlining steps to reunification, then parents will gain the confidence to engage actively and make informed choices whilst navigating child care proceedings.
8. If parents have access to simplified, step-by-step guidance from advocates about navigating care orders, service access, and appeals and complaints processes, then they are more likely to feel a sense of agency in the child care proceedings, fostering higher satisfaction with outcomes.

Theme: Parent-Professional Interaction

9. If advocates act as intermediaries to bridge communication between parents and professionals, then parent-professional relationships will improve leading to parents being offered the support they really need to improve the lives of them and their children.
10. If advocates actively promote parents' voices in child care proceedings, then parents will feel valued and respected, leading to greater participation and transparency in the decision-making process.
11. If professionals view advocates as collaborative partners, then they will be more open to integrating parental perspectives into case discussions, promoting a cooperative, rather than adversarial, approach to child care proceedings.
12. If advocates model respectful, empathetic interactions with professionals, then this dynamic reduces adversarial tensions and sets the tone for a more constructive parent-professional relationship.

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13. If PAIS establishes a supportive organisational culture with regular advocate training and resources, then advocates will feel valued and perform effectively, leading to better advocacy outcomes.
 14. If the PAIS advocates undergo joint training with child protection professionals, then advocates can better understand professional perspectives, which enhances interprofessional respect and cooperation.
 15. If advocates provide trauma-informed, culturally sensitive support tailored to parents' needs, then parents are more likely to feel understood and accepted, which promotes a trusting and collaborative advocacy environment.

Theme: Collaboration and Interagency Work

16. If advocates establish regular communication channels with social workers and other professionals, then this leads to better coordination of support and more cohesive service delivery for parents.
17. If advocates participate in multi-agency meetings and case conferences, then parents' perspectives are more effectively integrated into decision-making processes across services.
18. If PAIS maintains clear professional boundaries while building collaborative relationships with other agencies, then this enhances trust and credibility with both parents and professionals.
19. If advocates share appropriate information with other professionals while maintaining client confidentiality, then this facilitates more informed and coordinated support planning.
20. If PAIS develops clear protocols for working with other agencies, then this reduces potential role confusion and promotes effective partnership working.
21. If advocates model respectful, collaborative approaches in their interactions with other professionals, then this contributes to a more constructive working environment across the system.

7.2 Phase 2: Programme Theory Refinement and CMO Configurations

Building on the IPT, this phase refines our understanding of how specific mechanisms interact with diverse parental contexts to generate a range of outcomes. The following Context-Mechanism-Outcome (CMO) configurations provide a more nuanced view of PAIS's mechanisms and their variable impacts across different situations.

7.2.1 Detailed CMO Configurations for PAIS

Theme: Relationship Building

1. If advocates provide consistent, non-judgmental emotional support, then parents will feel emotionally validated and develop trust, which encourages them to share insights and express concerns openly.
2. Context (C): Parents have experienced trauma and ongoing challenges which may have impacted their parenting, resulting in risks to child wellbeing and safety and are involved in child care proceeding.
 - Parents often feel judged, isolated, or mistrustful due to past negative experiences with child welfare and protection systems.
 - **Mechanism (M):** Advocates are trauma-informed and offer a non-judgemental, consistent presence, providing emotional validation and creating a safe space.
 - **Outcome (O):** Increased trust between parents and advocates; parents feel more comfortable expressing needs and concerns.
3. If trauma-informed advocates build rapport with parents through empathetic, active listening, then parents will feel less isolated and more confident, which increases engagement with advocacy and child care proceedings.
 - **Context (C):** Parents who have experienced social isolation or are sceptical of child welfare and protection systems.
 - **Mechanism (M):** Trauma-informed advocates actively listen and show empathy, building rapport and addressing the emotional needs of parents.
 - **Outcome (O):** Parents feel supported and more willing to engage with advocacy and child care proceedings.
4. If advocates actively demystify child care proceedings through non- confrontational discussions, then they reduce fears and stigma, fostering a more positive perception of child protection professionals.
 - **Context (C):** Parents harbour fears and stigma toward child protection services, often feeling intimidated or marginalised.
 - **Mechanism (M):** Advocates explain the role and limitations of child protection in clear, non-threatening language.
 - **Outcome (O):** Child safety and wellbeing remains at the centre of decision making.

parental fear and stigma is reduced; improved trust and openness toward child protection professionals.

Theme: Empowerment and Knowledge Transfer

5. If advocates simplify complex language and processes within child care proceedings, then parents will better understand their rights and feel more empowered to participate in discussions and decisions about their children.
 - **Context (C):** Parents who are unfamiliar with legal jargon and feel overwhelmed by the complexities of child care proceedings.
 - **Mechanism (M):** Advocates provide clear explanations and simplify language.
 - **Outcome (O):** Parents gain understanding and feel empowered to participate in child protection systems.
6. If advocates provide tailored rights-based education to parents about their legal roles and entitlements, then parents will feel better equipped to advocate for their family's needs within the child care proceedings.
 - **Context (C):** Parents have limited knowledge of their legal rights and may feel disenfranchised within child care proceedings.
 - **Mechanism (M):** Advocates educate parents about their legal rights, responsibilities, and entitlements in a personalised, accessible manner.
 - **Outcome (O):** Parents feel more knowledgeable and empowered to advocate for themselves and their families.
7. If parents are supported in understanding the “why” behind specific interventions and care arrangements, then they will be more likely to accept and engage with the intervention process because they feel informed and involved.
 - **Context (C):** Parents who feel alienated or confused by intervention decisions, leading to resistance.
 - **Mechanism (M):** Advocates explain the rationale behind interventions and care arrangements.
 - **Outcome (O):** Child safety and wellbeing is at the centre of decision making, Parents are more likely to accept and engage positively with interventions, feeling informed and respected.

Theme: System Navigation

8. If advocates guide parents through system navigation by attending meetings, explaining court procedures and orders, and outlining steps to reunification, then parents will gain the confidence to engage actively and make informed choices within child care proceedings.
 - **Context (C):** Parents who feel uncertain or intimidated about navigating the child protection system and legal requirements.
 - **Mechanism (M):** Advocates provide structured guidance and in-person support during critical meetings.
 - **Outcome (O):** Parents report increased confidence and feel equipped to engage actively within child care proceedings.
9. If parents have access to simplified, step-by-step guidance from advocates about navigating care orders, service access, and appeals, then they are more likely to feel a sense of agency within child care proceedings, fostering higher satisfaction with outcomes.
 - **Context (C):** Parents feeling overwhelmed or passive due to procedural complexity.
 - **Mechanism (M):** Advocates deliver step-by-step guidance and clarify processes in a structured way.
 - **Outcome (O):** Increased parental sense of agency and satisfaction with child protection interactions and outcomes.

Theme: Parent-Professional Interaction

10. If advocates act as intermediaries to bridge communication between parents and professionals, then parent-professional relationships will be more collaborative, with increased responsiveness from professionals to parental input.
 - **Context (C):** Historical mistrust and perceived power imbalances between parents and child protection professionals.
 - **Mechanism (M):** Advocates facilitate communication and present parental input in professional meetings.
 - **Outcome (O):** Improved collaboration, with professionals becoming more receptive to parental concerns and perspectives.

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11. If advocates actively promote parents' voices in child care proceedings, then parents will feel valued and respected, leading to greater participation and transparency in the decision-making process.
- **Context (C):** Parents feeling undervalued or sidelined within the decision-making process.
 - **Mechanism (M):** Advocates ensure that parental perspectives are included and respected in meetings.
 - **Outcome (O):** Increased parental participation and perceived transparency in decision-making.
12. If professionals view advocates as collaborative partners, then they will be more open to integrating parental perspectives into case discussions, promoting a cooperative, rather than adversarial, approach in child care proceedings.
- **Context (C):** Professionals accustomed to non-collaborative practices may initially resist integrating parental input.
 - **Mechanism (M):** Advocates maintain a collaborative approach, encouraging professionals to see them as partners.
 - **Outcome (O):** Greater professional openness to parental involvement and a shift toward cooperative decision-making.
13. If advocates model respectful, empathetic interactions with professionals, then this dynamic reduces adversarial tensions and sets the tone for a more constructive parent-professional relationship.
- **Context (C):** High-stakes interactions in child care proceedings often characterised by tension or conflict.
 - **Mechanism (M):** Advocates model respect and empathy in interactions with professionals.
 - **Outcome (O):** Reduced tension, more constructive communication, and strengthened parent-professional relationships.

Theme: Operationalisation of Advocacy

14. If the PAIS programme offers flexible support options (e.g., in-person, virtual, helpline), then more parents will engage, as the programme accommodates individual circumstances and needs.
- **Context (C):** Parents with varied schedules, access limitations, or unique needs may struggle with standard service models.
 - **Mechanism (M):** PAIS provides multiple support formats (virtual, in-person, one-to-one, information sharing etc.).
 - **Outcome (O):** Increased programme engagement, with parents able to participate in advocacy despite logistical constraints.
15. If the PAIS establishes a supportive organisational culture with regular advocate training and resources, then advocates will feel valued and perform effectively, leading to better advocacy outcomes.
- **Context (C):** Advocacy roles can be challenging and emotionally taxing, requiring a strong support structure.
 - **Mechanism (M):** Regular training, supervision, and resources are provided to advocates.
 - **Outcome (O):** Advocates feel supported, enhancing job satisfaction, reducing burnout? and effective advocacy delivery.
16. If the PAIS advocates undergo joint training with child care proceedings professionals, then advocates can better understand professional perspectives, which enhances interprofessional respect and cooperation.
- **Context (C):** Gaps in mutual understanding between advocates and professionals.
 - **Mechanism (M):** Joint training sessions to build mutual respect and shared knowledge.
 - **Outcome (O):** Strengthened advocate-professional cooperation, fostering better collaboration on cases.
17. If advocates provide trauma-informed, culturally sensitive support tailored to parents' needs, then parents are more likely to feel understood and accepted, which promotes a trusting and collaborative advocacy environment.
- **Context (C):** Parents who have experienced trauma and/or those from diverse cultural or socioeconomic backgrounds may feel misunderstood or judged.
 - **Mechanism (M):** Advocates use trauma-informed, culturally responsive approaches, respecting each parent's unique context.

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- **Outcome (O):** Increased trust in advocates, with parents feeling more understood and willing to engage.

Theme: Collaboration and Interagency Work

18. If advocates establish regular communication channels with social workers and other professionals, then this leads to better coordination of support and more cohesive service delivery for parents.

- **Context (C):** Complex cases involving multiple agencies and professionals; risk of fragmented service delivery.
- **Mechanism (M):** Advocates establish and maintain consistent communication pathways with social workers and other professionals; regular updates and information sharing.
- **Outcome (O):** More coordinated support for parents; reduced duplication of services; better alignment of interventions.

19. If advocates participate in multi-agency meetings and case conferences, then parents' perspectives are more effectively integrated into decision-making processes across services.

- **Context (C):** Important decisions about children's wellbeing and safety being made across different forums and agencies.
- **Mechanism (M):** Advocates attend and actively contribute to multi-agency meetings, ensuring parents' views are represented.
- **Outcome (O):** More balanced decision-making that incorporates parental perspectives; increased transparency in professional discussions.

20. If the PAIS maintains clear professional boundaries while building collaborative relationships with other agencies, then this enhances trust and credibility with both parents and professionals.

- **Context (C):** Need to maintain independence while working effectively with statutory services.
- **Mechanism (M):** Clear role definition and boundary-setting while fostering cooperative relationships.
- **Outcome (O):** Enhanced credibility with both parents and professionals; effective advocacy without compromising independence.

21. If advocates share appropriate information with other professionals while maintaining client confidentiality, then this facilitates more informed and coordinated support planning.

- **Context (C):** Multiple professionals needing accurate, up-to-date information while respecting client confidentiality.
- **Mechanism (M):** Structured protocols for appropriate information sharing; clear consent processes.
- **Outcome (O):** Better-informed professional decision-making; maintained trust with parents; coordinated support planning.

22. If the PAIS develops clear protocols for working with other agencies, then this reduces potential role confusion and promotes effective partnership working.

- **Context (C):** Potential for role confusion and overlap between different services.
- **Mechanism (M):** Development and implementation of clear interagency protocols and procedures.
- **Outcome (O):** Reduced professional tension; clearer pathways for support; more efficient service delivery.

23. If advocates model respectful, collaborative approaches in their interactions with other professionals, then this contributes to a more constructive working environment across the system.

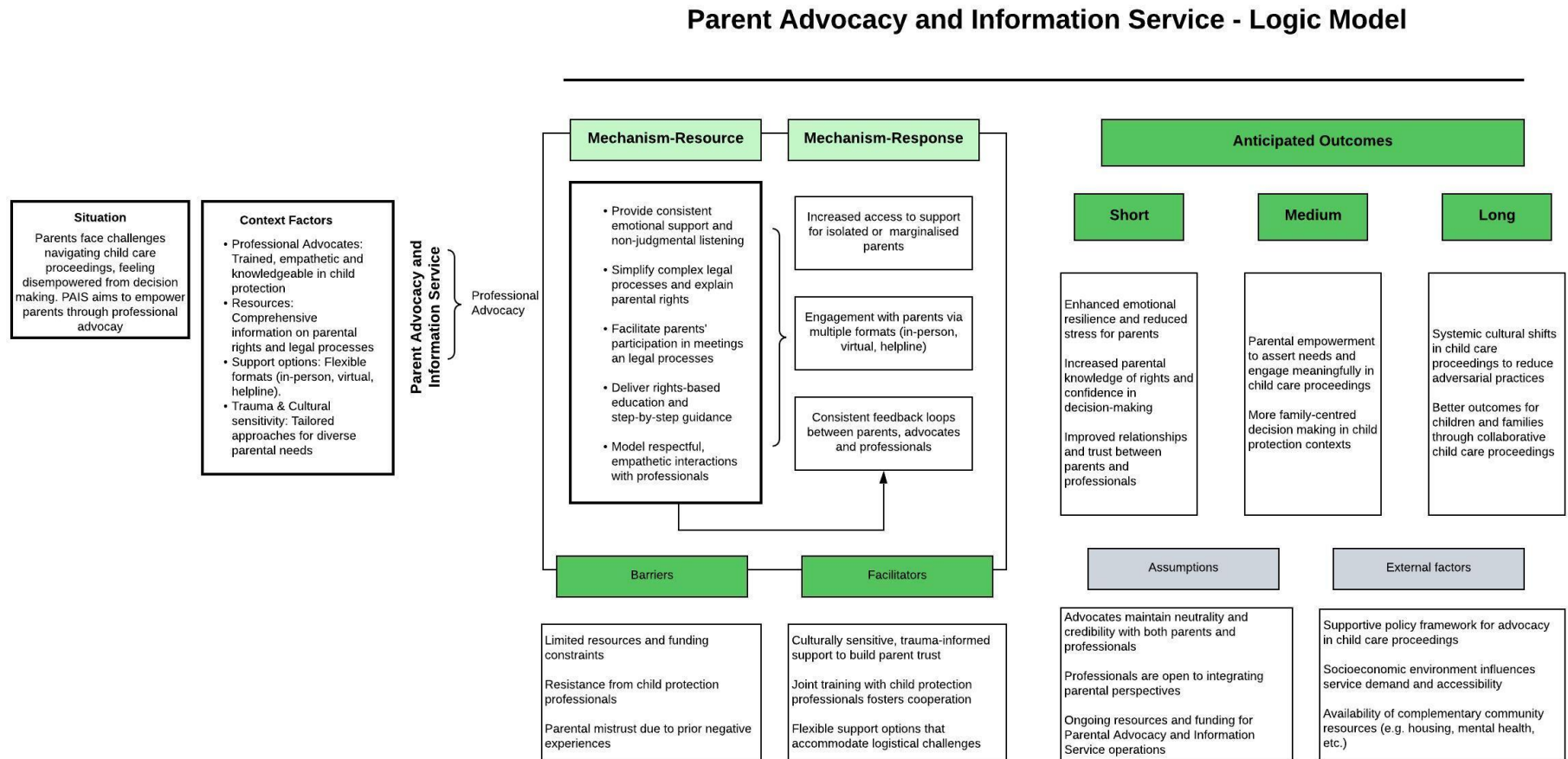
- **Context (C):** Historical tensions between parents and child protection services.
- **Mechanism (M):** Advocates demonstrate respectful, solution-focused approaches in professional interactions.
- **Outcome (O):** Improved professional relationships; more constructive working environment; better engagement from parents leading to better decisions for children and reduced exposure to adult conflict.

7.3 Logic Model

The final phase of this analysis presents a logic model, synthesising key inputs, mechanisms, and outcomes of the PAIS, along with assumptions, barriers, facilitators, and external factors influencing the programme. This visual summary distils the elements of our programme theory into an actionable framework for the PAIS evaluation and improvement.

The logic model captures the core components and relationships within the PAIS, emphasising the structured nature of professional advocacy. The use of professional advocates, as opposed to peer advocates, brings particular strengths to the model: formal training, established credibility, and clear boundaries within the child protection system. These elements enhance advocates' capacity to navigate complex legal processes, represent parental perspectives in formal meetings, and foster collaborative relationships with child protection professionals. Together, these structured mechanisms underscore the PAIS's unique contributions to transforming parental engagement within child protection.

Figure. 18. Logic model for the Parent Advocacy and Information Service.



The PAIS operates in a context where parents face significant personal and social challenges and can experience a lack of understanding of their rights and the complex legal processes involved in child protection decisions. The service focuses on providing professional advocacy, delivered by trained, empathetic advocates who are well-versed in child protection. These advocates play a key role in simplifying the often-complex system and supporting parents as they navigate legal proceedings. In addition, the service offers flexible support options—including in-person, virtual, and helpline services—that accommodate the diverse needs of parents, ensuring that advocacy is accessible in a format that best suits them. The PAIS also takes into account the cultural sensitivity of its service delivery, recognising the varied backgrounds and needs of the families it serves.

Central to the PAIS model is the manner in which specific resources interact with mechanisms to drive change. The service is rooted in a trauma-informed approach and offers a combination of emotional support, clear communication, and rights-based education, all aimed at empowering parents and ensuring that child safety and wellbeing remain at the centre of decision making. The emotional support provided by the advocates helps parents feel heard and understood, which is essential for building trust. This trust is critical in enabling parents to engage in more complex legal processes and child protection meetings. By simplifying complex legal concepts, explaining parental rights, and offering step-by-step guidance, the advocates help parents understand their role in the decision-making process. This guidance ensures that parents can actively participate in child care proceedings and in decision making about their children's welfare, something that can be an overwhelming and stressful process without support.

As parents engage with the PAIS, they respond by becoming more involved in their cases. Many of the parents served by the programme are isolated or marginalised, and the service helps to bridge these gaps by providing consistent feedback loops between the parents, advocates, and child protection professionals. The use of multiple support formats—in-person, virtual, and via helplines—ensures that parents can access the support they need in a way that is most comfortable for them. The feedback loops further ensure that communication remains open, allowing for regular updates and continued engagement throughout the child care proceedings and processes.

The anticipated outcomes of the service are reflected in short, medium, and long-term goals. In the short term, the PAIS aims to enhance emotional resilience in parents, reducing the stress they experience while navigating child protection systems. Parents also gain increased knowledge of their rights and feel more confident in decision-making, which leads to improved relationships with child protection professionals. As a result, trust is built between parents and professionals, fostering a more collaborative and respectful environment.

In the medium term, the service seeks to empower parents to assert their needs and engage meaningfully in child protection processes. By gaining confidence and understanding, parents are more able to participate in meetings and decisions affecting their children, leading to family-centred decision-making. This approach ensures that the parent's perspective are heard and respected while ensuring protection decisions are made in a way that ensures child safety and wellbeing and supports the family as a whole.

The long-term goal of the PAIS is to instigate systemic cultural shifts within the child protection sector, reducing perceived adversarial practices and encouraging more collaborative practices within child care proceedings. By working to shift the culture of child protection services, the PAIS aims to create a system in which child safety and wellbeing is central to decision making and where parents feel supported and respected throughout the process. The goal is to achieve better outcomes for both children and families, as a result of these more inclusive, collaborative approaches.

Despite the strengths of the PAIS model, several barriers must be overcome for the service to achieve its desired impact. Limited resources and funding can restrict the scope of the service, particularly as demand grows. There is also some resistance from child protection professionals, who may be hesitant to fully integrate parental perspectives into the decision-making process. Additionally, many parents come to PAIS with mistrust of the system, due to prior negative experiences within the child protection system.

However, several facilitators help to enhance the service's success. Trauma-informed, culturally sensitive support is critical in building trust with parents, especially those from marginalised communities. The service also benefits from joint training with child protection professionals, which fosters cooperation and mutual understanding between advocates and social workers, creating a more unified approach to supporting families. The flexible support options offered by the PAIS are also crucial in overcoming logistical barriers that may otherwise prevent parents from accessing the service.

Several assumptions underpin the success of the PAIS, including the belief that advocates will maintain neutrality and credibility with both parents and professionals, and that professionals will remain open to integrating parental perspectives into their practice. Furthermore, it is inherent in the programme theory that ongoing resources and funding will be available to sustain the service and meet increasing demand.

Finally, there are several external factors that influence the service's effectiveness. A supportive policy framework for advocacy in child care proceedings can help legitimise and expand the role of the PAIS in the broader system. The socioeconomic environment also plays a role, as it impacts both the demand for services and the accessibility of support. The further availability of complementary community resources, such as housing and mental health services, can further support the work of PAIS by addressing other systemic issues affecting families.

In conclusion, the PAIS logic model reflects a comprehensive approach to addressing the complex needs of parents involved in child care proceedings. By providing professional advocacy, emotional support, and practical guidance, PAIS empowers parents and fosters a more inclusive, collaborative approach to child protection decision-making. Through its short, medium, and long-term outcomes, the service seeks to reduce adversarial practices in child care proceedings, improving outcomes for children and families by making the system more supportive and responsive to their needs.

7.4 Conclusion

The realist informed analysis presented in this section provides a comprehensive framework for understanding how the Parental Advocacy and Information Service (PAIS) operates and generates change for parents involved child care proceedings. By developing an initial programme theory, refining it through detailed CMO configurations, and synthesising the findings into a logic model, we have sought to capture the complex, dynamic processes through which advocacy supports parents and influences child protection outcomes.

The analysis highlights the critical role of advocates in building trust, providing emotional support, and empowering parents through knowledge and skill-building. It also underscores the importance of advocacy in bridging communication gaps, rebalancing power dynamics, and fostering more collaborative relationships between parents and professionals. By offering flexible, culturally sensitive support and working to shift systemic practices, the PAIS has the potential to drive long-term, transformative change in how child protection services engage and support families.

However, the analysis also identifies key barriers and challenges, such as resource constraints, professional resistance, and the complex socioeconomic factors that shape parents' experiences and needs. Addressing these issues will require ongoing commitment, collaboration, and innovation from all stakeholders involved in child care proceedings.

Overall, this realist analysis provides a strong foundation for further evaluation, learning, and improvement of PAIS. By continuing to refine and test the programme theory through iterative cycles of data collection and analysis, we can deepen our understanding of what works, for whom, and under what circumstances in the provision of parental advocacy. This knowledge can inform the design and delivery of more effective, responsive, and equitable child protection services that truly put children, parents and families at the centre.

Chapter 8: Discussion

The PAIS was established in 2022 as a innovative initiative, grounded in the principles of trauma-informed practice, empowerment, participation, and rights-based practice to support parents navigating the complexities of the child protection system in Ireland.

The PAIS aims to amplify parents' voices and ensure their needs and perspectives are central to decision-making about their children's welfare. This evaluation sought to understand the key components, mechanisms, and impact of PAIS, drawing on a realist-informed mixed-methods approach to capture the complexity of advocacy provision across diverse contexts.

The evaluation was guided by three overarching research questions:

1. What are the key ingredients of PAIS and how can they be described using a logic model?
2. In what ways and under which circumstances does the PAIS support parents to play a more meaningful role in decision-making when there are child protection concerns?
3. How does PAIS impact the experiences of parents and professionals involved in the child protection system?

To address these questions, the evaluation drew upon quantitative service data with qualitative insights from surveys, interviews, and case studies involving parents, advocates, and key stakeholders. A realist lens was applied to elucidate how the PAIS works, for whom, in what circumstances, and why. The findings offer valuable learning for the ongoing development and sustainment of parental advocacy in Ireland, with broader lessons for rights-based practice in child protection.

This chapter synthesises the key findings of the evaluation in relation to each research question, and considers their implications for policy, practice, and research. It highlights the transformative potential of the PAIS in humanising the child protection system and fostering more collaborative, participatory approaches to supporting families. The discussion also acknowledges the limitations and challenges encountered in the evaluation process and identifies areas for further exploration and development.

8.1 Key Ingredients and Logic Model of the PAIS

The first research question focused on identifying the core components of PAIS and representing them in a logic model to theorise how the service operates to achieve its intended outcomes. The evaluation found that PAIS is a multi-faceted service combining elements of emotional support, legal advice, advocacy, and case management within a trauma informed approach, to amplify parent's voices and empower them to navigate child care proceedings. Key ingredients include:

1. Dedicated one-to-one advocacy provided by trauma-informed, skilled, trained professionals
2. Attendance and representation at child protection conferences, court proceedings, and other key decision-making forums
3. Emotional and practical support for parents before, during and after these events
4. Accessible information and advice on child protection processes, parental rights and responsibilities, and sources of support
5. Liaison with solicitors, social workers, guardians ad litem, and other professionals to facilitate communication and collaboration
6. Signposting and referral to other services to meet parents' wider needs (e.g., housing, benefits, mental health)
7. A flexible, relationship-based approach tailored to each parent's unique circumstances and priorities
8. Advocacy at a systemic level to promote a more humane, rights-based child protection culture

These components are captured in the logic model (Figure 18), which provides a visual representation of how the PAIS is intended to work. The model posits that by providing independent professional advocacy, accurate information, and emotional support, the PAIS may help parents to feel heard, validated, and equipped to participate meaningfully in child protection processes. Through skilful communication and collaboration with professionals, the PAIS also aims to foster a more transparent, strengths-based, and participatory approach to decision-making and care planning. Ultimately, the model suggests that these interacting mechanisms can contribute to better engagement of parents, more robust and balanced assessment of their capacities and needs, and in some cases – where appropriate and in the best interests of the child – safe alternatives to children entering or remaining in care.

The logic model was informed by insights from the literature on parental advocacy and refined through data obtained from key stakeholders during this study. It represents a programme theory/logic model of how the PAIS operates, which can be further tested and elaborated through on-going evaluation in the future. While the model provides a helpful framework for understanding the core functions and intended outcomes of the PAIS, the evaluation also highlighted the complexity and non-linearity of parental advocacy work in practice. The impact of the PAIS is shaped by a dynamic interplay of individual, relational, organisational, and structural factors, which cannot be fully captured in a static model. As such, the logic model should be viewed as a starting point for theorising and interrogating the mechanisms of the PAIS, rather than a definitive account of how it works.

8.2 Supporting Parents' Meaningful Participation in Decision-Making

The second research question explored how the PAIS supports parents to play a more active and meaningful role in child care proceedings and decision-making about their children's welfare. The evaluation found compelling evidence that the PAIS enhances parents' opportunities to participate meaningfully in decision making through a combination of rights-based education, support by the advocate; emotional support, and practical assistance.

A consistent theme from the data was the value of advocates in translating complex legal and bureaucratic processes into accessible terms for parents. Through clear, timely explanations of child protection procedures, parental rights and responsibilities, and the rationale for professional concerns, advocates helped parents to make sense of a bewildering and often frightening system. Parents frequently described feeling more informed and empowered to ask questions, express their views, and challenge decisions because of this educative aspect of advocacy support.

Advocates' role in providing independent emotional support was also crucial in enabling parents' voices to be heard. Many parents reported feeling judged, dismissed, or intimidated in their interactions with child protection professionals and with court proceedings and legal processes, which inhibited their willingness to engage and assert their needs. By offering a non-judgmental listening ear, validating parents' experiences, and helping them to regulate strong emotions, advocates created a safe space for parents to articulate their concerns and aspirations. Parents described feeling more confident and able to communicate effectively with professionals as a result of this emotional scaffolding.

At a practical level, advocates played a vital role in amplifying parents' perspectives and ensuring they were considered in decision-making processes. Advocates supported parents to prepare and present impact statements, solicited their input into assessment and care planning, and relayed their views when they could not attend meetings. In child protection conferences and court proceedings, advocates' presence alongside parents was a powerful visual representation of their right to be heard and taken seriously. Several parents described how this practical support enabled them to participate more fully and assertively in meetings and discussions about their children's care.

However, the evaluation also highlighted the persistent barriers to parents' meaningful participation, even with advocacy support. Some parents continued to feel peripheral to decision-making, particularly in court proceedings where their input was filtered through legal representatives. The adversarial and risk-averse culture of the child protection system may present as an obstacle for parents' strengths and capacities to be recognised and harnessed. Resource constraints, high thresholds for intervention, and the limited availability of family support services also constrained the options for partnership working between parents and professionals.

As such, while the PAIS undoubtedly enhanced parents' participation in many instances, the evaluation underscored the need for wider systemic change to fully realise the potential of parental advocacy. This includes reforms to make child protection processes more transparent, accessible, and collaborative, as well as investment in preventative services to address the underlying drivers of family distress. Parental advocacy may play an important role in ensuring parents whose children are open to child protection services are more aware of their rights, but it cannot overcome all of the structural inequalities and power imbalances that shape parents' experiences of the child protection system.

8.3 Impact on the Experiences of Parents and Professionals

The third research question focused on how the PAIS affects the lived experiences of parents and professionals involved in the child protection system. The evaluation found that the PAIS had a predominantly positive impact on parents' and professionals' perceptions of the process, although there were also some points of tension and challenge.

For parents, the PAIS was often described as a 'lifeline' or 'beacon of hope' during a deeply stressful and isolating experience. The consistent, caring support provided by advocates was contrasted with the perceived indifference or hostility of some child protection professionals. Parents valued the sense of being heard, respected, and fought for by someone independent of the system. The practical assistance and emotional containment offered by advocates helped to humanise the process and keep parents engaged in making changes to address concerns raised by child protection professionals.

Many parents reported that PAIS had transformed their understanding and ability to navigate the child protection system. The accessible information and advice provided by advocates demystified legal and bureaucratic processes, while the modelling of assertive communication emboldened parents to advocate for themselves. Parents described feeling more in control, less afraid, and better able to present their needs and views, due to the PAIS's support. In some cases, this was linked to tangible outcomes, such as increased contact with children or more tailored support plans.

For professionals, the PAIS was largely seen as a valuable addition to the child protection landscape. Social workers, Guardians ad Litem, and legal professionals described how the PAIS facilitated more constructive engagement with parents and promoted a more rounded understanding of their circumstances. Advocates were seen as a 'bridge' between parents and professionals, improving communication, defusing tensions, and focusing on solution-finding. Many professionals felt that the PAIS enhanced the fairness and robustness of decision-making by ensuring parents' voices were heard and their rights upheld.

However, the evaluation also highlighted some ambivalence and wariness among professionals about the advocacy role. Some social workers expressed concerns that advocates could sometimes 'overstep' their remit by questioning professional judgments or giving parents false hope. There were occasional tensions around information sharing and the boundaries of client

confidentiality. A minority of professionals felt that advocates were too aligned with parents' perspectives and could hinder timely decision-making in the interests of children.

These findings underscore the importance of clear communication and mutual understanding between advocates and other professionals about their respective roles, responsibilities, and ethical duties. The evaluation pointed to the value and potential of joint training, protocols for working together, and regular opportunities for advocates and social workers to build relationships and discuss any concerns. Ultimately, while the PAIS was broadly welcomed by professionals, there is an ongoing need to navigate the complex dynamics of power, trust, and accountability at the interface between advocacy and statutory child protection services.

Looking beyond individual experiences, the evaluation provided tentative evidence of PAIS's potential to help create a shift the culture and practice towards expanded participatory and rights-based approaches. By modelling a participatory, strengths-focused approach to working with parents, the PAIS offered a template for professionals to follow. The presence of advocates in child protection conferences and court proceedings was seen by some as a catalyst for more respectful, collaborative engagement with families. Over time, the operationalisation and effective implementation of parental advocacy, may serve help to re-balance power relations and promote a partnership approach as the norm rather, than the exception in child protection work.

8.4 Strengths and Limitations of the Evaluation

This study has several methodological strengths that enhance the reliability and trustworthiness of the findings. The mixed-methods design allowed for a holistic, multi-perspectival understanding of PAIS, with quantitative service data providing a broad overview of patterns and trends, and qualitative insights adding depth and nuance. The purposive sampling strategy ensured a diversity of perspectives from parents, advocates, and key stakeholders across the three pilot sites.

The collaborative ethos of the evaluation was another key strength, with regular communication and consultation between the research team and Barnardos' staff. This helped to ensure the evaluation was grounded in the realities of frontline practice and generated actionable learning for service improvement.

However, the evaluation also had some significant limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. The evaluation team were based in Cardiff, Wales, limiting the depth and richness on-the-ground interactions, although the research team worked in collaboration with Barnardos to gather data through remote means and researchers from Barnardos conducted in person interviews with parents.

The response rates for the parent and professional surveys were lower than hoped or absent, meaning the findings may not be representative of the full range of experiences and views. This was also reflected in the professionals' interviews, with no representation from solicitors. The lack of survey responses from Dublin North City and Wexford in particular means that the parent voice is skewed towards the Waterford site. Experiences may differ across these locations. Unfortunately, no parents from these two sites completed the survey. Future evaluations should seek to gather feedback from parents engaged with the service in all three pilot sites to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the PAIS's impact nationwide. The tight timescale for the evaluation also meant that only a snapshot of experiences could be captured, rather than tracking change over time.

More broadly, the evaluation was not designed to provide a definitive verdict on the effectiveness or impact of the PAIS, but rather to generate learning and inform ongoing development. The lack of a counterfactual or comparison group means that any changes observed cannot be solely attributed to the PAIS. The complexity of families' circumstances and the myriad influences on child protection processes also make it challenging to isolate the specific impact of advocacy. As such, the findings should be interpreted as indicative rather than conclusive, pointing to areas for further exploration.

8.5 Implications and Recommendations for Policy, Practice and Research

Notwithstanding these limitations, the evaluation offers valuable insights and lessons for the future of parental advocacy in Ireland and beyond. At a policy level, the findings add to the growing international evidence base on the importance of embedding parental advocacy as a core component of child protection systems. The demonstrated benefits of the PAIS in supporting parents' participation rights and promoting more collaborative approaches to child protection suggest that access to independent parental advocacy should be enshrined as an entitlement for all families involved with social services.

To realise this goal, there is a need for sustainable funding and infrastructure to embed the current service and scale up parental advocacy provision nationwide. This should include mechanisms for quality assurance, training and support for advocates, and clear governance arrangements to ensure the independence and accountability of services. Parental advocacy should also be integrated into policy frameworks and guidance on best practice in child care proceedings, as a key enabler of rights-based, participatory approaches.

At an organisational level, the evaluation highlights the value of the Barnardos' model of providing trauma-informed professional, specialist advocacy rooted in a children's rights ethos. The findings affirm the importance of recruiting advocates with relevant skills and experience, providing ongoing training and supervision, and fostering a culture of reflective practice. The evaluation also points to the need for clear protocols and pathways for referral, information sharing, and joint working between advocates and other professionals. Embedding parental advocacy within wider structures of support and ensuring smooth transitions between services will be critical to maximising its impact.

In terms of frontline practice, the evaluation yields rich insights into the skills and qualities that underpin effective advocacy work. These include deep empathy, active listening, and the ability to build trust with parents facing complex challenges; legal and procedural knowledge to navigate the child protection system; and the confidence to speak up and challenge decisions where necessary. The findings suggest that advocacy should be underpinned by a commitment to empowerment, participation, and strengths-based practice, working in partnership with parents to identify and build on their capabilities.

More broadly, the evaluation points to the importance of relational and reflective practice in child protection work. The insights from parents and professionals highlight the transformative potential of treating families with respect, compassion, and a willingness to understand their experiences. Creating space for dialogue and collaborative problem-solving, may serve to humanise the child protection process and improve outcomes for children. While parental advocacy plays a vital role in modelling and facilitating these approaches, they should be core competencies for all professionals working with families.

In terms of future research, the evaluation highlights several priority areas for further investigation. These include:

1. Longitudinal studies to examine the impact of parental advocacy on child and family outcomes over time, ideally with a matched comparison group to strengthen causal inferences.
2. Economic evaluations to assess the cost-effectiveness and social return on investment of parental advocacy, building a business case for sustainable funding.
3. Participatory research with parents and advocates to co-produce knowledge on what works, for whom, in what circumstances and why.
4. Studies to explore the role of parental advocacy in addressing inequalities with marginalised communities.
5. International comparative research to identify lessons and promising practices from different models of parental advocacy across jurisdictions.

Importantly, future research should be designed and conducted in partnership with parents, advocates and child protection professionals, valuing their insight and experience, as central to generating meaningful knowledge. Methodologically, studies should embrace complexity and strive to capture the dynamic, context- dependent nature of advocacy work, rather than seeking reductive or one-size-fits-all answers. Creative, inclusive and ethnographic approaches may be particularly valuable in this regard.

8.6 Conclusion

This evaluation has provided compelling evidence of the value and potential of the PAIS in supporting parents involved with the Irish child protection system. By offering a skilled, compassionate, and rights-based service, the PAIS has made a significant difference to the lives of many families facing immense challenges and adversity. The findings demonstrate the transformative impact of advocacy in amplifying parents' voices, enhancing their participation in decision-making, and promoting collaborative approaches to keeping children safe and promoting their wellbeing.

At the same time, the evaluation has underscored the complex nature of parental advocacy within a system that has historically been oriented towards risk aversion and professional expertise. Advocates must constantly navigate ethical tensions, power dynamics, and resource constraints in their efforts to support parents while keeping the best interests of children at the centre of

their work. The findings point to the ongoing need for dialogue, reflection, and mutual understanding between advocates and other professionals to ensure a joined-up approach to safeguarding.

As the PAIS service moves beyond the pilot phase, there is an exciting opportunity to build on the learning and momentum generated by this evaluation. By scaling up provision, strengthening partnerships, and continuing to innovate and adapt, the PAIS has the potential to transform the landscape of child protection in Ireland. This will require ongoing commitment, collaboration, and creativity from all stakeholders – advocates, parents, professionals, policymakers, and researchers.

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