

# Giving people a voice: A volunteer advocate's personal story

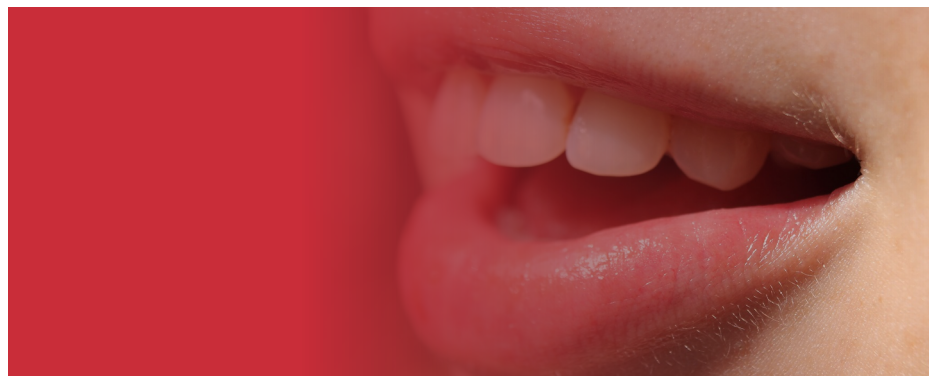
Citizen Advocate volunteers are matched with adults in Leeds, most of whom have a learning disability, and are supported to form long term advocacy relationships.

They support their matches to identify their wishes, values and preferences, and support them to ensure their voice is heard, and they are empowered to make choices. In this piece, Charlie, one of our volunteer citizen advocates, talks about what they do and why they volunteer.

Basically, I volunteer because I feel better when I'm doing something useful involving other people. I like volunteering when mostly using my existing transferable skills because I am retired, have plenty of life experience and am not looking to develop new skills for future plans.

However, I have learned lots, and lots about myself through being a volunteer. I think I would have been better at my job if I'd had some of these experiences earlier - as a parent of three small children working full-time, I never thought of it!

I've tried to give up volunteering, and so has my partner (my civil partner, not my advocacy partner to be clear!), but we keep coming back to it,



because it keeps us more active (physically and mentally) and more cheerful too. But we do have to keep reminding ourselves to say no to things now and then, it can get a bit out of hand sometimes!

Volunteering is the opposite of a zero sum game - I like that. Was it Robert Wright who wrote a whole book and a TED talk about it? Everybody benefits and the world is hopefully a bit better for it.

Albert Schweitzer said 'Wherever a man turns he can find someone who needs him' - apart from the annoying gendered aspect, that just about covers it. One of my favourite songs is "He Ain't Heavy, He's My Brother"!

Citizen advocacy volunteering, to be specific, gives you the opportunity to focus on helping one person get more

of what they want out of life, one step at a time. This is usually very rewarding for everyone involved, even if there are some rocky and frustrating times along the way. It is a complete contrast to being a committee member or a trustee volunteer, which I also dabble in.

You know that without support, your advocacy partner (AP) would be missing out on important things that they might not even have been aware of or thought about.

Being a volunteer with no conflicts of interest about your own position or the agency budget etc. can make you the ideal person to focus on your AP's real needs and wishes without limiting their options because of what is and is not available in these difficult economic times.

## What is Advocacy?

**“Advocacy is taking action to help people say what they want, secure their rights, represent their interests and obtain services they need. Advocates and advocacy providers work in partnership with the people they support and take their side. Advocacy promotes social inclusion, equality and social justice”**

*The Advocacy Charter, 2016*

## Collaborate to Communicate: Engage with local people

Advonet has been working with Healthwatch Leeds, the NHS in Leeds and Leeds City Council, looking at ways to engage with local people more effectively.

We have joined together to create a unique event of quickfire workshops on a range of topics, to share with local interested and engaged people. We will be looking at updating plans and find new ways to take work forward.

The event takes place on **Thursday 22 February 2018** from **10am-1pm**.

On the day, Advonet will be consulting on how we can help more people to understand what advocacy is, how we can be more accessible and effective ways of promoting advocacy.

If you are interested in coming, you can either call Healthwatch Leeds on **0113 898 0035** or send an email to **info@healthwatchleeds.co.uk** and let them know that you want to come.

## AIM mentor training People's Parliament Mental health talk

Leeds Autism AIM have confirmed dates for their next volunteer mentor training session. The sessions will be on Saturday 27th January, Saturday 10th February and the induction will be on Thursday 15th February.

To become a volunteer mentor, you need to attend all three. Lunch will be provided at the first two, whilst the training is free of charge.

To book a place, email Owen, Leeds Autism AIM's Volunteer Coordinator at [owen.walker@advonet.org.uk](mailto:owen.walker@advonet.org.uk).

The People's Parliament, the regular reference group for people with learning disabilities that feeds into the Leeds Learning Disability Partnership Board, has confirmed its' meeting dates for 2018. These meetings are facilitated by our Asking You! project. The next People's Parliament meeting is on **Tuesday 30th January** at the St Matthias Church Centre in Burley. It starts at **10am** and will finish at **Noon**. It is free to attend for adults in Leeds with learning disabilities.

In February, the Leeds Autism AIM team will be running an afternoon session as part of an event on autism and mental health, run by BABCP, the British Association for Behavioural and Cognitive Psychotherapies.

It will be led by autistic academic Gill Loomes, whose expertise is in advocacy and mental capacity. She will run it alongside AIM staff and volunteers. The closed session takes place on Wednesday 28th February at the St George's Centre in Leeds.

## WHAT'S ON THIS MONTH?

**Tuesday  
30th Jan**

**People's Parliament**  
**Time: 10am-Noon**  
**Venue: St Matthias Church  
Centre, St Matthias Street, Burley,  
Leeds LS4 2DZ**

**Saturday  
27th Jan**

**Leeds Autism AIM: Volunteer  
Mentor Training**  
**Time: 9:30am-4pm**  
**Venue: TBC**  
**Lunch will be provided**

## Free advocacy training: Book your place now!



Our latest **Effective Advocacy and Negotiation Skills (EANS)** training takes place early next month. It is free to attend and is spread over two days. The course is open to volunteers and third sector workers who want or need to use advocacy and negotiation skills in their work. It is also open to our current or future volunteers. The dates are **Tuesday 6th February** and **Monday 12th February**. Each session runs from **9:15am to 4:15pm**. If you are interested in coming, please visit [advonet.org.uk/resources/training/](http://advonet.org.uk/resources/training/) to find out more and complete the form on the page. Then, email it to [office@advonet.org.uk](mailto:office@advonet.org.uk) or call us on **0113 244 0606**.

## Advonet volunteers' stories captured on camera



Advonet recently booked Harry Locke to return to add to his filming of our volunteers. He interviewed 23 additional volunteers from across all areas of Advonet, including citizen advocacy, autism mentors, bilingual advocates, community mental health volunteers, Leep1 volunteers and Asking You.

He will make a film to show how important the skills of the range of volunteers are to our organisation, the difference they make to local communities and how volunteers can benefit from being involved. You will be able to see the film shortly on our website, which we will publish details of on our social media accounts.

## Contact us



**“Advonet**  
Providing Independent Advocacy  
& Related Support **”**

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