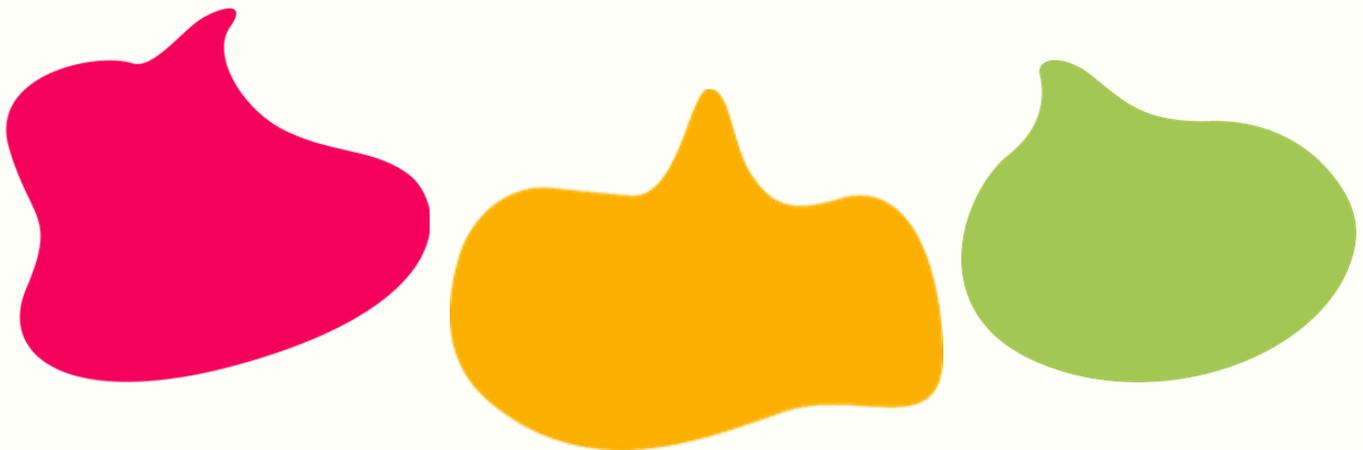


Advocating for Collective Advocacy

2026 Event Report





“Collective Advocacy speaks truth to power. It's important for marginalised people to have their voices heard, especially in these times of crisis where it often seems only the richest and most powerful matter.”

— Collective advocacy group member



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Why We Held This Event

We wanted to tell a different story about collective advocacy in Scotland, one that moves beyond crisis and focuses on what's possible when people come together to shape their own futures.

Often, conversations about the public and third sectors understandably focus on what's broken, who's vulnerable, and what we're losing. This can leave us feeling helpless and resigned. It suggests that decline is inevitable and that those affected are passive recipients of decisions made elsewhere. But that's not the story collective advocacy tells.

Collective advocacy is about people with shared experiences coming together to build power, challenge discrimination, and create the conditions for everyone to live good lives. It's about communities developing their own solutions, holding systems accountable, and ensuring that those most affected by decisions have a genuine say in making them. It works because it shifts us from thinking about individuals in need to recognising the strength that comes from collective action and shared purpose.

Who joined us

On 20th January 2026, over 50 people gathered at Norton Park Conference Centre in Edinburgh with the shared purpose of strengthening collective advocacy. The event brought together collective advocacy group members, independent advocacy



organisations, commissioners, civil society representatives, and Scottish Government officials, including the Minister for Social Care and Mental Wellbeing, Tom Arthur MSP.

Advocating for collective advocacy, conversations

We did not shy away from the challenging conversations. Across Scotland, collective advocacy provision faces unprecedented financial pressure. This is happening at a time when the evidence shows increasing need: mental health detentions are at their highest, guardianships have doubled in a decade, and more people than ever are reporting mental health conditions.

Our conversations covered three main topics:

- The value of collective advocacy,
- Collective advocacy in law and policy, and
- Funding and commissioning.

But this event wasn't about accepting decline. It was about collective advocacy groups speaking up for themselves and recognising collective advocacy as essential infrastructure for a society where everyone can contribute and have their voice heard. It was about demonstrating why investing in collective advocacy is not a cost but a strategic choice that strengthens communities, prevents crisis, and saves public resources long-term.

This report captures what was shared, what was heard, and what must happen next to protect and expand this vital provision.

We were delighted to have Jenny Capon recording a graphic minute of the event, which you can find on the next page. It captures the story we need to tell is not one of inevitable cuts and vulnerable people losing services; it's a story about investing in people coming together to advocate collectively, to build the foundations for a more accountable, responsive, and rights-respecting society.



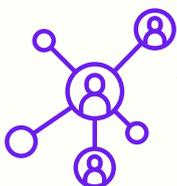
What We Heard: The Value of Collective Advocacy

Collective advocacy groups:

- Influence policy and practice through co-production and education
- Challenge systemic discrimination by raising collective concerns - a collective voice is louder than one person alone
- Prevent crises by building peer support networks and developing skills
- Hold services accountable by documenting lived experience
- Create community where people can be their authentic selves

Examples of the impact of collective advocacy from across Scotland.

- The [Lothian Voices group](#) met with Minister Paul McLennan in 2024 regarding homelessness and housing, ensuring lived experience voices reached parliamentary level
- The [Much More Than A Label group](#) delivers workshops on personality disorder to nurses and therapists – often the only training professionals receive on this diagnosis
- [Spirit Advocacy](#) supported the review of the mental health assessment template and participate in the induction of new mental health nursing staff
- [Independent Advocacy Perth and Kinross's New Scots group](#) has shed light on issues connected to life in temporary hotel accommodation, contributed to Perth's City of Sanctuary strategy.
- The [Oor Mad History](#) project has documented the history of mental health activism, informing current policy and practice
- The [Out of Sight, Out of Mind](#) exhibition provides a platform for hundreds to express experiences through art



Collective advocacy creates spaces for people to explore shared issues, support each other, and find a stronger voice

What We Heard: The Value of Collective Advocacy

What collective advocacy group members said:

- "They're the reason I'm able to attend events like this and have the confidence to speak up"
- "Collective Advocacy asks 'what can we do about this?' which can lead to genuine positive change in policy and services"
- "People often have shared issues without realising this and collective advocacy can help people relate"
- "It's a way to bring people together and provide them with a space where they have peers, support and voice"
- "It's supportive of the community to have an ongoing sustainable voice"



- Collective advocacy flattens power dynamics.
- Collective advocacy is life saving.
- We are standing on the shoulders of others, we need collective advocacy to prevent the loss of knowledge and so that the next generation also benefits from our experiences.
- We wish we didnt know about the negatives of mental health services, but we do, so we have to do something.
- Its an opportunity for silenced voices to input.
- Collective advocacy is a springboard to other things and builds skills.
- Peer advocacy is important, as is choice, one type of advocacy doesn't suit everyone so it is important to provide different options
- Collective advocacy breaks stigma.
- A collective voice is stronger and has more weight, decisions and change may happen faster as a result.
- Mental health challenges don't come alone and should not be treated alone - but funding often causes a focus on one specific area, greater flexibility would enable an intersectional approach.

“People just get me and the issues I face and we work together to make things better”

“can make more changes more quickly through collective advocacy”

“A collective voice is louder than an individual’s”

“Collective advocacy asks the question, what can we do about this?”

“Advocacy: the one place there’s not an agenda”

“if it wasn’t for third sector, I wouldn’t have now what I have”

“These are life-changing groups and we need more of them”

Funding and commissioning

Collective advocacy is being cut across Scotland:

- Edinburgh IJB only reversed their decision to defund all collective advocacy after significant pressure (locally and nationally) - cuts still took place and **'recomissioning' is very worrying for people**
- Similar cuts have taken place or loom across Scotland
- Where you live determines if you can access collective advocacy
- Some areas have no collective advocacy at all, rural areas in particular

This is happening when need is **GROWING**:

- Mental health detentions at highest level ever recorded
- Guardianships have doubled in 10 years (now over 19,000)
- People reporting mental illness rose from 4.4% (2011) to 11.3% (2022)
- 71% of advocacy organisations report unmet need

Funding has been static for the last 10 years! This is close to a 50% real time cut.

Independent advocacy SAVES money:

- Every £1 spent saves £7 to NHS and £5 to councils
- Helps prevent crisis - people get support before problems escalate

What's Behind the Cuts? IJBs say they have no money:

- Integration Joint Boards (IJBs) are under financial pressure but they also have a legal duty to ensure independent advocacy is available
- Commissioners are choosing to cut collective advocacy first
- This means people do not have a choice in what model of independent advocacy they need, i.e individual or collective



Collective advocacy is preventative and stops problems getting worse meaning savings for public services.

Funding and commissioning

We heard about:

- A **lack of resources is limiting capacity and staffing** within collective advocacy services – many staff are on insecure, part time contracts.
- Cuts that create challenges for the workforce, including **job insecurity, lethargy and resentment**. Questions around how staff bring 100% of themselves to work and give 100% to their clients in these circumstances?
- We need sustainability, to meet **growing demand**, and to look longer into the future.
- Making better funding decisions is about the right **priorities!**
- The third sector is putting a great deal of effort into building and maintaining relationships with the NHS. **Government needs to find a mechanism whereby the NHS will listen to us**. When NHS or public sector staff retire or move on there is no continuity.
- The third sector runs services when HCSP's ask but it's not a two-way street.
- NHS is repeatedly transferring costs onto the third sector.
- Loosing funding also means loosing connection with Health and Social Care.
- Collective advocacy groups are having to apply for different grant funding to plug gaps – even if we survive now this is not sustainable and we often have to change services to suit funders rather than participants.
- Mental health challenges don't come alone in silos and should not be treated alone, but funding often focuses on a specific area.
- Policy **implementation gap** is especially big where funding is concerned.
- Health and Social Care Partnerships are not using their engagement strategies.

Will you have the moral courage to do the right thing on a difficult day?



Collective advocacy in Scottish law and policy

The Mental Health (Care and Treatment) (Scotland) Act 2003:

- Gives people with a “mental disorder” a **legal right** to access independent advocacy this includes people with mental ill health, learning disabilities, dementia, acquired brain injury and autistic people
- Local authorities and NHS Boards have a **legal duty** to make sure independent advocacy is available

Guidance is clear that this includes collective advocacy:

- Mental Welfare Commission: "The [Mental Health] Act gives people a right of access to both collective and individual advocacy"
- 2003 Act Code of Practice: Provision may be "one to one or group or collective advocacy" and people should have CHOICE about the type they access
- This right is for everyone with a “mental disorder” - not just people in hospital or on a treatment order

The Scottish Mental Health Law Review (2022) said:

- **Expand independent advocacy**, don't reduce it
- Work on our recommendations to **develop and support collective advocacy should begin now**

In 2025, the UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities recently told the UK to strengthen mental health support

In practice, collective advocacy is being treated as optional:

- Only 5% of people who have the legal right actually access independent advocacy
- Health Boards and Local Authorities interpret the law too narrowly - only funding independent advocacy for tribunals and specific processes
- Short-term contracts (1-2 years) instead of sustainable funding and contracts are focused on individual advocacy, not collective
- 18 out of 32 areas don't have up-to-date strategic advocacy plans



**Integrated Joint Boards in Scotland are cutting collective advocacy.
The direction of travel is wrong - Scotland is going backwards!**

Collective advocacy in Scottish law and policy

What we heard:

- There is a **policy implementation gap**, legislation is not met in practice. Health and Social Care Partnerships **need more direction** from Government.
- The law isn't clear that there is a right to collective advocacy, it gives decision-makers too much discretion (as seen with Edinburgh IJB) - need to narrow that discretion.
- It's not widely framed by accident - the Minister must push for collective advocacy.
- **Full implementation of SMHLR would resolve** this as long as adequately funded
- The SMHLR isn't being pursued by the Government, the focus is on AWI, leaving collective advocacy in a queue.
- What can be done to speed up implementation? We are already three years in, so much time has been lost.

"If the Scottish Government is committed to implementing the recommendations of the Scottish Mental Health Law Review, what practical steps will they take to ensure it is done more quickly (that don't require further law changes)?"

- There is **much which should be done without further legislative change** (but it's all about politics)
- IJBs say they have no money but what about their legal duty? If lived experience is vital to policy and practice, then we need to ensure collective advocacy is resourced
- Can you **commit to updating the Independent Advocacy Commissioner Guide** explicitly including collective advocacy?
- There should be a basic level of rights met for everyone - **minimum core obligations** - a commitment to human rights as per the CRPD.
- **Collective advocacy brings imagination to tackling human rights issues** - will Scottish Government fulfil its commitment to human rights?
- The Third Sector is crucial for many to enable people to exercise these rights.
- We welcome the Scottish Government **extending voting rights on IJBs**.

What can the government do to ensure local authorities understand that independent advocacy includes collective advocacy as well as individual?

Minister's Reflections

Minister for Social Care and Mental Wellbeing, Tom Arthur MSP, spent the morning listening to each table's thoughts, experiences and discussions on collective advocacy's value, the funding crisis, and the legal framework. Below are his reflections on what he'd heard:

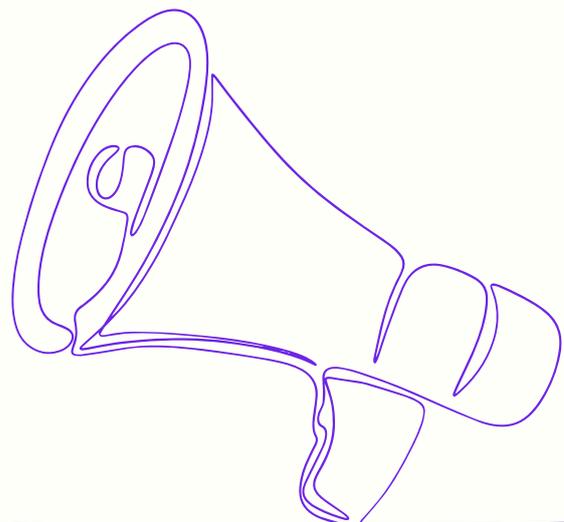
On the value of collective advocacy:

- Thank you for sharing your powerful stories
- Collective advocacy can shift dynamics and reshape society
- An unconditional, non-judgemental, empathetic approach which is so profound for the individual
- Collective advocacy is hugely important in terms of service delivery
- For democracy to be effective, it has to be an ongoing process - decision makers need feedback to adapt and adjust
- We have a good story to tell in Scotland with regards to engagement with lived experience
- It's not just policy development but ongoing evaluation.

On the funding pressures:

- IJB decisions are for them to make but I'd encourage local partners to recognise the significant benefits achieved through collective advocacy and cost savings made through early intervention
- Without it there is a risk of deterioration and crisis prevention is far more costly
- We don't need a top-down approach, we can be collaborative so people have a genuine sense of agency
- Collective advocacy feeds into how we want to work as a society
- Voting rights for lived experience on IJBs will change the dynamics: vote = greater power.

**“Collective advocacy
can shift dynamics and
reshape society”**



Minister's Reflections

On the legal aspects:

- (We should be) Promoting collective advocacy in an meaningful way
- Decisions are made locally but will promote collective advocacy
- We have a Framework to prioritise prevention
- When we have the opportunity to make impactful interventions we should; collective advocacy helps us achieve that.

On Human Rights:

- The Scottish Government has sought to enhance human rights within the constraints of devolution
- A rights-based approach is paramount.

“IJB decisions are for them to make but I’d encourage local partners to recognise the significant benefits achieved through collective advocacy and cost savings made through early intervention.”

On the way forward:

- We need continued engagement and work with local partners on decisions taken locally
- The SMHLR is complex. We are focusing on the AWI Bill (at the moment) and this will build momentum. The incoming Administration can build on this and look towards reform legislation in the next parliament.
- We are taking a phased, coherent approach that recognises the complexity.



Suzanne Swinton (CEO, SIAA), **Tom Arthur MSP** (Scottish Government Minister for Social Care and Mental Wellbeing), **Natalie Stevenson** (Manager, VOX Scotland)

Scottish Mental Health Law Review Reflections

The Scottish Mental Health Law Review was an independent review chaired by Lord John Scott KC, commissioned in 2019 to examine how well Scotland's mental health, incapacity, and adult support and protection laws were working. After three years of consultation and evidence gathering, it produced [a final report with over 200 recommendations](#) centred on strengthening human rights, improving individual autonomy, and reducing non-consensual treatment and restrictive practices.

The [Scottish Government published its response in 2023](#), supporting the Review's ambitions and committing to a new Mental Health and Capacity Reform Programme to modernise legislation in line with international human rights standards. The response acknowledged that reform would be a long-term, staged process spanning up to a decade, with some changes possible in the short term without legislation.



Graham Morgan

Three of the authors of the Scottish Mental Health Law Review, Graham Morgan, Professor Jill Stavert and Professor Colin McKay, joined us for the event and shared their reflections on what the Review had heard from people about Collective Advocacy, the International Human Rights context and the Review's recommendations.

When the Scottish Mental Health Law Review published its report, it received widespread support. We expected the Scottish Government to pay close attention to its recommendations and to implement them, and still hope they will.

We know the right to independent advocacy for people treated under the Mental Health Act does not specify collective advocacy, which means collective advocacy provision can be overlooked in favour of funding individual advocacy. Collective advocacy groups provide a safe and supportive space for people to raise issues that affect them. They identify and seek remedies to issues that are affecting more than one person, including influencing policy and practice in their area, and play a critical role in both realising and promoting people's rights. People spoke of collective advocacy's role in addressing systemic issues, identifying trends and geographical areas where rights are being violated, and identifying solutions and good practice.

Speaking out collectively is often an act of liberation and empowerment. It creates a sense of community, belonging and connection...we grow and support each other, we share food, conversation, dreams, tears and laughter...a sense of community and belonging are hugely important for us.

There was also support for experience-led development of systems of support, monitoring, evaluating and standards for collective advocacy.

We heard from people and services throughout the Review, they told us:

- there is a need for greater awareness within NHS Boards and public bodies about what collective advocacy is and how to engage with it, the provision of infrastructure and access to legal advice, guidance and support for collective advocacy.
- We need services to listen to collective advocacy and take it seriously in a way that was not happening. It must not be tokenistic engagement.
- Development will take time. Collective advocacy is currently working with short-term, non-guaranteed funding models.
- That the independence of collective advocacy groups is paramount. They cannot be 'mandated' into existence, they must continue to emerge from the needs, wants and views of their potential members.
- There was support and recognition for a greater degree of accountability to ensure these groups are reaching out to capture the voices of everyone in their community.
- Most respondents to the Review said there should be the right for Collective Advocacy Groups to take court action for human rights breaches and that we should create a way for collective advocacy groups to escalate unresolved human rights issues.
- The effectiveness of our proposals would rely on sustainable and long-term funding for collective advocacy groups. A framework with clear oversight, could ensure consistency and strengthen the esteem in which independent advocacy is held by services.

Indeed, we heard and said that work needs to begin now in collective advocacy and does not need wider legislative change if the wider legislative reforms we are proposing are to be effective.

Collective advocacy provision is not consistent across Scotland, with only a few organisations having this as a key part of their role. The Review supported a coalition of organisations which have specialist mental health expertise. Such a national organisation could develop and promote collective advocacy, and collect and amplify issues from collective advocacy groups across Scotland.

- ECHR rights and case law emphasise the need for fairness, and respect for dignity and autonomy, and non-discrimination in relation to mental health care and treatment. This is already reflected in the 2003 Act.
- The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) reinforces the importance of respecting a person's views and supporting them to one's dignity, including supporting people to make decisions.
- The CRPD Committee has specifically mentioned advocacy as such as support.
- Advocacy (independent, self and collective) are therefore vital to respecting ECHR and CRPD rights.
- ECHR rights are legally enforceable in Scotland. CRPD rights might not be as yet but they are influential and the Scottish Government is obliged not to act in a way which violates them.



**Professor
Jill Stavert**

The Scottish Mental Health Law Review (SMHLR) was set up by the Scottish Government as a **hugely ambitious** attempt to ensure **mental health and capacity law fully reflected the human rights** of people with mental health issues or disabilities.

Individual and collective **empowerment** is absolutely central to this. We already have provision for **independent advocacy which we can be proud of**, even if not always as well-resourced as would like.

The Review made many recommendations to deliver a modern rights-based system, but one thing was very clear: **you can have all the laws you want, but without systems in place to support people, they won't make the difference people want to see.**

systemic problems – if something bad is happening to one person, it's probably happening to others, and needs collective action to resolve.



**Professor
Colin McKay**

The SMHLR recognised full law reform would take a long time, but there was a lot that should be done now to support service users; and there are already examples of how collective advocacy can be part of this.

Collective advocacy can be provided under the existing duty to provide independent advocacy for anyone in the mental health system who needs it, but we recognised that this is more generally interpreted to favour advocacy for individuals.

We therefore recommended that people with mental or intellectual disability should have **a right to collective advocacy**, and that there should be a **legal duty on the Scottish Government** to support effective collective advocacy organisations.

But we didn't want to wait for legislation. We said that **work on our recommendations regarding collective advocacy should begin now**; indeed, that it needed to begin now if the wider reforms we recommend are to be effective.

That doesn't mean that collective advocacy groups can just be wished into existence. We want the **Government to create the conditions for them to exist and thrive**, but it is vital that they are truly independent and led by their members.

We also recommended that SIAA and existing collective advocacy organisations lead on the development of a **system for supporting, monitoring and evaluating collective advocacy organisations**, and that training is in place to support the development of advocacy workers and peer leaders.

We also made other recommendations which depend on collective advocacy being developed. including around complaints systems which, too often, are not accessible to people – they may not feel well enough to jump through all the hoops, they may fear being targeted, or they think they'll be told that the problem is lack of resources.

“Give credit to Government for their ambition – to make Scotland a world leader in mental health policy based on human rights.”

We recommended there should be provision for collective **complaints** – that advocacy groups should be able to raise systematic failures with bodies such as the Public Services Ombudsman and the Mental Welfare Commission. In the most serious cases, it should be possible for the Mental Welfare Commission or similar to raise legal action to enforce guarantees of human rights.

A key aim of Review was to **reduce coercion** in the mental health system. To do that, you need new kinds of service to support people, particularly in crisis, including models using peer support. **Collective advocacy can help develop people’s skills to support their peers, and bring new kinds of care into being.**

The Scottish Government’s response to our Review set out their **vision**: that the mental health system upholds human rights and enables people to live well, with choice and control over their own lives.

So, it’s not just that people want collective advocacy; it’s not just that human rights require it – it’s a key part of realising the Government’s own vision for mental health.

Our special thanks to Graham Morgan, Professor Jill Stavert and Professor Colin McKay for joining us to share their reflections.

You can read their [speech notes in full via this link](#).

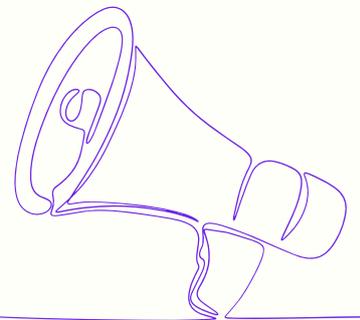
Recommendations - Building Sustainable Solutions

For the Scottish Government:

1. Update the Independent Advocacy Guide for Commissioners.
2. Progress the SMHLR recommendations on collective advocacy, encompassing two concurrent workstreams:
 - Strengthening collective advocacy legal rights and duties, including the capacity of groups to raise collective complaints and pursue court actions; and,
 - Commencing the development of infrastructure necessary to support expanded provision and reach without further delay and within the existing legislative landscape.

For Health and Social Care Partnerships:

1. Complete strategic advocacy plans in all areas.
2. Fully use your engagement strategies.
3. Fund and support your local collective advocacy groups.

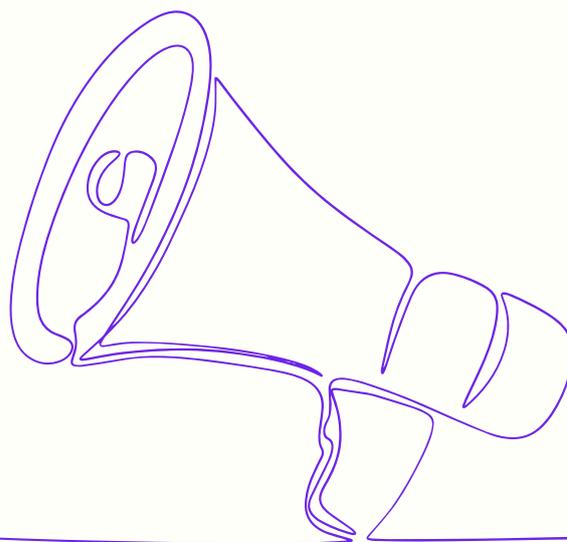


For SIAA, VOX Scotland, and Collective Advocacy Groups:

1. Support the Scottish Government, the Mental Welfare Commission and local commissioners to understand and grow collective advocacy.
2. Build and share the evidence base.
3. Hold decision-makers accountable to legal duties and policy commitments.
4. Work together to campaign for full implementation of the SMHLR.

Thank you to the 30+ organisations that have supported our campaign for collective advocacy and to everyone who joined our event and shared your lived experience.

“We believe lived experience can benefit services and collective advocacy can help cut costs – it keeps people well”





Collective advocacy asks the question, "what can we do about this?" which can lead to genuine positive change in policy and services which may not have been possible for someone by themselves.

I trust working collectively, in confidence and being independent. It is a safe way to share learning from experience about what helps and what hinders, and discuss new ideas.

Contact us:



Scottish
Independent
Advocacy
Alliance

SIAA Website: www.siaa.org.uk

Find an advocate: www.siaa.org.uk/find-advocate/

Email SIAA: enquiry@siaa.org.uk



VOX Website: www.voxscotland.org.uk

Become a VOX member: www.voxscotland.org.uk/sign-up

Email: VOXScotland@mentalhealth.org.uk