





Recognising quality
in independent advocacy

an  NDTi Programme

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Executive Summary

1.1 Overview of QPM

Advocacy is taking action to support people to say what they want, secure their rights, pursue their interests and obtain services they need. Advocacy providers and Advocates work in partnership with the people they support and take their side, promoting social inclusion, equality and social justice.

Based on the principles of the [Advocacy Charter](#), the Quality Performance Mark (QPM) is a quality assessment and assurance system for providers of independent advocacy in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. Used by many organisations as a development tool, the QPM framework and Assessment Workbook supports organisations to think about and improve the advocacy they provide alongside the policies and procedures that support advocates to deliver the best person-centred services they can.

Working towards and achieving the QPM:

- Helps people who need advocacy services to identify organisations in their areas which will be able to support them well
- Enables independent advocacy providers to demonstrate and promote their commitment and ability to provide high quality advocacy
- Offers commissioners of advocacy services some reassurance that a QPM-accredited provider is robust and focused on ensuring delivery of quality services.

1.2 Overview of Assessment

The QPM assessment process includes a 'desktop review of:

- The completed Assessment Workbook
- Key organisational policies and procedures
- Anonymised case files and reports

On successful completion of the desktop review, a QPM Assessor visits the organisation and conducts a series of interviews with key staff and stakeholders.

This Assessment Report has been prepared for [Vital Projects](#) following completion of all stages of the QPM assessment process, culminating in the site visit conducted by [Helen Jones](#) on [March 9th 2023](#).

The Assessor reviewed delivery of community advocacy, forensic advocacy and independent complaints advocacy. At the time of visiting **Vital Projects** there were **6** advocates providing these services.

1.3 Areas of good practice

- Vital Projects is an outstanding values driven advocacy service which demonstrates its commitment to the involvement of people who use the services it provides, with engagement and representation at all levels within the organisation. Trustees and staff are very proud of their impressive history of a genuinely user led ethos and practice.
- Staff support is excellent, with a clearly very motivated and passionate team. Staff feel involved in the future of Vital Projects, its place within the local community and its contribution to community development.
- The independence of the services provided was clear throughout the principles and practice at Vital Projects.

1.4 Areas for improvement

- The CEO and the staff team are in the process of reviewing their staff training and development programme, mandatory and desirable training and individual training plans for each staff member.
- The Safeguarding Adults Policy and procedures require updating, with a named Safeguarding Lead for the organisation. Vital Projects' Engagement Protocol requires review, as part of the Casework Management Guidance.
- Vital Projects needs to review its reporting and monitoring procedures, making the most of its data collection capacity so that they can regularly analyse up to date figures on use of the services, outcomes and EDI data.

1.5 Assessor's recommendations

I am pleased to recommend that Vital Projects be re-awarded the Advocacy QPM for a period of three years from March 2023.

1.6 Vital Projects' response to the Assessment Report

Sharon Cullerton, CEO at Vital Projects said:

'Once again we are delighted that the quality of our work has again been recognised by the National Development Team for Inclusion (NDTi) with the award of the Advocacy Quality Performance. The process of assessment is both a rigorous and rewarding experience providing an opportunity to shine a torch into our work and reflect on what we do, why we do it and ultimately how we do it.

As an organisation with over 30 years' experience we have seen many changes within the provision of advocacy, the advocacy sector and legislation pertaining to the delivery of advocacy. Vital remain strongly focussed on the underlying principles of our advocacy delivery and are passionate about the value of independent advocacy can play in transforming people's lives. We value greatly the opportunity to work with an independent external provider to assess the quality of our work and have this validated with the award for a further three years.

Vital welcome the recommendations contained within the report and will ensure as always that they are acted on with all possible considerations taken into account to ensure we maintain and develop all areas of the organisations practice and policy.'



Summary of Assessment

2.1 About Vital Projects

Vital Projects is a service user led Charitable Incorporated Organisation, which specialises in mental health. Established in 1989, the organisation began as Bradford and Airedale Mental Health Advocacy Group (BAMHAG), rebranding as Vital Projects in 2018 and expanding their advocacy provision beyond mental health services. They currently offer community advocacy, forensic advocacy and independent complaints advocacy to people living in Bradford and Airedale. The community advocacy service is for vulnerable adults, vulnerable either as a result of ill health or who are in receipt of health or social care services, who have no legal entitlement to statutory advocacy provision. Vital has funding in place for some welfare rights advocacy and advocacy support for parents in care proceedings. As well as one-to-one advocacy they offer self-advocacy workshops and Experts by Experience training and consultancy.

Vital Projects is led by a Trustee Board of 6, a part-time CEO and two Advocacy Managers. The Board and the staff team are passionate about the organisation, committed to the service user led ethos and to ensuring financial sustainability.

Vital Projects is well-established in the local area and works in partnership with other community and voluntary sector organisations.

2.2 The Assessment Team

Helen Jones has over 30 years' experience of working in mental health advocacy. She set up the first mental health advocacy service for older people in the UK in the 1990s. For 20+ years she was the CEO of MIndOut the LGBTQ Mental Health Service where she ran LGBTQ and Trans specific advocacy services.

She is passionate about ending health inequalities, co-production and amplifying the voice of minoritised communities.

Alongside her work as a QPM Assessor for NDTi she also works as a Services Reviewer for the Mind Quality Performance Mark. She works freelance as an independent evaluator, organisational consultant, and social researcher.

She was awarded an honorary MA from the University of Brighton and an MBE for her work in LGBTQ mental health.

2.3 Approach to QPM Assessment

Helen Jones carried out both the desktop assessment and site visit for Vital Projects. The desktop assessment included review of:

- The completed Assessment Workbook
- 5 anonymised case files

Together with the following documents:

- Prioritisation Policy, part of the Casework Management Guidance document
- Non-instructed Advocacy Policy
- Equality and Diversity Policy
- Engagement Protocol, covered in the Casework Management Guidance document
- Confidentiality Policy
- Safeguarding Adults and Children Policy
- Fair Processing Notice
- Vital Projects' Constitution
- The Vital Projects website

During the site visit, the assessor undertook a series of interviews with the following people:

- The CEO
- Two external stakeholders
- Three people who have accessed the advocacy services
- The Chair of the Board of Trustees
- Two Advocacy Managers
- Four advocates who between them deliver all types of advocacy support offered by the organisation

At the site visit the assessor was shown:

- EDI data collection process on database
- Vital Projects' latest Annual Report



Summary of Findings

This section provides a summary of some of the findings against each of the themes that are set out in the Advocacy Charter and form the structure for the Quality Performance Mark. It does not seek to comment on each individual quality indicator that sits beneath each standard.

3.1 Clarity of Purpose



Advocacy Providers ensure that the individuals they advocate for, referrers, health and social care services and funding agencies all receive information that helps them understand the advocacy service and the role of the advocate, including its benefits and boundaries.

The Advocacy Providers objectives and activities must align with the principles set out in this Charter.



Vital Projects has clearly stated vision, mission and values on its recently relaunched website. These are clear and well expressed, and reflect the objectives in its Annual Trustees' Report. The Advocacy Charter and Advocacy Code of Practice are clearly linked and consistent with the stated objectives and activities.

The purpose and practice of Advocacy is described clearly on the website and in their literature. There is a very helpful web page on the importance of advocacy and how an advocate can assist at decision making meetings, which illustrates some of the limitations of advocacy.

All the staff at Vital Projects were clear about their professional roles and remits and were reflective about the boundaries of the advocacy relationship, depending on the type of advocacy being provided. Supervising Advocates were clear about boundaries the kinds of dilemmas that can arise and how they advise their supervisees. All the staff were passionate about the benefits of advocacy and spoke eloquently about its importance both to individuals and to local communities.

The well established Trustee board were clear about the aims, objectives and practice of advocacy. The Chair of Trustees has experience of using services provided by Vital Projects as well as having been a member of staff, before becoming a Trustee.

External stakeholders from both the voluntary sector and a statutory health provider confirmed that Vital Projects is clear and consistent in its role as an advocacy organisation.

'[Vital] is clear what they offer, that comes across very well, the advocates are very clear with clear boundaries. Vital is a trusted organisation...no one else does what they are doing. It's a very skilled organisation'. - External Stakeholder

3.2 Independence



The Advocacy Provider is independent from statutory organisations and all other service delivery and is free from conflict of interest, both in design and operation of advocacy services. The Advocacy Provider's culture supports Advocates to promote their independence with individuals, professionals and other stakeholders; Advocates will be free from influence and conflict of interest so that they can represent the person for whom they advocate.



Vital Projects highlights its independence from statutory services in all its publicity and communications and emphasises independence as a key value and practice. This was reinforced in discussions with staff, Trustees, people who use the services and external stakeholders during the site visit.

Conflicts of interest are acknowledged, registered and reflected on. Staff were aware of actual and potential conflicts of interest which arise during case work and gave examples of not working with people who use the same services as themselves and not working with members of the same family.

'We are a user-led organisation and our personal experiences may mean that you can't represent someone. We can be very open about that and talk any potential conflicts through with the team' - Advocate

Trustees were aware of the importance of declaring any conflicts of interest at Board level.

Examples were given of challenges that Vital Projects have raised with the local authority, showing how the organisation has maintained its independence from funders and commissioners.

Advocates were clear about the importance of communicating their independence to the people they are working with, including within residential services where it may take time to establish that the Advocate does not work for the NHS. It can take time to create trust with people using the service. Advocates gave excellent examples of how they demonstrate their independence and reinforce it, emphasising how important it is to maintain good boundaries with other professionals. An example of this was recognising when professionals are attempting to use Advocates to deliver unwelcome news to people accessing the services.

'I didn't know what to do...Vital were a godsend: they listen, they are objective, they explored everything possible' - person who accessed the service


3.3 Confidentiality



Information held by the advocacy service about individuals will be kept confidential to the advocacy service. The Advocacy Provider will have a Confidentiality Policy that reflects current legislation. It will be clear about how personal information held

by the Advocacy Provider will be kept confidential, under what circumstances it may be shared, the organisation's approach to confidentiality in the delivery of Non-Instructed Advocacy and how the organisation responds if confidentiality is breached.

Advocates will ensure that information concerning the people they advocate for is shared with these individuals unless there are exceptional circumstances, when a clear explanation will be recorded.

Advocates must also be aware of situations that require making a child or adult safeguarding alert. 

Vital Projects' Confidentiality Policy and procedures are up to date and in line with GDPR. Personal information is stored securely on an encrypted data base.

Advocates were clear that they explain confidentiality, and its limits, to people who access the services. They were clear that they can identify safeguarding concerns, they understand their responsibilities and they take appropriate action.

Vital Project's Fair Processing Notice is reproduced on its website.


'I was immensely reassured by the professional approach and confidentiality of the service.' - Person who accessed the service

3.4 Person Led and Empowerment



Person led - *The Advocacy Provider and Advocates will put the people they advocate for first, ensuring that they are directed by their wishes and interests. Advocates will be nonjudgmental and respectful of people's needs, views, culture and experiences.*

Empowerment - *The Advocacy Provider will support people to self-advocate as far as possible, creating and supporting opportunities for self-advocacy, empowerment and enablement. Advocates support people to access information to exercise choice and control in their lives and the decisions affecting them.*

People will choose their own level of involvement and the style of advocacy support they want. Where people lack capacity to influence the service, the Advocacy Provider will ensure the advocacy remains person led and enable those with an interest in the welfare of the person to be involved. People receiving advocacy will be involved in the wider activities of the organisation up to and including the Board. 

Vital Projects is a service user led organisation which highly values lived experience and the wisdom that comes from that experience. Everyone involved, staff and Trustees, has experience of accessing services across a wide spectrum of needs. This is apparent in the leadership and culture of the organisation. Members of both the staff and Trustee teams also have experience of using Vital Projects' services.

Advocates described good practice in keeping the person using the service central to the advocacy process. An example given was encouraging people using the Independent Complaints Advocacy Service to make changes to draft letters and reminding them that they can change their minds about taking action at any point. Advocates emphasised the importance of presenting all the options available to people using the services.

'I am the client's eyes, ears and mouth. I will tell them everything I am told and help them to explore choices and options, I am not there to make up their mind for them...' - Advocate

Advocates and Senior Advocates spoke about the importance of taking instruction from people using the service, and the importance of explaining instructed advocacy to professionals. Vital Projects does not provide any statutory non-instructed advocacy, though Advocates gave an example of taking instruction from a terminally ill person accessing the service who wished them to pursue issues after their death.

'The advocate is absolutely brilliant, easy to get hold of, and makes good relationships with people who use our services. It's really easy to refer into. They are very good and person centred.' - External Stakeholder

Vital Projects runs self-advocacy workshops which are open to anyone to book on and participate. People who have used Vital Projects' services spoke passionately about the impact of using the service.

'I write down what I feel and prepare for the meetings – I wouldn't have thought to do that without the advocate. Now I share that with other people who struggle, them [Vital Projects] helping me has meant I help others.' - Person who accessed advocacy

3.5 Equality, diversity and accessibility



The Advocacy Provider will have an up to date Equality and Diversity Policy that recognises the need to be pro-active in tackling all forms of inequality, discrimination and social exclusion so that all people are treated fairly. Advocates time will be allocated equitably.

Advocates make reasonable adjustments to ensure people have appropriate opportunity to engage, direct and benefit from the advocacy activity.

Advocacy will be provided free of charge to eligible people. The Advocacy Provider will ensure that its premises (where appropriate), policies, procedures and publicity

materials promote full access for the population that it serves. Advocates will provide information and use language that is easy to understand and accessible to the person.



Vital Projects is embedded within and very much part of its local community, with a long history of community action. This encourages and enables people to access its services, along with its clear and accessible website. The advocacy team has bilingual workers, important for access for people whose first language is not English. There is currently no waiting list for community advocacy or Independent Complaints Advocacy, new referrals are responded to within 5 working days, sooner if people are in crisis or have urgent issues.

As noted in the Desktop Assessment, Vital Projects has a thorough, thoughtful Equality and Diversity Policy which covers implementation, promotion and monitoring of equalities across all protected characteristics. The policy covers the behaviour of people who access services and acknowledges the isolation that workers from minoritised groups may feel within the organisation.

Advocates talked about proactive outreach to minoritised communities and how it is a challenge to find the resources to plan outreach activities as a very small team. Vital Projects is proud to note that people from minority ethnic communities are accessing their services in proportion to the local demographic.

3.6 Accountability



The Advocacy Provider is well managed, with appropriate governance arrangements in place, meeting its obligations as a legally constituted organisation.

People accessing the service will have a named Advocate and a means of contacting them. The Advocacy Provider will have systems in place for effective recording, monitoring and evaluation of its work, including identification of the impact of the advocacy service and outcomes for people supported. In addition, it will be accountable to people who use its services by obtaining and responding to feedback and complaints.

The Advocacy Provider will address systemic issues in health and social care provision or other services.



The Trustee Board and senior managers at Vital Projects are experienced and committed to the organisation and services. Trustees meet every 6 weeks as well as supporting the CEO. There is good communication between the Trustees, senior managers and staff.

Vital Projects uses an encrypted data base to keep records of all people using the services, for case management and for monitoring. The case files provided for the Desktop

Assessment included records of the impact and outcomes for people accessing the service. Regular reports on qualitative outcomes are provided to funders, alongside case studies.

‘They have made a lot of difference to me...so much help with professionals...they found out things I needed to know. I can’t thank them enough’ - person who accessed advocacy

Examples were given of systemic issues raised by Vital Projects, for example feedback to the local authority about the gaps in local advocacy provision. Advocates spoke about recurring themes related to the difficulty of getting minority voices heard and people’s struggles to get access to mainstream services. Advocates are increasingly concerned about the longer response times of emergency services.

Vital Projects has raised issues regarding the operation of the local acute hospitals trust at the Health and Social Care Scrutiny Committee and has links with the CQC and Healthwatch. Recently they have raised issues regarding A&E services sending people home without adequate assessment and the poor quality of dentistry services.

3.7 Safeguarding



As part of supporting people to realise their Human Rights, the Advocacy Provider will have a thorough understanding of safeguarding responsibilities and processes as set out in law and best practice guidance.

The Advocacy Provider will have clear, up to date policies and procedures in place to ensure safeguarding issues are identified and acted upon.

Advocates support people to have their rights upheld and will be supported to understand and recognise different forms of abuse and neglect, issues relating to confidentiality and what to do if they suspect an individual is at risk.



Advocates and Advocacy Managers demonstrated a good working knowledge of identifying safeguarding issues, using safeguarding procedures, raising Safeguarding alerts and following them up. They raised current issues around response times of emergency services for people in crisis who are at risk.

As noted in the Desktop Assessment Report, Vital Projects’ Safeguarding Vulnerable Adults & Children Policy covers issues of consent, breach of confidentiality and outlines the process for identifying issues of concern. However, it does not cover the types of abuse which workers should be able to identify, nor does it mention the importance of identifying themes and trends and communicating those to service providers and commissioners. The Policy does not include a named Safeguarding Lead for the organisation.

The Assessor discussed the Policy with the CEO at the site visit and this will be reviewed as a priority.

3.8 Supporting Advocates



The Advocacy Provider will ensure that Advocates are suitably trained, supported and supervised in their role and provided with opportunities to develop their knowledge, skills and experience, including access to legal advice where necessary.

It will create a supportive culture that enables Advocates to undertake their role in line with this Charter.



There is a positive ethos of shared values and team work. Advocates spoke warmly of the mutual support they offer each other, ensuring that there is plenty of opportunity to debrief from stressful, challenging or crisis work. Advocates and Advocacy Managers receive regular one-to-one supervision, as well as ad-hoc support.

Advocates feel that their life experience and professional experience is valued by the organisation and that their welfare is prioritised. The Advocates are committed, enthusiastic and proud of their work. Advocates talked about how long they had been working at Vital Projects, some had left to work elsewhere and subsequently returned to Vital Projects as they appreciate the supportive culture.

Advocates feel that they have been engaged in and supported through a period of change within the organisation. Their views are sought about issues facing the organisation and they feel that their views are valued and listened to.



Further information

Further information about the QPM and the resources and key documents noted in this report can be viewed on the website here www.qualityadvocacy.org.uk.

Should you wish to discuss this report in further detail, please contact the QPM Support Team or Awards Manager at:

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