



Aylesbury Vale Advocates

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AYLESBURY VALE ADVOCATES

Profile of AVA

Aylesbury Vale Advocates (AVA) is an independent charity set up 15 years ago to provide free support to vulnerable people who are unable to speak for themselves, either because of a learning disability or a mental health problem. Our clients are from a wide variety of social and ethnic backgrounds living in Aylesbury, Buckingham and surrounding villages.

AVA has a team of 9 Trustees who act in a totally voluntary capacity for the organisation. The day-to-day running of the organisation is managed by a team of part-time employees including a Manager, Volunteer Support Manager, 1 Mental Health Co-ordinator and 2 Learning Disability Co-ordinators. There are currently about 37 trained volunteers giving about 1-2 hrs/week or fortnight.

Aims of AVA

As a free and independent advocacy service, our aim is to empower vulnerable people by providing effective communication skills on their behalf.

The service is provided within the Vale of Aylesbury for adults, 18 or over with mental health issues, learning difficulties / disabilities or limited communication skills.

Examples of the issues we address are:-

- Housing and financial
- Support with court and tribunal appearances and meetings with legal professionals
- Correspondence and paperwork
- Supporting families through Court of Protection issues
- Uninstructed advocacy for those who lack the capacity and understanding for decision making
- Support at meetings with healthcare professionals

The service is provided by trained volunteer advocates supported by a team of professional coordinators and administrators.

WHAT IS ADVOCACY?

Advocacy is speaking up for yourself or on behalf of another person in order to produce action.

WHO IS IT FOR?

AVA aims to support people who need help in speaking up for themselves. We work mainly with people who have learning disability or mental health problems and who have a specific problem in areas such as housing, public services, family, physical or sensory disability issues.

WHY IS IT NEEDED?

- ▶ To make sure the person's voice is heard
- ▶ To help the person get the services they want or need
- ▶ To help the person know their rights or entitlements

WHO ARE THE ADVOCATES?

Volunteers or Co-ordinators who are supportive, non-judgemental and independent of all other services.

WHAT DO ADVOCATES DO?

They represent another person's interests as if they were his or her own. They offer independent support to help a person make a decision which is right for them.

WHAT ARE THE KEY PRINCIPLES OF ADVOCACY?

Listening	Giving people the choice to talk about their opinions, needs and hopes.
Being heard	Helping people to speak for themselves, sometimes through a competent and independent voice.
Choice	Finding out about different options and making choices for now and the future.
Independence	An advocate is loyal to their client or partner and defends their views, wishes and opinions.
Rights	Finding out about rights and using them.
Respect	Gaining respect for individuals wherever they are and whatever disability they may have.
Confidentiality	Ensuring that personal information is not shared without permission of the person involved.

LEARNING DISABILITY

If you work full time but would like to give some of your spare time in the evenings or at weekends, then working with Learning Disability clients would probably be most appropriate for you. Of course, these clients can also be visited during the day on weekdays.

People with a mild learning disability often live in a flat or room within a Supported Living environment and are mostly able to deal with simple day-to-day matters, such as shopping and cooking. This group of clients mainly need help when they are having difficulties with practical matters, such as housing, sorting out benefits and other basic financial issues, accessing other services or activities etc. Other people may live independently and may have their own family, but still need help with similar issues. Clients are usually visited in their own homes, or in a public place and are usually able to say what support they would like.

Many of our other clients live in groups of 4 to 8 in houses staffed by full-time carers. Many of them have been moved out of Manor House Hospital over the past few years and are enjoying the freedom of being able to make some choices which were not available to them in hospital. They have moderate to profound learning disabilities.

These clients require advocacy in varying degrees, depending on the severity of their condition.

At the beginning, it is necessary to build up a friendship with the client in order to gain their trust and confidence, so that they understand you are there for them. Volunteers play a very valuable role in ensuring such clients continue to receive the choices they now enjoy. They are able to go shopping, out to a park for a picnic, listen to their choice of music, and go to group activities such as woodwork, painting, keep fit. Part of this work involves liaising with the care staff, who are very happy for people in their care to have advocates to speak up on their behalf when the need arises.

People with severe or profound learning disability are usually non-verbal. Some will use sign language, but in most of these cases communication is at quite a basic level - maybe a smile or a shake of the head to indicate their preferences. Extra training and support is provided for those volunteers who feel they would like to work with our severe or profoundly disabled clients. Clients are usually visited in their homes, with care staff present. Where appropriate, and with the agreement of the staff, some clients can be taken out - for example, to go shopping or for a cup of coffee. In all cases an AVA

Co-ordinator will accompany you on your first visit and will continue to give you as much support as you need.

MENTAL HEALTH ILLNESS

There is a well accepted statistic that one in four people will, at some time during their lifetime, experience some form of mental illness. The loss of social and life skills associated with mental illness can often result in a lack of self-confidence and personal esteem.

The potential consequences of this type of illness can be devastating to someone's life. It often impacts upon a person's physical appearance, home, family, job and income. The personal suffering of these people will often be unknown to their work colleagues, friends and sometimes, their family.

Advocacy can provide a vital link to the outside world for many of these people, while giving support in solving many practical problems which they are unable to deal with on their own.

It is often necessary for an advocate working with a mental health client to be available during the day, in order to support them at meetings and be able to contact various services, council departments, etc. during office hours. Most of our mental health clients live in Aylesbury town, rather than in the surrounding villages.

Most of our clients suffer from varying degrees of depression, although some may have another mental illness, such as schizophrenia or bi-polar disorder. They mainly need help in practical ways - support at meetings or appointments, with social services or health professionals, housing or benefit officers; help with filling in forms for benefits; help in sorting out financial or housing problems. In general, these clients need on-going support to deal with day-to-day matters which they find difficult or impossible to cope with on their own.

Clients can be seen in our office or in a public place - such as a coffee bar - or, if appropriate, in their home, and at a time which suits both client and volunteer. In all cases an AVA Co-ordinator will accompany you on your first visit and will continue to give you as much support and advice as you need.