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Empowering Parents in Child Protection: An Evaluation of the Parental Advocacy and Information Service (PAIS) in Ireland

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ABSTRACT

Parental advocacy represents a crucial response to the marginalization of parents within child protection systems, aiming to empower them by amplifying their voices, ensuring their participation and supporting them through complex legal and bureaucratic processes. This article evaluates the Parental Advocacy and Information Service (PAIS), a pilot service launched in Ireland to provide independent advocacy for parents involved in child protection cases. Drawing on qualitative data from interviews and surveys with parents and professionals, the study explores how advocacy services contribute to meaningful parental participation in decision-making, impact relationships between parents and professionals and address the emotional and informational needs of parents. The findings highlight the role of advocacy in breaking down complex information, enhancing parents' knowledge of their rights and fostering improved communication with child protection professionals. Despite challenges, the PAIS has proven to be an invaluable tool for empowering parents, reducing emotional distress and facilitating more collaborative relationships with social workers. This article contributes to the growing body of literature on parental advocacy in child protection, offering insights into its potential to transform systems of support for families.

1 | Introduction

Parental advocacy represents an emergent response to long-standing concerns about the marginalization of parents within child protection systems internationally. Research demonstrates that parents experience child protection processes as disempowering, stigmatizing, exclusionary, judgemental and at times oppressive (Diaz 2020; Featherstone et al. 2018; Gibson 2017; Smithson and Gibson 2017; Tobis 2013). These experiences may impede meaningful partnership working between families and professionals, potentially compromising outcomes for children. Within this context, parental advocacy has developed

as an approach to address power imbalances and amplify parents' voices when navigating child protection systems. Parental advocacy encompasses support, advice and representation for parents to ensure their perspectives are heard in decision-making forums, their rights are upheld, and their participation is facilitated (Tobis et al. 2020). Whereas most international research has focused on the benefits of peer advocacy approaches (Berrick et al. 2011; Lalayants 2017), professional advocacy models which centre on trained advocates working independently of statutory services are increasingly being recognized as valuable in supporting parents facing complex child welfare proceedings (Featherstone et al. 2011), just as peer advocacy models.

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1.1 | Defining Parental Advocacy and Its Theoretical Underpinnings

Grounded in several interrelated theoretical frameworks, 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 et al. (2020, 20) define advocacy as primarily peer-based: 'A form of peer advocacy where parents who themselves have had experience of the child welfare system help other parents involved to navigate it. In addition, they also help to develop strategies to change the system'. Although peer advocacy remains central in many parental advocacy models, other approaches have also emerged as valuable alternatives. Professional advocacy involves trained practitioners independent of statutory services who support parents through knowledge of child welfare systems rather than personal lived experience (Powell et al. 2024), aiming to empower parents while maintaining constructive relationships with professionals involved in child protection cases. In the United States, interdisciplinary models combine peer and professional advocacy, providing parents with both professional representation and a peer mentor (Joh et al. 2023).

Critical theories, including anti-oppressive practice and radical social work, highlight how child protection policies disproportionately impact poor families and ethnic minority families (Bilson 2019; Featherstone et al. 2018). Mutual aid and social network theories emphasize the relational aspects of advocacy in combating stigma, reducing isolation and building solidarity between parents (Cameron 2002; Lalayants et al. 2015). 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). Though applied differently across models, these theories share a commitment to empowering agency in parents and catalysing more just, caring and effective child welfare responses.

1.2 | Evidence on Parental Advocacy Models and Impact

Research exploring the lived experiences of parents engaged with advocacy services reveals that advocacy enhances their sense of emotional support and validation, specifically emphasizing the importance of having someone who listens non-judgementally and acknowledges their perspective (Berrick et al. 2011; Lalayants 2012). Saar-Heiman et al. (2024) highlight how emotional support from parent advocates is a foundational component of engagement with child protection services, reducing feeling of isolation and shame and enhancing meaningful and sustained parental involvement. Previous studies demonstrate how parents value advocates' translation of professional jargon, explanation of legal processes and clarification of expectations (Evans et al. 2024; Featherstone and Fraser 2012). Tobis et al. (2020) underscores the importance of rights-focused interventions for addressing power imbalances between parents and state systems, arguing that knowledge of legal rights and entitlements is a prerequisite for meaningful participation in decision-making.

From professionals' perspectives, many value the role of parental advocates in improving engagement, facilitating communication, alleviating workloads, enhancing collaboration between parents and professionals and providing emotional support that busy practitioners may lack the time to offer (Evans et al. 2024; Lalayants 2017; Lalayants and Merkel-Holguin 2025). Whereas qualitative research has provided rich insights into stakeholder experiences, quantitative studies have also examined measurable outcomes of parental advocacy, suggesting that case advocacy may reduce entries into care, increase reunification rates and expedite time to permanency (Berrick et al. 2011; Chambers et al. 2019; Enano et al. 2017; Gerber et al. 2019).

1.3 | The Policy Context in Ireland

The Irish child protection policy landscape has evolved significantly in recent decades, creating both opportunities and challenges for parental advocacy initiatives. Developments including The Child Care Act (1991), Ireland's ratification of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1992), the publication of the Children First Guidelines (Department of Children and Youth Affairs 2011) and the 2014 establishment of Tusla, Ireland's national child and family agency, have progressively shaped a more rights-based, family-focused approach to child welfare. Despite these policy developments, research continues to highlight significant challenges for parents navigating the Irish child protection system. In 2024, the Child Law Project (2024) found that 29% of parents involved in childcare proceedings have some form of disability, yet only a quarter of these parents had access to an advocate. The development of PAIS represents an important response to these challenges, aligning with broader policy goals of enhancing parental participation and supporting family-centred practice.

1.4 | Development of the Parental Advocacy and Information Service

The development of the Parental Advocacy and Information Service (PAIS) followed a scoping review undertaken by the Children's Rights Alliance in 2021, which identified significant gaps in support for parents with children in care. Findings revealed the need for empathetic and non-judgmental support, improved communication and confidential and voluntary services independent of Ireland's Child and Family Agency (Tusla).

In June 2022, following a competitive tendering process, Barnardos was awarded the contract to deliver a pilot parental advocacy service. The service is fully funded by Tusla but maintains operational independence through contract oversight delegated to the Children's Rights Alliance and governance via a multi-stakeholder Project Oversight Group. PAIS became operational in October 2022, with an official launch in July 2023, operating across three locations: Dublin North City, Waterford and Wexford. The core service comprises face-to-face advocacy in all three of its pilot sites across Ireland, complemented by a national information and advice service offered via helpline and email. Advocates support parents across multiple contexts including court appearances, child protection conferences, child in care reviews and pre-birth assessments.

1.5 | Rationale for the Evaluation

The establishment of PAIS represents a significant innovation in the Irish child protection landscape as the first government-funded parental advocacy service specifically designed to support parents navigating child protection and legal processes. Although international evidence suggests that parental advocacy can yield positive outcomes for families (Chambers et al. 2019; Tobis et al. 2020), there remains limited research on how such approaches are experienced by key stakeholders within the Irish context. Additionally, this study addresses a significant gap in knowledge, as previous research has often privileged either parent or professional perspectives, with few studies examining the interplay between these viewpoints within the same service context. As Featherstone et al. (2011) note, parental advocacy operates at the interface between parents and professionals, making it essential to capture both perspectives to fully understand its dynamics and impacts. This qualitative analysis was undertaken as part of a broader evaluation of PAIS during its initial pilot phase. By focusing specifically on the experiences and perspectives of parents, advocates and professionals engaged with the service, we sought to generate nuanced insights into how parental advocacy operates in practice.

2 | Methodology

This article focuses on the qualitative components of a broader realist-informed mixed methods evaluation of the PAIS in Ireland.¹ Qualitative methods were selected to generate rich, in-depth insights into how parental advocacy is experienced by different stakeholders and the meanings they attribute to these experiences. This approach is particularly well suited to exploring complex social interventions (e.g., parental advocacy), which operate within multifaceted human systems and involve nuanced interpersonal dynamics (Featherstone et al. 2011).

2.1 | Research Design

The qualitative component employed a realist-informed approach focused on understanding how the PAIS operates in different contexts, the mechanisms through which it generates change and the outcomes experienced by different stakeholders. Realist approaches ask not whether interventions work, but rather ‘what works, for whom, in what circumstances, and why’ (Pawson and Tilley 1997). This perspective acknowledges that social interventions operate within complex open systems where outcomes are shaped by contextual factors and the choices of multiple actors.

This paper addresses two primary research questions that emerged from the broader evaluation:

1. In what ways and under what circumstances does the PAIS support parents to play a more meaningful role in decision-making when there are child welfare concerns?
2. How does the PAIS impact the experiences of parents and professionals involved in the child protection system?

Through these questions, we sought to understand how and if advocacy facilitates parental participation, the contextual factors that influence its effectiveness and the perceived impact on relationships, communication and engagement within child protection processes.

2.2 | Ethical Considerations

The research was granted ethical approval by Cardiff University’s School of Social Sciences ethics committee and Tusla. Given the sensitive nature of child protection involvement and the vulnerability of participating parents, comprehensive ethical safeguards were implemented throughout the study. Participants received detailed information sheets explaining the study’s purpose and methods, with informed consent obtained prior to data collection. The voluntary nature of participation was emphasized, with participants informed of their right to withdraw without giving reason. Data protection measures included early anonymization of personal data, secure storage on university servers, restricted access limited to the research team and confidentiality agreements for third parties involved in transcription. Throughout the study, the research team adhered to Cardiff University’s Research Integrity and Governance Code of Practice, with regular review of ethical issues to ensure compliance with ethical principles.

2.3 | Sampling and Recruitment

The current study used a purposive sampling framework, targeting participants with direct experience of PAIS across different roles and perspectives. To protect confidentiality, parent recruitment was facilitated through service managers who acted as gatekeepers. Professional recruitment occurred through direct invitation via service managers. As outlined in Table 1, the final sample included 28 interview participants (14 parents and 14 professionals) and 37 survey respondents (12 parents and 25 professionals). The professional interviews comprised four advocates, one project manager, one information officer, four social workers, three guardian ad litem and one care plan chair. Distinct surveys were distributed to parents, social workers and solicitors across the service network. Although effort was made to ensure diversity in participant characteristics, the sample was limited by who was willing and able to participate. All parent survey respondents were from the Waterford area. Consequently, parent voices from Dublin North City and

TABLE 1 | Total number of participants.

Participant	Interview (N=28)	Survey (N=37)
Parent	14	12
PAIS advocate	4	—
Project manager	1	—
Professionals	9	25

Note: Professional survey respondents comprised various professionals, though exact numbers for each profession are not disaggregated.

Wexford were under-represented in the survey data, though some were included in interviews. Additionally, despite efforts to recruit solicitors as participants, none participated in interviews, representing a limitation in capturing legal perspectives on the advocacy service.

2.4 | Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews were conducted across two parallel streams between May and October 2024, held either in-person (for parent interviews), online using Microsoft Teams or via telephone. The interviews with parents were conducted by a Barnardo's researcher, whereas the professional interviews were conducted by Cardiff University researchers. These interviews investigated operational perspectives, implementation challenges and the perceived impact of the advocacy service on parents, professionals and the wider system. Three distinct surveys were developed using Microsoft Forms, targeting parents, social workers (and other professionals) and solicitors, respectively. The survey framework incorporated contextual information as well as open-ended questions relating to the support provided by advocates, suggestions for service improvement, perceived impact on relationships and effects on decision-making.

2.5 | Data Analysis

Qualitative data were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase approach to thematic analysis, facilitated by NVivo software. Analysis was conducted concurrently with data collection in an iterative process that allowed emerging insights to inform subsequent data gathering. 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 analysis focused particularly on five key themes identified from the parents' narratives: (1) advocates breaking down complex information, (2) enhancing parents' knowledge of their rights, (3) amplifying parents' voice and wishes, (4) emotional empowerment and support and (5) changes to relationships with social workers. Regarding professionals, themes included: (1) perceptions of the advocacy role, (2) consideration of parents' voices, (3) power dynamics and relationships, (4) organizational factors and (5) collaborative approaches.

3 | Findings

This section presents the key themes that emerged from qualitative interviews and surveys with parents and professionals engaged with the PAIS. The analysis is structured to address the two primary research questions: how the PAIS supports parents to play a more meaningful role in decision-making and how the service impacts the experiences of parents and professionals involved in the child protection system.

3.1 | In What Ways and Under What Circumstances Does the PAIS Support Parents to Play a More Meaningful Role in Decision-Making?

3.1.1 | Advocates Breaking Down Complex Information

A prominent theme was advocates' role in translating complex bureaucratic processes, legal language and professional jargon into accessible terms for parents. Parents consistently described feeling overwhelmed by the volume and complexity of information they encountered, from assessment reports to court orders.

Parent 2 explained how their advocate supported them to comprehend 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.

This account illustrates the personalized, collaborative approach advocates took to interpreting dense professional reports. Rather than simply explaining terminology in isolation, the advocate engaged in jointly reviewing documents, helping to identify and prioritize relevant information, enhancing knowledge and understanding.

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

Yeah, because they're ... 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 ... I was vomiting and everything. I never hit my children. ... I couldn't understand why this was, why they're saying this. And then {the advocate} ... rang ... only for her ... I would have lost my mind ... {the advocate} explained it to me, and then I was like, I want to fight my corner.

This narrative reveals how legalistic language in court documents can trigger significant psychological distress and demonstrates the potentially traumatic impact of misunderstood legal terminology. The advocate's timely intervention provided both emotional containment and critical contextualization, transforming the parent's experience from despair to determination, 'I want to fight my corner', highlighting advocates dual role in providing both cognitive clarification and emotional regulation support.

3.1.2 | Enhancing Parents' Knowledge of Their Rights

Advocates significantly impacted parents' knowledge and understanding of their rights within the child protection process.

Many participants reported feeling ill-informed about their entitlements prior to working with an advocate:

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 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 ... So yeah, the knowledge that my advocacy has, and that's passed on to me, is brilliant.

(Parent 2)

This quotation reveals several dimensions of rights-based advocacy: Advocates provide information about parent's rights while respecting parental autonomy, as well as expand awareness of children's entitlements and available support services.

Parental accounts also highlight how increased rights knowledge can bolster their confidence across multiple domains, both in legal settings and in their personal lives, demonstrating the ripple effect of rights-based advocacy beyond the immediate child protection context, suggesting a transferable set of skills and confidence.

3.1.3 | Amplifying Parents' Voice and Wishes

Advocates empowered parents to express their views and ensured their wishes were represented in decision-making forums. Prior to working with advocates, parents often felt unheard, dismissed or reluctant to voice their opinions.

Parent 2 articulated how their advocate helped amplify their 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 be my words or what have you ... 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.

This extract reveals a sophisticated co-productive approach to communication. The advocate engages in collaborative 'brainstorming', translating concerns into effective written form while preserving ownership, 'it would be my words'. This scaffolded process supports the development of communication skills rather than creating dependency. The parent's observation on the varying responses to different expressions, 'if it's said this way, they're not listening ... if it's said this way, they're listening', demonstrates critical insight into the power of framing in professional-parent interactions.

Parents reported that advocates' presence in meetings bolstered their confidence:

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)

This quote illustrates how advocates presence can alter power dynamics in professional meetings. The parent explicitly identifies age as an influencing factor on power structures, leading to infantilization that undermines their authority as a parent. The advocate's presence appears to confer legitimacy and status that helps counterbalance these dynamics, creating conditions where professionals 'have to listen'.

The transformative impact of having their voices heard was evident in parental narratives, with accounts highlighting a notable shift in the parent's understanding of their role in legal proceedings. Through advocacy support, parents were able to reconceptualize their relationships with their solicitors, no longer assuming the role of a passive observer, demonstrating a critical rebalancing of power and agency.

3.1.4 | Professional Perspectives on Supporting Parental Participation

Professionals provided valuable insights into how PAIS supports parents' meaningful participation in decision-making. Professional 7 described the impact of advocacy on a parent's engagement:

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.

This account illustrates how advocates help parents manage emotional reactions in high-stakes meetings. The parent's initial response of 'storming off' could have resulted in complete withdrawal, but the advocate's encouragement allowed for continued engagement, facilitating both emotional regulation and informed participation.

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.

This comparison reveals how advocacy can shift the tone and dynamics of professional discussions about families. The reference to 'vilification' in meetings without advocacy suggests a tendency towards deficit-focused characterizations of parents lacking representation. By contrast, the advocate's presence appears to promote a more balanced, humanizing perspective that recognizes parent's dignity and worth.

Professional 5 emphasized the advocate's role 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.

This quotation highlights several dimensions of participation that advocacy supports: physical presence, emotional regulation and coherent articulation of needs and wishes, demonstrating meaningful parental participation. The professional frames the parent's engagement as 'a major step forward', suggesting that participation itself is viewed as a valuable outcome, regardless of specific decisions reached.

However, some professionals also noted ongoing challenges in fully incorporating parent's voices:

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.
(Professional 5)

This acknowledgement reveals ongoing resistance to parental participation within some professional spaces. The characterization of parental involvement as something that 'complicates the matter needlessly' exposes a perspective that prioritizes procedural efficiency over participatory rights. The suggestion that this is 'an energy and a resource issue' points to systemic constraints that may discourage meaningful engagement with parents.

3.2 | How Does PAIS Impact the Experiences of Parents and Professionals Involved in the Child Protection System?

3.2.1 | Emotional Empowerment and Support

A dominant theme was the critical emotional support parents received from PAIS advocates. Many described feeling overwhelmed, confused and powerless when first encountering the

child protection system. Accounts frame child protection involvement as traumatic, highlighting the psychological distress parents' experience. In these situations, parents report both emotional containment and practical guidance provided by advocates, creating an environment where the parent can process feelings while navigating the system. Parents emphasized advocates' proactive communication and advocacy for children's needs, demonstrating how emotional support is intertwined with practical case management.

Parent 4 described the hope provided by advocates during profound despair:

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.

This extract captures the existential dimension of advocacy support during crisis. The parent's description of being 'so broken' reflects a state of profound helplessness that can characterize parent's initial encounters with the child protection system. The advocate's intervention provides both emotional sustenance and practical assistance, addressing immediate needs when coping resources are depleted.

3.2.2 | Changes to Relationships With Social Workers

The research revealed significant impacts of PAIS advocacy on parents' relationships with social workers. Parents frequently described strained dynamics with child protection professionals prior to advocacy involvement. Some reported that having an advocate led to faster, more responsive communication, suggesting that advocacy can help address power imbalances in communication, with professionals responding more promptly when an advocate is involved.

Other parents shared how advocates helped them regulate emotional responses and communicate more constructively:

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)

This quote explicitly links emotional regulation with more effective communication, recognizing that intense emotions can impede clear expression and receptive listening. This emotional support appears to create conditions for more productive dialogue.

Over time, some parents reported that advocacy support fostered tentative trust and openness to collaborating with social

workers, revealing the complex psychological journey that advocacy support can facilitate. Parents described moving from an adversarial position to a more collaborative stance prompted by the advocate's mediation and reframing of the relationship.

However, advocacy did not transform all parent–social worker relationships. Another parent expressed continuing frustration:

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 experience highlights the limitations of advocacy in contexts where systemic issues or entrenched relational dynamics persist, demonstrating that although advocacy can facilitate relational repair in many cases, it does not resolve all challenges in parent-professional interactions.

Professional perspectives on relationship changes were also mixed. Some acknowledged positive shifts following advocacy involvement:

I think it's just reassuring as well, because I think you know when they say 'you're going to take our kids off us' and things [...] But I think they are there to help them out with understanding the situation, what they've got to do to progress and get out of child protection or PLO [Public Law Outline] and things like that.

(Social Worker 2)

This account suggests that advocates may help address parents' fears and misconceptions, promoting a more accurate understanding of the child protection process.

3.2.3 | Professional Experiences and Perceptions of Impact

Professionals shared varied perspectives on how PAIS influenced their practice and experiences. Professional 7 described the advocate's role in humanizing parents in professional contexts:

And in both those cases, the parent advocate is really good at, in almost ... like a liaison now, not, 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.

This account positions the advocate as a neutral figure who provides accurate documentation of discussions and agreements. The reference to a parent who is 'quite mentally unwell' suggests that advocacy may be particularly valuable for parents whose capacity to process and recall information might otherwise be questioned.

Professional 7 also highlighted the advocate's support for fathers who might otherwise be marginalized:

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.

This observation addresses the gendered dimension of child protection practice, acknowledging how fathers can be 'pushed out to the side', illustrating how advocacy can help challenge unconscious biases and promote more inclusive practice.

Professional 5 emphasized the advocate's role in facilitating parental presence and participation:

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.

This statement frames advocacy as enhancing both physical presence at meetings and psychological empowerment. The professional explicitly values the parent being 'heard' and having their views 'respected', suggesting a normative commitment to participatory practice. The acknowledgement that advocacy helps ensure parental perspectives are 'taken on board' indicates recognition that without such support, parents' voices might be noted but not meaningfully incorporated into decision-making.

Professional 1 reflected on the nature of successful outcomes in advocacy:

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 perspective challenges narrow definitions of success, expanding beyond reunification to consider other valuable outcomes such as 'safety for everybody involved' and collaborative

relationships between parents, foster carers and professionals. The professional acknowledges the advocate's role in facilitating these alternative positive outcomes, particularly through supporting constructive interactions in meetings.

3.2.4 | Challenges and Collaborative Approaches

Although findings predominantly highlight positive impacts, professionals identified several challenges in implementing parental advocacy effectively. Professional 5 reflected on potential tensions advocates face:

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.

This observation highlights a core ethical tension in parental advocacy within child protection contexts. The professional characterizes advocacy as operating in a 'silo', focused exclusively on the parent's perspective without engaging directly with child safety concerns. This framing suggests a potential disconnect between the advocate's parent-centred role and the child-centred focus of the wider system.

Social Worker 3 noted how parents may initially misunderstand the advocate's role:

I had one interesting family where the parent was trying to use the advocate to [...] to her benefit sort of thing, you know. But she [...] I know her personally as well, and she worked really hard to sort of ground the parent, and it worked in the end, and they were deregistered [...] I think she misunderstood what the advocate was there for. I think she thought she could get away with anything.

This account illustrates the importance of clear role definition and expectation management. The parent's initial misconception that the advocate would help them 'get away with anything' suggests a view of advocacy as unconditionally supportive regardless of actions. The professional's observation that the advocate 'worked really hard to sort of ground the parent' indicates the boundary-setting sometimes necessary for advocates.

Despite these challenges, professionals described various collaborative approaches that enhanced effectiveness, including proactive information sharing to help coordinate support. By alerting the advocate to potentially difficult conversations and following up after challenging interactions, professionals ensure the advocate can provide timely, relevant support.

Professional 6 highlighted the value of advocates' distinctive 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.

This reflection highlights the value of advocates' distinctive relational approach. Rather than seeing the advocate's 'different way' as challenging their own approach, these professional values diverse perspectives and relationships. The self-awareness about being perceived as 'authoritarian' demonstrates reflexive practice that recognizes how structural roles shape interactions regardless of individual intentions.

4 | Limitations

The reported findings have several limitations that should be acknowledged. As a qualitative analysis focused on a specific parental advocacy service in Ireland, the findings may not be generalizable to other contexts or advocacy models. The sample size, although sufficient for qualitative insights, limits statistical representation across the broader population of parents involved with child protection services. The under-representation of parent survey respondents from Dublin North City and Wexford limits the geographical diversity of feedback. Further, the recruitment of participants through service managers acting as gatekeepers may have introduced selection bias, potentially favouring parents with more positive experiences. The lack of longitudinal data limits our understanding of how advocacy impacts long-term outcomes for families and relationships with professionals. In addition, the absence of solicitor perspectives represents a gap in understanding the views of legal professionals on parental advocacy.

5 | Discussion

This study has examined how professional parental advocacy operates within the Irish child protection context, revealing several key mechanisms through which advocacy supports parental participation in decision-making and impacts experiences of both parents and professionals. The findings contribute to an emerging body of literature on professional advocacy models, complementing existing research that has primarily focused on peer advocacy approaches.

Thematic analysis identified three core mechanisms through which advocacy supports meaningful participation: breaking down complex information into accessible terms, enhancing parents' knowledge of their rights and amplifying parents' voices in decision-making forums. These mechanisms align with theoretical frameworks underpinning advocacy, including empowerment theory (Berrick et al. 2011), and critical perspectives on power imbalances within child protection systems (Featherstone et al. 2018). The function of advocates as translators of complex bureaucratic processes and legal terminology emerged as particularly significant, supporting previous research highlighting how professional jargon can alienate and disempower parents (Evans et al. 2024; Lalayants 2012;

Lalayants and Merkel-Holguin 2025). Our study extends this understanding by illuminating the emotional impact of inaccessible language, with parents describing visceral reactions to misunderstood terminology. Rights-based approaches to parental advocacy featured prominently in our findings, echoing Tobis et al.'s (2020) assertion that knowledge of legal rights is a prerequisite for meaningful participation. However, our study also underscores the complexity of implementing rights-based approaches within adversarial child protection contexts, supporting observations that such approaches require careful navigation to avoid reinforcing defensive patterns. This tension between rights and relationships merits further theoretical and practical attention.

The emotional dimension of advocacy emerged as a foundational aspect of the service. Parents' accounts of being 'broken' and 'overwhelmed' by child protection involvement highlight the profound psychological impact of these processes. Advocates provided critical emotional containment and practical support to parents, supporting Saar-Heiman et al.'s (2024) emphasis on emotional support as a core component of effective advocacy, and aligns with Damman et al.'s (2025) conclusions on the multidimensional support domains associated with parental advocacy, particularly the category of psychosocial support, which emphasizes the emotional containment and regulation provided by advocates to parents. The study revealed significant impacts on parent-professional relationships, with many parents reporting improved communication and tentative trust-building following advocacy involvement, supporting previous findings by Featherstone et al. (2011) and Evans et al. (2024). However, our study also captured instances where advocacy did not transform entrenched mistrust, emphasizing the limitations of individual interventions without broader systemic change.

Professional perspectives on advocacy revealed complex dynamics around role boundaries and power-sharing. Whereas most professionals acknowledged the benefits of advocacy, particularly in facilitating parent engagement and improving communication, some expressed concerns about advocacy 'complicating' processes, supporting the findings of Lalayants (2017). The findings also reveal how advocacy may address systemic biases towards certain groups. Professional reflections on how advocates supported fathers who might otherwise be 'pushed out to the side' and parents with mental health difficulties suggest advocacy may help challenge unconscious biases and promote more inclusive practice. This aligns with critical perspectives on how child protection policies may disproportionately impact marginalized families (Bilson 2019).

5.1 | Implications for Practice and Policy

The study's findings have several implications for practice and policy. For practitioners, results suggest the importance of acknowledging power dynamics from the outset of intervention and recognizing how professional language may impact parents' emotional well-being and capacity to engage. For advocacy services, findings highlight the value of combining practical information with emotional support and of establishing clear role boundaries while maintaining collaborative

relationships with professionals. For policymakers, results underscore the importance of embedding advocacy within broader reforms that address structural barriers to meaningful participation.

6 | Conclusion

This analysis illustrates how the PAIS influences parents' participation in decision-making and impacts experiences of both parents and professionals within the Irish child protection system. The service operates at cognitive, emotional, relational and systemic levels to enhance parents' capacity to engage meaningfully with processes affecting their families.

Regarding the first research question, the PAIS supports meaningful participation through three key mechanisms: breaking down complex information into accessible terms, enhancing parents' knowledge of their rights and amplifying parents' voices in decision-making forums. Professionals generally recognized the value of these services in promoting more balanced, inclusive decision-making, although some tensions around role boundaries were evident. Concerning the second research question, findings demonstrate predominantly positive impacts on experiences. For parents, PAIS provides crucial emotional containment during distressing times and facilitates more constructive relationships with social workers in many cases. For professionals, it generally enhances their ability to engage effectively with parents and make more informed decisions. Whereas challenges exist in implementing advocacy within established power structures, collaborative approaches that capitalize on complementary roles show promise in addressing these tensions.

Despite its positive impact, PAIS cannot overcome all structural barriers to meaningful participation. Resource constraints, organizational cultures, prioritizing procedural efficiency and deeply embedded adversarial dynamics continue to shape experiences. This suggests advocacy must operate at both individual and systemic levels, challenging conditions that marginalize parental perspectives while providing practical support to navigate existing structures.

In conclusion, the PAIS represents a valuable innovation in the Irish child protection landscape, offering support that enhances parents' rights, voice and well-being during a critical time. By fostering more collaborative, transparent approaches to child welfare decision-making, the service has the potential to contribute to better outcomes while promoting a more humane, rights-based professional culture.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The data related to this study are not publicly available for privacy and ethical reasons.

Endnotes

¹The broader evaluation included quantitative analysis of service data, case study analysis and development of a logic model.

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