



**Health
Information
and Quality
Authority**

An tÚdarás Um Fhaisnéis
agus Cáilíocht Sláinte

Health Information
and Standards

The Fundamentals of Advocacy in health and social care: Exploring the effectiveness of the online learning course

October 2025

Safer Better Care

About the Health Information and Quality Authority

The Health Information and Quality Authority (HIQA) is an independent statutory body established to promote safety and quality in the provision of health and social care services for the benefit of the health and welfare of the public.

Reporting to the Minister for Health and engaging with relevant government Ministers and departments, HIQA has responsibility for the following:

- **Setting standards for health and social care services** — Developing person-centred standards and guidance, based on evidence and international best practice, for health and social care services in Ireland.
- **Regulating social care services** — The Chief Inspector of Social Services within HIQA is responsible for registering and inspecting residential services for older people and people with a disability, and children's special care units.
- **Regulating health services** — Regulating medical exposure to ionising radiation.
- **Monitoring services** — Monitoring the safety and quality of permanent international protection accommodation service centres, health services and children's social services against the national standards. Where necessary, HIQA investigates serious concerns about the health and welfare of people who use health services and children's social services.
- **Health technology assessment** — Evaluating the clinical and cost effectiveness of health programmes, policies, medicines, medical equipment, diagnostic and surgical techniques, health promotion and protection activities, and providing advice to enable the best use of resources and the best outcomes for people who use our health service.
- **Health information** — Advising on the efficient and secure collection and sharing of health information, setting standards, evaluating information resources and publishing information on the delivery and performance of Ireland's health and social care services.
- **National Care Experience Programme** — Carrying out national service-user experience surveys across a range of health and social care services, with the Department of Health and the HSE.

Visit www.hiqa.ie for more information.

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1. Background

Advocacy is essential to ensure person-centred care and support in health and social care services. Staff working in health and social care services have an important role in supporting people to advocate for themselves, providing information to people about advocacy services, and supporting people to access advocacy services when needed. In response to recommendations on advocacy in the *COVID-19 Nursing Homes Expert Panel: Final Report*, and the National Nursing Home Experience Survey 2022, HIQA launched an online course, booklet and educational video on [The Fundamentals of Advocacy in health and social care](#) in April 2023.^(1,2,3) The aim of the online learning course was to improve knowledge and awareness of advocacy among health and social care staff. More information on the advocacy resources can be found in Section 7 of this report.

The online learning course, entitled [The Fundamentals of Advocacy in health and social care](#), is available on HSeLaND (the HSE online learning platform) and the HIQA website, and takes approximately 60 minutes to complete. It explains what advocacy is; types of advocacy; the role of health and social care staff in supporting advocacy; the skills needed to do so; and the legislative underpinning for advocacy in Ireland. The course guides the learner through three case studies, and includes video contributions from an advocacy expert, a patient representative, a nursing home resident, a nursing home activities manager and a nursing home senior care assistant. [Additional resources](#) including a booklet and educational video on advocacy were also published alongside the course.

Since the launch of *The Fundamentals of Advocacy in health and social care*, the course has been completed over 22,000 times. Over 18,000 booklets were distributed to 2,332 health and social care services and professional organisations. The educational video has been watched over 10,000 times on YouTube.

HIQA subsequently engaged with those who had completed the course, and other key stakeholders, to understand the effectiveness of this online learning course. To provide an understanding of the effectiveness of the course over an extended period, these engagements were carried out six months and one year following the launch of the course. The engagements involved:

- A survey of people who had completed the advocacy online learning course, conducted six months after its launch. 155 people completed this survey.
- Three group interviews conducted one year after the launch of the course, with:
 - six members of HIQA's Regulation Directorates working in the areas of older persons, residential disability services, healthcare and information management;
 - five service providers working in nursing homes, residential disability services and public acute hospitals; and
 - four employees from advocacy organisations.

The purpose of this report is to describe the effectiveness of the online learning course as outlined by those who completed the course and other key stakeholders. This report sets out the findings under the following headings:

- survey of online learners
- group interviews with representatives who have oversight in health and social care settings
- examples of feedback from each sector
- conclusions
- next steps
- advocacy resources.

2. Survey of online learners

Individuals who completed the online learning course in the first three months of its operation were asked through an online questionnaire, if they were willing to provide feedback six months after the launch. The online survey was distributed to the 745 health and social care staff who agreed to provide feedback.

The survey opened on 4 October 2023 on the Qualtrics survey platform and ran for five weeks, closing on 8 November. The response rate to the survey was 21% (155 responses), following several reminders. Most responses came from staff in Older Persons Residential services (42%), followed by Disability Residential services (19%), Home Support/Homecare services (10%) and Disability Community services (10%). The findings from the survey of online learners are described in this section and summarised in the blue box below.

Key findings since completing the advocacy course:

- 97% (150) of respondents reported having a better understanding of advocacy.
- 96% (149) of respondents reported feeling more confident in using their skills to support the people who use their service.
- 82% (128) of respondents reported that they had made changes to the way they work.
- Those who said that they had made changes to the way they work noted having more knowledge and awareness of advocacy; supporting people to express their will and preference; better communication with people who use services; having more confidence around advocacy; and focusing more on people's needs.
- 74% (115) of respondents reported that they noticed changes in their workplace in relation to advocacy.
- Key changes that they had noticed in the workplace included activities supporting advocacy; increased awareness of advocacy; greater confidence around advocacy; and better communication with people who use services.
- 46% (71) of respondents reported that they were aware of both the booklet and video; 24% (37) were aware of the video alone; and 19% (30) were aware of the booklet alone.
- 99% (150 of 152) of respondents reported feeling that online learning courses were effective in helping them to improve their work.

Question 1. Having completed the advocacy online course, I have a better understanding of advocacy (Five-point Likert scale)

- 97% (150) of respondents strongly agreed or agreed that having completed the advocacy online course, they have a better understanding of advocacy (Figure 1).

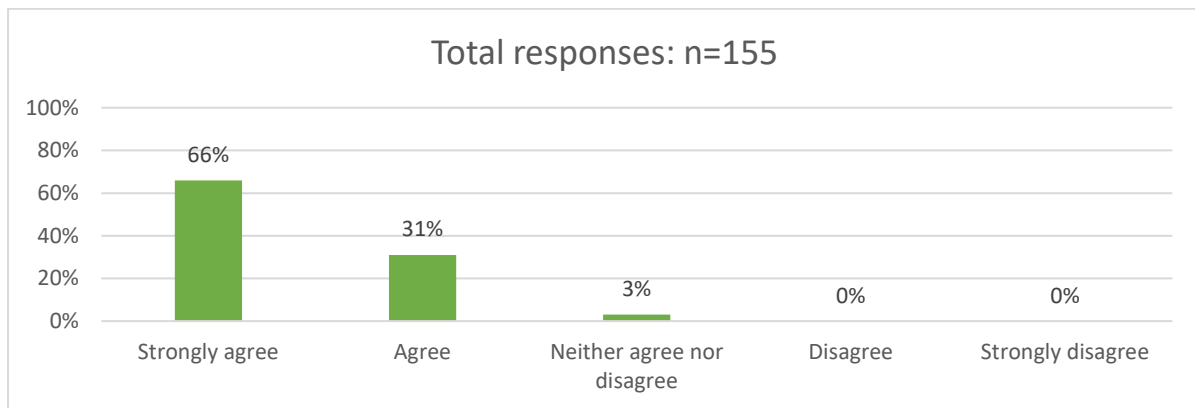


Figure 1: Having completed the advocacy online course, I have a better understanding of advocacy.

Question 2. Having completed the advocacy online course, I have a better understanding of my role in relation to advocacy (Five-point Likert scale)

- 98% (151) of respondents felt they had a better understanding of their role in relation to advocacy on completion of the course.

Question 3. Having completed the advocacy online course, I feel more confident in my skills to support the people who use the service I work in (Five-point Likert scale)

- 96% (149) of respondents felt more confident in supporting people using their service following completion of the course. (Figure 2)

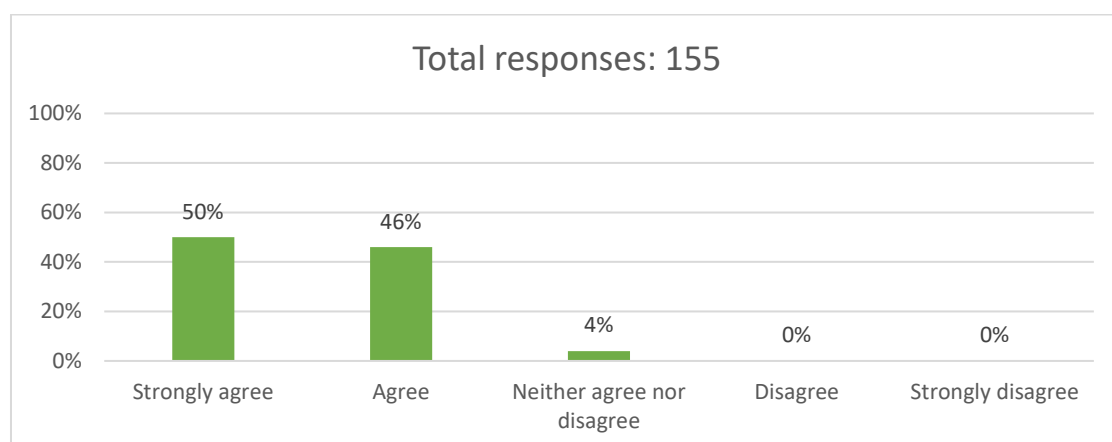


Figure 2: Having completed the advocacy online course, I feel more confident in my skills to support the people who use the service I work in.

Question 4. Since completing the advocacy online course, I have made changes to the way that I work (Five-point Likert scale)

- 82% (128) of respondents reported that they had made changes to the way they work since completing the advocacy online learning course.

Question 5. Please explain your answer and describe what changes you have made, if any (Free text)

Some of the ways respondents reported they had changed the way that they work included:

"I have made changes to my communication skills to ensure all patients' rights and needs are met in terms of advocacy, especially those with limited to none cognitive function" (Older Persons Residential services).

"I am more confident in my advocacy role e.g. exploring options with my residents, to alleviate any fears and anxieties they may have" (Older Persons Residential services).

"It made me more aware of the importance of residents having a say in their own care and to make their own choices where possible" (Older Persons Community services).

"I have always been conscious in my advocacy role. This course has given me the knowledge to support other carers in their advocacy role and the importance of doing a course like HIQA" (Children's Residential services).

Question 6. Since completing the advocacy course, I have: (Select all that apply)

Respondents were asked about actions they had undertaken since completing the advocacy online course. 145 responded, and the most frequent responses included that 58% (84) had discussed advocacy with colleagues; 48% (69) had supported a person to advocate for themselves; 47% (68) had supported a person to have their will and preference met; and 43% (62) had discussed advocacy with a person who uses their service. Eight qualitative 'free-text' responses were provided under 'Other.' One respondent noted working as a team to support residents' choices, and another recorded empowering service users and helping them feel valued (both respondents were from Older Persons Residential services).

Question 7. I was encouraged by my employer or manager to complete the advocacy online course (Five-point Likert scale)

- 90% (140) of respondents were encouraged by their employer or manager to complete the advocacy online learning course.

Question 8. I have noticed changes in my place of work as a result of the advocacy online course (Five-point Likert scale)

- 74% (115) of respondents noticed changes in their workplace as a result of the advocacy online learning course.

Question 9. Please explain your answer and describe what changes you have noticed, if any (Free text)

Some of the changes respondents noticed in their workplace included:

"As staff members we have been given flexibility to provide one to one supports for the people we support" (Disability Community services).

"Management are more willing to listen to and respond to concerns reported" (Disability Residential services).

"We always had advocacy as our work practice, but now we readily bring it up at house meetings with the residents" (Disability Residential services).

"More information visible on advocacy services are put up [sic] and ensuring all patients are aware of their rights" (Older Persons Residential services).

Question 10. Online learning courses are an effective tool to help me improve the way I work (Five-point Likert scale)

- 99% (150) of 152 respondents strongly agreed or agreed that online learning courses were effective in helping them to improve the way they work (Figure 3)

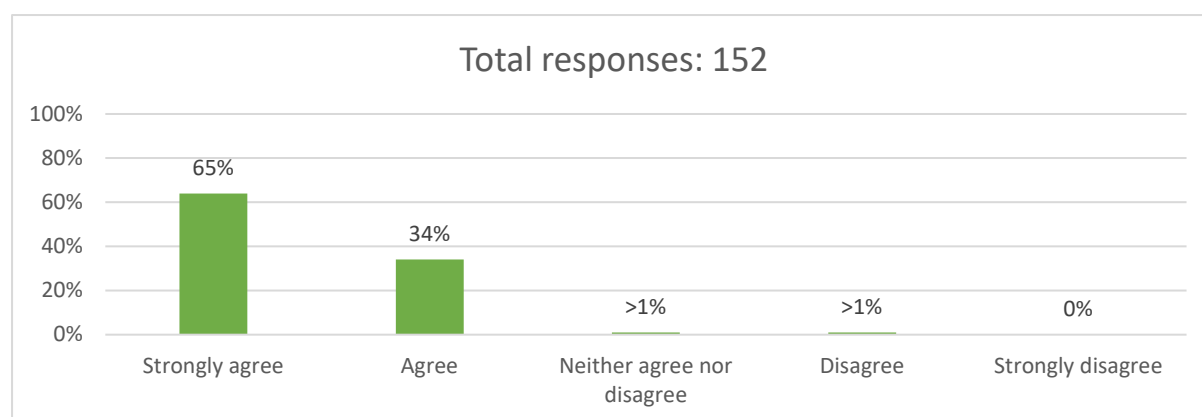


Figure 3: Online learning courses are an effective tool to help me improve the way I work.

When asked if they had any additional feedback, respondents said:

"Very good course, good for refreshing knowledge" (Older Persons Community services).

"I found it extremely helpful and pointed out a few things I may have overlooked previously" (Older Persons Residential services).

"Short sharp punchy messaging" (Older Persons Residential services).

"It may be helpful to encourage staff to do either the training or read the booklet if under time constraints" (Disability Community services).

3. Group interviews with representatives who have oversight in health and social care settings

In May 2024, just over one year after the publication of the HIQA advocacy online learning course, representatives with oversight of advocacy in health and social care services were invited to take part in three group interviews to discuss the effectiveness of the course. Fifteen people took part:

- five service providers, representing public acute hospitals (2), nursing homes (1) and residential disability services (2)
- six members of HIQA's Regulation Directorates, working in the areas of healthcare (2), older persons (1), disability (2), and information management (1)
- four representatives from key advocacy organisations in Ireland: the National Advocacy Service (NAS) and the Patient Advocacy Service (PAS).

Key findings are that participants:

- agreed that many staff were aware of the online advocacy course
- described the course as easy to understand and delivered in plain language, which made it enjoyable for those that accessed it
- noted that due to staff workloads, it can be difficult for staff to find the time to complete courses such as this
- noted that many of those who had completed the course had shown improved knowledge of advocacy, were more likely to promote advocacy and had a better idea of how to care for and support the people using their service
- reported that some staff were more confident to make a referral to an advocacy service having completed the course
- noted some improvements in staff work practices following course completion
- agreed that online learning courses are a good way of improving awareness, knowledge and understanding among staff
- made suggestions to improve online learning courses including in-person events, self-assessments and making CPD credits available for those who complete online learning courses.

Participants said that staff found the online learning course useful but lack of time to complete it was a barrier:

"They actually enjoy doing this one. They said that they found it was plain English for a subject that they thought was going to be, you know, over their heads" (Disability service provider).

"We've certainly heard from staff who are bombarded with online training. And that they have to do it in their own time and, you know, that's doesn't sound too good either" (HIQA Regulation).

Participants said that many staff have improved knowledge and awareness of advocacy on course completion:

"I think the fact, the types of advocacy. That was what a lot of my staff found very interesting. You know, it wasn't just the person on the poster, and...you know, for new staff, things like this are invaluable" (Disability service provider).

"Staff are more aware of what advocacy is and they're able to be an advocate and they know how to do that with patients...I don't know if that is linked to the HIQA online course or our own discussions" (Healthcare service provider).

"When they actually do the course they realise, wait, actually there are different niches and different organisations and different types of advocacy as well, there's not only representative advocacy there's other types of advocacy as well" (Advocate).

"I do think there's a great awareness in relation to advocacy services and referring residents" (Older Persons Service).

"In terms of people like, you know, referring service users to us, I think...there's a greater awareness of who we are, what we do, what benefit we would have, not just to the person but to the service as well" (Advocate).

Participants said that staff have a better idea of how to support residents having completed the course:

"I think that's reflected in, you know, we had a resident actually didn't want to be in here. And I found that staff were more assertive in their approach to me to get something done about this" (Older persons service provider).

"They now are kind of using the words, do you know? Where before, it would have been well, X said she wants to, you know, how do we make this happen?...Now we're kinda going, well come on here, you know, I'm advocating for X" (Disability service provider).

"I think its second nature to staff now to refer" (Disability Service)

4. Examples of feedback from each sector

Case studies from the survey and group interviews of how learning from the online learning course were used

Older persons services

Following completion of the online learning course, a staff member working in a residential service for older people "approached an outside advocacy service" on behalf of a resident who wished to return to live in a community setting, but their family did not agree. The independent advocacy organisation worked with the resident, social services, and other relevant departments to put supports in place

which empowered the resident. As a result “they’re actually now living back in the community against the advice of everybody, because they made...the decision themselves”.

Disability services

Participants from disability services explained how, following completion of the advocacy course, staff were more likely to promote advocacy; they are now “using the words...” and explaining that “I’m advocating for X”. Staff were described as being more educated on advocacy and engaged in advocacy, “doing it on a daily basis”.

Healthcare services

A participant from healthcare services reported an increase in staff awareness of what advocacy is, its importance, and their role in it. They reported that, in general, there has been a drop in complaint numbers and an increase in advocacy in their setting. However, uptake of the online learning course has been lower in acute healthcare services than in other sectors, so these improvements could not be attributed directly to the online learning course.

Advocacy organisations

A participant from one of the advocacy organisations described how they felt frontline staff had more clarity and understanding about the ways different advocacy organisations delivered different types of advocacy. They felt more people were being supported by staff to contact them, and they were receiving “kind of an increase, particularly in the nursing homes, in people being supported by the nursing home”.

5. Conclusions

Survey respondents who had completed the online learning course, and those with oversight of health and social care services who took part in the group interviews, are in agreement that the online learning course has been effective in improving knowledge and awareness of advocacy among those who completed the course. Both groups also reported examples of improved practice among individuals who had completed the course. These improvements include:

- staff communicating better with people who use services, listening more to what they have to say, to better support them
- staff having a better understanding of advocacy, and the importance of involving and supporting people who use their services to make their own choices about their care
- staff being more focused on advocacy and people's needs; more assertive when advocating on behalf of a person; and more likely to support people to express their will and preference
- staff having more discussions about advocacy with management; staff sharing learnings from the course with others; more discussion about advocacy at staff meetings and residents' meetings; and staff being more likely to engage an independent advocate.

Survey and group interview respondents indicated that online learning courses, in general, can be effective in improving knowledge and awareness among health and social care staff.

Some challenges noted by staff to the use of tools such as online learning courses include high staff turnover and staff workload, and it was suggested that in-person training may encourage uptake. Participants suggested that online learning courses could be improved through the use of assessments to ensure the course content was understood, and made more interactive, for example by having in-person events.

6. Next steps

HIQA will use the findings from the survey and group interviews to inform development of future guidance and implementation support tools to assist service providers and staff in understanding national standards, and in implementing them into practice.

7. Advocacy resources

The following resources, developed to support staff working in health and social care to improve their knowledge and understanding of advocacy, are available on the [HIQA Learning Hub](#) on the [HIQA website](#).

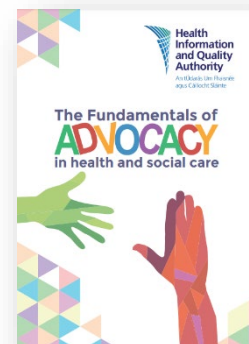
Online learning course

The Fundamentals of Advocacy in health and social care is hosted on [HSE LanD](#) in the course catalogue 'Health & Social Care Professionals' where certificates of completion are available. Alternatively, the course can be completed on the [HIQA website](#) under the tab 'Online Learning Courses'.



Booklet

[The Fundamentals of Advocacy in health and social care](#)



Video (approximately 12 minutes)

[The Fundamentals of Advocacy in health and social care](#)



Poster

[The Fundamentals of Advocacy in health and social care](#)



For further information visit the [HIQA website](#), the [HIQA Learning Hub](#) or contact Standards@hiqa.ie

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