



Towards a real Big Society

How do we promote a Big Society for and with people with learning disabilities?

Our research identified the need for government to promote policies that demonstrate that they regard people with learning disabilities as **fully human** and **entitled to full citizenship**. In order to create a Big Society for people with learning disabilities, social policy, service provision and professional practice must recognise the importance of networks of **interdependence** in developing a sense of independence in people's lives.

Key messages:

- Although people don't seem to talk much about Big Society any more, it is clear that the government is relying upon civil society (charities and third sector) to fill in the gaps left by cuts to the welfare system;
- While the government has recently promised no more new cuts to disability benefits, people with learning disabilities are living with the realities of an austerity welfare state, which threaten their day-to-day existence;
- Many people with learning disabilities and their supporters have developed innovative forms of support around community living, employment and self-advocacy but this innovation risks being suspended by austerity;
- There is an urgent need to end the de-institutionalisation of people with learning disabilities and this can only be achieved through challenging current models of service commissioning and through strengthening community networks;
- In a context of austerity, the potential of circles of support [[link to promoting community living link](#)] to enhance the

community inclusion of people with learning disabilities is an under used resource;

- There is a need to focus on effective commissioning of support that promotes the independence of people with learning disabilities through a politics of interdependence – this means thinking about politics in ways that value connectedness between people, rather than focusing on individual success or failure.

Background

The community inclusion of people with learning disabilities is under threat. Post-Winterbourne view, 3,000+ disabled people remain incarcerated in institutions away from their families and communities and many more people with learning disabilities live in the community in supported living environments but experience little choice and control in the lives;

Community exclusion poses threats to the health and well-being of people with learning disabilities; men with learning disabilities die thirteen years sooner than men in the general population and women with learning disabilities die twenty years sooner. Employment rates for people with learning disabilities remain stubbornly low - less than ten percent of people with learning disabilities in the UK are in paid work, and this figure has changed little over twenty years. Local authorities that commission supported employment providers are experiencing swinging cuts.

Self-advocacy groups have a thirty-year history of promoting the rights of people with learning disabilities but their numbers are dwindling. The government states that it is committed to improving the life chances of disabled people but the cuts to key services undermine this commitment.

Evidence

Our research explored the contemporary experiences of people with learning disabilities in Big Society in a time of austerity drawing on qualitative research undertaken between 2013-15. The research demonstrated that:

- Supportive communities are key to people with learning disabilities leading good lives;
- We are witnessing an increase in hate crime against people with learning disabilities and this indicates that communities might be less than supportive;
- Circles of support offers one methodology for supporting the community inclusion of people with learning disabilities. But the number of circles of support remains small;
- There is currently no requirement to focus on employment in the transition planning for young people with learning disabilities. If a young person goes into employment they lose their Education, Health and Care Plan;
- Well-trained job coaches provide effective support to move people with learning disabilities into employment and to support them in paid work;
- Supported internships have emerged as an effective strategy to move people into employment. These involve, for example, young people with learning disabilities, job coaches, colleges and employers working together towards real employment. However, their availability is patchy across the country;
- Fewer and fewer people are able to engage in self-advocacy even when we know how powerful self-advocacy can be for people with learning disabilities. This is particularly the case for people with learning disabilities living in care homes or supported living arrangements.

Specific key policy recommendations

- In employment, self-advocacy and community participation, people with learning disabilities do well when they are supported by effective networks. These networks need strengthening;
- Post Winterbourne, there is an urgent need to end the de-institutionalisation of people with learning disabilities, yet this can only be achieved through strengthening community networks, raising employment opportunities and promoting self-advocacy;
- Our research suggests that, in a context of austerity, the potential of circles of support to enhance the community

inclusion of people with learning disabilities is an untapped resource;

- There is a need to re-focus attention on the employment of people with learning disabilities. Supported employment models appear to be hugely successful;
- There is a need to strengthen employment as a strand within the transition review for young people with Special Educational Need and Disability (SEND) aged 14 with a requirement to engage with supported employment providers which continues at every subsequent review of the Education, Health and Care Plans (EHC);
- Commissioners of services must recognise that people with learning disabilities are differentially precarious in a time of austerity and, therefore, offer tenders for self-advocacy services in ways that do not exclude self-advocacy groups supporting people with learning disabilities;
- Commissioners must also recognise that as statutory services are cut, self-advocacy services are becoming the first line support for people who do not meet the thresholds for statutory support, without having been given any extra resources to match the increase in demand.

Conclusions

The current period of austerity in Britain means that people with learning disabilities are experiencing increasingly precarious, or uncertain, lives - this is evident in their access to paid work, advocacy and community participation. People with learning disabilities are still incarcerated in institutions and marginalised citizens.

Services are haunted by the unspoken assumption that people with learning disabilities are not fully human and are not entitled to the same rights and living standards as other people.

In order to counter the differentially precarious forces in their lives, there is an urgent need to challenge these assumptions and to focus on effective commissioning of support that promotes the independence of people with learning disabilities through a politics of interdependence.

For more news and research on the impact of the cuts on people with learning disabilities - and information and resources for surviving austerity – visit **humanactivism.org**.