



Valuing Lives in Austerity

Our research identifies the need for the government to promote policies that demonstrate that they regard people with learning disabilities as fully human and entitled to full citizenship. One key aspect of being a valued citizen relates to community living and participation.

Key messages:

- While the government has promised no further 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;
- Circles of support is a well known and rehearsed approach to working with people with learning disabilities that has been shown to increase the community participation of people with learning disabilities;
- Circles of support have a long history of empowering people with learning disabilities;
- 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;
- More information should be made available to people with learning disabilities and their families/those closest to them about the purpose and availability of circles of support;
- Circles of support should be part of local authorities' advocacy offer to people with learning disabilities

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. Many more people with learning disabilities live in the community in supported living environments but experience little choice and control in the lives.

Many people with learning disabilities are supported only by the people in their lives who are paid to be there.

Community exclusion poses threats to the health and well-being of people with learning disabilities. Men with learning disabilities die, on average, thirteen years sooner than men in the general population and women with learning disabilities die twenty years sooner. One theme which emerged across the research was the power of circles of support to enable people to live and participate in their local communities.

Valuing lives

Many respondents reported that a circle of support had enabled them to become part of the community. Being a member of a community entails participation, a sense of belonging and promotes psychological health and well-being.

Evidence

Our research [add link to Our research page] explored the contemporary community living experiences of people with learning disabilities in a time of austerity drawing on qualitative research undertaken between 2013-15. The research demonstrated that:

- People with circles of support had generally got information about how to set up a circle from other people with learning disabilities and/or family members;
- Circles of support spring up in clusters where one of the following, the local authority, local service providers and voluntary organisations have shown a commitment to rolling them out locally;
- Some circles of support are enabled by paid facilitators;
- Some people with learning disabilities are using their individual budget to pay a facilitator, others are accessing a facilitator for free through the local authority or local service provider;
- Circles of support can promote community inclusion and people with learning disabilities in their transition to adult services;

- Circles help with issues of ‘succession planning’ for when family carers are no longer able to care for their loved ones;
- The research therefore demonstrated circles of support can work as a strong approach to enabling the community inclusion of disabled people.

Conclusion

The current period of austerity in Britain appears to be raising the spectre of the re-institutionalisation of people with learning disabilities. In order to counter these forces, there is a need to focus on the community inclusion of people with learning disabilities. Circles of support offer ways to promote health and well-being through community connections and participation. The records of circle meetings provide evidence of how and why decisions affecting the person at the centre of the circle were made.

Worryingly, despite the overwhelming support for circles of support demonstrated in this study, access to a circle is still dependent on where you live and who you know. Local authorities, health authorities and service providers can play a key role in supporting the co-produced advocacy of people with learning disabilities through the commissioning of services to develop circles of support in local communities.

Enabling circles of support not only acknowledge the humanity of people with learning disabilities but enhances their human capacity through their participation and sense of belonging in our communities.

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**.