

Just William: breaking down the barriers to employment for people with learning disabilities

by Dr Katherine Runswick-Cole

A case study illustrating why an outdoor centre team are working with a young man with additional support needs and how together they are breaking down the barriers to employment for people with learning disabilities.



In September 2014, an outdoor centre in Derbyshire welcomed a new team member.

Each Wednesday 19-year-old William volunteers at the centre. He's taken on a wide range of roles from ironing to sweeping up to helping with packed lunches and even trying out the high wires. He attends staff meetings and is treated like every other member of the staff team. William isn't the first and won't be the last young person to do voluntary work at a charity, but what makes this story different is that William is a young person with additional support needs. While at the centre William is very much first, foremost and last, just William, but in other places he has been described as a person with complex needs, and a significant learning disability.

William left full time education in July 2014, and he and his family were looking for education and work opportunities that would meet his interests and aspirations. William is supported by his family and a circle of support. A circle of support is a group of people who come together to support the focus person, in this case William. People who use circles often find themselves socially isolated or excluded, they have been used to support people with a learning disability, people living with dementia as well as mental health service users. Working together, William and the circle set about making William's dream of having a job a reality. William was already a familiar face at the centre as he had visited when he was a student at a local school but it was thanks to a chance encounter that the seeds of the idea of William working at there were sown. William's Dad, a teacher who was visiting the centre with his students told Chris, the assistant manager, about William's work aspirations and he began to think about how the centre could make it happen.

Chris was clear from the outset that William should be a full team member. He said: *"we have always worked with lots of children and young people with additional support needs, but we had never had a member of staff with additional needs working with us. William helps us to develop further the way that we work with children and young people, and constantly reminds us of the need to break down tasks, and to be clear."* William attends the staff briefing at the beginning of the day, and has his breaks and lunch with the team members.

William is flourishing at the centre. As he says: *"the thing about the centre is that they love me there."* He knows that the work he does is highly valued and he enjoys working alongside all his colleagues learning new skills and preparing for the world of work. The wider aim is for William to continue to develop his skills and to move into paid employment.

Sadly, many other young people with a learning disability do not have the opportunities William has been given. An ongoing research project funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ES/K004883/1) found that fewer than 11% of people with learning disabilities are currently in paid work and that number has changed little over the last twenty years. The study found that anxiety about losing benefits sometimes deters people with learning disabilities from working. People with learning disabilities and their allies are often unaware that people are almost always better off in work than on benefits. Family

members/carers often lack the information they need to support the person with a learning disability into work. In a time of cuts, the services that support people with learning disabilities into work, including job coaches and supported internships, are patchy across the UK, with services under threat. Wider welfare and benefit reforms mean that people with learning disabilities have become differentially precarious – experiencing heightened levels of uncertainty disproportionate to that of the general population. Exclusion from the world of work has wider consequences resulting in social isolation and community exclusion for people with learning disabilities. Recent press reports of hate crime against people with learning disabilities and abuse within institutions like Winterbourne View, the National Health Service assessment and treatment unit, featured in a shocking Panorama exposé, reveal the full impact of such isolation and exclusion.

By working with William, we have taken these challenges head on, learning from each giving some tangible evidence to our claim to build individual and societal wellbeing. As Jonathan, William's dad says:

"We are delighted that William has such a positive experience and we hope that his experience will inspire other centres to offer the same opportunity to other people with additional support needs." ■

You can meet William here:

<https://vimeo.com/119873857>

To learn more about circles of support visit:

<http://www.learningdisabilities.org.uk/our-work/family-friends-community/circles-of-support/>

OR <http://tinyurl.com/k6gvjsu>

You can learn more about the research *Big Society? Disabled people with learning disabilities & civil society* here:

<https://bigsocietydis.wordpress.com>.

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Hollowford is run by Lindley Educational Trust, a well-established and successful charity, working with young people from across the UK providing personal and team development that helps to build self-confidence and self-esteem, particularly for those who are from disadvantaged and vulnerable backgrounds. Their mission is to empower people to develop individual strengths, enable positive relationships and to build systems and cultures that add to the well being of individuals and society.