

The **Italian Job**



*Kai Jones, one of LDW's Information Officers took a 'Mini' trip to Italy. Did he come back with the Gold?
... Read on and find out*

The borders of Europe are shifting ever nearer and it is no longer an excuse to hide behind the pretence that the English Channel protects us from the continent's influence. Whether we like it or not, culturally and legislatively, Europe is becoming more dominant in our lives (frankly, if it means more choice in the supermarket and better-designed cycle paths in our cities then I'm all for it) Now, more than ever, there is a need to build links of understanding and partnership with other people and organisations in Europe.

In a recent Llais article Jim Crowe explained the benefits to people with learning disabilities of taking part in European initiatives. In the past twelve months we have worked in partnership with organisations in Poland, Spain, Bulgaria, Greece and Germany on intercultural exchanges. Learning Disability members from VIVA!, Innovate Trust, Llanelli Warriors, Cardiff Young People First and

North East Wales Self Advocacy have taken part in these exchanges, benefiting from training programmes, drama workshops and sports activities.

Exciting links with different countries and organisations are becoming apparent all the time. As a direct consequence of participating in the Spanish training programme, the organisers recommended Learning Disability Wales to an organisation in Italy.

Italy

Organised by AFSAI, an Italian organisation well adapt at these things – they have been doing so since 1958 – the training took place in Brescia, a picturesque old town since overtaken by industry and situated halfway between Milan and Lake Garda. Under the banner Youth Approach to the Third Sector, the week consisted of regular training sessions in the European Union's Youth Programme.

The Youth Programme is an innovative EU initiative catering for the interests of young people aged between 15 and 25 and youth workers, not only by offering financial support for their projects but also by providing information, training and opportunities to develop new partnerships across Europe and beyond. There is a particular focus on disadvantaged groups, including people with a disability.

Action 5

The Youth Programme allows for projects to operate under one of five different areas, or Actions. For instance, international exchanges comes under Action 1 – Youth for Europe, while Action 2 details the European Voluntary Service, where individuals can volunteer in another country for a period of between 6 and 12 months. Our training was actually taking place under Action 5 – Support Measures, which is aimed at helping all those involved in

Llais



youth activities or interested in youth matters to prepare and develop projects and initiatives within the context of the Youth Programme.

Action 5 is a very exciting and useful part of the Youth Programme. Under this Action not only can organisations acquire skills for organising a multi-national project through training, seminars, study visits and feasibility visits, they can also participate in or host a Contact Making Seminar. Contact Making Seminars bring together potential partners for a project – useful for an organisation to identify and build relationships with other countries. Learning Disability Wales has attended two such seminars, in Poland

and Bulgaria, making key links with other organisations that are already benefiting our work and that of our members.

Projects

Alessio and Marco, our hosts from AFSAI, gave us a good grounding in the programme during the week, proving themselves to be first-class trainers and allowing us to further explore the different actions through a series of workshops. One of these workshops involved designing a potential project and making a draft application. Under the title Quality of Life and including the countries Estonia, Portugal, Spain and Wales, our group designed a values-led project

that would bring together best practice and thinking, such as person centred planning, for a seminar to be held in Estonia. People who use services, trainers and professionals from the different countries would be able to learn from each other plus gain an understanding of the service set-up in Estonia.

The other groups, which were made up from people from Slovenia, Italy, Estonia, Portugal, Sweden and Spain, all devised dynamic projects, involving drama therapy and cinema. At the end of the week, as part of a fun competition, Quality of Life was awarded the project most likely to succeed. As a result, hopefully we can pursue this and make it a reality.

Llais

Our Italian organisers had worked hard at putting an informative schedule together for our seminar. Through Futura, AFSAI's partner in the project and a local co-operative offering day opportunities to people with learning disabilities, we had the opportunity to visit local service settings in Brescia. Futura also facilitated a presentation by a representative of the local volunteer council on the Italian volunteer system.

Education

A presentation was also held in a local high school on the inclusive Italian education system. Integration became national policy in Italy during the 1970s, but we were told integration is still a work in progress. However, the talk was certainly inspiring, as we were presented with the history of inclusive education in Italy by the Head of the school and examples of the support offered

for pupils with special needs.

For instance, all students are taught together in the same class, with special education teachers providing up to 20 hours per week of services and support - determined by the needs of the individual student. All teachers are therefore involved in inclusive education for the whole class, with the special education teacher being available to all the children as well as consultant to both the regular teachers and the child with support needs.

We were also given the opportunity of visiting a local high school to see this inclusive approach in action. Unfortunately on the day we visited the school was holding an open day with students involved in activities such as art classes and a rock concert. Yet it was obvious how ingrained integration was in the school, with students with special

needs and without all mixing and socialising together as if it was the most normal thing to do – which it should be.

Discussion

Our week ended with a round table discussion and a welcome opportunity to give feedback on our separate experiences of the seminar. AFSAI, Futura and representatives from the services we had visited were also keen to find out the situation in our respective countries. This crucial and interesting exchange of knowledge, plus the chance to explore service settings and attitudes in each other's countries, was a perfect end to a varied and informative week.

- Learning Disability Wales are seeking groups who represent people with a learning disability aged between 15 – 25 who would like to participate in an international exchange project. Accommodation and food costs for projects are 100% funded, while travel expenses are funded to the sum of 70%.



If you are interested please contact Kai Jones on 029 2049 2443 or email: kai.jones@learningdisabilitywales.org.uk

- For further information on the European Youth Programme contact: Katie Antippas at British Council Wales. The following websites are also very helpful:
http://ec.europa.eu/youth/index_en.html
www.connectyouthinternational.com
www.eurodesk.org.uk