

Able Radio

Rob Symons of Links-Wales describes the journey from vision to reality of the UK's (and maybe the world's) first disability focussed radio station.



Three years ago, Malcolm, a good friend, came up with the crazy idea of starting a radio station to provide a voice for those with disabilities of any form or long term illnesses. The prompt for this was when he was out shopping and witnessed a group of disabled people being verbally abused by a bunch of jobs. This set him to wondering what, if anything, could he do to improve the lot of all people with disabilities. Malcolm himself is a lifetime sufferer from Type 1 Diabetes along with a number of related health, mobility and sensory issues which prevent him from working. Before his health deteriorated he worked in both the NHS, and more latterly, in both radio and television. He decided to draw on his professional experiences to develop something that could provide both opportunities and information for people with disabilities.

Scope

The initial pilot project was carried out at Scope in Cwmbarn, where an old and partly derelict portacabin was made available, and so the Scope Cwmbarn Radio project

came into being. Malcolm had asked me a few times about getting involved, but I was always too busy, however, when it came to fixing a leaking roof and sorting the lighting, as a DIY lover I couldn't resist. Over the weekend making these repairs we chatted more about the project and by the end of the weekend I was on the committee. Two meetings later and I'd somehow become Chair and there was clearly no way out! I remained on the committee and then as Able Radio moved to be a social enterprise they recruited a new Chair and became a Director myself.



Scope studio

A single studio was built and equipped with the help of donations and a grant from the Cwmbarn Trust, and training started with Scope service users.

Before long a variety of request shows and programmes were being played throughout the centre. This was very successful but still fell far short of the vision of a radio station accessible to disabled people in their homes, and open to all who wished to participate. Sadly this was not possible from Scope as all participants would need centre access for toilets, giving rise to protection and insurance issues, and Scope HQ were very concerned about broadcasts going out that they could be associated with which were not under their control. Things were looking desperate, when by good fortune Malcolm attended one of Links-Wales network meetings and described what Able Radio (as it was by then called) needed a new base. Jim Wright - Torfaen's Day Services Manager was at the same meeting, and said he might be able to help. Jim made some enquiries, and very soon an offer of space at Ty Nant Ddu, a former day centre was made. This was perfect, as it was a totally accessible building, with a wide range of facilities, allowing us to focus just on the radio side.

Llais

No equipment

After some discussion it was agreed that the existing studio equipment would stay at Scope where it would continue to be used for training and internal programmes. We now had a venue, but no equipment. At this point another Links member suggested the UnLtd entrepreneurs fund. This fund supports the entrepreneur, rather than the project and has the twin benefits of being the simplest grant application process you will ever see, and almost total flexibility in how the money is spent. Generally I understand it is spent on research and consultancy. We spent ours on building materials, a second hand mixer and other essential pieces of kit. We had received quotes to build a sound proof studio, and a custom made console to accommodate people with a variety of disabilities and it ran to over £30,000 for a very basic set up. We had £5000 and a lot of attitude, so we did it ourselves. We did however overstretch slightly, and very nearly had to

return the mixer. Luckily Pontypool Round Table heard of our plight and came up with the goods. At the same time we were discussing at length how we could best broadcast to our target audience. Clearly traditional AM and FM radio have a very limited geographical reach, and to cover a wider area becomes incredibly expensive. This led to the conclusion that we needed to embrace the digital age, and utilise the internet. The web name www.ableradio.com

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was immediately registered, and work commenced on a web site and radio streaming connection.

We then recruited our first set of volunteers, people with a range of sensory, physical and mental health issues. Malcolm devised a training programme and before long participants were practising interviewing one another over the desk. An interesting fact is that virtually every participant who has come through the centre has started out offering to do research etc. but swearing that they would never present..... then after a couple of sessions learning to love the microphone! On February the 9th 2009 the time for pilots, trials and training was over and Able Radio went on air!

Brynglas Beats

At about the same time, a group of service users at Brynglas House in Newport were looking to set up their own radio project. Able Radio were approached to help with this, and our first training contract ensued. This group have now been working with us for over a year now and the transformation in them has been fantastic. We quickly experienced our first crying social worker (many more have followed) amazed by the increased confidence, communication skills and reduction in problematic behaviour that quickly developed and crucially was taken out of the studio. Brynglas Beats as they have now named themselves record interviews with both service users and staff at



Llais

Volunteers



Brynglas House, and indeed have also interviewed a number of senior council officials and councillors. They then bring this back to Able's studios for editing, and mixing with music tracks, and then produce a CD which is played back at the centre, and also distributed around the council. The first CD was of such good quality that it was also broadcast on air, giving rise to a massive growth in our early listening figures as the directive went around Newport County Council that everybody should listen!

Increased funding

Whilst the training was very rewarding, and also generated much needed revenue for Able, it became immediately apparent that it would not be possible to develop a full time broadcasting model, whilst also running training with only one studio. Investigation and a number of discussions identified that we could be in a position to qualify for a Heads of the Valleys award. We completed an application and went through the variety of requirements that always

accompany such things and were successful in winning a significant capital grant to build and equip a second studio, have our existing mixer professionally upgraded and refurbished, replace our second hand PCs which sadly were not up to the job and were crashing regularly with latest state of the art machines, and also equipping studios with more microphones, headphones etc. and the office



Sally

area with furniture, printer, scanner etc. This brought our suite of studios to their current state. One which incidentally has been looked on with some envy by broadcasters from major broadcasters, particularly in terms of space, so essential when some presenters are in electric wheelchairs.

Over the year the programme has grown to the point that we now put out 18 hours of original programmes per week, each played three times, and interspersed with a variety of music programmes such that Able Radio is now on air 24-7. Topics covered include health and wellbeing, money, arts, sports, friends and social networking and youth. To find out what's on when just go to www.ableradio.com and click on schedule. Alternatively to listen just click on the listen now button.

Things have also developed on the training front, and in October we started a contract with Torfaen Service Users, and Ty Nant Buzz came into being. This group runs in a similar way to Brynglas Beats, though spends more time with us, and less doing their own thing. Shortly before Christmas we brought the Beats and Buzz crews together for a surprise visit from Angela Jay from the Real Radio breakfast show. She was great and as well as talking to the students, allowed them to interview her for their shows.

We now also run courses for 1st Campus with groups of young people who are not in education, earning or training (the so called NEETs). With this group we focus on confidence raising and transferable skills.

Whilst our training activities clearly addressed those with a learning disability, I was concerned that little representation was made on the broadcast side. In discussion with colleagues at the station the idea for a new programme – “Out & About” was created. This involves an interviewer visiting a different learning disability project around Wales every week, interviewing staff and trainees, then mixing this with their choice of music to broadcast the following week (Wednesday 1pm, Friday 7pm and Sunday 3pm). To date 16 sites have been visited from Anglesey to Newport. This work directly overlaps with my Links-Wales activities so fortunately I am able to undertake these recordings during work time rather than in my greatly misnamed “leisure time”. I am constantly on the look out for new sites to visit, the criteria being that they must either be an enterprise, project or training where people with learning disabilities can learn skills and engage in activities that will improve their lives. If you are interested in having a radio visit (which I can guaranty will cause considerable excitement) please email me on: links-wales@btconnect.com.

The story at Able Radio continues to develop, with the

receipt of a grant from the Big Lottery to part fund a Station Manager and Assistant Station Manager for the next three years. During that time we need to grow our revenue from training, sponsorship and other commercial activities to ensure that Able Radio is here to stay. If you have a story to tell, an event to promote or anything that you think could make interesting radio, or alternatively would like to discuss training, need help developing a project, or would like to commission or sponsor a programme especially targeted at your group please contact Able Radio on 0845 4090294 or studio@ableradio.com

Rob Symons Director and Manager Links-Wales, Director Able Radio.

QUOTES:

Sally M, Able Radio's longest serving presenter

“I went along to the first meeting of interested volunteers and came away hooked! I can't imagine life without Able now! Being involved in this fabulous project has given me direction and purpose, a reason to get up each morning and a huge desire to bring hope to so many others who like me were lost, feeling useless and overwhelmed by their illness and disability.”

Emma B, member of Ty Nant Buzz crew

“it was the coolest thing I have ever done”

David J, Brynglas Beats crew

“it has been a wonderful experience and I would like to come back next time”.

Julie S, Youth team Worker in Torfaen

“I heard of Able Radio when they came to our team meeting, and wondered if it might be of interest to Eiyron. The young man in question has Aspergers syndrome and has become obsessed with computer games, and has hardly left the house for years. He was persuaded to come to the studio to review games for a programme. In the course of the programme he became increasingly animated and broadened to talking about other subjects. By the end of the interview, he expressed a desire to return and take part in producing programmes at Able Radio regularly. I have worked with him for several years, and never seen him so enthusiastic about anything. I am not ashamed to admit that I stood in the studio and cried.”