

## **Friendships and Relationships**

### **The Background to the Citizen's Jury**

At our 2008 Annual Conference, our membership told us they wanted us to do something about Friendships and Relationships. They told us that people with learning disabilities don't get the same rights as the rest of society when it comes to friendships, relationships and parenthood.

At our National Council meetings people said:

- It is difficult to form relationships in the first place. Social opportunities which might allow people to 'get it together' are rare.
- There is no support for us to develop friendships and relationships from the people that care for us. They dismiss this area of our lives as a taboo issue.
- People who are in a relationship are often not allowed to live together
- There is very little in local policy. Most local authorities do not have a relationships policy.
- We can't get services that will help us to sort out problems with relationships.

- We don't get services which support us in parenting skills
- We don't get sex education when we need it, even though there is so much information already written for people with learning disabilities.
- The press writes about society's negative attitudes towards us on this matter.
- People with learning disabilities that do have babies often have them taken off them and put into care.

A lot of people with Learning Disabilities have moved on from institutionalised living.

Services have become more community based.

We have come to expect an ordinary life in the community and many of us have achieved that.

But as well as good housing, good health and something good to do during the day we also expect to be able to have adult relationships and fulfilment.

**We are not eternal children.**

People around us would prefer to ignore this issue. They ignore it because:

- They don't think it concerns us.
- They stereotype us.
- They are afraid, because it brings some risk.

But if this question goes on being ignored and we don't get education and support, the risk to us and to our future families will grow and grow.

When we started talking about this issue, we quickly realised that there are many sides to the problem. We set up a subgroup to look at the issue.

The subgroup decided there were 3 areas to work on:

### **1. Social networks for people with learning disabilities**

There isn't the opportunity for people to get together socially, for example night clubs, holidays and so on. As a result

people with learning disabilities don't have many chances to mix with a range of people.

There are things happening in England such as the Octopus Night Club and dating agencies for people with learning disabilities. We asked ourselves whether All Wales People First should set up a dating agency. But we agreed this is not our job. Our role is to create the ground upon which services like this can grow.

## **2. Information and education**

We asked ourselves why people feel there isn't enough sex and parenting education for people with learning disabilities. In fact, there is already lots of training information written for people with learning disabilities.

We think this training doesn't reach people, at the right time, because other people don't think we need to know about it. Or at least, not until something happens, such as people start having sex, or get pregnant. This is too late.

## **3. Informing and educating others.**

We think that most local authorities believe that friendships, sex and relationships is not their responsibility.

But if the issue gets into policy then they will have to think about it and accept that it's as much a part of our lives as where we live, or what we do during the day.

We need to lobby across Wales to make sure this issue gets into local policy. Then it will be on everyone's agenda.

**Everybody needs to go on the journey towards change,** professionals, the government, the public and people with learning disabilities too. We need everyone around us to agree a map that will get us to our destination in a way that is responsible, safe and supportive **and** which recognizes our rights.

This is the reason why we decided to hold a Citizen's Jury at the 2009 Annual Conference. The Citizen's Jury allowed a wider debate amongst a cross section of society.

The question we chose was:

***'Does everyone, including people with learning disabilities, have the right to marry and start a family?'***

The expert witnesses were:

**1. Annette de Grandis (Brecon Citizen's Advocacy)**

*The right, enshrined in law (Human Rights Act), to relationships, marriage and parenthood.*

**2. Jackie Murphy (Tros Gynnal)**

*The rights of the child and the circumstances where a child might be taken into care*

**3. Andrew Holman (Inspired Services and Trustee of 'Stars in the Skies' Dating Agency)**

*The need for creating opportunities to build loving, long term relationships - the foundation for marriage and parenthood.*

**4. Pauline Young (All Wales Forum for Parents and Carers)**

*The concerns of parents when their children enter into intimate relationships, marriage and parenthood.*

**There were workshops on both days for delegates to give their views on the expert evidence. These views were given to the Jury and were included in their deliberations for reaching a Verdict. The Verdict was**

**given on day 2.**

### **The Verdict**

*The jury thinks that the laws that are in place at the moment are clear and adequate.*

*The law says people have a right to marry and have children, but it is not being applied to people with learning disabilities. We think everyone should have the opportunity to have fulfilling relationships.*

*The jury thinks this is because people with learning disabilities are valued less by society. The general public is still unwilling to recognise people with learning disabilities as full members of society. They want to keep them separate and safe and protected.*

*Society as a whole does not acknowledge their needs or their human rights. This filters down to the families and professionals who treat them according to society's influences.*

*The jury agrees with Pauline Young's comment that there is a culture of meeting people's needs rather than exceeding their expectations.*

***The jury made these recommendations***

*We need more research and numbers so we know what is happening now*

*People need to talk about rights and what it means for everyday life*

*Information about rights needs to go out to everyone in a way they can understand it*

*We want to see people with a learning disability in a position of power.*

*We want a champion to make sure that the law is implemented in policy and in how money is spent.*

*We would like positive stories to be made public about*

*families with learning disabilities.*

*We want adult and children's services to work together positively.*

*Child protection process needs to focus on children's rights, not risk. It needs to assume people **can** succeed with help, not assume they will fail.*

*We need workshops for people who want to be parents to explain children's rights and how they can make sure their children's needs are met.*

*Spend money on educating parents rather than putting the money into taking children away*

*We want parents of people with learning disabilities to get help so they can be a resource and help their children grow into confident individuals.*

***Most importantly, MAKE SURE THINGS HAPPEN***

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