

## **Borderline Learning Difficulties** and the Impact On 16-19 Year Olds.

*A growing group of people who do not 'fit' the 'Learning Disability' criteria are being failed by current contracting and funding arrangements leading to increased social exclusion writes Barry Shiers MBE.*

'Disabilities are no reason for exclusion'. They are reasons for specific attention to the needs of individuals who may require time and support not afforded in current funding and contracting arrangements.

If the Welsh Assembly Government and DCELLS (Department for Children, Education, Lifelong Learning and Skills) seek to achieve equal opportunities for all, it is imperative that this section of the community are afforded additional and ring fenced funding. Without this the various needs of those who can develop the potential to become fully integrated into society and contribute to the prosperity of Wales will not be addressed.

### **Inappropriate funding**

Although individually tailored programmes already exist, in reality training providers do not find them to be cost or time effective as payments are often based on outcomes and have time restraints. This is one of many real hurdles that providers face when trying to fit these

individuals into a system that they have never successfully fitted into. Many agencies recognise the inadequacies of the current "inappropriate and inequitable funding system".

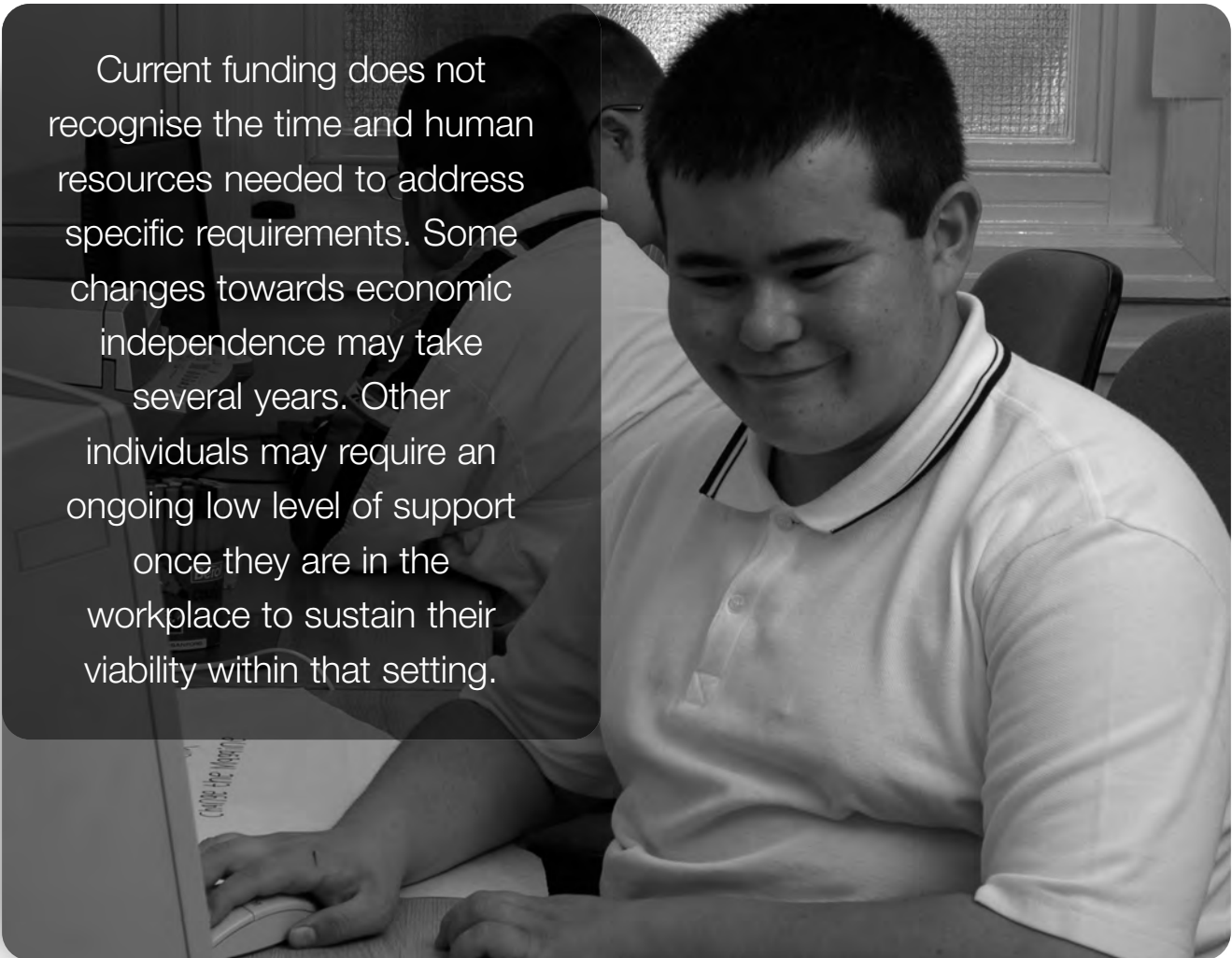
It is not predetermined that any disability group will fail to achieve certain skills but it must be recognised that "traditional" forms of delivery may not suit some clients and therefore, training providers and funding mechanisms must allow appropriate time for individuals to achieve. Current funding does not recognise the time and human resources needed to address specific requirements. Some changes towards economic independence may take several years. Other individuals may require an ongoing low level of support once they are in the workplace to sustain their viability within that setting.

### **Grow out of it!**

Parents are now increasingly recognising the problems their children are having and are seeking support. Some of those

affected move successfully through education and into the world of work or vocational training without adequate skills in place. This can result in reduced access to employment and may limit the individual's ability to fulfil their potential.

Until recently there has been a view that children with specific learning difficulties "grew out" of their problems. However work by Biederman, Losse and Henderson, Wender and others have shown that some individuals with ADHD, DCD-developmental co-ordination disorder (also known as Dyspraxia), Aspergers and Dyslexia continue to have difficulties into their adult years that impact on their ability to become fully active in society. They are rarely seen as being a priority in terms of service provision. They are also not seen as learning disabled as their IQ is too high (over 70) and so cannot access social services, and yet are not seen as having specific mental health needs, so fall through the gaps. There is often



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the view that these difficulties are minimal and require little support.

### **Impact**

The first stage in helping is identifying how the difficulties impact on an individual in the context of their learning and the environment they are being placed in.

In addition to lack of services, transition times can pose a real challenge for the individual and information is not always transferred from one educational provider to another.

There remains a continuing lack of success in transferring people with learning disabilities from training into employment or from school into further education and this impacts on the dropout rate as seen in retention figures in both training provider sector as

well as FE. This may stem partly from:

- a) Lack of awareness on the part of training providers as well as other educators
- b) A shortage of appropriately tailored provision
- c) A lack of additional support available to those undertaking training with the aim of securing employment.

### **Younger age**

The need for support is being identified from an increasingly younger age. Services for children are already stretched, as seen from 'Doubly Disadvantaged' a report from the College of Occupational Therapists which sites average waiting times to be 46 weeks. A recent survey undertaken in South Wales asked GP's if they would consider

extending services into primary care for children with ADHD. GP's cited the main barriers for provision as having a lack of time, manpower and training.

A study by Kirby (2004) showed that educational and health professionals had limited understanding of specific learning difficulties. It is likely that this is as true, if not more true of training providers and others working at FE and HE level.

Approximately 10% of individuals will be identified as having specific learning difficulties and a number of these (approximately one third) will continue having living and learning difficulties into adulthood that will impact on their ability to gain and remain in employment. (Gillberg, C population study).

The difficulties impacting on individuals include:

- Dyslexia – a reading and spelling difficulty
- Dyspraxia – a motor co-ordination difficulty (also known as Developmental Coordination Disorder)
- Asperger's Syndrome (a social and communication difficulty)
- ADHD – attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (an attention and concentration difficulty)

Individuals with the above difficulties are usually of average or above average intelligence. If their training and support needs are met, many can enjoy long-term success in the labour market. Without adequate support however, they can develop additional mental health difficulties or anti-social behaviours such as depression and drug and alcohol misuse. They may even end up in the penal system causing an additional longer-term burden of care on society (Biederman et al, 1993).

These individuals may "exist" in society at a number of levels:

1. have been "diagnosed" and appropriate support given
2. have been "diagnosed" but have not had difficulties addressed
3. have not been identified and still have difficulties that require help
4. require pre-training – i.e. preparation for skill based courses
5. require training in skills before employment
6. require support for a limited

7. require long-term support in employment
8. with initial help, can be employed without support

### **Lacking skills**

Many of the individuals described above will leave school with qualifications ranging from basic or no skills all the way through to A levels. They may even enter further and higher education yet still encounter difficulties accessing employment. Despite having achieved academically, they still lack the essential organisational and social skills that impact on their ability to maintain a job and react to change around them.

This has been an issue for many organisations such as Vision Twenty one Cyfle Cymru, Drive, The Autistic Society, The Dyscovery Centre and many others in the field who have attempted to address this growing and important problem area.

We have debated long and hard on this particular area of concern and politicians and learned colleagues have yet to resolve an acute problem that will continue to escalate if we do not begin to meet the needs of those with borderline learning needs.

The following is an example of how early responsive and individualised intervention can impact on students with Borderline Learning Disabilities.

### **Leon's Story so far...**

Leon is 25 years old and has

borderline learning difficulties. He lives independently and travels by train to Vision 21. Leon's home and work life has been unsettled throughout his teenage years, moving from living with his mum to his auntie's flat and struggling to hold down a job.

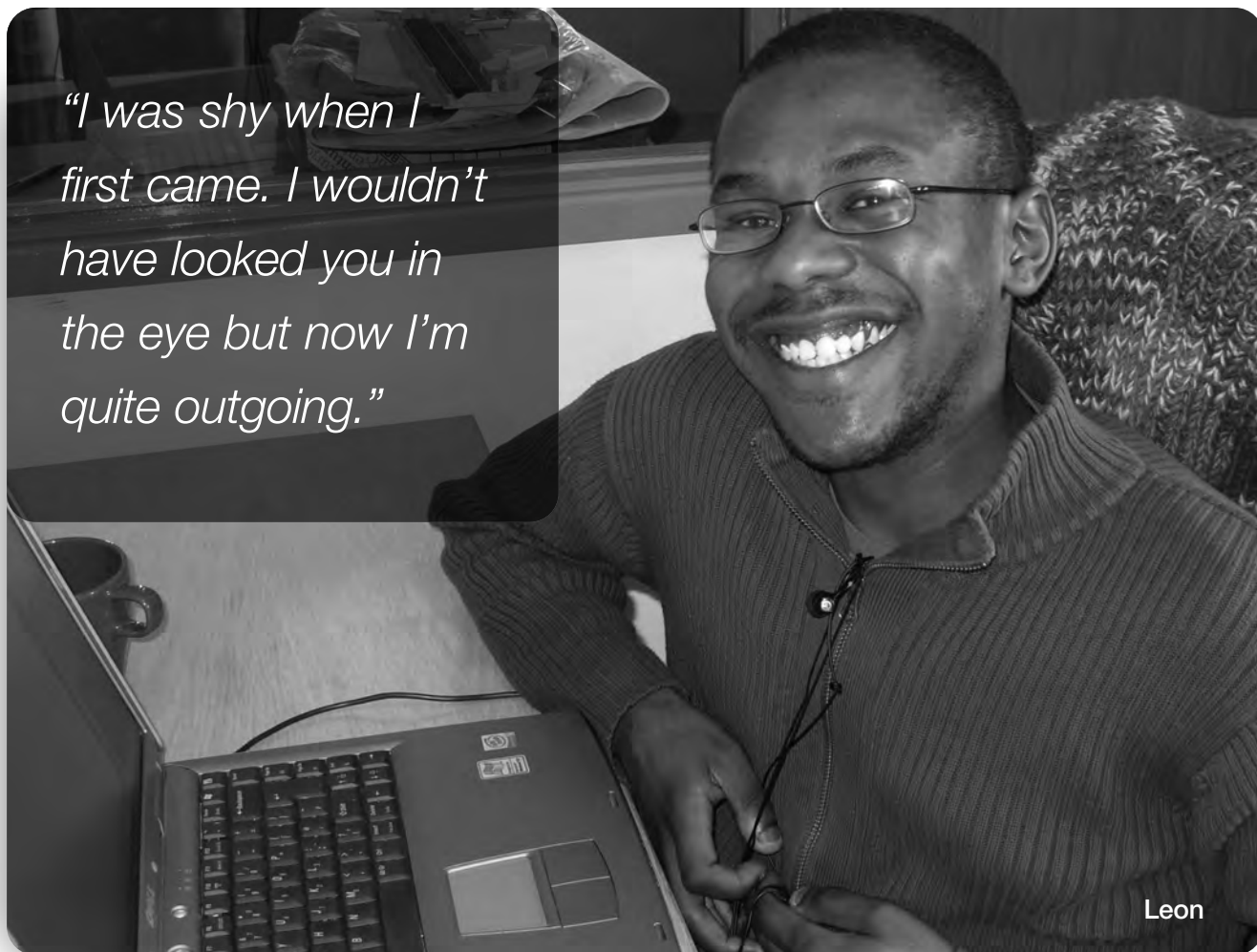
Leon found it hard at school. He had dyslexia and dyspraxia but only found this out about three years ago. He couldn't understand why he struggled to co-ordinate and do things that other people found easy. This led to lack of motivation, feelings of isolation, poor eye contact, limited peer interaction, poor time and money management and low self esteem. Leon says:

***"I left school at 15 with no GCSE's. I didn't get the help and support I should have had. I really wish I had learnt IT skills."***

Leon dipped in and out of education. He spent some time with ACT, a work based learning provider, but left before he finished the course. At 16 he went to Coleg Glan Hafren and studied Foundation Leisure and Tourism. He found this easy and finished the course with an NVQ1 qualification:

***"I liked going to college, I got more help and was treated like an adult but didn't really know what I wanted to do. I was interested in IT. Then I met a careers advisor and he told me how to get into IT. I did a BTEC First Diploma in IT. Unfortunately, I got distracted and didn't finish it."***

*"I was shy when I first came. I wouldn't have looked you in the eye but now I'm quite outgoing."*



Leon has had a number of jobs but has not managed to maintain employment. Some of this has been due to his learning difficulty and dyspraxia and lack of understanding from employers.

Leon's aunt looked for somewhere he could attend that would help him to improve his confidence. She heard about TAM (Training and Mentoring) project at Vision 21 which offered an eight week induction to Vision 21 courses. The course was tailored to individual needs and offered one to one support in a variety of subjects from basic life skills to work skills and helped young people with learning difficulties to move on.

Leon started by doing woodwork which helped him to co-ordinate his hands. He has become aware of how he learns best:

***"I like getting stuck in and doing things with my hands. We've***

***made bird boxes, wooden benches, a wishing well."***

Leon attends Vision 21 three days a week and has a care worker to come to his flat to help him tidy up and cook. He has progressed to working as a volunteer and mentor to young people who are new arrivals to TAM. He is studying for an OCN accredited mentoring certificate. Leon says:

***"I was shy when I first came. I wouldn't have looked you in the eye but now I'm quite outgoing."***

Leon recognises that the main things he has got out of his time at Vision 21 are an increase in confidence, good communication and practical skills and friends and colleagues he can trust.

**Critical success factors**

- Keeping young people engaged

by treating them as equals and providing an initial induction course

- Being flexible and providing a choice of courses that are accredited. Lots of short courses are run and there are good links to schools and Social Services.
- Every member of staff works above and beyond the call of duty. They do everything possible to support a young person emotionally and practically to maximise and retain the students' enjoyment in learning.

I would like to acknowledge Dr Amanda Kirby and The Discovery Centre for their contribution and data included in this article and for their pioneering work in this particular field.

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