

# Maintaining Friendships



In the last year a new and influential service called locality groups has been developed as part of the modernisation of day services in South Gloucestershire. South Gloucestershire Council commissioned Options, a specialist learning difficulty provider based in Bristol, to provide support to individuals whose day centre had closed. The new service was created specifically to enable people to maintain established friendships and relationships, while supporting them to make the best use of facilities available in their local communities.

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## Key points

- ▶ Locality groups are proving to be a popular and positive way of enabling people to make best use of their local community facilities.
- ▶ Maintaining friendships and relationships following the closure of traditional day centres was a key reason for setting up the groups.
- ▶ This way of working has resulted in increased independence for individuals, more use of public transport and less dependency on paid support staff.
- ▶ It has also transformed the way that day service provision is viewed by professionals and family members.

Historically, people with learning difficulties have had few social opportunities compared with the general population. The resultant social isolation was highlighted by Valuing People when it noted that

*'it remains a problem for too many people with learning disabilities. A recent study found that only 30% had a friend who was not either learning disabled, or part of their family or paid to care for them... at present many people with learning disabilities do not take part in community activities or participate in wider social networks with non-disabled people. Few have friends apart from those paid to be with them, their close family, or other people with learning disabilities with whom they live. Being part of the local community benefits everyone'* (Department of Health, 2001).



Valuing People demonstrated the need for day service provision to be modernised so that people could move beyond traditional services and use and be part of their local community in the same way as the rest of the population. The vision was that people would then expand their social networks and become more valued members of the community.

The development of the locality groups service was influenced by Valuing People's call for modernised day services to support people to develop social skills and the capacity to form friendships and relationships with a wider range of people and to enhance their employability. Locality groups are also intended to help communities welcome people with learning difficulties.

South Gloucestershire Council, like many other local authorities, is working through a period of day-service modernisation. Its Learning Difficulties Improvement Programme aims to replace in-house services, currently located in large, segregated buildings with community-based services, in line with Valuing People objectives.

Earlier this year South Gloucestershire closed two of its resource and activity centres (RACs). Among the many issues raised during consultation with the users of day services and their carers was how friendships could be maintained once a centre had closed. People were concerned that they would not be able to keep up existing friendships and relationships

without going to a day centre building, which, at that time, was the one place that guaranteed that service users would meet each other. It was apparent that there was tension between the need to progress provision so that people had real opportunities to be more integral members of their local communities, while at the same time ensuring that the closure of the day centre did not result in people becoming more socially isolated than they were before.

The need to support people to keep in touch with their friends was accepted as a priority by the council. However, it became clear that people would find it difficult to keep up friendships and relationships on their own because the practicalities involved entail a degree of independence that they had not had the opportunity, or indeed the need, to develop while attending a day centre.

The solution was to work with small groups of friends who would be supported to take part in activities of their choice in their local community; these were called 'locality groups'. The emphasis is on using ordinary, local community facilities and enabling people to make real links into networks and support that exists for people outside of paid support systems. The support provided to the locality groups is designed to encourage and promote greater independence and confidence so that in the future people can get out and about in the community without paid support.

South Gloucestershire has a number of expectations of the service:

- ▶ it should enable people to maintain existing friendships, social contacts and community links, as well as developing new ones
- ▶ it should increase people's confidence and ability to go out and about in their local area
- ▶ by maintaining and extending the range of interests and activities that people take part in, it is anticipated that their skills will improve and that some will be able to take up vocational and employment opportunities
- ▶ above all, the locality groups service aims to stimulate natural support networks including peer support.

## How it works

Presently, there are three locality groups meeting on three separate days. The maximum number of people to attend on any one day is six and the ratio is three people to one support worker. The days that people attend a group

depends on who, during the planning stage, they chose to link with, thus maintaining their existing friendships from the day centre. The ratio of support workers means that people can easily split into smaller groups.

Everyone meets at various community locations, such as the community centre, the bus station or the leisure centre, depending on the plan for the day. The emphasis is on linking people who live in the same local area and so most members only need to travel a short distance to the meeting place. Most members travel by bus independently or with support and some members who live in more rural locations use a taxi to get to the venue.

For service users who need more support to travel, support workers meet individuals at different places. For example, one individual is able to catch the first of two buses, but meets a support worker to catch the second bus.

Each locality group holds a meeting every four weeks to make plans for their future sessions. These plans are primarily based around the interests of group and the overall aims and objectives of the service, but they are also influenced by each member's individual support plan (ISP). People can achieve their goals while doing things with others, but at the same time can be working towards different independent goals. For example, at the leisure centre a person can be learning about communicating with a variety of other people and still make progress towards their own individual goals.

The nature and economics of the service mean that it cannot be individualised to each person's exact wishes and needs all the time in the same way that a one-to-one support service can be. The service was established to support people to do things together. People have developed an understanding of others' wishes and needs and how, as friends, you sometimes do things with other friends that are not your primary interests. It has developed people's understanding of the need to collaborate and be considerate of each other, to work in partnership with each other and to co-operate with others. This has made friendships stronger by giving people a better understanding of each other. If the service was entirely individualised, there is a good chance that people would not have developed such a high level of group decision-making skills and parallel thinking.

During spare time at the beginning and end of each session individuals are supported to update their ISPs and log their progression.



## Outcomes

On the whole, feedback – from people who have used the service and families, carers and professionals – has been very positive and constructive. The feedback suggests that the service has made a difference in the following ways.

- ▶ The locality groups work independently of traditional learning difficulty services by relying on community-based facilities.
- ▶ Everyone using the service travels independently on public transport, removing a previous dependency on support workers to provide transport.
- ▶ Maintaining friendships is the most important outcome for some of the people who join the locality groups: *'I do not mind what we are doing in the day, I like being able to see my friends.'*
- ▶ People are able to take part in a wide variety of social, leisure and community services, and use public transport: *'I have most enjoyed going on trips away for the day outside of the local area and catching a train.'*
- ▶ People have more choice and control over the way they spend their days. They are also supported more flexibly to do things outside normal working hours: *'I have been able to meet a friend in the evening for dinner, which I had not been able to do before.'*

The positive feedback from families and carers of the people involved has, at times, been tinged with residual concerns about the service:

*'My son goes to the new day service based at Turnberries Community Centre for two days a week, which works well. The group allows him to do things that the day centre staff are not able to do because of staffing restrictions. He has learnt to be more independent in his local community and people at the leisure centre and other places are getting to know him and visa versa.*

*'I fought against the closure of the day centre, and I was very worried about what my daughter would do during the daytime, and I am still not happy that it was closed. But I did not know how things would develop and now I am glad that my daughter has a better day service. She is happier, more confident and in the end it has worked out very well.'*

The cost of the activities that service users are choosing has been picked up in the reviews of individual plans. As one parent noted: *'It has been more expensive for my son. The day centre did not cost very much money to attend.'* This is something that the support provider needs to consider with the service users involved.

The local authority expects the service to develop and change as the service users involved become more confident and really start to engage with what's on offer in their local community. It recognises that flexibility and innovation will be needed to maximise outcomes for service users.

This is an approach that has provided a new way to ensure that these needs are met. The locality groups are viewed as an exciting development and are seen as a way of ensuring that people maintain friendships and relationships and develop new ones, while taking part in the same community activities that the rest of us take for granted.

From the perspective of Options, it appears that what people most value is simply meeting up with each other in the community. At times it has been a challenge to provide a good service for everyone when different people want different things. On occasion, individual members have wanted to go – quite literally – in a different direction to the rest of

the group when something else has sparked their curiosity and this can delay the group.

We have also found that the hopes and expectations that we and the authority share are not always matched by the individuals using the service. Options is keen to encourage the development of work opportunities, but few members of the groups seem interested. We are discovering that a big part of providing the service is developing service users' understanding of what they might aim for and achieve. We are trying to help them to be more ambitious about their own goals in order to raise their levels of independence still further.

The overall experience of supporting the individuals has been a very pleasurable one made more satisfying by the positive feedback from individuals, family members and professionals.

## Future goals

The service aims are to:

- ▶ gradually reduce dependency on the amount of support provided by support workers
- ▶ increase opportunities for people to get voluntary and paid work
- ▶ continue to enable opportunities for people to further develop their social networks.

## Conclusion

People who have been supported through the locality groups have highlighted the importance of being able to maintain and establish friendships. In addition, the groups have helped them develop independence, reduced their dependency on paid support staff and transformed the way that day service provision is viewed by many people, including some of those family members concerned about the closure of the day centre. Above all, it has proven how positively service users can develop their lives outside of centre-based units. ■

### Reference

Department of Health (2001) *Valuing People: A new strategy for learning disability for the 21st Century*. London: Department of Health.