

People First Dorset



Supporting people with learning disabilities to speak up, be heard and lead change

People First Dorset is a charity led by people with learning disabilities, with support from staff. Our members want to have their voices heard, be independent and to be included in community life. Something which many people with a learning disability find very difficult to do, for all sorts of reasons.

There is much evidence to suggest that people with a learning disability are one of the most marginalised groups in society, with almost one in three 18-35 year olds spending less than one hour a day outside their home. Many of our members still tell us they struggle to feel included or accepted in society, or feel able to speak up and be heard about things they want to talk about, or worries they have.

To enable people to be heard, included and valued by society, People First Dorset supports members to build each other's confidence, improve their communication skills, and development their ability to challenge decisions. This is called 'self advocacy', or coming together; speaking up and leading change.

People who have learning disabilities take part and work or volunteer on all our projects. We promote the views of people who have learning disabilities in Dorset through consultation, surveys, big meetings and a Forum. We also have a new management committee, which is 100% run and led by people who have a learning disability.

Our projects

Being connected to each other and the community is the foundation of self advocacy. If you are not connected then you cannot come together, speak up and lead change.

People First Dorset therefore runs the **Friendship Club**, which is one of the largest social inclusion projects for adults with learning disabilities in England. It provides approximately eighty supported social events each year for around four hundred people with learning disabilities. It is funded through a combination of grants, fundraising and member's subscriptions. The Friendship Club is run by two part-time Project Managers, a Steering Group of members who have a learning disability and lots of volunteers!

Events take place in mainstream settings, all of which are chosen and often run by members. Outcomes include people feeling safer in the community, more accepted by the public, feeling happier and healthier (many events include physical activity) and more confident. It also gives an opportunity for respite to many carers. *'My Client has become more confident making new friends and becoming integrated within the community. He takes more pride in his appearance and will instigate more*

conversations. He has become much happier in himself, no longer lonely, isolated or self-conscious. Many of my other previous clients have benefited tremendously as well' (Professional carer). 'It's like counselling for me. Good talking to people as it's a way of making me feel better' (Member). The Club has even supported members to start a weekly column in a local newspaper, and continues to support them to edit these articles. As far as we know, they are the only columnists with a learning disability in the UK.

With these foundations in place, our members have the opportunity to join one of eight dedicated **Speaking Up groups**, that work to develop our members' communication skills. These groups run across Dorset and outcomes have already included working alongside the NHS to help them prepare an Easy Read document, taking part in local health and local authority consultations or learning about cyber-crime. Our Speaking Up groups are currently funded by Comic Relief, and are run by a Project Manager and Project Worker, who has a learning disability. Feedback from the Speaking Up groups is fed back to the Forum.

People First Dorset also runs the **Forum**, which is the vehicle by which the voices of people with learning disability and complex needs are heard at a strategic level. We represent people at a range of Local Authority and other meetings. The aim is to identify issues that affect people in their everyday life, and we use our networks and contacts to make this change for the better.

The Forum is run by a Project Manager and Project Worker, who has a learning disability. Their job is to seek out views and opinions from the learning disability community, influence strategy and development at individual, local and national level and develop and maintain a loud and clear voice to bring about positive change for all people with a learning disability.

The impact we have is not often immediate. We are part of a wide network of organisations, and this type of strategic change happens slowly, sometimes over years. Patience is essential! We still stand by the principles set out in Valuing People (2001);

- Choice
- Rights
- Independence
- Inclusion

The Forum has developed strong partnerships with many organisations, including Southampton University, Dorset County Council, Dorset Clinical Commissioning Group, other People Firsts, Dorset Advocacy and care providers. The Forum is funded under a contract to Dorset County Council.

With these skills in place, some of our members choose to take part in our **Quality Checkers** project, which checks provider standards. The Quality Checkers are a team of people with learning disabilities who have had training to review the quality of services, community facilities and to do research. The team are supported to do their work by a Project Manager.

They are all people who have used, or use, services and now get paid to use their expertise. They also help people to understand what quality means and what they should expect from services.

At the moment the team are very busy; they are being paid by Dorset County Council to check day services, residential homes and supported living homes. After each review, or piece of research, they work together to write reports and make recommendations.

They are especially good at their jobs because they know what it is like to use services and their peers are comfortable to talk to them.

Kerry Martin has been worked on the project and says, 'We aren't scary like people in suits turning up and we really understand what makes services good because we have asked other people with learning difficulties what matters to them.' The Quality Checkers stamp means that the team would be happy to use a service themselves -a useful bit of information.

People First Dorset also carry out other work, including **Easy Read, Learning Disability Awareness Training, Short Breaks and specialist Workshops.**