

Newsletter Summer 2009

Giving everyone a voice

Advocacy is about standing up for a person and taking their side.

Advocacy is about standing alongside people who are in danger of being pushed to the margins of society.

Citizen Advocacy means we ask an ordinary member of the community, who is unpaid, to advocate for just one person. This can be for the short term, focusing on one or more issues or long term with the partnership lasting as long as both people want.

Direct advocacy is issue based and time limited. It is provided by a member of staff.

Equal Say for Parents Big Lottery Success

Over the last few years, we have noticed more and more parents who have a learning disability coming to us for advocacy support. In many of these situations, it is because of concerns about the welfare of their children and social workers have become involved. What follows can be upsetting and confusing for parents and children alike.



Because we were concerned about what was happening to parents with a learning disability, we did some research with Glasgow School of Social Work to find out about the experiences of some of the parents we knew and also to find out about how we could work better with parents with a learning disability to make sure that their voices were heard. We found out that:



Parents who find themselves in this situation often say they are scared to ask for help in case their children are taken into care. Because of this and also because parents with a learning disability are often not able to get support in their own right, it can be hard for parents to get the right support when they need it.

"The support just isn't there when it's needed"

Parents also say that the information they receive is often poor. They are not given all the information they need and the information they are given is not always written in a way that is helpful to them.

"There has been an issue with communication... the reports weren't done according to the assessment which said don't use long and difficult words...try and use pictures...None of that was done"

Similarly, parents feel that their views are not listened to or taken into account. One parent reported being asked for her views for a report to the Children's Panel. She told her social worker what she thought, but none of it was put in the report.

Having an advocate can help parents in these situations to better understand what is happening and how they can be involved in the decisions that are being made. It can help parents to feel more empowered to challenge the decisions they believe are wrong and it can help parents to be better heard by the professionals who are involved in child protection procedures.

"Every time I go to the panel he comes with me...he sticks up for me...he speaks for me...I get stuck on stuff and he says for me what I mean."

Because of the difficult and complicated situations parents with a learning disability find themselves in, advocates who support them have to have specialist knowledge about the child protection system and enough time to support them with the large amounts of information they receive and number of meetings they need to attend. Our research shows that this can be too much for a citizen advocate to manage and often a paid worker can have greater availability and flexibility to attend the range of meetings that these cases involve. However we also know that parents with learning disabilities are often socially isolated and experience other difficulties outwith the child protection issues. We also felt it was essential to recognise the important role that a citizen advocate can play in the life of a parent with a learning disability.

For these reasons, we applied to the Big Lottery Fund to provide both paid advocacy and citizen advocacy for parents with a learning disability. At the end of last year we heard the great news that we had been successful and were awarded just over £250,000 over three years to fund a new project.



This new project, known as **Equal Say for Parents**, means that parents with a learning disability will benefit from the knowledge and experience a worker can bring as well as the valuable involvement of an ordinary person, prepared to stand beside them to increase their skills and confidence as a person in their own right as well as a parent.

Equal Say for Parents will be open to any parent with a learning disability living in Glasgow and East Renfrewshire, whether or not they are involved in child protection procedures. The project staff are working through their induction period at the moment, and as we go to press the first parents to benefit from the project are being recruited.

Amanda Muir

Quotes taken from Parents with Learning Disabilities, the Lived Experience A study for Equal Say, Glasgow.





Good Times Had By All

At Equal Say we like to think we know how to throw a party. We should do, we've been doing it for years. We've had ceilidhs, 70's discos and a hoedown. We've had Christmas parties, Easter dances and a St. Valentines disco and we've had outdoor fun with barbecues, strawberries & cream, belly dancers and drummers.

These events are always good fun and are enjoyed by all, but they take a lot of planning and represent a lot of hard work by staff and volunteers. So why do we do them? It's not just that we enjoy a good knees-up or a chance to get together with old friends (although we do). Equal Say events are about much more than what is printed on the ticket. In other words they do a lot more than what it says on the tin.

We like to hold our events in hotels, community halls and public parks. Ordinary venues that are in the community and available to every member of the community. And that word community, is at the heart of everything we do. We want to help advocates and partners to experience what their community has to offer, and to have the opportunity to go to new places and try new things.

But community isn't just about the buildings and places, nor is it just about the people who live in them. It's about the whole package and how it all fits together and how the different parts interact. And part of that picture is the community that is Equal Say: a community of interest. A very diverse community made up of people who share similar values and have broadly similar aims. What better way to celebrate that community than to come together, to share food and music and smiles and good times, to meet old friends and make new ones and to let others see Citizen Advocacy in action.



Citizen Advocates are changing the way the world sees people with disabilities and challenging the status quo. That's why an Equal Say dance isn't just a dance; it's radical socialising. The barbecue isn't just about cooking outdoors; it's about claiming the public spaces. And as long as people are happy to join us, we'll keep on celebrating.

Now we are looking for your help. If you have any ideas for events that you think we should try, please tell us about them. You might enjoy a bus run or boat trip. You might have a great idea for a party theme. Do you know of somewhere we should visit. All ideas are welcome. We would also like to hear your opinions of things that we have done in the past. Do you have good memories of past events. Do you think there are things we could have done better? Is there any way we could make our events

more accessible or are there problems that make it difficult for you to attend? Should we hold our events in the city centre or in different areas; daytime or evening, weekends or midweek? Please let us know what you think. You can phone, write or email us at **info@equalsay.org**

Alan Graham

Changes at Equal Say

Over the past few months we have had a few staff changes at Equal Say, Jessica Kearslake left us to return to education in August last year, Moira MacCalman retired earlier this year and Yvonne Duffy left to take up a post with Alzheimer's



Scotland last month. We wish them all the best for the future and thank them all for their hard work and contribution during their time with Equal Say. A particular thanks has to go to Moira, who retired after 13 years service. She will be missed, especially by many of the advocates and partners she has supported over the years.





Until we hear from East Renfrewshire Council about their plans to put advocacy services out to tender, we are unable to fill the Coordinator's post. In the meantime, Helen, Sam and Amanda at the Partick Office will continue our work in East Renfrewshire.

Joining us, are Neil Woollatt and Judy McInnes, who are our new Equal Say for Parents workers. Neil and Judy introduce themselves below.

I joined Equal Say after working with the National Autistic Society for over seven years. I worked in their Playscheme Project, supporting young people and staff offering Aromatherapy and training at Daldorch House School, and Teenscene social groups. I then worked in the Transitions Project, supporting young people and their families with their transition from education to adult life.

I enjoy walking, taking my dog out and nothing better than a good pub lunch afterwards. Having grown up near the seaside, a walk in the beach is a good day out and favourite place to go. My other interests are the theatre, cinema and reading recipe books!

I very much look forward to working on the Equal Say for Parents Project .



Judy McInnes

Thave volunteered with and supported people with a learning disability for over twenty years in Cardiff, London and Glasgow.

I live on the South Side of Glasgow and my interests include football, music, cinema and football! I have always felt very strongly about empowerment and the right of individuals with a learning disability to have a voice. I am very much looking forward to helping provide this whilst working for Equal Say.



Neil Woollatt

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