The Friendship Club

At what price friendship and social acceptance?

Friendship Club Vision

All people with learning disabilities leading a fulfilling life within their community, which embraces and supports them

“It’s changed my life. I have much more confidence and don’t need my OT or community nurse any more”, Member
An overview of the Friendship Club

The Friendship Club is part of Dorset People First, a user led charity which helps people with learning disabilities support each other to speak up and lead change.

The Friendship Club began in 2008 following a pilot project funded by the Dorset Partnership Board Learning Disability Development Fund. Over 150 adults with learning disabilities, their carers and professionals were interviewed, the aim being to find out what could be done to support adults with learning disabilities form relationships. Most adults with learning disabilities reported feeling socially isolated and unsafe in the community, especially if out alone. Very few had support to make or meet peer group friends outside of work or daytime services. They wanted to do everyday things like everyone else in society - to be accepted, feel safe and to make and meet friends in pubs, cafes and other community places. It was agreed that support was required to bring people together and organise opportunities for this to happen.

A Co-ordinator was duly appointed and the Friendship Club began in September 2008. Monthly events started in Bridport, Weymouth and Dorchester. Venues were chosen which felt safe, friendly, were unlikely to be busy and had good disabled access. By December 2008 over 150 adults had attended, a user led Steering Group had been formed and demand was growing in other areas of the county. More funding enabled the club to expand into North and East Dorset. By 2010 numbers stood at 400 and £287,000 of Big Lottery funding was secured to continue and develop the Friendship Club. This funding ends at the end of 2013.

The Friendship Club is successfully addressing issues of social isolation in Dorset. Its vision is that all people with learning disabilities will lead a fulfilling life within their community which embraces and supports them. The Friendship Club is user led (i.e. it is led by its members) and as a consequence has grown organically. It is open to all adults with a learning disability. Activities are chosen, and often run, by members. These take place mainly in the evenings and might include meeting friends for a drink in the pub or cafe, skittles, bowling, educational talks, discos, bingo, quiz nights, stand up comedy, walks, fitness, bell ringing, boccia & more.

Around 150 events take place annually in 12 towns across Dorset and approximately 500 members meet regularly, though over 750 people with learning disabilities have attended at least once. Co-ordinators signpost members to other activities or groups in the community.
and the club also acts as a safety net by directing members to professional support if required. Members are also supported, if they wish, to meet up with their friends independently outside club times. A team of around 50 volunteers help run events with members as well as attend workshops and conferences on behalf of the club. The club now employs a part time member of staff who has a learning disability to work in the office and on the Help Place Scheme.

Although events at the Friendship Club are aimed at adults with learning disabilities, the use of mainstream activity settings and involvement from volunteers helps provide members with opportunities to build friendships beyond learning disability circles, promoting social acceptance and understanding within the community.

The Friendship Club makes savings by its use of partnership working. It has strong links now with a vast number of organisations including third sector and community groups, private service providers, the health and public service sector, arts centres, church groups, volunteer organisations, the police, venues such as cafes, nightclubs and pubs – many of whom offer support in kind by covering the cost of discos, venue hire etc.

Support for people with learning disabilities to feel safer going out and about in the community comes through the clubs Help Place scheme. This is achieved through the ICE (In Case of Emergency) Card which members carry. If people need help they show the card in any Help Place which includes shops, cafes and other places people attend in the community. Coordinators promote the scheme through workshops in day centres, at events and through partnership working with local businesses, police and community support officers.

Benefits and Outcomes

It was evident there are many positive benefits to members who attend events so the Friendship Club carried out an evaluation in 2012, the aim being to measure its impact, in particular the effect it has on supporting statutory services and its value for money. Dorset County Council Adult Services Research Department supported the research and a variety of methods were used to gain the views of members, professionals and carers. The Friendship Club also sought to demonstrate if the club was achieving its four main outcomes (see diagram overleaf).
Results from the research highlighted that as a consequence of attending the Friendship Club members felt happier, less isolated, more confident, healthier, safer in their community and more independent. They said they now had real peer group friends and relationships and also felt more accepted by the public – in other words, having a normal life.

The statistics below, together with the outcome stories (Appendix A) clearly highlight the Friendship Club is making a significant difference to the lives of adults with learning disabilities in Dorset.

75% of professionals believe the Club is effective in reducing the need for statutory support
86% of carers/professionals indicate members are learning skills around social interaction
100% of professionals/carers say Club achieves opportunities for friendship and integration
67% of professionals/81% carers say Club helps members feel confident with good life skills
91% of carers/professionals say members feel safer now when out in the community
90% of carers/professionals indicate members are integrating more into the wider community
68% of carers feel the Club has made a difference to their caring role
87% of members say they have made friends at the Friendship Club
67% of professionals indicate Club helps members stay healthy both in mind and body
This feedback demonstrates that not only does the club make a huge difference to its members' wellbeing but that there appears to be scope for significant research in this area.

Please do read some of the many outcome stories in Appendix A as they are the direct voice of members, parents, carers and professionals who clearly appreciate and value the Friendship Club.

**Discussion**

A recent study has shown that social isolation is as bad for your health as smoking 15 cigarettes a day, being an alcoholic and twice as harmful as obesity. The findings are based on an analysis of over 300,000 people and was led by Dr Julianne Holt-Lunstad who said, "when someone is connected to a group and feels responsibility for other people, that sense of purpose and meaning translates to taking better care of themselves".

We know that stronger social capital, the sum total of people’s involvement in community life, is linked to better health and positive social outcomes. There is also considerable evidence which suggests that people with learning disabilities have fewer opportunities for friendships, are socially isolated, victims of hate and mate crime and have poorer wellbeing than the majority of the population (See Appendix B).

So how are we, as a society, addressing this lack of equality in the lives of people who have learning disabilities, in particular the need for friendship, integration, feeling safe and free from discrimination or abuse? Friendships and belonging are vital for all our wellbeing.

Friendships can take time for the best of us to develop and sustain, but in particular for people with learning disabilities and can’t be artificially created. Dr Liz Tilley, chair of the Social History of Learning Disability Research Group, tells us “how vulnerable to isolation and harassment people with learning disabilities can be if they do not have people around who are actively supporting them to develop and sustain social networks”.

Our own research, and that we have collected nationally, demonstrate that not only does the club make a huge difference in the lives of its members, but that there appears to be scope for significant research on the value of friendship clubs and support for adults with learning disabilities in the community. Surely more successful and evidence based projects which,
at minimal cost, significantly improve the lives of people with learning disabilities – schemes which work – would be particularly welcome at a time when learning disability is high on the national agenda for many of the wrong reasons such as Winterbourne View and the tragic case of Fiona Pilkington.

The Friendship Club relishes retaining Dorset as a leader and trailblazer in beginning to address these core issues for adults with learning disabilities through its user led approach of supporting its members to establish and maintain satisfying interpersonal relationships within their community. As far as we know, there is nothing else on this scale nationally, though other smaller friendship based groups across the country are reporting similar outcomes and benefits for its members as the Friendship Club.

Much is changing in the world of learning disability, in particular the positive developments of personalisation and choice. We see Government and local councils facing cuts and fire fighting while simultaneously seeking innovative, cost effective and proven alternatives to improve the lives of people with learning disabilities. See Appendix B for more examples of good practice, evidence, policy (local and national) and relevant research.

The Friendship Club is proof that adults with learning disabilities liver happier and more fulfilled lives if they are able to enjoy the companionship of like minded people, stay physically and mentally active and participate in their community.

If the Friendship Club is no longer able to operate we could conclude that the evidence collected suggests that the impact would be extremely negative in the lives its members. Further, it might be reasonable to assume that this may result in greater costs to the state in terms of the knock on impact and increased additional dependence on support services i.e. GPs, health service, carers support etc. Funding is only with us until the end of December 2013 at which point the club will need to close unless any firm offers of funding can be sourced.

With continued funding for the existing Friendship Club activities the club would become a strong candidate for additional grants, such as from Reaching Communities and other grant funding bodies, to develop its offering and its value for money, particularly in areas where members have highlighted a need for more support. This includes sustainable daytime activities in the community, relationship workshops and more health/wellbeing events.
Observations from coordinator

Having been involved with the Friendship Club from the outset, I have been amazed and privileged to see first hand the overwhelming growth in confidence, wellbeing and reduced social isolation of members during the past five years.

Before moving to Dorset, I ran a small weekly club in Ipswich for ten years so was already aware of the enormous value of improved friendships and integration into the community which can be gained by attending such clubs. What I had not anticipated was how much demand there would be from adults with learning disabilities in Dorset, who have driven the development and success of the Friendship Club.

As a team, we have seen members blossoming from shy adults lacking in confidence to self assured and happier individuals who are less isolated. It is inspiring to see those who have attended for some time supporting new or less able members, and it’s impossible not to go home after an event without feeling uplifted….a response shared by colleagues, carers, professionals and volunteers. It has also driven me to not only continue this work but also strive to reach more people and develop the club offering.

If funding ends, where does it leave members? They are gaining ground in an area which is likely to carry increasingly greater importance on local and national agendas. It has changed members lives and to stop it now would be devastating for them, as well as for many of their carers.

With Lottery funding ending at the end of 2013, my priority is to seek sustainable funding, in order to continue and expand this initiative.

So what price friendship?

Laura Kerr, September 2013