



## An independently supported no life

**Rich and I were sitting outside a café in Tenerife in baking sunshine last summer when I suddenly said to Rich ‘Look! Look at that.’**

*‘What?’ said Rich, ‘I dunno what you’re looking at’.*

*‘Those three people over there... look at them.’*

*‘What?’*

*‘When do you ever see people interacting like that in the UK?’*

There were three young men. One was a wheelchair user and one apparently non-verbal. They were walking along together and laughing in a kind of jiggly group. Having fun.

We live on the outskirts of a city with a lot of independent

supported living houses (I can’t call them homes) in our neighbourhood. Every so often I see people in twos or threes. A typically grim faced carer striding ahead with one or two people following. There is no interaction and I can’t say I have ever seen any glimpse of joy or enjoyment. More often a low level sense of anxiety.

I can’t help thinking that jargon has got in the way when it comes to learning disabled adults’ lives. All this talk about ‘independent living’ has led to a group of people’s lives being

viewed through a particular lens. One which, too often, strips away any ingredients necessary for happy, engaged, involved community living; love, care, companionship, reciprocity, activity and fun.

The idea of ‘independent living’ is constrained by budgets and resources, by commissioning decisions, the quality of the care providers and the staff they employ. Each person involved in the provision of ‘independent living’, from the top down, are themselves influenced by numerous factors including; what they actually think about learning disabled people, their job satisfaction and salaries, the constraints they are under in their working lives, the support they receive in their workplace, their personal lives, how they feel on a daily basis and so on. The person who the independently

supported life is being done to is powerless. Their families often excluded from real engagement in their lives.

In 2014 there was a bit of a refreshing breeze with the development of the crowdsourced Private Members Bill, the #LBBill, and Norman Lamb stepping up and producing a Green Paper – No Voice Unheard, No Rights Ignored - with proposals to introduce legislative change to strengthen the rights of learning disabled people.

The government has just kicked these proposals in some very long grass. I suspect this means too many people will continue to lead independently supported no lives for some time. What are we going to do about this?

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## Can we afford for people with learning disabilities to live independently?

**What are the prospects for everyone with learning disabilities to live independently?**

By living independently, I don’t mean necessarily living on your own or the myth of ‘standing on your own two feet’ without any help or support from other people – we all rely on help or support every day, even if we don’t notice (or say thank you as much as we should). I mean people with learning disabilities having the same freedom to be in control of how they live their life as anyone, including having the help and support you need to exercise this control.

We know that some people with learning disabilities in England are disappearing from ‘official statistics’ and not getting support from education or

social services. We know that the support that people with learning disabilities do get and the current benefits system often don’t help people to live independent lives, instead trapping people in a life of poverty, isolation, boredom, everyday segregation and an early death.

Although there have been big cuts to funding for support, the state is still spending a lot of money on supporting people with learning disabilities. Why is so much of this money being spent in ways that don’t help people to live independently? Why is the system stacked against people with learning disabilities working and why,

when they do, rather than being paid for their labour people all too often have to pay for the privilege of engaging in a ‘therapeutic work experience programme’? And from the point of view of a person with learning disabilities, how much of this money do they see or have control over, and how much swirls around people’s heads and directly into the pockets of landlords and service providers?

There is an idea around that the state can’t afford for people with learning disabilities to live independently, and instead the state should focus on withdrawing to provide ‘protection’ for the ‘most vulnerable’. This is the falsest of false economies. More

people with learning disabilities will turn up in prisons, accident and emergency and other hospital services and zombie institutions. And, shamefully, we will all be living in a society that systematically denies a huge group of people the fundamental human rights and support which many of us take for granted without even noticing.

Finally, who are ‘we’? We are everyone, people with learning disabilities and people without learning disabilities together. Can we afford for people with learning disabilities to live independently? We can’t afford for people not to.

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