

Organisation Journey



This is one of a set of information produced from The Bridge, a two year action research project asking "How can people with learning disabilities start businesses to earn real money for real work?". It was funded by the National Lottery Community Fund as part of the DRILL programme.

For more information about this research, visit www.barod.org.

For more information about DRILL, visit www.drilluk.org.uk.

About The Bridge

Many potential entrepreneurs with learning disabilities are part of self-advocacy organisations. These are organisations set up and run by and for people with learning disabilities. Most are charities and/or companies limited by guarantee with paid facilitators, staff and offices.

The research partnership was made up of three self-advocacy organisations:

- Carmarthenshire People First,
- My Life My Choice in Oxford and
- People First Dorset

together with **Social Firms Wales**, a business support organisation, and the lead partner, **Barod Community Interest Company**, a cooperative business of people with and without learning disabilities.

Two of the self-advocacy organisations investigated how to turn projects into businesses that were led by and employed people with learning disabilities. One self-advocacy organisations supported members to investigate setting up individual self-employed businesses.

As part of the action research we developed two resources:

- An online glossary of business words that people found hard to understand
- A business blocks pack that helped people to work on their business idea and monitor how far they had got.

The research has highlighted political, economic and social barriers which we will continue to address after the lifetime of The Bridge.



Organisation Journey

Self advocacy organisations are often charities. Their main sources of income are grants from local authorities, charitable trusts or the National Lottery. As such they spend time finding and applying for grants. This is time they could spend on self advocacy work.

Some self advocacy organisations provide services to their local authorities or service providers as quality checkers or training providers.

The idea of earning income is attractive. It provides unrestricted money for the organisation. It raises the status of the members when 'outsiders' see them delivering a professional service. It also provides an opportunity to create paid work for members. This is important because the employment rate of people with learning disabilities is thought to be below 6%.

In The Bridge we followed two organisations as they developed businesses from services that were grant funded or part of a service level agreement.

"It's been difficult, but it's been worth it" Kerry

The organisations and their business ideas

Two self advocacy organisations participated in the Bridge:



My Life My Choice (www.mylifemychoice.org.uk), based in Oxford, is a charitable association with an income of £320,000 (2018-19). It has been developing a project called Power Up for a number of years. It provides training, facilitation and consultancy services for Universities, public bodies, statutory services, independent service providers self advocacy groups. Originally grant funded, by the time The Bridge started it had already been changing its funding model to being fees based. It also wanted to develop some 'off the shelf' training that could be marketed to increase its profitability. My Life My Choice employs eight people and nine freelance workers (2019) for the general work of the organisation. In addition, five self advocates are employed as Consultants that work across the organisation and a number of self advocates are paid in projects such as Travel Buddies. One consultant and another member and two other staff members worked in Power Up on the Bridge project.

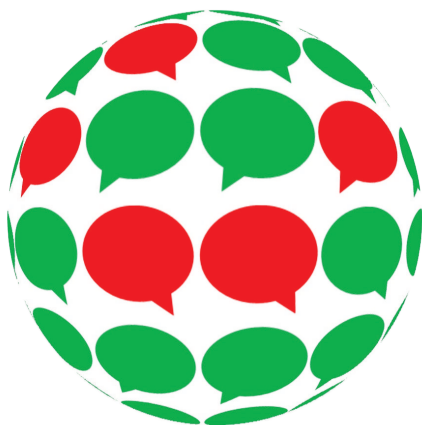


Dorset People First (www.peoplefirstdorset.org.uk) is a company limited by guarantee and a registered charity with an income of £172,000 (2017-18). It provides a Quality Checker service under a service level agreement with the local authority. The service is funded to check local authority funded services. The funding was time-limited, with the requirement for People First Dorset to look for ways to make it self-funding. People First Dorset wanted to explore the possibility of selling quality checks to service providers.

Dorset People First employs seven people. Two of these are self advocates paid to be quality checkers. These two and two other staff members worked on The Bridge project.

What we Found

socialfirmswales
enterprise, employment, empowerment



Over the 18 months of active support from The Bridge, Barod and Social Firms Wales provided support to the two organisations and used that engagement to inform the developing and testing out of more accessible and appropriate forms of support.

These findings are relevant to any organisation that is wanting to become more business-like, or wanting to support the development of a business from an existing project.

Governance

My Life My Choice and People First Dorset are both charities. Issues of identity, values and control are important to charities and this was evident in many ways in both organisations. When considering forming a business both organisations were supported to consider the best legal form of the business: a separate private company, a trading arm, a community interest company or to remain as part of the charity. The teams developing the business ideas both proposed to their trustees that they form separate wholly owned companies. This would

- reduce the risk on the parent organisation
- enable the company to trade outside of the geographical restrictions of the charity.

Both boards of trustees rejected these proposals, wishing to maintain the control over the activities of the emerging business and for the business to keep the identity of the charity.

These internal negotiations took considerable time and effort, involving the teams investigating the pros and cons, developing a presentation to the trustees and at least two trustee meetings.

Identity

People 'out there' don't associate people with learning disabilities or self advocacy organisations with delivering professional services. This was seen in a number of ways:

- Being expected to provide training for free or at a lower rate than other training services
- Customers not always happy communicating with a person with a learning disability
- Treating the people with a disability as 'also here' rather than the ones in control with power to make decisions
- Having lower expectations of the training and those delivering the training
- Not seeing the services delivered as important as other things the service provider has to do.
- There were a number of ways that the developing businesses countered this impression:
 - Putting the people with learning disabilities front and centre of any interaction with customers, eg making marketing phone calls, being listed as staff on websites, responding to enquiries and leading site visits or training.
 - 'Wearing the right shoes' as a team. The team have a similar dress code. Power Up had polo shirts for everyone to wear when delivering training. See the Belonging in the Business World factsheet.
 - Having job titles that reflect the role and don't differentiate between those with and without learning disabilities. Everyone introduces each other with these job titles.
 - Making sure the marketing, brand and ways of communicating give a professional impression. Quality Checkers invested in a new branding which was spread across the whole organisation. Power Up developed new web pages and leaflets that advertised the new standardised courses.
 - Having quality measures that are used internally to make sure standards are high. Power Up ran test sessions of the standardised courses.
 - Responding to enquiries promptly and having a high standard of customer service. Inviting customer feedback and evaluation for services.

Becoming business minded

Changing from 'project thinking' to 'business thinking' is a big change. If you have funding to deliver a service, you deliver the service you have told the funder you will deliver. The funder is the customer. If they say you can't do something, you don't do it. So if the funding is to deliver training to Learning Disability Nurses, then can service provider staff also attend?

With business thinking, you start with the person receiving the service. What do they want? What can they afford? What will make them come back again? Who else might they go to? Then you have questions about your organisation. Will we get enough money to pay the staff and the bills? What can we provide that matches our aims?

After 18 months we did a Dragon's Den group exercise at a Big Think meeting with mixed teams from the self advocacy organisations. In less than an hour they had formulated new services or business ideas, could see what market research would be needed and had the beginning of a business plan. They were also able to present their ideas and answer questions. This showed that they had learned a lot about business thinking in the 18 months and gained a lot of self confidence.

Something that a funder wants to provide may not match what the client wants. Quality Checkers needed to redesign the checks to make them suitable for services that were not funded by the local authority. Power Up took their most popular training and designed the standardised training around those topics.

Businesses tend to make quick decisions, responding to demand for services rather than being resource or supply dependent. This can mean that you need more flexibility from staff or to recruit more people who can be flexible to give you the capacity to deliver services. It also means that you need devolved authority to make decisions. The Power Up manager took on more responsibility for decisions over the 18 months of the Bridge. Quality Checkers recruited more people who would be able to do checks once they were confident they would have more business.

There is also the effects of the funding cycle. Funding may be for one, two or three years. This means there is uncertainty when it is being won or renegotiated, but in between things are fairly stable. Businesses are uncertain every week or month. Where is the next customer? Do we have enough business to pay the staff this month? This continuous uncertainty can cause anxiety among staff.

This uncertainty relates to a fundamental part of business: to succeed you need to take risks. Both organisations had to invest in the services.

Power Up had been turning away opportunities because of lack of capacity. By estimating the income that would have been generated by the lost business, they employed another member of staff and grew the business. This would not have been possible with grant funding. It also meant Power Up had an annual income target to pay for known costs. The Power Up team worked for a number of months doing market research, finding other training providers and checking their websites, designing their own web pages and a leaflet. They also designed the course and did a test run, where participants didn't pay.

Quality Checkers needed to invest in time to redesign the documentation, so that they had a service that was fit for purpose. After they had used it once, they used customer feedback to refine it. They also needed to write a branding brief, invite quotes, decide on which one and pay for branding and leaflets.

Taking these risks was done in a considered way as a team, with reference to charity managers and trustees where applicable. This led to some concerns expressed by self advocates who were not used to this level of decision making. However, it was part of the organisations putting their values of inclusion and being member led into practice.

Using marketing language, the unique selling point of self advocacy organisations is the lived experience of the members. Both businesses responded to this by making sure the members who were employed were front and centre stage.

Self advocates and employment

Employing people who receive Disability Living Allowance or Personal Independence Payment, Tax credits or Universal Credit can be complicated. Often eligibility for help with housing costs or carers allowance are linked to receiving benefits of tax credits. Self advocates who start working for your organisation need good benefits advice and support, especially if it would involve moving to Universal Credit for the first time.

One organisation had a limit on the amount that a member could earn with the organisation. This both prevented one member getting lots of work (and sense of status) and meant that they stayed below the level that would affect benefits. Both organisations employed people for a set number of hours per month as this can be reported to Job Centre Plus and provide financial stability.

Quality Checkers recruited people with learning disabilities and carers to be Quality Checkers. Some of these recruits insisted on volunteering because they were afraid that earning money would affect their benefits. Some had found applying for or having benefits reviewed so stressful that they did not want anything to rock the boat. Where people volunteered, Quality Checkers offered them time credits with a local timebank that could be exchanged for admission to council leisure services or other things. Power Up paid all workers. Quality Checkers found it hard to treat people the same if they were paid or volunteering.



Time to change

We followed the developing businesses for 18 months. They progressed more slowly than we expected. There were a number of reasons for this:

- There was a lot of learning and change required by the self advocates as well as the staff.
- The teams were made up of people working part time. The self advocates were employed for 8-16 hours a week and often volunteered in other roles in the organisation. The staff worked more hours but all had other duties as well as the business development. Thus, the capacity for developing the business was limited.
- The teams co-worked, so two to four people would work on the task together. Co-working was essential for the team members to have a shared understanding of what they were learning and putting into practice, but did slow things down.
- Because of the size of the organisations, if there was a crisis (for example a threat to core funding or a member of staff leaving) then work on the business stopped.
- For some self advocates they are surrounded by support systems that may not be flexible and need time to change. Doctors appointments are rarely scheduled to avoid working days.
- For self advocates, starting to work or changing the amount of work you do can lead to a lot of appointments with advocates, Job Centre Plus, Housing Benefit and social workers. It can also interfere with developing the business as:
- It takes time
- The appointments may clash with normal work hours
- The anxiety means people are distracted and find it hard to concentrate
- The process is exhausting, meaning people have less energy.

Try this

Allies and support organisations

Supporting people with learning disabilities into work can be through a number of different routes. Being employed by a self advocacy organisation can mean gaining skills that give you a high earning potential than some living wage jobs. This employment also comes with power within the organisation that helps develop self confidence and esteem. Such opportunities should be encouraged, supported and promoted.

Business support organisations

When a group involving people with and without learning disabilities is developing a business it will need jargon words to be explained and business thinking to be developed over months or years. We have developed a glossary of business words and a business blocks approach to help.

Policy makers and service commissioners

When commissioning services do you consider supporting or helping set up user led organisations? These could both provide services and provide real work for real money for those you support? In Wales there is a duty to support social enterprises on local authorities.

Do you package work contracts so that smaller, user led organisations are able to bid for them?

If a service you fund may be able to operate as a social enterprise or a business within a charity, think about how to taper funding to avoid the all or nothing experience that one of our groups was faced with.

Self Advocacy groups

Have you considered selling services or products to generate unrestricted income?

There are hard decisions about whether the business sits within the organisation or as a separate (or semi-separate) entity. If it sits within the organisation, the organisation will have to juggle business demands with the values and culture of the organisation.

When you employ people on benefits, make sure they get good independent advice before they commit to working for you.

Members of Self Advocacy groups

Working for your self advocacy group can be a great experience. It feels different to be working rather than volunteering. Make sure it is worth you working by getting good benefits advice.





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