

# The Personal 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](http://www.barod.org).

For more information about DRILL, visit [www.drilluk.org.uk](http://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.



# The personal Journey

Starting a business is a personal journey. There are barriers to be climbed and potholes to be avoided. Sometimes you need a ladder to help you get out of a hole, or a bridge to get over a river. Sometimes you find you are in a dead end and have to retrace your steps and choose another path. Sometimes the only way forward is a leap of faith, and that has its own video and findings sheets.

People's personal journeys are better measured in years than months. It began long before The Bridge, and the 18 months of support was not long enough to reach the goal of belonging in the business world and earning enough money to come off benefits. If we had provided more intensive interventions, people's journeys might have gone faster. Equally, more intensive interventions would have risked a sudden end to their journeys with The Bridge finished, and made it harder to apply the research findings for those without intensive interventions or support.

The people with learning disabilities who came to The Bridge had enthusiasm and ambition. They brought confidence and skills from their involvement in self advocacy. They were able to speak up for themselves, find out and represent other people's views and train people in disability awareness or how to speak up.



Many people with learning disabilities live in the 'learning disability world', a professionalised world of social care, low expectations and fear of any change that may upset their finances. It is a world where changing where you go or what you are doing requires other people to change. It may require agreement from people responsible for your care.

Some self advocates have additional health issues and personal circumstances that may limit how many hours they can sustainably work, or may mean they have fluctuating ability and opportunity to work on starting or running their business. Daily life can be complicated!



## What we Found

For many people with learning disabilities, there are things in our lives and support circle that make it hard to start the journey. Low expectations from those around us means we often just don't think earning money is for us. We may have been brought up and supported by people who don't let us take risks, so we don't have much confidence or as many opportunities to use the skills we have. We may have spent so long in college that we wondered if we would ever be ready for work. We may have been told that we are working when really we are volunteering or doing something for free.

We developed a Business Blocks visual planner [ADD PHOTO] to help people see where they were with the different elements of starting a business at any particular time.

We found people had four sets of questions in common as they made their personal journey. These could happen in any order, and could recur at any time. We had predicted, from previous experience, that these would need answering.

Sometimes it's the practical things like:

- How do I get there?
- Can I open a bank account?
- Is the information in Easy Read?
- I bought something on the internet but it hasn't arrived.
- I need to go to hospital and can't do my business for a while.

Sometimes it's worrying about

- will the business work or not
- being responsible for other people getting paid
- my benefits
- having enough time to do things

Sometimes it's things you don't know

- How do I work out how much to charge?
- How do I know if people will buy what I want to sell?
- How do I keep track of the money?
- What is a fair wage?
- What insurance do I need?

Sometimes it's things to do with other people

- getting others to agree to the plans
- changes in my support or the team I work with
- how do we work as a team?



In addition, we found four areas that we had not been aware of:

- It needs to be someone's burning vision. People may drift or be nudged into the idea of starting a business, or they may feel forced into it as the only way to start work. Starting and running a business needs to be a personal goal.
- It's not just about learning business jargon. The business world has its own ways of thinking and its own culture.
- Starting a business means balancing time and status ,and risking financial security. Each person needs support to work out what matters to them and what they are willing to give up or risk before they can make an informed commitment to starting their business.
- Finding clients and working with strangers is particularly challenging for some of us and can be a road block.

Some of these barriers can be overcome if you know they are coming and can plan for them. We have made the business blocks pack so you can know how to develop a business. If you are receiving benefits, then getting some good advice before you start will help you to be sure that your finances will be okay.

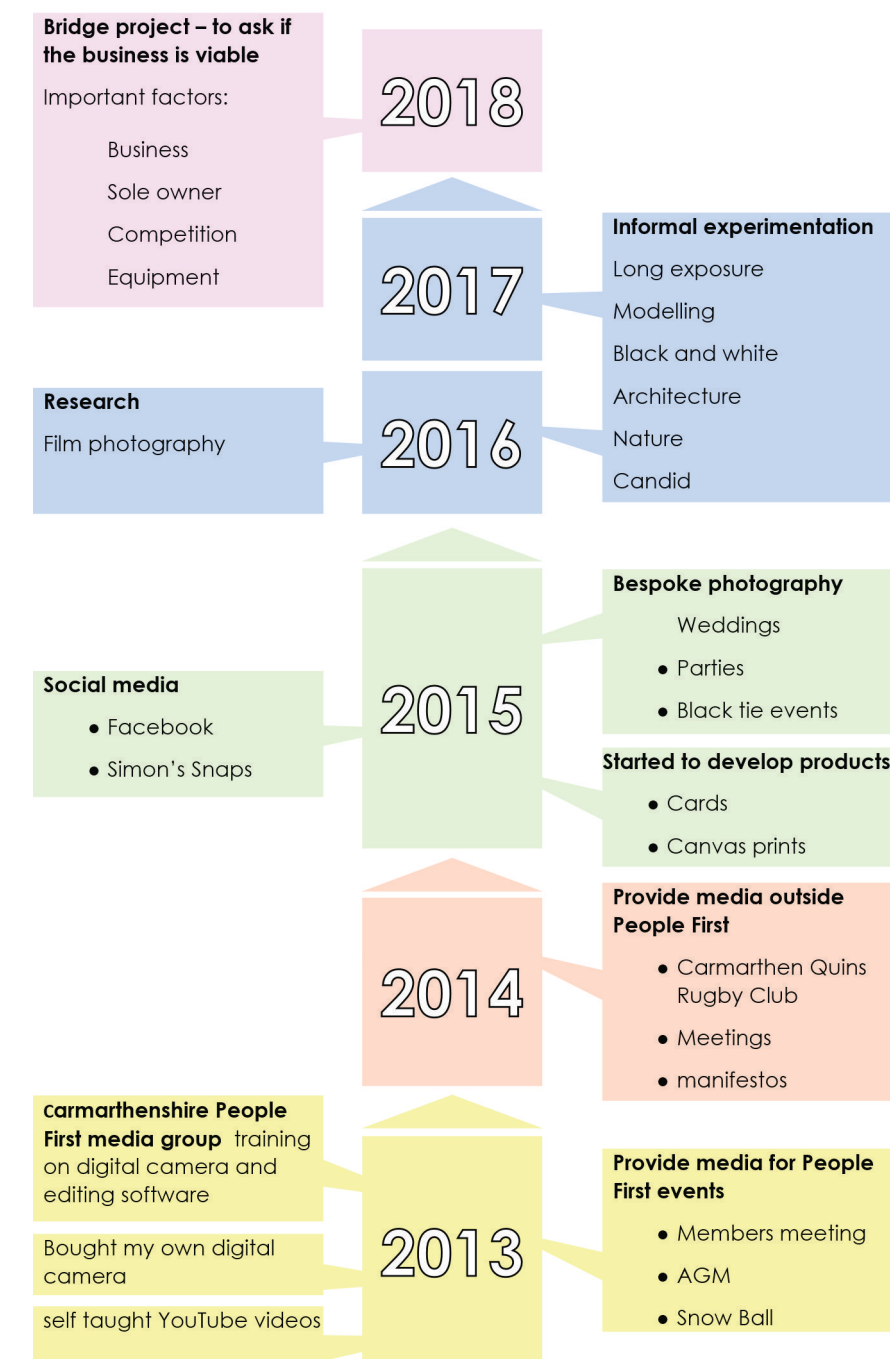
You can get out of some holes if you have access to the right support. If you are worried about things, then having someone to talk to is really important. If you struggle with numbers, you can ask someone to help you keep track of the money.

Sometimes you have to admit defeat and change direction. If you find out that you need to pay someone a lot of money to use their name or photo, then you think of another name or another photo. If people won't buy what you make, then you have to find something else to make. If you find a work situation is making your health worse, you need to stop and find another way of working.

You are more likely to succeed if you have help, support and an 'I can do it' attitude that doesn't experience each set back as a personal defeat.

When put together, these areas mean that the personal journey takes time, and rightly so.

One participant began his journey to having a photography business in 2013. Thanks to The Bridge, he is in a position to make informed choices. His current timeline for getting where he wants with his business idea takes him to 2025. He is fortunate to be a member of Carmarthenshire People First who in response to the Bridge research findings are developing a 'My Future Business' hub for ongoing peer support and networking on the journey.



# Try this

## Government

If we want people with learning disabilities to get into employment or be a business person, self advocacy organisations need to be properly funded.

Income fluctuates when you start a business. This is a worry for anyone. The benefits system makes it even more risky and worrying for disabled people whose benefits situation may be complex. Are there ways this can be managed from the benefits end?

Current schemes to encourage self employment for people receiving JSA or ESA are not a good fit for people with learning disabilities, as business development takes much longer than a year.

## Business and employment support services

People need time and support to make the journey into employment or business. They need to be allowed to 'test the water', withdraw and try again later.

## Services for people with learning disabilities

Learning disability staff, services, parents and others need to nurture and encourage people's ambitions throughout their lives.

You may not be business minded, but don't let that stop those you care for have the opportunity to start their own business.

## Businesses led by and employing people with learning disabilities

It can take a long time for people to get into a work role and mind-set.

Good benefits advice is essential, especially if you may be triggering a change to Universal Credit.

## People with learning disabilities

Find others on the journey and build your own network of support.

Expect to make sacrifices. Get support to think about what matters most to you in life. Work out if the sacrifices you would have to make are worth it.





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