

People with learning difficulties in danger of isolation

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Research by the University of Southampton has shown adults with learning difficulties are being left to organise their own support networks, following changes to the provision of care services.

A study, which gives a snapshot of lives of [people](#) with learning difficulties in south Hampshire, has found individuals are building informal networks of their own – gathering together for solidarity, support and friendship.

Published in the 'Journal of Intellectual Disabilities', the paper Peer-Advocacy in a Personalised Landscape, recognises the positive nature of these self-evolved networks and groups, but warns they are precarious in nature and need more formal support.

The findings are being presented at the launch of a new group '[Southampton Platform for Inclusive Research and Ideas Together](#)' (SPIRIT) on Wednesday 25 May 2016 at Unity 12, Rose Road in Southampton.

Author Dr Andrew Power, Lecturer in Human Geography at the University of Southampton, explains: "The last five years has seen a move away from communal day care centres, towards user led, individual support. This switch from more static, inflexible care has been largely positive, but it has also left a gap where people are in danger from isolation, with no focal point for their care.

"Our research reveals how some, but not all people with learning difficulties, are coping with these changes and cuts to services by gathering together in ordinary places, such as local pubs or leisure centres – sharing experiences and helping each other with common issues."

Although relatively small in scale, the study provides a unique, qualitative glimpse into the lives of 12 individuals living with learning difficulties in the Southampton and south Hampshire areas. University researchers also observed how four informal support groups in the area operated, and held open discussion meetings with participants.

The researchers found that 'personalisation' of services had undoubtedly helped people's choices and control over their lives, but had also led to the diffusion of spaces where people could gather for support. The findings reveal a growing social precarity in the lives of those with learning difficulties and the threat of deep isolation where centres are removed and not replaced with alternatives.

However, the study authors also found that participants themselves are often reimagining places where care can take place via peer support – finding spaces of their own to gather, and initiating their own interaction with people facing similar challenges.

Dr Power comments: "We would not advocate returning to the model of inflexible day centres, but those implementing social care need to not only emphasise individual choice – but also help facilitate more formal ways in which people with [learning difficulties](#) can help each other, in group situations in the community."

The study authors acknowledge that more research is needed on a larger scale to further their conclusions. It's hoped the launch of SPIRIT will help encourage additional work in this area, bringing together people

with learning disabilities, academics, Choices Advocacy (a local advocacy service based across Southern Hampshire) and People First Dorset (a branch of the national learning disability self-advocacy network). The platform welcomes contributions and engagement from interested groups in the south of England.

More information: Power, Andrew, Bartlett, Ruth and Hall, Ed (2016) Peer-advocacy in a personalised landscape: the role of peer support in a context of individualised support and austerity. *Journal of Intellectual Disabilities*, 1-19. eprints.soton.ac.uk/386134/

Provided by University of Southampton

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