



Hear Our Voice #CTMLockdownVoices Series

**Learning Disabilities: the 'new normal' – Day Centre Services  
Cwm Taf Morgannwg**



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## Introduction

Social Care for adults with learning disabilities has typically consisted of engagement in some form of day centre service or structured daytime opportunity that aims to increase the potential for social interaction and the development of new skills, providing more purposeful and meaningful lives for those who access them. There is no, nationwide, systematic way of delivering such services, or definition of what they should look like, instead their structure is largely determined by service providers of which the majority are run by or commissioned by local authorities. Therefore, day centre/daytime opportunities provisions have the potential to be varied and diverse in the hope that they are needs driven, offering a range of opportunities that help the individuals who access them reach their personal goals as well as complimenting individuals interests and desires.

However, this is not always the case, and the localisation of design and delivery has also allowed a number of day centre services and daytime opportunities to become out-dated and ineffective. Demand, and to a certain degree, social expectations, have started to transition into more person-centred models of working. Although being backed by the Social Services and Wellbeing Act (Wales), 2014 outlining the importance of individuals having Voice, Choice and Control over their lives and the social care services they access, there still appears to be a delay in these person-centred models becoming reality within service delivery. As with many service-based provisions, one of the biggest elements that has hindered the successful transition into a more person-centred approach has been a distinct lack of resources: finance, staff, buildings, transportation etc. Increasing pressure on local authorities to reduce budgets and save money has led, in some cases, to favouring larger generic provisions which can serve increased numbers of users rather than smaller, person-centred, needs-based, targeted provision, allowing day centre services to become a destination or holding place rather than a mechanism for personal growth and development. Additionally, the desire to cut back and reduce costs has also led to reduced hours of care and less stability in the care package on offer which has left parents and unpaid carers filling in the gap to try and give their loved ones a sense of a meaningful life. Key findings from the Welsh Government's, Learning Disability Improving Lives Programme Review, June 2018 further suggests that this transition to the person-centred approach is yet to be achieved. It states:

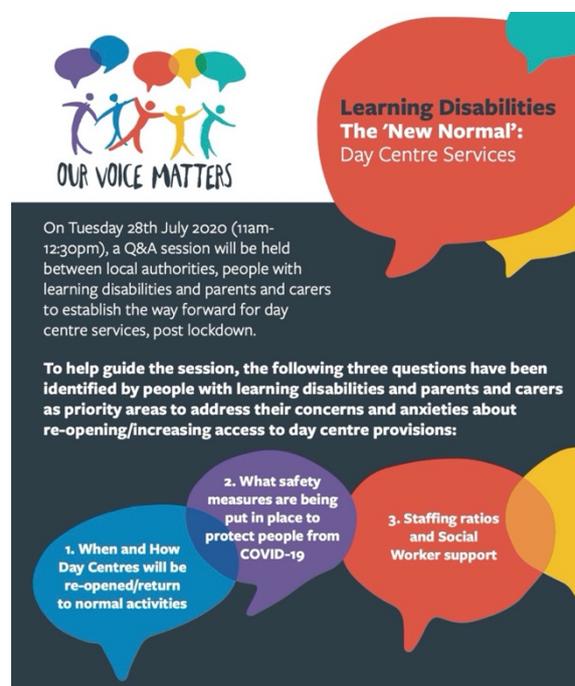
*The overriding response from parents and carers regarding their lived experience was that it was a "fight" and a "battle" to get the right services and the right support [and that] services were generally not seen by parents and carers as person centred and flexible to adapt to people's needs*

The issues with day centre services/daytime opportunities have recently been exasperated by the COVID-19 pandemic. During this time of unprecedented challenges and uncertainty, the charity Mencap conducted a survey to capture and understand the experiences of those caring for someone with a learning disability through this time. In a review of the survey's findings, ITV News (August 2020) reported that 'Social care cuts [have] left people with a learning disability 'forgotten' in lockdown'. Within this report, Edel Harris, chief executive of Mencap suggested that 'social care has had

decades of underinvestment...[as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic there] are clear signs that the system has broken and people with a learning disability and their families are paying the price... social care needs significant investment now and a bold plan for reform for the future. People with a learning disability and their families must not be left behind in lockdown'. The report further highlights that 'more than 65% of people with a learning disability had their social care slashed by at least half [during this period, and that] the amount of social care support their loved one receives from the local authority has decreased a lot... [as a result] cuts to day services, personal care in the home and respite for carers have had a devastating impact on people with a learning disability and their families, leaving them still in lockdown despite the easing of official restrictions'.

Whilst this pandemic has set in place a number of unanticipated challenges for the health and social care sector, including provisions and services run and commissioned by local authorities, it has also provided some breathing space in which to reflect upon and re-evaluate the effectiveness of the day services on offer to people with a learning disability. Due to the strict government guidelines that were issued in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, many day services and daytime opportunities provisions across the Cwm Taf Morgannwg region were closed to adults with learning disabilities except for in exceptional circumstances for those with the most complex needs. This closure/reduction of services, whilst necessary, has caused many disruptions to the lives of people with learning disabilities, leaving some struggling to cope with the changes to long engrained routines; grieving a loss of independence and identity; and forcing the transition into full-time unpaid caring roles for some parents and carers. This has left many craving a return to a day service of any kind as a means of missed connection, social interaction, and respite.

As lockdown measures across the UK began to ease in July 2020, many relished in the hope that they would soon be able to experience some kind of return to normality. However, as the excitement of that hope began to rise, so did the reality that even as they return to day service, normal was going to be different, leading to a myriad of fear and anxiety. As a result, adults with learning disabilities across the Cwm Taf Morgannwg region started to raise these concerns to their area People First organisations' (or The Grapevine in relation to parents and carers) as a source of information and advice. In response, People First through the Our Voice Matters project decided to facilitate an opportunity for members across Cwm Taf Morgannwg, along with their parents and carers, to discuss their fears, as well as ask questions with representatives from their relevant local authority area who in turn offered to outline their future and on-going plans for day centre services as a means to reduce



**OUR VOICE MATTERS**

**Learning Disabilities The 'New Normal': Day Centre Services**

On Tuesday 28th July 2020 (11am-12:30pm), a Q&A session will be held between local authorities, people with learning disabilities and parents and carers to establish the way forward for day centre services, post lockdown.

To help guide the session, the following three questions have been identified by people with learning disabilities and parents and carers as priority areas to address their concerns and anxieties about re-opening/increasing access to day centre provisions:

1. When and How Day Centres will be re-opened/return to normal activities
2. What safety measures are being put in place to protect people from COVID-19
3. Staffing ratios and Social Worker support

Registration will be via Eventbrite ticket:

[CLICK HERE](#)



unnecessary panic in line with both short and longer term decisions being made: to either remain closed, or re-open/increase capacity and access to their services in this post lockdown climate.

The event titled 'Learning Disabilities: the 'New Normal' – Day Centre Services' took place on Tuesday 28<sup>th</sup> July 2020 at 11:00am on both the Zoom – and Microsoft Teams platforms, with a total of 34 people participating in the conversations across the three breakout rooms representing the three different local authority areas as follows:

Bridgend – 12 participants

Merthyr – 5 participants

Rhondda Cynon Taf – 17 participants

### **Report Limitations**

Although feedback from those who joined the conversation was largely positive and full of insight into the importance of such events, especially in light of the unprecedented COVID-19 climate we find ourselves, it was not without limitations that may impact the validity of the findings and conclusions contained within this report. These limitations will be explored to provide context, as well as a source for future consideration as the conversation around day centre services, and other important topics for people with learning disabilities, continues. Whilst distinct crossover can be formed between the limitations outlined, they will be displayed below as individual sub-headings for clarity.

#### **Time Constraints**

Due to the evolving nature of the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown measures, alongside the developing crisis of fear and anxiety that had begun to grip people with learning disabilities trapped in isolation and with limited access to their pre-COVID support systems, this event was created with a sense of urgency. This meant that from its concept creation to its actuality, the Our Voice Matters project had only a short lead time to establish and engage the relevant conversation contributors to deliver an effective and meaningful conversation. This short preparation time led to a number of calendar clashes, with some key contributors being unable to attend. Equally, this time constraint reduced the amount of planning time available to the local authority areas in developing the presentation of their plans. Therefore, some of the breakout room conversations were limited in content.

The second aspect of the time constraint limitation was in reference to the event/conversation length. The overall event was set to be run over a 1.5hour period. This allowed for joining time, the relevant online platform logistics and explanation of the event through its welcome and introduction. As a result, breakout room conversations were limited to 1hour. Whilst this time frame had originally been set to meet the needs of people with learning disabilities, it perhaps didn't take into account the complexity of the topic being discussed, resulting in some conversations being cut short. However, during the welcome and introduction, it was explained that this event was designed to be the start of an ongoing and naturally evolving conversation and was not to be seen as a one-off opportunity. This is something that has been

outlined within this report as a key action to move forward, so that the full depth of these conversations can be explored as local authority areas develop their day centre service plans in conjunction with users of those services.

#### Conversation Contributors:

As a result of the time constraints posed, contributors to the conversation were limited and lacked the necessary diversity to ensure good representation in every breakout room/geographical area. Whilst every room contained at least one person with a learning disability who access(ed) day services in that local authority area, it should be noted that the views and experiences of that individual may not be representative of all people with learning disabilities who access services in that locality. Parents and carers of those who access day services were only represented in two out of the three local authority areas and this was highlighted as a distinct gap in conversation contributors. Two out of the three breakout rooms contained service providers and wider contributors with various vested interests in reference to day centre services. Adequate local authority representation was in attendance within all three local authority areas. Therefore, the details contained within this report are limited to the information, experiences and concerns raised within this event only, and should not be taken as a full and detailed account of the current climate surrounding day centre services in each local authority area, but rather as an indication of some emerging themes in which future conversation development can be based.

#### Technology/Communication Issues:

An additional factor that impacted representation levels across the three local authority areas was the platform of choice in which the event/conversation was held. Due to the current and ongoing challenges presented by COVID-19 in regard to the strict regulations on social distancing and the gathering of people, the most convenient method to facilitate such conversation was through an online event. This in itself created a barrier for some people who either did not have access to relevant and necessary technology or did not have the confidence to use the required technology satisfactorily in order to engage in the conversation.

*“It is proving difficult to get internet into the day centres in Merthyr. Due to the location of the Greenhouses it is unlikely they will gain internet access and due to wider reasons, it is a challenge to get it in Ty Gwyn too” – Lowri Morgan, Merthyr County Borough Council*

*“COVID has shown that there are connectivity issues across Bridgend, and it is not as accessible to some service users as other...we had started a project before lockdown to look at the utilisation of technology in people’s homes, but that has had to go on hold now... [COVID has shown us] that technology and access to the internet has the potential to change people’s lives in a big way, and could help them to be more independent whilst staying connected moving forward” – Mark Wilkinson, Bridgend County Borough Council*

The online platform used for this event was zoom, having previously been identified by people with learning disabilities as their platform of choice. However, this created a block for some local authority contributors, as this platform has been deemed unsecure and therefore inaccessible for staff to access. This was a big issue for Bridgend County Borough Council and in order to facilitate a conversation which

included them, the event platform had to be changed to Microsoft Teams. Despite this change of platform, some event registered local authority officers from BCBC still were unable to join the conversation. It was agreed that the Microsoft Teams platform was not fully accessible for people with learning disabilities, and one member had several issues trying to connect, before joining the conversation via a separate telephone conference.

*“COVID has accelerated staff utilisation of technology. within BCBC and we have been using Microsoft Teams for video conferencing and virtual meetings, but I am not aware of us using [these platforms] for any service user engagement... We have been told that as a local authority we cannot support the use of Zoom, so we have to look at how we can expand our use of Teams and Skype, and how we can engage with service users if they can't access these” – Mark Wilkinson, Bridgend County Borough Council*

### Data Collection

The way in which the conversation within each breakout room was recorded was through an individually assigned scribe. As different scribes were used in each different breakout room, there are some inconsistencies regarding how information was collected and the level of detail each scribe fed back to the Our Voice Matters project following the completion of this conversation starter event. To try and overcome some of these issues, the Our Voice Matters coordinator, did drop in to each of the breakout rooms throughout the conversation and capture snippets of information to be used in conjunction with the scribes notes and to help increase the understanding of the context of the conversation for the purposes of compiling this report. Therefore, the following analysis of the individual breakout room conversations can only provide a snapshot of the themes identified, and where detailed, outcomes discussed, and should be regarded in this manner to form a foundation from which further conversation development can begin.

### Breakout Room Conversations

#### Bridgend

During the planning and preparation phase of the Learning Disabilities: the ‘new normal’ day centre services event, the Our Voice Matters project engaged People First Bridgend to help gather relevant conversation contributors to ensure that the discussion held was purposeful and meaningful across the Bridgend area. Through this early stage planning it was identified that representatives from Bridgend County Borough Council (BCBC) were unable to access the Zoom platform and would therefore be unable to join the conversation. After discussions with People First Bridgend, it was agreed that the Microsoft Teams platform would be used to host the Bridgend Breakout Room discussion, and that People First Bridgend would work with its members to enable them to access Microsoft Teams so that the conversation could happen. Whilst this was not ideal, and some issues were experienced through the use of the Microsoft Teams platform, a good conversation was held with a diverse range of contributors from across the Bridgend area about the current and future plans for day centre services and the impact COVID-19 has had on people with learning disabilities accessing the support they need.

Within the Bridgend breakout room, conversation contributors consisted of:

People with learning disabilities	2
Parents/Carers	1
Support Staff	2
Local Authority	2
Service Providers/Voluntary Sector	5
Total	12

The conversation began by the representatives of BCBC outlining that their aim is for everybody who was having a service pre-lockdown, to return to some kind of service post-lockdown, however, this is likely to be in a limited capacity to meet the relevant regulations/requirements of social distancing. BCBC continued by explaining that when COVID-19 first hit they never shut their day services completely, and where it wasn't possible for people to access day centre, they continued to provide services from people's homes. Now, they have realised that the lockdown period has been difficult for people, and the changes to people's routines and negative effect it has had on some people's mental health has meant that they have had to change their support priorities to consider people who are having difficulties being at home, including the stress level of and impact on carers. Therefore, there is an increasing need to be able to provide some form of structured service, and in line with the easing of government restrictions, BCBC have started to open their buildings for people with more complex needs.

*“The biggest factor on how we prioritise who to offer services to first is not only the complexity of their needs, but the effect the support and respite that service will have on the individual and their families” – Mark Wilkinson, BCBC*

As the conversation developed, some of the contributors started to share their personal experiences of the lockdown period and the support and activities they had engaged with. The main theme that emerged was that the lack of social interaction has been the biggest issue for people with learning disabilities during this time. Whilst technology has been used where available and accessible this hasn't been able to overcome the need for proper “real life” social contact.

*“I have been doing loads of activities on the computer through lockdown like, coffee mornings, zumba, healthy eating workshops, Bingo, Quizzes, karaoke and choir practice and it has been nice to have all these activities to keep me busy but I miss my friends and I still want to meet people face to face and get proper social contact”  
- Raymond Byles, People First Bridgend Member*

*“Parents are saying that they are not coming up as emergency care but that they're loved ones are desperate to come back in. If we can comply with social distancing can we have more in?” – Laura Deens, Autism Life Centres, Bridgend*

*“We are operating in a public building to deliver essential support for protected people. People want to come back after shielding [as a result*

*of] starting to decline with emotional their wellbeing” - Brenda Farley, Trinity Care Support*

*“I would feel happy going back to day service to see my old friends, a little bit scared but not much, I think it would be safe because I want to see my friends”*

*- Raymond Byles, People First Bridgend Member*

In recognition of people’s need and desire for social interaction and that *“as time [in lockdown and out of day services] progresses, the stress for people at home continues to increase”* BCBC indicated that they are working on developing clear risk assessments to expand access to services as quickly as possible. These risk assessments aim to ensure that people’s *“safety is a key priority”* and takes into consideration how many people can be in each building at one time and how many staff are required, so that everyone can gain access to a service and the support and opportunities they need. As a result, people are continuing to come back into buildings as and when they can in relation to the guidelines, putting all the correct measures in place with constant monitoring and evaluation to establish its effectiveness. However, BCBC are not in a position to say that they are officially open to all yet. In the meantime, they are continuing to support people from home in whatever way they can. Respite services are also planned to restart in August in a similar way, with the hope to decrease the pressure on parents and carers; protecting their mental wellbeing.

*“There have been a few bumps along the way, but we are feeling quite optimistic moving forward...Things will be slowly starting again, not that they ever stopped, and now we are looking at how daytime opportunities will look moving forward...Skills development [for people with learning disabilities] has dropped down the agenda a bit [due to COVID] and we need to get back to focusing on that”- Mark Wilkinson, BCBC*

*“The risk assessments to do something are an awful lot of work”  
– Jean Gregson, Parent/Carer and Trustee of People First Bridgend*

*“Risk assessments can be a lot of work but they are essential in our plans to re-open and increase access to day service provisions...when considering how to re-start you need to think about how you allocate time to people and limit the amount of time people can come in so that everyone can come in so that it’s fair, but of course this means people will only be able to come in for limited hours...you should be able to offer services and support as long as you do a risk assessment and break down how much time you can allocate` to each person.*

*It is a tricky balancing act so that they can spend time with their friends again”*

*- Mark Wilkinson, BCBC*

Alongside the conversation about risk assessments to ensure safety as services look to re-open, discussion developed to consider the need for and use of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE). Whilst BCBC and the other service providers in the breakout room stated that they have sufficient supplies of PPE, it was recognised that the wearing of PPE, whilst necessary, was not always comfortable and induced a level of fear and anxiety for some people.

*“I would be scared going back to day centre because*

*they*



*have to wear masks. It is hard to communicate when you can't see people's faces"*  
- Tina Larner, People First Bridgend Member

*"It's not easy for staff to wear PPE either, it is scary for everyone. Masks aren't comfortable and we do also supply visors, which can be better to help in communicating with people as they can see your face...our supplies of PPE look great at the moment, but it did take a long time to come, but it continues to come in so we have plenty of PPE now"*  
- Mark Wilkinson, BCBC

The wearing of PPE was not the only new measure included within the risk assessments to showcase how a provision or service is meeting the stipulated guidelines and laws issued by Welsh Government, as within this discussion, some of the wider measures were also highlighted. This included protocols around social distancing, hand washing and movements in and around buildings. One of the common themes of this discussion was how people were going to be told the rules/measures to ensure understanding and compliance. This conversation also expanded to consider the use of PPE and safety measures for the transporting of users of services to provisions.

*"There are strict regimes with washing hands and social distancing [that we have put in place] and at the moment we think we can manage things. We don't know if things will ever be the same so we have to start getting used to some of these new measures so that we can return to some kind of 'new normal'...We try to keep people in separate areas away from each other which is hard because of cross contamination...It will be difficult to get people to understand so we will have to keep reminding them. We will make signs/posters and have them visible but do understand that some people don't recognise the signs so we will also need to keep verbally reminding them. It is something that we will need to work on, how we communicate that message effectively...it would be good if we could start consulting people on things like this, through events like this so that we can share and get ideas from people so they feel included in the process"* - Mark Wilkinson, BCBC

As the conversation came to a close a brief discussion was held about what would happen if either a staff member or user of service within a day service was to get COVID-19, alongside the likelihood of a second wave. In terms of a second wave BCBC confirmed that things would likely go back to how they were during the lockdown of the first wave, *"not to close the service but operate it from people's homes in the best way that they can"* and that this would *"depend where [the second wave] broke out and how many people were affected"*.

*"[If someone was showing COVID symptoms] either the person wouldn't come in or if they become ill in another building, we would arrange for them to go home and get tested. Track and trace would be arranged, and those people would have to self-isolate. That is perhaps one of our biggest worries, what if people don't know they have got it and are having more contact [with other people and staff]. We do have robust risk assessments and procedures in place and hope that they would provide the protection we need"*  
- Mark Wilkinson, BCBC

The conversation concluded with the contributor's present agreeing the following action points to ensure that the conversation continues, and

that people are brought back into day centre services as and when it is safe and appropriate to do so:

1. It was recognised that it is important for this conversation to continue, and therefore, the first action point identified was that BCBC will liaise with People First Bridgend and wider service providers to set a date to meet again and discuss any developments in line with the day centre services plan. They recognised that parent/carer involvement in this conversation was limited and that they need to identify ways in order to increase this moving forward.
2. BCBC highlighted that they have been working on a Service Development Plan for people with learning disabilities and it was noted that it would be good to increase the involvement of users of services in this. BCBC are to liaise with People First Bridgend to identify a way of running a series of virtual ‘having a say meetings’ that allow people with learning disabilities to share their experiences and offer ideas to improve services moving forward and feed into this Service Development Plan. The Our Voice Matters project coordinator offered to be involved in these discussions to help facilitate user of services involvement and establish regional links in relation to ongoing emerging themes.
3. That BCBC would track and follow the evolving Welsh Government guidance and relay any identified targets or key dates to the contributors present to establish ways to work in collaboration to move things forward and re-open/re-start service delivery when and how they can.

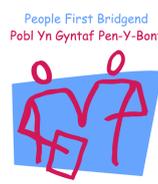
### Merthyr Tydfil

Prior to the start of today’s event, Cwm Taf People First struggled to connect with and engage people with learning disabilities who access day centre services to contribute in the conversation. iPad’s had been issued to the three Merthyr based day centres: Keir Hardy, Ty Gwyn and The Greenhouses, however due to internet and connectivity issues these are yet to be utilised in the Hear Our Voice #CTMLockdownVoices series, as well as other co-production activities. As a result, the two conversation contributors with a learning disability had limited knowledge and experience of attending a day centre, however, were able to share their thoughts and opinions on lockdown and the wider daytime opportunities they access, including college.

*“[Although internet has been a problem], there is scope for us to possibly arrange some socially distanced meetings to happen soon or maybe using day centre devices we could have a virtual meeting to discuss these plans soon” – Lowri Morgan, MTCBC*

Within the Merthyr breakout room, conversation contributors consisted of:

People with learning disabilities	2
Parents/Carers	0
Support Staff	1
Local Authority	1
Service Providers/Voluntary Sector	0



Regional Partnership Board Representative 1

Total 5

The conversation began with the representative from Merthyr Tydfil County Borough Council (MTCBC) outlining what has been happening with day centre services through lockdown as follows:

- We have been keeping in touch with individuals and families, to check that they are ok. This was done via a weekly phone call. If a person with a learning disability or their family were not ok, then day services would contact a social worker to identify what help and support day services could offer.
- Day services opened in MTCBC as soon as it was felt it was safe to do so, and this was done in a limited capacity. This has included only operating on specific days due to social distancing and health and safety with fewer numbers in attendance at any one time.

*“Day services are open. The opening times and days are less than before and due to social distancing less people are able to attend...day services will no longer be able to offer a 5 day a week service, so direct payments may be another option for support”*

*– Lowri Morgan, MTCBC*

- MTCBC have asked families to transport people with a learning disability due to difficulties with public transport/transport contracts and social distancing.
- Robust cleaning takes place before people arrive into day centres and when they leave.
- Every person entering into day centres has to have their temperature taken and if it is high, they will be asked to return home.
- To ensure that everyone who has needed to access a day centre service through the lockdown period is able to, MTCBC has had to plan who can be in the centre at the same time as others. This has taken into consideration individual needs and has resulted in less numbers and reduced capacity which means that everyone can still receive some sort of a service and support.
- MTCBC have been working with individuals to offer one to one support in day centres to reduce the risk of any cross contamination and abiding to the necessary COVID-19 prevention guidelines.
- Sufficient PPE has been sourced and staff are wearing PPE with masks at work all the time.

*“It has been a challenging [time for everyone], but families and individuals have been understanding and are aware that we have to follow the government guidelines. There have been no complaints from the families about the changes that have been made”*

*– Lowri Morgan, MTCBC*

As lockdown restrictions have started to ease, MTCBC has been safely meeting together as officers every 2 weeks to discuss individual’s needs and prioritise accordingly how to offer services and support. In addition they have been continuing the weekly phone calls with

users of services to check

in with people, so that their feedback and experiences can help shape the future developments for day services and the support they can offer. As a result, the following points were offered as insight into how the future of day services could look across MTCBC area:

- Offering activities that people want to do not just having to participate with what is on offer.

*“The aim is to match people up with their friends where possible and keep people together safely whilst adhering to social distancing measures...If people like to walk, we could meet at a central point rather than meeting at the centre. We need to look at how we deliver services differently” – Lowri Morgan, MTCBC*

- Continuing to keep everyone safe by not having everyone in day centre all at one time.
- We know from conversations with People First that it is important for people with learning disabilities to have access to paid work and volunteering, and opportunities to try new things.
- More work needs to be done with school leavers.
- Looking at different ways of being independent and maybe offering a day service at home.
- Including families in decisions surrounding support.

*“Working with families and people with a learning disability has helped everything to move forward” – Lowri Morgan, MTCBC*

MTCBC concluded their presentation of their plans for day centre services by indicating that they will be liaising with colleagues and other daytime opportunities to find out what else will be available in the area for people with learning disabilities to access so that they can assess the holistic opportunities on offer for the users of their services.

Following the formal presentation of MTCBC’s plans, conversation contributors were asked to share their thoughts and experiences, as well as pose questions to be able to provide feedback and ideas about the current and proposed changes to day centre services. However, the it became apparent that the people with learning disabilities had struggled to understand some of the plan that had been presented and asked for it to be explained using easier language.

*“I didn’t understand all of what you have said Lowri, would you be able to explain again and use easier language to help me understand so that I can tell you what I think?”  
- Daniel Barnard, Cwm Taf People First Member*

After some further discussion and explanation it was agreed that Lowri Morgan would liaise with Cwm Taf People First to produce some easy read versions of the ideas and plans they have proposed regarding the future of day centre services so that people with learning disabilities can input into the future plans effectively. Therefore, to bring this part of the conversation to a close and to ensure

that it continues in the future with a higher diversity of contributors, the following action points were agreed:

1. That MTCBC will continue to liaise with Cwm Taf People First as well as other colleagues and daytime opportunities providers to ensure that the conversation continues, and that people are provided adequate opportunity to input into the plans being developed by the local authority.
2. That Cwm Taf People First will translate MTCBC plan's and ideas into easy read versions for people with learning disabilities to be able to understand fully the changes that are being proposed and maximise their involvement in plan development.
3. That MTCBC will co-produce a daytime opportunities strategy.

### Rhondda Cynon Taff

Due to the close relationship RCT People First has with parents and carers group The Grapevine, conversation contributors registration for the Rhondda Cynon Taff (RCT) discussion was higher than average, with a good level of representation of both people with learning disabilities and parents and carers who are engaged in day centre services across the area. Therefore, the original plan was to hold this conversation over two breakout rooms, with local authority representation in both rooms to share their plans and take and answer questions. However, on the morning of the event, the Our Voice Matters project was informed that only one equipped local authority representative would be available to attend, meaning that only one breakout room discussion could take place. As a result, the set conversation length was not long enough and not all questions and topics were covered effectively.

Additionally, prior to this conversation taking place, it was reported through local media platforms that Rhondda Cynon Taff County Borough Council (RCTCBC) had released their draft plans concerning day centre operations and wider daytime opportunities for people with a learning disability, and that these plans were due to be presented to cabinet for approval later that day. These reports were met with some anguish as both people with learning disabilities and parents and carers now felt that the conversation was tokenistic in the eyes of RCTCBC and that their opinions and voice had no power as the plans had already been drawn and were being considered for immediate implementation. What heightened these adverse feelings was that during the planning and preparation for this event, RCT People First had requested that any plans RCTCBC had regarding day centre services were made available to them as their members had been feeling a lot of anxiety as well as despair and hopelessness about the easing of lockdown and the return to the 'new normal' in terms of day centre service access, as a way to dispel some of this fear and to also allow the voice of users of these services to be included in the decision making process. These plans were not previously discussed or shared and the report on Wales Online was the first People First and The Grapevine had seen in regard to these plans. Whilst RCTCBC did apologise for this, it was difficult for some conversation contributors to feel that the discussions held during the event had both value and meaning.

*“It is disappointing to read about what is happening around day centres on Wales Online before discussions were had with the users of services [they impact]”*

*– Kay Tyler, The Grapevine and Parent and Carer Representative for the Cwm Taf Morgannwg Regional Partnership Board*

*“The information put on Wales Online is a proposal going to Cabinet today. I apologise that it was in the public arena before discussions were held and that people felt they were not involved in the process of developing the proposal. Hopefully today’s discussion will give us better insight and we can feed that into our future plans” – Alexandra Beckham, RCTCBC*

Within the RCT breakout room, conversation contributors consisted of:

People with learning disabilities	4
Parents/Carers	5
Support Staff	2
Local Authority	3
Service Providers/Voluntary Sector	3
Total	17

The main session of the conversation began with RCTCBC representatives outlining the current situation in terms of day centre services and how they have been operating during the lockdown period.

*“This has been a challenging time [for us all]. Treforest day centre was flooded before lockdown and so we weren’t able to run a service from there because of the damage. Llwynypia was operating a very small service in lockdown for those who were identified as struggling and now as lockdown measures are easing Llwynypia, Gadlys and Autism Life Centre are all operating a small service for those who have been prioritised as needing support during this time” – Alexandra Beckham, RCTCBC*

After establishing what has been happening RCTCBC started to outline how they plan/hope to move forward to be able to provide people with some sort of service. They stated that they have considered how they will follow government guidelines in relation to things such as social distancing and infection control and as a result they have had to evaluate the buildings in which day centre services are delivered so that they can effectively plan how many people can safely be accommodated at one time in each building. Additionally, this review for future planning has also helped RCTCBC to consider how they could deliver services differently moving forward, identifying different types of support for people to access so that some may not need to return to formal or traditional day centre services. They indicated that as part of the thought process of moving forward they are looking at contacting families to see what people need and contacting social workers to find out how people have been coping without a service during lockdown, and that through these conversations, including today’s conversation, they hope to get some other ideas and perspectives on how they can best support people with a learning disability both in a lockdown and post-lockdown climate.

*“We cannot go back to what was before COVID-19 due to the government guidelines, so things are going to look a bit different for a while yet. The team has looked at how many people can be supported in each building so that we can start to open out our offer for a service to more people as quickly and as safely as possible...There will only be a certain number of people who can be supported each day in each building being used. Letters will go out to families and users of services to let them know what is happening and what support can be offered...we are hoping to be able to open out services to more people from the 3<sup>rd</sup> August 2020, depending on need and demand” – Alexandra Beckham, RCTCBC*

Before the conversation progressed and the other attending conversation contributors were able to pose their concerns, questions and ideas in response to the presentation of RCTCBC’s plans, a People First Member highlighted that he used to attend Treforest day centre before it was flooded and that when it was closed as a result of the flooding he and his friends were then put into different day centres but were not asked if they wanted to go there. He further stated that he felt like he was being told what to do and that his thoughts and feeling weren’t important. Whilst lockdown has made things even worse for day centres, he expressed that now as restrictions begin to end he hoped that people who go to day centre would be included in the decisions being made so that they felt like they were important and that they had a choice in what happens to them. RCTCBC responded by outlining that *“contact will be made with all that use day centres for them to make an informed decision on what they want to do once we have established how we will move forward with our plans” – Alexandra Beckham, RCTCBC*, as a commitment to involving people in the process and providing them the opportunity to have Voice, Choice and Control over their lives.

The first topic of concern to be raised in the conversation was in regard to safety measures being put in place to help people return to day centre without fear of catching Coronavirus. This included concerns that some people don’t fully understand the concept of social distancing, the wearing and use of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), and the fear of infection spread, especially from staff to users of service. RCTCBC then confirmed and reassured conversation contributors that all these things had been seriously considered on an ongoing basis and that they would continue to review them frequently in line with the government guidelines being issued. A representative from RCTCBC stated that:

*“a lot has been learnt during this time [of COVID-19 and lockdown]. All safety provisions will be in place before anyone can go back to day centre. Day centres will look different and follow government guidelines. It will be the job of all staff to support people to understand and follow the rules” – Ann Broadway, RCTCBC*

It was also explained that users of service were not expected to wear PPE unless they wanted too, as this had been another concern that had increased the level of anxiety of some people with learning disabilities regarding a return to day centre. However, it was reinforced that staff would be required to wear PPE at all times, and that this is especially important when they are providing personal care to an individual. Again, where possible, staff would try to provide one-to-one support within day centre to avoid any cross contamination, as well as looking to provide further one-to-one home-based support where someone is not able to re-access day centre. Where staff

capacity was not able to accommodate any home-based support, RCTCBC explained that they would look for an external agency to provide this, so that everyone who is in need of support can receive some. Again, they highlighted the fact that they are working closely with the social work team to understand how people are coping without access to day centre to help them identify who to prioritise and what type of support is most suitable for that individual. As part of this conversation topic reference was made to the possibility of a second wave, and the need to provide support to people now, in case we are placed back into lockdown measures again in the future. Therefore, RCTCBC are looking into how they can utilise outreach projects as a source of support especially as leisure services re-open.

*“There are always concerns about if a second wave might happen, so we have to look at how we can support people now. To do this and increase our capacity we are exploring how we can use outreach projects when leisure services re-open as a source of alternative support, and a way to provide opportunity for individuals to see their friends and have some social contact” – Alex Beckham, RCTCBC*

To help people with a learning disability fully understand the changes, as well as the safety measures being implemented, the use of easy read interpretation of plans and information being issued by RCTCBC was discussed. It was evident in the conversation that this was something highly important to people with learning disabilities and therefore RCTCBC stated that this is something they are looking into and that they would like to produce some easy read information for users of services and their families. To also help the process and transition back into day centre, it was suggested that the use of visual aids such as photographs and videos of what day centre would look like could be beneficial in increasing people’s understanding as well as reducing the level of anxiety and fear some people are experiencing.

*“Schools made videos on what they will look like before students went back. It would be a good idea if day centres did something similar” – Kay Tyler, The Grapevine and Parent and Carer Representative for the Cwm Taf Morgannwg Regional Partnership Board*

The topic of COVID testing and re-testing of staff was then explored as well as the procedures for anyone displaying symptoms of Coronavirus.

*“Welsh Government are only testing/re-testing care homes/nursing homes/residential homes. We are monitoring this for day centre staff...We will ask people who are displaying symptoms not to come to day centre and to go and get a test. There is no guidance from Welsh Government to mandatorily do this in learning disability services and older people’s services” – Alex Beckham, RCTCBC*

The conversation then moved to discuss how people would get to day centre once they were allowed to access services again. Transport has always been a priority issue for people with learning disabilities and this has been made worse as a result of COVID-19 and lockdown, surrounded with confusion, fear and having to wear masks. Therefore, many are not keen to use public transport and wanted to know how RCTCBC will help support people to attend day centre. In response RCTCBC agreed that transport was an area of concern and that they may have to ask people to arrange their own

transport to day centre, whether that is provided by a family member, a private taxi or public transport. However, where they are able to, they will try to introduce the use of RCTCBC transport to support people to attend day centre and confirmed that their transport would be sanitised regularly, including any contracted transportation in line with strict risk assessments to reduce the risk of infection spread.

The final topic discussed by conversation contributors was the relationship RCTCBC have with supported living providers, and what access to support people living in supported living accommodation have. RCTCBC stated that

*“No day centre support will be offered to those living in supported living at this time. Day centre support is only being offered to those living at home with families who need support or are not coping well” – Alexandra Beckham, RCTCBC*

As the conversation came to a premature close due to time constraints, the following action points were agreed to ensure future involvement of people with learning disabilities and parents and carers in the local authority’s plan development:

1. That RCTCBC will continue and extend its contact with users of services, families and social work colleagues to understand individuals’ experiences, issues and concerns to help inform their future plans as well as evaluate their effectiveness moving forward.
2. That RCTCBC (Alexandra Beckham and Nicola Sweet) will look into producing some easy read information for people with learning disabilities, and that these will be co-produced with People First to ensure they are relevant and effective in helping people gain full understanding about the changes and rules that are being put in place.
3. That visual aids will be produced to share with users of services, parents and carers prior to someone re-engaging with day centre to reduce anxiety and fear.
4. To continue the conversation in a similar format to today’s event at the end of September 2020, to assess what progress had been made in terms of the ‘new normal’ and to review any changes to the government guidelines that may impact the plans they have proposed.

## Report Summary and Recommendations



Illustration of the 50 most common words highlighted within the breakout room conversations depicted as a service user reaching out for support as chosen by people with learning disabilities

Whilst the breakout room conversations were largely diverse in both length and content between all three of the local authority areas within the Cwm Taf Morgannwg region, there were a number of similarities that could be drawn from the discussions held. The most prevalent of these is the need for people with learning disabilities and their parents and carers to be involved in decision making process to help shape the 'new normal' as we enter a post-lockdown world. The importance and value of such conversations in increasing clarity, reducing fear and anxiety, and finding shared solutions to overcome some of the challenges posed by COVID-19 and the lockdown period was celebrated by all in attendance. It was recognised that hearing, understanding and utilising people's experiences is an essential strategy in plan development and service transformation, and that engaging users of services in these conversations is vital. However, it was also noted that this only works when the right audience is available and actively engaged in the conversation so that information and experiences shared can be effectively acted on to inform decisions and initiate needed changes to improve not only services, but the livelihoods of people with learning disabilities across the Cwm Taf Morgannwg region. As a result, all three breakout rooms agreed that the conversation regarding day centre services should not only be continued but expanded to explore other emerging topics and themes as the 'new normal' for people with learning disabilities services is established.

The second common theme that resonated in the majority of the breakout rooms was the need for more easy read information, as well as visual aids, to be produced in helping people with learning disabilities and their families fully understand the changes that have been made and are proposed to change in the future. It was acknowledged that it is important for users of services to have Voice, Choice and Control over decisions that impact their lives, and therefore there is a need for reasonable adjustments to be made to ensure that people have full understanding to be able to make informed choices. Equally, having full understanding is critical within the 'new normal' of this post-lockdown climate to ensure that the safety measures being implemented to keep people safe and reduce the risk of infection are adhered to correctly by all.

In order to move this conversation on the following recommendations are proposed:

1. That each local authority area identifies a mechanism in which these conversations can continue. This includes the need to identify a mutual platform upon which these conversations can take place, that is first and foremost, accessible to people with learning disabilities as well as other conversation contributors.
2. That the engagement and involvement of users of services, in this case, people with learning disabilities and their families, is made a key priority of each local authority area within the Cwm Taf Morgannwg region, and that methods of co-production are established despite the challenges of social distancing and COVID-19 prevention guidelines.

3. That local authorities ascertain suitable mechanisms for information sharing and the dissemination of information and future plans to users of services in an accessible manner that aims to provide a good level of understanding so that people are able to make informed decisions and take ownership of their lives.

4. That there is a need to increase engagement with parents and carers of people with learning disabilities and include them in both information dissemination and these conversations, as well as other co-production opportunities moving forward.