

# Everyone has the right to work: describing a growth-focused service to support adults with learning disabilities to work

Ann Anka, Paul Lucas and Avigail Abarbanel

## Abstract

**Purpose** – This paper reports on one community-based service in England that uses a growth-focused approach to support people with learning disabilities to gain skills for employment in their communities. The purpose of this paper is to contribute to the literature.

**Design/methodology/approach** – This paper is based on a literature review and case studies from one community-based service with people with learning disabilities. A literature review was undertaken to identify relevant literature, theories, policy and law, aimed at supporting adults with learning disabilities to gain skills for employment in their communities.

**Findings** – The community-based service uses a growth-focused approach to support people with learning disabilities to gain skills for employment within their own communities. Staff members provide intensive, one-to-one support for three service users, working with each individual for up to year. This targeted approach allows staff to tailor their support to each person's specific needs and goals, preparing them for the workplace.

**Practical implications** – This practice-based paper focuses on adults with learning disabilities, and not on children. It draws on experience from one community-based service rather than present empirical research.

**Originality/value** – This paper shows how one community-based service applied theories of growth development, relationship-based practice and community of practice theory to inform its practice approach, to support adults with learning disabilities gain skills for employment in their communities.

**Keywords** People with learning disabilities, Employment, Growth development, Relationship-based practice, Community of practice theory, Skills

**Paper type** Research paper

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## Introduction: background and rationale for the development of a growth-focus community-based service

Research tells us that people with learning disabilities often receive poor services in comparison to other adults with care and support needs (Ramsey *et al.*, 2022). Significant, studies also suggest that although most adult with learning disabilities would like to work, employment rates for people with disabilities are lower compared with the overall population [Giri *et al.*, 2022; Nuffield Trust, 2023; Office for National Statistics (ONS), 2023]. A survey conducted by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) (2024a) also shows that 63% of disabled people aged 25–49 were in employment compared to 9% for non-disabled people in the same age group. The data suggests that the rate of unemployment for people with disabilities is wider for those without qualifications (DWP, 2024a). Citing Robertson *et al.* (2019), Giri *et al.* (2022) note that having a job increases autonomy, reduces depression and anxiety and increase self-reported well-being. Emerson *et al.* (2016) estimate there will be growth in the number of

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people with learning disabilities who may require support that enables participation. There are currently an estimated 1.3 million people with learning disabilities in England (Care Quality Commission, 2024; Parkin, 2023). Government policies that encourage participation in employment require support for people with learning disabilities to participate in work, education and training (Powell, 2024). Informed by our interdisciplinary backgrounds in social work and psychotherapy, a growth-focused community-based service underpinned by growth-development theories, relationship-based practice and community of practice theory was developed to support adults with learning disabilities to gain skills for employment within their own communities in England.

The aim of this paper is to describe the growth-focused community-based service referred to as *The Service* in this paper, including the approaches used to support adults with learning disabilities (also known as adults with intellectual disabilities for our international readership) to gain skills for employment. The paper begins by locating adults with learning disabilities in the wider context of literature, including the policy/legal context of work in England.

### The legal context for adults with learning disabilities

People with learning disabilities are viewed as People First in policy [Department of Health (DH), 2001]. The UK's, Department of Health (DH, 2001, p. 14) policy paper, *Value People* define learning disability to include "the presence of a significantly reduced ability to understand new or complex information, to learn new skills, with a reduced ability to cope independently (impaired social functioning), which started before adulthood". The policy and legal framework relating to adult with learning disabilities is devolved in the UK. However, a key theme of how people with a learning disability should be supported across the four nations has focused on deinstitutionalisation, and the aim of supporting individuals to live at home and within their communities albeit with challenges [Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC), 2025; Hatton, 2017]. In England, a key objective of the *Valuing People* (DH, 2001, p. 128, 8) policy is supporting "more people with learning disabilities to participate in all forms of employment, wherever possible in paid work and to make a valued contribution to the world of work". Successive government policies, such as the Autism Strategy (DH, 2010), Think Autism Strategy (DHSC, 2018) and the National Autism Strategy (DHSC, 2021) have all built on *Valuing People* (DH, 2001) policy aspirations to support people with learning disabilities into employment (Abreu, 2025). At the international level, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that "everyone has the right to work, to free choice of employment, to just and favorable conditions of work, and to protection against unemployment" (Article 23.1). In England, the current legal framework that guides adults with learning disabilities practice is outlined in the Care Act 2014 and its accompanying Care and Support Statutory Guidance (DHSC, 2025). At the heart of the Care Act 2014 is the well-being principle, which obligates local authorities to promote individual well-being. The Care Act 2014 also requires local authorities to work with public bodies, private and not-for-profit community-based organisations with a focus on preventing and minimising the need for care and support (DHSC, 2025).

### Current evidence on supporting people with learning disabilities into employment

The Buckland Review of Autism Employment (DWP, 2024b) identifies a number of supported employment programmes aimed at assisting people with learning disabilities to gain employment. These include new Universal Support programmes, Disability Confident and Access to Work, Austistica Neurodiversity Employment Index, Work and Health Programme and Intensive Personalised Employment Support. In addition, the British Association for Supported Employment (BASE) provides useful frameworks for supporting people with learning disabilities into employment. The BASE Supported Employment model

provides core values, practice guidance and processes for supporting people with learning disabilities into employment. The BASE Model consists of five stages: engagement, vocational profiling, employer engagement, job matching and in-work support and career progression. However, whilst supporting people with learning disabilities to live and work in their communities is enshrined in policy and law, employment rates for people with learning disabilities remain low (DWP, 2024a). Data suggest that approximately 30.6% of autistic people in the UK were employed in 2022–2023, compared to 80% of non-disabled people (DWP, 2024a). Additionally, disability charity Mencap and the Leonard Cheshire Report (House of Commons, 2024) highlight difficulties in inclusivity and accessibility with some of the existing programmes. In addition, the literature points to a care culture that still focuses on paternalistic practice (Ramsey *et al.*, 2022; United Nations, 2006). Qualitative research undertaken by Ramsey *et al.*'s (2022) with  $N = 13$  people, examining the lived experiences of people with learning disabilities and their carers through focus group meetings and analysis of care opinion feedback, found a lack of flexibility and rigidity in health and social care provision. The findings also identified inability to accommodate individualised needs for time and space, fragmentation of care and lack of support for a social network of support, which then leads to carer burn-out. Similar findings were identified in case law. In *R (BG) v. Suffolk County Council* (2022) EWCA Civ 1047, rigidity in eligibility determination resulted in service-led provision, rather than meeting the needs of two brothers with learning disabilities. Giri *et al.*'s (2022) research, which focused on employment aspirations of people with learning disabilities, identified that they want to work. They recommend that programmes supporting people with learning disabilities to gain employment skills should be inclusive and promote citizenship and independence. Nind *et al.* (2021) explored how people with learning disabilities learn from involvement in managing their daily lives in their communities in four geographical areas in England and Scotland. They found that learning resulted from interactions with more knowledgeable individuals and from receiving support that builds skills and confidence in others.

### Growth-focused model of practice

The growth-focused model is based on humanistic ideas of self-actualisation and theories of thriving. Thriving is described as a state as well as a process, encompassing development and success. Su *et al.* (2014, p. 272) contend that “to thrive in life is not only marked by feelings of happiness, or a sense of accomplishment, or having supportive and rewarding relationships, but is a collection of all these aspects”. Maslow (1971) and Rogers (1978) observed that all living beings have an innate drive to become everything they have the potential to become. However, in conditions that do not support growth, they inevitably end up unwell (Maslow, 1968). According to Rogers (1978, pp. 7-8) “there is in every organism [...] an underlying flow of movement toward constructive fulfilment of its possibilities”. Maslow (1943, p. 382) suggests that self-actualisation is “the desire to become increasingly what one is, to become everything that one is capable of becoming”, or to develop to “full humanness” (Maslow, 1971, p. 27). The need to self-actualise is intricately connected with the human need for meaning. When humans develop towards their potential, they also seem to develop a sense of purpose and meaning (Compton, 2018). Yalom (1980, p. 422) observes that having a sense of meaning and a purpose is so important that to live without it could even “[...] lead to the decision to end one's life.” To grow towards their innate potential, all life forms, including humans, require the right conditions. Hanley and Abell (2002) suggest that the most important conditions for the development of well-being and a sense of purpose are provided by growth-promoting human relationships. People with learning disabilities have the same need for growth and development as everyone else. If these needs are not met, it could lead to psychological suffering. In this context, engagement with others is not about doing something *to* or inducing someone to do something about themselves. Rather, engagement becomes a facilitative relationship between practitioners and the people they work with.

## Relationship-based practice

Relationship-based practice is underpinned by relational ontology and emphasises the importance of emotional availability and attunement to others' feelings within relationships. Relationship-based practice promotes and facilitates trust, collaboration and empowerment among practitioners, service users and organisations. This approach enables individuals and their families to share concerns, anxieties, joys and capabilities with practitioners, while allowing practitioners to provide appropriate support tailored to individual needs (Bryan, *et al.*, 2016). Relationship-based practice is closely linked to the concepts of holding relationships and relational pedagogy. Drawing from their ethnographic study on factors sustaining long-term relationships between social workers and service users in child protection work in England, Ferguson *et al.* (2022, p. 209) suggested that a "holding relationship" is characterised by practitioners' ability to be "reliable, immersing themselves in the service user's day-to-day existence and developing their life-skills, getting physically and emotionally close to them, and practicing critically by taking account of power and inequalities". Closely linked to the concept of a holding relationship in the learning context is relational pedagogy. Hickey and Riddle (2024) point out that relational pedagogy affirms inclusion, diversity and citizenship. It emphasises openness, trust and collaboration within the learner–instructor relationship as helpful in facilitating and sustaining the co-production of knowledge. Learning new skills can evoke uncertainty, risk, fear and anxiety as well as joy. Hickey and Riddle (2024, p. 3272) note that a pedagogy of relationship should therefore "acknowledge and affirm the uncertainties and risk and the possibilities that are at stake" in the learning relationship.

## Community of practice theory

Equally significant is the concept of community of practice developed by Etienne Wenger-Trayner (previously Wenger) which premise that learning does not rest with the individual but as social process shaped by cultural experiences, meaning making through interactions and relationships with others (Lave and Wenger, 1991). Wenger (1998, p. 73) defined community of practice as "a community with a joint enterprise, shared repertoire and mutual engagement". The theory of community of practice suggests that learning takes place through engagement in multiple social practices. It includes but is not limited to learning activities carried out in educational settings, voluntary education, or participation in any enterprise over time (Farnsworth *et al.*, 2016). In a conversation with Farnsworth *et al.* (2016, p. 143) Etienne Wenger-Trayner clarified his use of "community of practice", noting that it is constituted of:

[...] a learning partnership related to a domain of practice. Members of a community of practice may engage in the same practice while working on different tasks in different teams. But they can still learn together. A learning partnership around a practice is a different structuring process than working on a joint task.

As practitioners, we took the view that supporting people with learning disabilities to gain employment skills within their own communities is a relational undertaking. This involves building relationships not only with the service users and their families, but also with other community-based organisations, drawing from these to inform our approaches. In what follows, we describe *The Service*. We then present two case study vignettes (data have been anonymised for confidentiality) to illustrate the approaches used and their impact.

## *The Service*

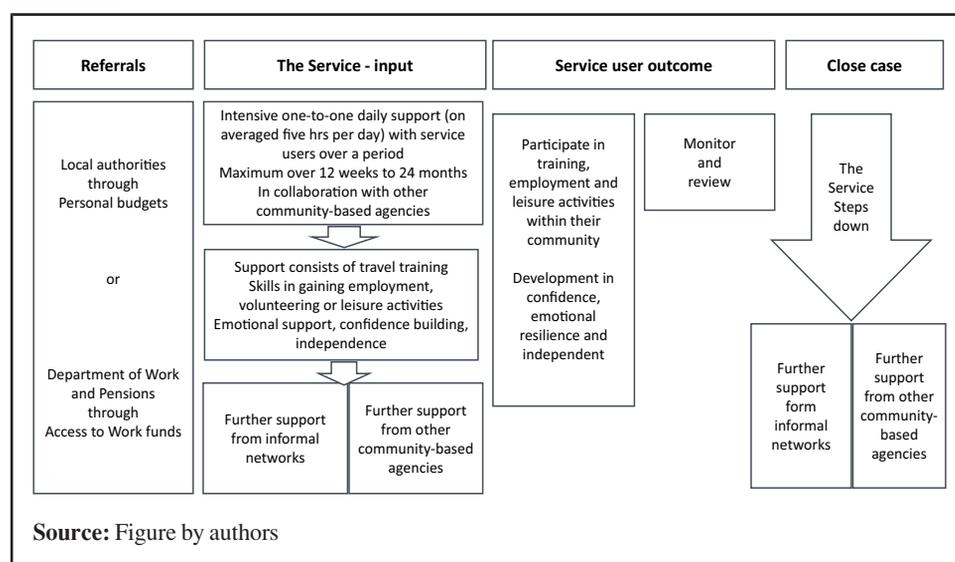
*The Service* was established in June 2012 in response to the second author's experiences as a statutory social worker. Having worked mainly with learning disability services, mental health and older people's services, the author observed that there was insufficient focus on

supporting people with learning disabilities to gain employment within their mainstream communities. Consequently, *The Service* was established to support adults with learning disabilities live independent, fulfilling lives in their own communities with an emphasis on personal growth and a particular focus on developing employment skills. *The Service* employs nine people, including the founder. Most of the work is commissioned by local authorities in England through 'personal budgets' (money that local authorities pay towards an individual's social care costs as required by s.26 of the Care Act 2014) and the Department of Work and Pension's Access to Work funds (Adams *et al.*, 2018). Service users consist of adults, aged over 18, with learning disabilities. They include people whose behaviour challenges services, individuals with a dual diagnosis, people with offending behaviours, and/or people with a forensic history. The ethos underpinning ways of practice seeks to prevent prolonged dependency on *The Service* by facilitating growth and encouraging natural support within the community as early as appropriate. This entails supporting service users to develop skills through other community-based services within their communities, not for financial compensation but through help in kind via training. Each staff member works intensively with up to three service users on a one-to-one basis over a period determined by their individual needs and circumstances to ensure that support is tailored to individual needs, skills and attributes. A typical working day consists of five hours. Day-to-day work with service users may include travel training, support with opportunities to gain work, education or leisure skills with private or charitable community-based organisations. A key focus is on supporting service users to carry out their day-to-day activities in mainstream venues within their communities. We are keen to understand what is important to service users, what works for them, and how to build on their existing skills. We therefore support staff members to develop meaningful relationships with service users, and time to listen to what matters to them, both emotionally and practically. Figure 1 presents the model of practice used at *The Service*.

### Case study 1 – Kenny

Kenny is a 24-year-old male. He lives in his own flat in a big city in England. He is Black British. He is non-verbal, except for a few phrases, although his reasoning far outweighs his verbal communication. Kenny lives with Autistic Spectrum Condition and is pro-perceptive, meaning he requires physically challenging activities to meet this sensory need. Kenny is

**Figure 1** The service: model of practice



supported by family members on a rota basis. Kenny wants a paid job, and his mother is also keen for him to have paid employment. Kenny was first supported via his local authority personal budgets, which was then superseded by Department of Work and Pension's Access to Work funds once he was settled in the workplace. To assess for his employability skills, Kenny was supported to find voluntary work with a well-known national organisation in his local area where he worked as part of their gardening team. With supervision, Kenny quickly moved on from composting, watering and planting, to using power tools to construct frames as well as use a petrol-driven lawn mower. He was also supported through supervision to adhere to all safety instructions. During one session, Kenny cuddled a young child who was visiting the garden with her mother. He also had a tendency to cuddle teenage girls who visited the gardens. As a result, the employer considered withdrawing their support because of safeguarding concerns. To address these, staff members from *The Service* worked with Kenny using a social story activity to help him understand that hugging strangers without their permission is not acceptable and is not a good idea. *The Service* also worked with the employer to review their safeguarding policy. In addition, *The Service* offered training to staff (of the voluntary organisation) to enable them to continue to work with Kenny and others presenting with similar behaviours. The safeguarding training was successful, and Kenny moved from volunteering to paid employment. With the help of a local authority employment worker, we (*The Service*) were introduced to a pilot project by an inner-city employer who wanted to offer work to people with disabilities within their factory environment. Owing to verbal communication difficulties, we (*The Service*) felt that a conventional interview would not be appropriate for Kenny. To address this, we (*The Service*) showed the prospective employers short video clips of Kenny working at the gardening placement. It was agreed that to further enhance his application, a voluntary placement would be offered to Kenny first, to enable him to showcase his skills. Before starting with this new employer, *The Service* delivered training sessions on autism and on how to create sensory-friendly workspaces to this new employer. A trial voluntary period was agreed, and this went well. As a result, Kenny was offered ten weekly paid hours.

### ***Case study 2 – Aryan***

Aryan is a 26-year-old male. He is of British Pakistani heritage, with a presentation of a moderate learning disability and a diagnosis of epilepsy. He has a shunt fitted to manage the condition. Overall, his seizure rate is stable. Aryan has some visual impairment, requiring glasses for close work. Aryan lives with his wife, young baby, mother and father in a four-bedroom townhouse in an inner city. From the outset of *The Service's* involvement, Aryan made it clear that he wants paid, part-time employment. His parents were concerned and fearful that participation in employment would lead to seizure activity. It took some negotiation and building a relationship of trust with the parents, which involved understanding and helping them work through their fears and worries. To access Aryan's skill levels, a voluntary placement was found at a local club. Aryan laid tables prior to sessions, put down cutlery, delivered meals to tables, using a trolley and washed-up plates and utensils. This worked well, but after considering the limitations of the role, it was felt that it was time for Aryan to move on. *The Service* sourced another voluntary placement for Aryan. In this new role, Aryan applied barcode stickers to CD and DVD cases for sale. He was also supported to use a pin gun to apply size labels and was able to sort cloth hangers into types. Employment Access Worker highlighted a data entry role with a local organisation. This consisted of one paid session per week on a fixed three-month contract. Aryan gained new skills on getting himself ready for work, how to dress for an office environment, adhere to organisational etiquette such as getting to work on time and as a member of a team at this new employment. In reviewing the employment with Aryan, he suggested he would like a job where he could use his verbal communication skills in a more positive way. Aryan speaks three languages. Attempting to build on this strength, we (*The Service*) explored different employment options with him, which included, working as a

translator, or as an information desk assistant. An opportunity came up with a local training organisation. As part of patient involvement initiative, Aryan was employed to speak to health care professionals (nurses, doctors and other community-based organisations) about his lived experience as a person with multiple disabilities, as part of Oliver McGowan Training (DHSC, 2023). Aryan attended an interview and was successful in his application. *The Service* continued to work alongside Aryan and his new employer, supporting him to structure his presentations, optimise time and supported him to navigate professional jargons. We also worked with the employer to ensure that reasonable adjustments were made for Aryan.

## Training

Drawing from community of practice theory, discussed earlier in the paper (Lave and Wenger, 1991). Wenger (1998), training opportunities for service users, as shown in the case study vignettes, consisted of volunteering in community-based programmes. These placements were identified with the staff members' help who then supported them to learn on the job. It is worth noting that although the approaches used align with some core values of The BASE Supported Employment model (e.g. engagement, vocational profiling, employer engagement, job matching and in-work support and career progressions), what distinguishes this service is that over the past four years, a humanistic and existential psychotherapist and supervisor has been engaged to facilitate training and supervision for staff and colleagues. This has consisted of training staff to work within the growth-focused ethos. For example, a six-part programme called *Beneath the Surface* was commissioned by *The Service*. In-Depth Observation Skills for Care Practitioners training was also trialled with care and support workers from *The Service* and two other local authority-based services. The training focused on the personal growth of the practitioners and on the skills needed to facilitate growth in people with learning disabilities. The programme included topics such as the "Maintenance" vs Growth model (Linear vs Systemic thinking), the role of in-depth observation in facilitating growth in self and others, skills for in-depth observation, exercises in self-awareness, emotional awareness and emotional validation skills of self and others.

## Supervision

Research tells us that effective supervision encourages an atmosphere of trust and allows peer support and learning (Ravalier *et al.*, 2023). Supervision has also been identified as one of the key facilitators for enabling practitioners to discuss affective factors affecting their work. As such, independent supervisors with expertise in the field and with backgrounds in learning disabilities and autism, occupational therapy, social work and teaching offer supervision to staff members on more complex cases. Supervision consists of in-depth conversations focused on one service user and their presenting needs, to target interventions. Both supervisor and supervisee are encouraged to think differently about service users, to ensure that learning and support are co-produced. Based on a model developed by Tavistock & Portman NHS Trust, a "Thinking Space" group convenes every six weeks, facilitated by a clinical psychologist. The group focuses on topics relevant to the service user such as, what is working well, dilemmas, challenges, learning, how to facilitate growth and development, and how to move forward. In addition, supervisors within *The Service* participate in a regular supervision group facilitated by a psychotherapist aimed at offering a thorough grounding on the supervisor/supervisee relationship.

Ongoing feedback from staff confirms that the training and supervision have made a considerable difference not only to service users but also to staff by supporting them to work with adults with learning disabilities. Our experience suggests that the approaches used is making a difference in supporting adults with learning disabilities to gain skills for

work in their own communities using a growth-focused, relational and community of practice approaches as evidenced in the two case vignette examples. An organisation with approaches similar to those used by *The Service* was highlighted in a House of Commons Report (2024, p. 24). The report describes *Helt Med*, an Oslo-based organisation whose programme “demonstrated that once people with a learning disability had the opportunity to get into work, they thrived” (House of Commons, 2024, p. 24). Similarly, the case studies of Kenny and Aryan show that both are thriving in employment.

## Conclusion

This practice paper reported on one community-based service that supports adults with learning disabilities to gain skills for employment within their community. It draws from the principles underpinning humanistic and existential psychology on growth development, relationship-based practice, relational pedagogy and community of practice theory to inform its work. Two case vignettes (examples) are used to illustrate the approaches used to work with adults with learning disabilities, their families and other community-based employers in supporting the people that we worked with to gain skills for employment. It is our hope that readers would find the approaches used helpful in supporting others in their communities to gain skills for employment.

## Limitations

A limitation of this practice concept paper is that it focused on one community-based organisation’s model of practice in England. We also mainly focused on supporting adults with learning disabilities to gain skills for employment. It is a practice paper and not based on empirical research. We’ve used two case vignettes to illustrate the approaches used in terms of how the approaches used supported the people we worked with to develop skills for employment within their communities. Empirical research could examine the usefulness of the growth-focused/relational approach used to support adults with learning disabilities to gain skills for employment within their own communities. Comparative empirical research could also be undertaken to compare the approaches used with other existing approaches used within the sector in the UK and internationally.

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