Disability Project and In-Person Friendship Groups

Annual Report

April 2025-February 2026

CONTENTS

1. Project Overview
2. Disability Awareness and Confidence Training
3. Map of In-person Friendship Groups across Devon
4. Project Impact - Developments & Case Study
5. Impact - Friendship Groups
6. Positive Stories
7. Challenges and Learning
8. Future Plans
9. Final Thoughts

Addendum:

- DeVA Survey of Disability Access
- Bank of Resources
- Friendship Group Handbook

DISABILITY PROJECT

Aims of the Project:

- **Across Devon, we want more people to live independently in their own homes in the community, to benefit from support that builds on their strengths and to live the life that is right for them and those who support them.**
- **We want to create fairer, healthier, more inclusive and caring communities where people feel safe and connected within their community, and able to help themselves and each other.**
- **We want adults with disabilities and/or mental health needs to have choice, control and support to live independent lives, and when needed, to access outstanding quality care and support.**
- **Our aim has been to build on our pilot project to create improved opportunities to link adults of a working age with a disability into the local community and voluntary services that exist in local towns and areas.**



Disability Awareness Training

Following an initial survey carried out by Devon Voluntary Action (attached) looking at what was available for people with disabilities and the gaps in need, our aim was to develop 6 workshops for VSCE organisations to support inclusion for people with disabilities in local services over the year to:

- Deliver in partnership.
- Can be in-person or virtual.
- Delivered together with people with disabilities.

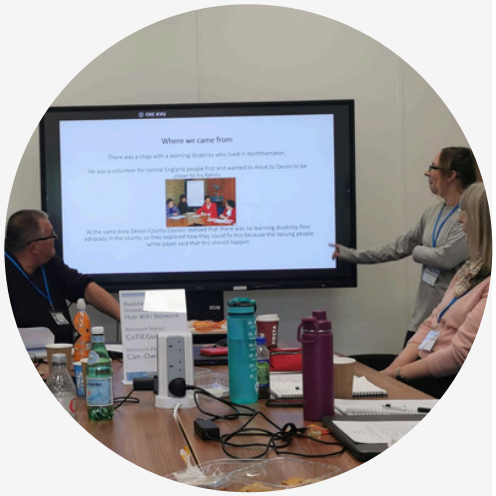
We have developed a PowerPoint presentation for this training which includes:

- Gaining an awareness of Disability: What is a disability?
- Equality, treating everyone the same.
- Citizenship: What is citizenship?
- People with disabilities, their desires to be treated equally.
- The human rights of people with disabilities.
- What are the benefits for people with disabilities to be included in the community?
- What are the benefits for organisations when including people with disabilities in the community?
- A perspective from a volunteer with a disability. Confidence and wellbeing.
- What are the barriers to inclusion? A disabled persons perspective.

An important element of the training is to hear from someone with lived experience and the opportunity for interactive discussion. We also developed a Bank of Resources which is given to every attendee following the training (see attached).

DISABILITY AWARENESS AND CONFIDENCE TRAINING

Over the course of the year we have run 5 on-line Disability Awareness and Confidence training sessions with 53 attendees from a variety of VCSE organisations as well as NHS staff and volunteers. We have an in-person training scheduled in February for a further 16 participants. The sessions have been an invaluable opportunity to share experience, problem solve, and network and learn with other groups.



In connection with Involve and DeVA, Devon People First consulted with these organisations to discuss the aims and practicalities of each group, and provided a new Handbook to support the process. We have also had regular 'catch up' meetings and provided support with creating robust policies and procedures such as risk assessments and easy-read communications with input from those with lived experience.

We have also highlighted the usefulness and positive impact of Co-Production, and recommended training in this process to encourage best practice, and person centred services.

FEEDBACK

Best parts:

- Participation from people with lived experience.
- Finding out about the Friendship Groups and hearing Nicky's feedback as someone who has lived experience.
- Hearing feedback from service users and staff.

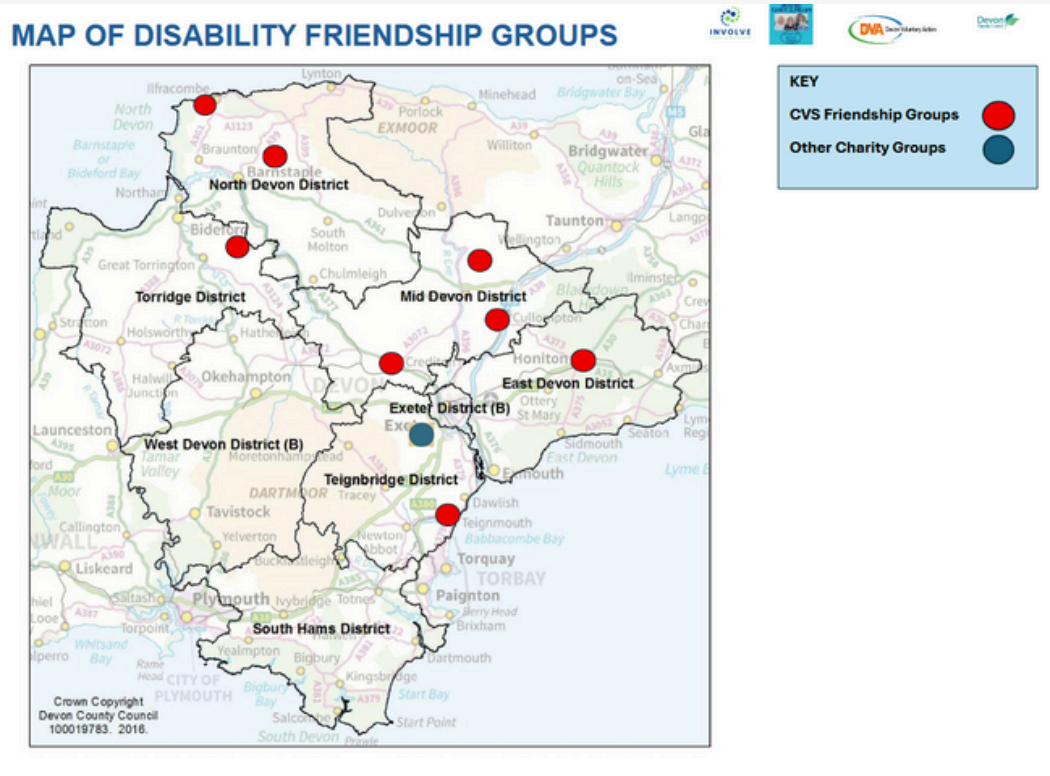
Main takeaways:

- We are all people trying to negotiate the world we live in.
- A greater understanding, especially when I am organising community pop ups. I need to ask myself are they inclusive - for example - if a wheelchair user attended, is there equipment they could access?
- We all have different needs and we all just need to be a bit more broad-minded and accepting, patient and accommodating.
- Listening to others experiences and the importance of inclusion for all.

Comments:

- Keep it up. Great work!
- It was great to connect with such a range of staff, which I'll follow up. Thanks so much Laura - I really enjoyed it.
- This is how it should be; out in the community enjoying themselves.
- This has been the fastest growing group we have set up here, well done!

FRIENDSHIP GROUPS ACROSS DEVON 2025-26



OUR IMPACT

in the past year:

53 staff and volunteers attending training between April and Feb.

5 New In-Person groups

9 In-Person Friendship groups in total

111+ Group attendees

100% of participants would recommend the group to a friend

300+ Attendees across our In-Person Friendship Groups

20+ Partner organisations

2 New groups starting

PROJECT IMPACT

DEVELOPMENTS OVER THE YEAR...

- There are now 4 well established Friendship Groups running in Teignmouth, Barnstaple, Ilfracombe, and Exeter, in addition to the original 3 in Honiton, Crediton and Cullompton. By March we will have set up a further 2 groups, one in Tiverton and one in Bideford.

- We have hosted 5 online Disability Awareness and Confidence Training sessions, with 1 in-person training session planned in February.

- We look forward to hosting our first Disability Skills and Networking event with our partner organisations and local Charitable and Voluntary Sector providers on February 12th 2026.

- We have developed pro-active key partnerships and collaborations within the voluntary and charitable sector, including St Sidwells in Exeter, the Keystone Project in Cullompton, and the Congregational Church in Crediton.

- We have developed and produced a Handbook detailing the steps to setting up an in-person Disability Friendship group together with resources needed and circulated to all those organisations we have supported to start the process.

- Our groups are expanding all the time, with Exeter set to be a 'flagship' group as it is a central hub with access to a vast network.

- Devon People First launched it's accessible on-line directory of services for people with learning disabilities which has provided added value to the project and is a valuable resource.

CASE STUDY - FRIENDSHIP GROUP IMPACT

One of our Friendship Group attendees who now regularly attends the group in Cullompton has multiple learning difficulties and a mild learning disability. They needed encouragement to come along as they felt anxious about going somewhere new.



Laura contacted them on the day to remind them that the group was happening, and walked with them to the Community Centre so they did not have face going in alone which can be quite daunting especially for someone with a learning disability. During the session they began to open up about their experiences of living with a disability, and the fact that they also care for their two children who also have learning disabilities and neurodivergence. Towards the end of the session they shared how they had been really scared to come along, but that everyone was so friendly it made them feel at ease. They also found out more about local services that can support them on an ongoing basis. Even after one session, doing some gentle craft activities over a cuppa, they felt more confident and able to engage with the community.

IMPACT OF THE PROJECT

Barnstaple and Ilfracombe

The team of staff and volunteers (NDVS) are working hard to establish their group, having secured a venue and tweaked the timings to be more in line with local transport links. They have conducted user led surveys to see what people would like from the group, and recently received a donation of puzzles, craft and resources to support participants to engage in things they enjoy. On average 4-5 people are attending sessions. The CVS is working on getting the word out, with the aim of increasing numbers.

Teignmouth

With an accessible venue at the Alice Cross Centre, the team have built a really good foundation for the group. They started with just a couple of attendees but are now seeing a few more faces, with the latest group seeing 5 new people join. We are still in contact to support with any matters arising, and 4 of the centre's volunteers will be attending our Disability Skills and Networking event on February 12th. We are keen to encourage disability confidence amongst the team, and assist with easy read/accessible resources where needed.

We are on hand to support with risk assessments, questions on accessibility, volunteer support and our training sessions, plus equipping teams with our bank of resources and handbook for setting up their group. As this project develops there will be more opportunity for peer learning and support as mentioned later in this report.

Crediton

In an exciting development we now have a new Friendship group collaboration with the Congregational Church, who have offered us a table and space once a month, within their current drop in group session for adults with learning disabilities.



We visited in November and soon realised what a wonderful group this was, with over 30 people in attendance, lots of lovely activities, and plenty of potential for us to support.
We feel that this Friendship Group will look slightly different, as essentially there is already one happening, but we are there to help people with finding ongoing support, joining our online groups, health and social care meetings etc. We also recognise that we are often asked to offer general advocacy, both in this context and many others, so we are exploring the possibility of some funding to be able to pursue this. It seems to be a natural follow on from these settings, and something we often end up helping with.

In November we had direct contact and discussion/referrals/signposting with 6 people, plus a referral for support with social care support which we are looking to help with in some capacity.

Cullompton

This group, although smaller, has become a really lovely opportunity for people to make friends and get to know one another. It has developed into an important and special space for those who attend. They may not go every month, but when they do they always share that it has been a positive and affirming experience.

As a group they decided that they would like to open up to people with all disabilities, not just a learning disability, to become more inclusive. We have also come up with a monthly theme for the coming year. At our last group we had a visit from a local pastel artist who taught the group how to paint some beautiful artwork. Everyone was delighted. It was a great confidence boost for those who felt they 'weren't creative' as well as being a new route to self expression. Next month we are having some seated gentle exercise which the group are looking forward to.

Honiton

The Honiton group continues to thrive with a strong sense of togetherness and fun, and an average of 16 people every week. They enjoyed a very special time over Christmas with a Christmas party, and one member dressed up as Father Christmas with homemade gifts for all. It was a great way to mark the end of a year for the group. Richard Devaney has been volunteering on a weekly basis to enable the group to continue running so frequently because participants value it so much. Devon People First are attending on a monthly or bi-monthly basis, to support and offer signposting where needed. We aim for our involvement to become more geared towards organising special events and trips, supporting independence and volunteering.
We have had 4 new attendees this quarter as the group is grows within the local community.
Richard is also setting up a woodwork group which several of the participants will attend, to learn new skills in craftsmanship. This will be a really positive opportunity and may provide them with potential work in the future. We are looking to organise a springtime trip after the success of our Sidmouth trip, and will look into creating a monthly focus when DPF are present. We will directly involve the group in deciding on forthcoming themes.

Exeter

Our latest collaboration will see us working in the heart of Exeter, alongside the team at St Sidwells. We are thrilled with this opportunity, and the chance to partner with another wonderful organisation.



Working closely with their wellbeing lead and volunteers, we will be running a monthly drop-in Friendship Group for adults with disabilities on the second Thursday of every month. Participants will decide what they want the group to look like and focus on, using our co-productive values and way of working. There is an onsite cafe for refreshments/lunch, along with accessible and low stimulation spaces to accommodate the needs of the group.

We will also be creating a number of volunteer opportunities to support the smooth running of the group, including roles for those with lived experience.

POSITIVE STORIES

THEMED GROUPS

Our group in Cullompton decided they would like a monthly theme, and we are actively seeking people to come in and support with this. Recently we had a pastel painting workshop with a local artist who managed to secure funding to offer this to the group for free.

It was a wonderful time of creativity, proving that anyone can learn a new skill, even if they don't consider themselves to be creative. We have also shared a group lunch together where participants helped prepare the food (soup and salad) and wash up. These opportunities help our participants to develop their skills, and grow in confidence in their abilities and independence.



CASE STUDY- FRIENDSHIP GROUP IMPACT



We recently spoke with one of our regular attendees at the Cullompton Friendship group. This participant has neurodivergence and a chronic long term health condition.

It took a number of attempts before she attended the group as she was anxious and wasn't sure what to expect. We had a phone conversation ahead of her first meeting, assuring her that the group was friendly and welcoming. She agreed to come along if Laura attended with her, including travel to and from her home.

Once there, she immediately felt at ease because it was a relatively small group and everyone was 'very kind'. She has now been attending for 3 months.

We asked her what the group means to her, and why she think it is important. She told us that without the group she doesn't know where she would be. She said that groups like this are so vital because they give people a reason to get up and out in the morning and are a route into community involvement.

She went on to tell us how she has always lacked in confidence but the Friendship group has given her a place where she feels safe to be herself, and talk about things that are on her mind. This provides her with peer support as well as the opportunity to engage in the community.

CHALLENGES AND LEARNING

Okehampton Learning

It was proposed that Okehampton might be a good location for a new Friendship Group.

The local Community Builder spent a number of weeks researching potential venues and best timing for the group. During this time Laura was having regular contact and updates, but sadly the group has not materialised. This is for a number of reasons:

- The Community Builder only has so much capacity to give to researching and locating a suitable space.
- It became evident that there was a similar group already being hosted in the locality, so there may have been a slight conflict of interest.
- It was important to find a fully accessible venue and this proved difficult.
- It was unclear how the group would be resourced longer term.

Challenges to overcome...

As we look ahead to future developments, there are a few issues that we aim to address. These include:

- Resourcing the In-Person Friendship groups as they become more autonomous, both in terms of staffing them, and finding funding to offer activities that group members may like to do.
- We are looking into the possibility of skills-based workshops and having an Access To Work focus, but again we will only be able achieve these with additional funding.
- We really want these groups to thrive as they grow and develop, so we will need a supportive and robust infrastructure in terms of additional policies, volunteer recruitment and support, and looking at staff roles and responsibilities to accommodate for this growth.

What people are saying about the groups...

'I have really enjoyed today, it's been really fun.'

'Thank you for telling me about this group, I am so glad I came'

'These groups really matter, we can't lose them!'

'I was nervous about coming to the group, but you helped me feel at ease.'

'I have learnt something new today. I didn't think I was creative but it turns out I am!'

'I love what you are doing here, it will be so nice to have some new activities to do in the future.'



FUTURE PLANS

TRAIN THE TRAINERS

Moving forward we would like to develop a **'Train the Trainers'** programme. This is a natural next step and will be an opportunity for CVS organisations to run their own '**Disability Awareness and Confidence**' training sessions within their organisation. We would start with our current partners, plus other organisations within the locality to estimate the level of demand. We know there is a need for this training as evidenced by our feedback, and are keen to develop and broaden its reach.

VOLUNTEER HUB

We are delighted to have a new Volunteer Service Lead at Involve, and a brand new Volunteer Hub is being developed. We are encouraged by the opportunities this could provide for this project as a whole, but particularly as we expand the focus of the Friendship Groups to include volunteering. We are looking to establish a strong volunteer base into the future, to ensure the sustainability of the project. Our aim is to recruit volunteers with lived experience, and to maintain our co-productive values with regards to their role, expertise and desired outcomes from volunteering.

We are keen to utilise our established partnerships and speak with current group members as a starting point for these roles, and already have a few potential volunteers in mind. Ahead of recruitment we are updating volunteer and partnership agreements in communication with our new Volunteer Service Lead, Simone who will offer training and support for volunteers.

GROUP LEADER PEER SUPPORT AND EXPANSION

We will soon have premises in Tiverton that provide us with the opportunity to offer face-to -face peer support for our Friendship Group leaders, as well as online. We would initially aim for a quarterly meeting, to share learnings, success stories and outcomes, also problem solving any areas of need or challenge and skills sharing.









FINAL THOUGHTS

Thank you for your ongoing support. We are hugely grateful for your belief in what we are looking to achieve, and excited for what the future holds with this dynamic project.

A few considerations moving forward...

- We are often asked to support individuals with general advocacy, but as yet we are not funded to do so, which means we have to turn people away or signpost. This is definitely a point for ongoing discussion and development.
- We are looking to secure further funding to extend and continue the project with an aim to be sustainable long term.
- We are at the stage where it would be very useful to have volunteers supporting the established groups so we look forward to making this happen in the coming year.
- Catering for a wide range of needs- how do we ensure our groups are truly fit for purpose?
- Deciding on 'end goal' - widening a focus of building friendships; do we need to be supporting more of our participants to get voluntary or paid work and how do we incorporate this?
- Do the sessions need to have more of a theme to encourage more people to get involved?

This project reaches far and wide within our communities and beyond and hope this report demonstrates the impact. We are hugely proud of what has been achieved so far, and we know there is even greater need. We are committed to creating many more opportunities for those living with a disability to have a deep sense of fulfilment, belonging and opportunity within their community.

We would especially like to acknowledge the commitment and hard work of Lloyd Waterman (Lead Coordinator) and Laura Williams (Assistant Coordinator) from Devon People First in developing this project and getting it up and running so successfully.

Involve – Voluntary Action in Mid Devon
Empowering Communities.
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