Devon People First

Disability Project and In-Person Friendship Groups Report - April-Sept 2025

DISABILITY PROJECT

The project has evolved over the last 6 months with some exciting developments across Devon. The aims of the project remain the same.

- 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.



HEADLINE DEVELOPMENTS.

- **Previously established Friendship Groups in Cullompton and Honiton have been running for over a year now and are well attended.**
- **3 Disability Awareness and Confidence Training sessions have now taken place.**
- **3 new Friendship Groups have been established in Teignmouth, Ilfracombe and Barnstaple.**
- **A new Friendship Group is soon to be established in Okehampton.**
- **Torridge and Tiverton groups are planned and expected to start by the end of the year.**
- **We organised our first successful Friendship Group trip, with another one in the pipeline.**

DISABILITY PROJECT IN-PERSON GROUPS

PROGRESS AND SUCCESS STORIES.

Over the last 6 months we have supported several CVS organisations to set up their own In-Person Friendship Groups for adults with a disability. These each have their own unique identity, but all with the aim of being inclusive, diverse and accessible. We are thrilled to see 3 newly established groups, with 3 soon to come.

CVS partners have attended the Disability Awareness and Confidence Training we are offering, and have subsequently set up their own In-Person Friendship groups with funding through the project. It is very encouraging to see the level of support for these 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. We have also highlighted the usefulness and positive impact of Co-production, and recommended training in this area to encourage best practice, and person centred services.

It is clear that organisations are really behind the ethos of the project. They are now engaging with their respective communities to provide meaningful participant-led groups that connect people, helping them to feel more purposeful, welcomed and less isolated. Below is a summary of developments so far. We trust that these groups will go from strength to strength, and that the long term outcomes for adults living with a disability will be improved because of the support of the community they find as a result of participating.

Teignbridge CVS are now facilitating a monthly group on a Saturday for adults with learning disabilities. They have hosted two events, and 7 people with LD's attended. Their plan is to offer a range of activities and the group can decide which they would like to engage in. It has been positive to see co-production being used throughout this process, consulting with members on activities and communication.

The **Okehampton Community Builder** is currently looking for an appropriate venue with a view to setting up a group by Christmas. She is actively seeking a partner organisation to support in hosting and facilitating. Collaboration has been a key part of this project to ensure sustainability and longevity.

Barnstaple and **Ilfracombe** (possibly Torridge in the near future) **NDVS** are collaborating with Nicki Palmer (disability consultant) in offering Friendship groups for adults with disabilities. We are awaiting an update on these groups, but we know that this is set to be a really great opportunity.

In **Tiverton** we are looking into the possibility of using a new community space in the People's Park to facilitate this group, and will be in conversation with a view to getting something up and running towards the end of the year.



THE FEEDBACK

HERE'S WHAT PEOPLE ARE SAYING ABOUT THE GROUPS...

'I really like this group because it gives me something to do in the week.'
'This group is fun, and I like the cake!'
'I like meeting up with my friends and talking about what's going on.'
'The people here are really friendly.'
'This is OUR group, and we like it this way.'
'It stops me being bored at home.'
'The people here help me to work out what to do.'
'They remembered my birthday, that's so nice!'
'The group has given me more confidence. Thank you.'

HERE'S WHAT PARTNER ORGANISATIONS AND SUPPORTERS ARE SAYING...

'This was such a good idea.'
'So much has been closed down so this is lovely.'
'I am so glad they have this group.'
'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!'

The overall impact of establishing these groups is growing, and we hope attract many more people to join in the coming months. The following is our impact in numbers:

OUR IMPACT

in the past 6 months:

34
Individuals attended Disability Awareness Training

3
New groups soon to be set up

6
current in-person Friendship Groups

100%
Of participants asked would recommend the groups to a friend.

119
attendees across 5 groups

15+
partner organisation connections

PILOT FRIENDSHIP GROUPS

UPDATES AND DEVELOPMENTS

The in-person Friendship groups that were set up during the pilot stage have continued to run. We are very grateful for our partner organisations for their support, collaboration is key!

The **Honiton** Group continually has 12-14 participants, and is running every week under the oversight of community volunteers, with monthly input from Devon People First.

The **Cullompton** Group in partnership with the Keystone Project, has seen 6 new attendees in the last quarter, and we hope to see more in the next quarter. We are now working closely with the local Cullompton Community Builder, and GP surgeries, to promote the group more widely.

Our **Crediton** Group took a natural pause over the summer whilst we looked at finding a new venue and partnership opportunity. We are now looking at supporting the Congregational Church with a group for adults with learning disabilities, by attending monthly offering expertise, activities and wider support. We anticipate we will be up and running with this by December.

DISABILITY AWARENESS AND CONFIDENCE TRAINING

We have run 3 sessions and seen 34 attendees take part in this training this year. It has been an invaluable opportunity to share experience, problem solve, and network with other groups. We have had a very positive feedback. Here are some highlights:

Best parts:

- Participation from people with lived experience.
- Finding out about the Friendship Groups and hearing Nicky's feedback as someone who has experiences in this area
- 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

Final comments:

- Keep it up. Great work!
- It would be lovely if you could attend Friday Club at St Sidwell's Community Centre as the vast majority of their volunteers and attendees have additional needs. So it would benefit everyone.
- It was great to connect with such a range of staff, which I'll follow up. Thanks so much Laura - I really enjoyed it.
- Thank you for allowing me to take part.

A GRAND DAY OUT!

HONITON FRIENDSHIP GROUP

In August nine of the Honiton Friendship Group members decided they would like to have a day out. They chose the beach, and wanted to go for a walk, followed by fish and chips and some window shopping - so that's exactly what we did! We boarded the bus together at 10am, had a lovely journey to Sidmouth, and enjoyed a really pleasant day by the sea. Everyone appreciated the delicious lunch, and friendships continued to blossom. It was clear that this was a really impactful and special time, as the overwhelming response was 'when can we do this again?!'

With this in mind we have now planned another trip for November, when we will be going to a local pub to play skittles and enjoy more food together!

We asked the day trippers to give us some feedback and here's what they said...

'*Fantabydosey!*'
'A magical moment'
'When is the next one?'
'I liked walking on the beach and the food was nice.'
'We are all friends here and that's what it's all about.'
'I liked throwing stones in the sea, it makes me feel calm.'



A great success, and here's to many more grand days out encouraging independence and new friendships!

CHALLENGES AND QUESTIONS

Moving forward there are a few challenges and questions that have arisen as valuable learning points for consideration with the In-Person Friendship Groups:

- 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 be more frequent?
- Do the sessions need to have more of a theme to encourage more people to get involved?

SUCCESS STORY

We recently had someone attend the group in Cullompton who 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 the group was on, and walked with them in to the Community Centre so they didn't have face going in alone. 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. Even after one session, doing some gentle craft activities over a cuppa, they felt more confident, and will be returning again.

FUTURE PLANS

DISABILITY AWARENESS AND CONFIDENCE TRAINING

We are currently offering our training to local services, both voluntary and statutory. We plan to reach as many people as possible by the end of the year.

We are formulating plans to offer 'Train the Trainer' opportunities next year given continued funding, to teach staff and voluntary leads how to run the Disability Awareness training themselves for their area. This would likely involve a series of short presentations and online support.

We hope to run an in-person event in the new year to raise awareness of the training and other project developments and invite speakers to participate. The project is expanding.

We are also looking at how we can further publicise the training, to include demographics and people and groups that we have not yet reached. We are closely linked with local community builders who are sharing this with their wider network.

IN PERSON FRIENDSHIP GROUPS

We are pleased with developments so far, and are aware that these kinds of projects take time to get off the ground, both in terms of practicality, and getting people through the door.
We acknowledge that there are ongoing challenges, but also huge successes along the way.

For this reason we feel it would be good to offer a 'peer learning' space, where those who are running or supporting with the In-Person Friendship groups can share learnings and outcomes, whilst also coming up with some solutions to any challenges. We will be piloting this in November. This provides added value to the project overall.

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