

# SEEING PEOPLE AS THE SOLUTION NOT THE PROBLEM



**By Edel Harris**

**Edel Harris shares her insights here on how important it is to recognise and showcase the strengths in the people we serve and give them leadership roles, a key theme emerging from our Putting Relationships First cell.**

It is an interesting time for those of us working in the social care sector. And a very interesting time if you are an individual or a family who require some form of care or support.

Mencap's vision is for the UK to be the best place in the world to live a happy and healthy life, if you have a learning disability.

For this vision to be realised we need to ask – what sort of society do we want to live in? One where everyone who needs care and support to live a happy and healthy life gets the support they need when they need it, or a country where disabled and older people must be grateful for whatever they are given, often delivered by low-paid and undervalued workers operating within a system fixated on time and task.

As the parent of a young man with a learning disability who employs his own personal assistant, as a family we want a social care system that is genuinely personalised with the person firmly in the lead. A system that is based on individual strengths and assets not the current deficit culture within which we

operate. Let's think about measuring impact rather than input (if we need to measure something – my son is the only member of our family who has 'annual outcomes'!) and promote a system that encourages community innovation by providing the right environment for this to flourish.

On 1 December 2021 the UK Government published the White Paper entitled, *People at the Heart of Care*.

There is a lot to like in the White Paper – the way it was written with a focus on the 'I' statements was welcome, and the sentiments expressed throughout are worthy and hard to disagree with.

However, there is little acknowledgement of the current pressures – real pressures which we are experiencing right now – that are having a negative impact on people with a learning disability and their families.

Despite the warm words in the White Paper the overall sector narrative is still founded on words such as challenge, drain, deficit –

people who require support being viewed in a negative rather than a positive light and funding requirements seen as a drain on the public purse as opposed to an investment in people's lives and an investment in a vibrant and caring society.

I was surprised not to see more in the White Paper about commissioning practices, which are often inflexible, risk averse, inconsistent and lack a personalised approach to the type of support offered. Mencap is concerned that many local authorities continue to commission support based on the lowest cost rather than with a focus on other essential factors such as quality and based on achieving certain outcomes for the people who require the care and support. The trading in a commodity – an hour of care – does not chime with the 'people at the heart of care' intentions in the social care reform plans nor the principles of an integrated health and care system.

Users of social care and their families must help drive the design for local services, putting the individual at the centre by creating a commissioning model that focuses on outcomes rather than input and 'hours of care'. Give people greater choice to source the support that they want and, where someone has a personal budget, greater control over how this is spent. My son's PA recently took him on a trip to Old Trafford to watch a football match – I can't imagine that experience appearing in a social care contract tender process!

We need to refocus on prevention and early intervention. We know from our own family experience that a little support at the right time, determined by the person themselves, can go a long way and we must do more to

help people avoid crisis situations which result in expensive interventions or people ending up in in-patient units when this is not the best place for them to be.

People being in the lead also means ensuring everyone has access to information about their rights and the support that is available to them. This should include help to understand and exercise these rights, including support to challenge any decisions taken by others which impact on their life. We also need to invest in local decision-making and take a few risks to help enable people with a learning disability to flourish as active citizens. We understand the need to keep people safe, but this should be balanced with their right to live a happy and fulfilled life.

Mencap's current Big Plan (our organisational strategy) puts people with a learning disability in the lead. Whether that be at a personal level, where everyone receiving support decides what that support looks like and who should be involved in supporting them, or whether that is determining and leading our national campaigning activity.

As one of my colleagues who has a learning disability recently said: 'I love being part of Mencap's leadership team. I have learned so much but the best part has been contributing to the Big Plan and feeling like I am using my experience and skills to make a difference. I don't tell people that I meet now that I have a disability, I tell them that I am on the leadership team at Mencap. It feels good.'

**Edel Harris is the CEO of Mencap.**