Learning from Each Other in the Context of Personalisation and Self-build Social Care

UK policy for adults with intellectual disabilities no longer supports state-provided building-based day care but promotes personalised care and support under individuals’ control with choice of community-based opportunities. The research explored experiences of this new terrain and the informal learning involved.An initial scoping review was followed by interviews with key service providers in one urban and one rural area in England and one of each in Scotland. Next, ethnographic fieldwork with people with intellectual disabilities involved a flexible mix of observations, interviews, focus groups, and participant-generated visual data. Thematic analysis involved an iterative mix of deductive and inductive coding. Findings showed informal peer learning ranged from ad hoc to structurally supported. Though learning was often tacit, support was valued and agency developed. The availability of local supportive people and schemes and time spent in them to develop new skills and identities was vital to people self-building community lives.

Keywords: intellectual disabilities; personalisation; peer learning; lifelong learning; informal learning

# Points of Interest

* This research looked at the experiences of people with intellectual disabilities, as they and their friends and family respond to policy change bringing in more personalisation and individual choice.
* Often people with intellectual disabilities and those supporting them do not recognise their everyday learning. Learning outside schools/colleges gets little research attention. We looked at the learning involved in people managing their own daily lives in their communities.
* Staff and volunteers are helping people to learn from each other in organisations, and this can become more formal peer learning, peer mentoring and peer support programmes.
* Advocacy groups create a sense of belonging and shared purpose, encouraging peer learning through the sharing of knowledge, experiences and problem solving.
* When new projects start up or traditional day services change, the staff or volunteers may not involve people with intellectual disabilities in the planning. This means people with intellectual disabilities miss opportunities to learn.

# Introduction: The scope of social care

Social care has accrued a range of aims in recent decades beyond the traditional purposes of safeguarding, care delivery, promoting health and providing respite for carers. In policy at least, there are more ambitious aims to improve opportunities for people with intellectual disabilities to promote their social inclusion and to protect an enhanced conception of their human rights. The European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR), incorporated into domestic law through the Human Rights Act (1998), the Scotland Act (1998), together with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disability (UNCPRD 2007) provide a legal basis for the concept of personalisation (Chetty, Dalrymple and Simmons 2012). This is the notion that support services should be planned with the involvement of those who require them and adapted to their specific needs. The general principles include respect for individual dignity, autonomy and independence, together with the provision of supports to promote and facilitate full and effective participation and inclusion in society (Power, Lord and Defranco 2013).

The UK legal and policy framework reflects this expanded conception of what social care is for. Aspirations for care and support to be more ‘personalised’ entered government [social policy](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_policy) for people with intellectual disability with *The Same As You* (Scottish Executive 2000) and *Valuing People* (DH 2001). Scotland, as Manji (2018) discusses, has historically resisted adopting personalisation and the two countries have nuanced differences. Central to the vision of *Valuing People* was the notion of shifting power to the care-receiving individual through the rolling out of personalised budgets. Local councils were encouraged to offer people eligible for support money to pay for it, in lieu of providing the services. With this direct funding mechanism and the call for widespread cultural and attitudinal change, personalisation has been promoted as an approach that would allow people with intellectual disabilities to live more socially included lives.

This vision gained wider policy acceptance in England through the Care Act (2014) which requires local authorities to consider people’s lives holistically, in terms of participation in work, education, training or recreation, and to meet their needs in ways that contribute to their wellbeing. Similarly, the Scottish Government Social Care (Self Directed Support) Act 2013, aims explicitly ‘to protect the human rights and independent living of care and support users in Scotland’. Hence, local authorities have a duty to ‘develop the market’ in care and support services in their locality, to enable people receiving care to ‘shop around’ for the services that suit them and meet their personal desired outcomes. Local authorities have duties to provide information and advice about care and support choices in their area, including the range of funding and access options (DHSC 2014). The variety of options available and the potential for people to choose and control the kind of social care they receive is supposed to have increased radically as responsibility for providing social care has shifted from the state to local communities (see Charnley et al. (2019) for a contrary view of the reality). While some have benefitted from this new context (Social Policy Research Unit 2008; Stainton and Boyce 2004), the ‘choice and control’ and personalisation agendas have attracted considerable academic and professional criticism, especially for the complex assessment processes and delivery mechanisms (Kendall and Cameron 2014; Williams and Porter 2017), and the likelihood that a system with minimal central control might bypass some groups (Mansell 2010; Ferguson 2012). As the role of local authorities has shifted from care management towards support and brokerage, segregated building-based day services have become increasingly rare thereby removing this option for some who depended on it (Mencap 2012). The argument for developing a market in care rests on **the capacity of people with intellectual disabilities to acquire the skills and confidence** to envisage what the new support might look like and to be able to negotiate it successfully.

To understand how people with intellectual disabilities manage in the new policy landscape we looked at their learning. This is not an area that previous work on personalisation has prioritised. When exploring the daily life experiences of people with intellectual disabilities, Hamilton et al. (2017, 296) lamented cuts to education and formal learning opportunities for them in the course of personalisation reform and social care budget cuts; participants and support workers cited ‘[t]he restricted range of activities, educational and employment opportunities’ as constraints limiting individuals’ agency. Yet the new social care context suggests that the learning should occur outside of building based services, in the communities people use and occupy, that is, learning that can be framed as informal and lifelong. The necessity to build their own daily lives from information and resources within their local community should generate multiple opportunities, where there is scope in particular, for learning from others. This paper discusses what these opportunities to learn are and with whom they may be mediated. It draws on a study of four sites across the UK to explore how far these opportunities for socially embedded learning succeed in promoting the wellbeing of people with intellectual disabilities as policy prescribes.

# Research aims and theoretical context

The study was designed to advance a detailed understanding of how the landscape of social care, support and learning opportunities was being navigated, or possibly remade in England and Scotland, by people with intellectual disabilities and their allies. The research design included a focus on the effect of the change away from day services to emerging self-built networks and the associated gains and losses. The research questions for the study asked: How are adults with intellectual disabilities reclaiming, reimagining and experiencing support within the context of declining day services and an emphasis on community initiatives, and - particularly pertinent here - how is this fostering informal, community and lifelong learning?

Learning from each other in naturally occurring sociocultural contexts is at the informal end of the spectrum of formality in learning (Malcolm, Hodkinson and Colley 2003), though it may include some planned elements. Two strands of literature relating to informal learning are well developed: workplace learning (e.g., (Billett 2002; Eraut 2004) and community participation (e.g., (McGivney 1999; Coare and Johnstone 2008). The second strand is particularly relevant for this paper as it addresses the potential of learning from others in informal situations to promote the interests of  minority groups (Cullen *et al.* 2000) and populations on the periphery of the economy.

As social inclusion is an aim of newer forms of social care, then adults’ informal learning could be seen as a natural ally. Both social inclusion and lifelong learning have been widely adopted in national and international policies as concepts that can contribute to equalising social opportunities and increasing social cohesion within and across societies. Indeed, some see informal learning by adults as synonymous with widening social participation, as both are concerned with ‘active engagement by citizens […] in the construction, interpretation and, often, re-shaping of their own social identity and social reality’ (Cullen *et al.* 2000, ii). Learning in this socially engaged form should influence how people conceive of themselves in relation to others – a crucial factor for people with intellectual disabilities as they increase their social and community participation.

Informal learning is widely described as having significant value in increasing skills and self-confidence, including developing learners’ social capital and developing citizenship (Cullen *et al.* 2000; Golding, Brown and Foley 2009). A modernised concept of transformative learning (Illeris 2004, 2014) highlights the significance of lifelong learning of this kind for marginalised and low-skilled groups on account of its potential impact on self-perception and motivation to participate (Illeris 2006). Self-built networks (Power, Bartlett and Hall 2016) may be critical avenues in this respect, especially given that using and giving support – essential in self-building lives for people with intellectual disabilities – is a crucial factor in the formation of resilient identities in the face of economic and social disadvantage (Edwards and Mackenzie 2005).

Sociocultural theory generally emphasises the social, cultural and historical context of human activity. From our broadly sociocultural perspective, we viewed learning as taking place through forms of social interaction in varying cultural environments. As Lave (1996) indicates, real world contexts, with the right social relations and cultural resources, can be effective learning environments. Situated cognition theories (Brown, Collins and Duguid 1989; Lave and Wenger 1991) emphasise (literally) the situated-ness of learning, seeing it as embedded in the cultural practices and social interactions of any particular group, organisation or environment, and as legitimised through the duality of increased participation and sense of belonging. Wenger (1998) expands on this to describe communities of practice as a joint enterprise between members participating in mutual engagement using a shared repertoire of communal resources. However, defining these contexts of learning is becoming more problematic.

Although they are immediately driven by policy agendas on personalisation and an increasingly marketised social care sector, the type of devolved activities represented by self-building might be seen as indicative of the broad societal changes described by Bauman (2007), in which institutions are destabilised and individuals are required to be increasingly adaptable and resilient. Transition and instability in the sector are heightened by the precarity associated with the politics of austerity (which have disproportionately affected disabled people (Malli et al. 2018)). Yet these factors may provide opportunities for greater individual and collective agency and transformation within the intellectual disability community. Complex and relatively unbounded activities such as learning are being considered in more flexible, fluid and relational terms (Spinuzzi 2011), especially in what we might typify as informal and lifelong learning contexts. Sociocultural theorists have established metaphorical and analytical framings of learning practice that are not bound within a single context but are increasingly polycontextual (Engeström 2005), based upon participation across multiple, fragmented and interrelated settings (Edwards 2009). As Biesta (2008, 20) with colleagues argues, developing ‘the (situated) ability to give direction to one’s life’ is about agency. Moreover, in situations of ‘embedded’ informal learning, greater learning occurs when the learning is crucial for the task at hand (Eraut 2011).

While we might associate self-building with opportunities for greater individual autonomy and the gaining of skills to become more independent, people with intellectual disabilities are intrinsically linked with the varied support systems they rely on. As they begin to self-build looser individual networks of support than those found in a single day service, we need to recognise how the ‘interagency’ of families, providers, personal assistants, and other support services is also expanded, made more complex and potentially conflicting, and increasingly inclusive of support that is interdependent and peer based. Agency therefore becomes more relational and ‘involves a capacity to offer support and to ask for support from others’ (Edwards and Mackenzie 2005, 294).

Within the sociocultural framing of the study, the concepts of lifelong learning, informal learning and peer learning were critical. Lifelong learning can be informal or formal, directed at one’s own needs or the needs of society more widely. It is conceptualised as multidimensional with, as Biesta (2006) argues, a personal dimension (learning for and about oneself), a democratic dimension (learning to live ‘with others in more democratic, just and inclusive ways’ (p.173)), and an economic dimension (learning so one remains employable and productive). The latter aspect can dominate and as Bélanger (2016, 243) argues, it ‘too often confines “human activity” to what takes place in the formal economy’, from which people with intellectual disabilities are generally excluded. This narrow focus echoes the individualisation of social care that the personalisation agenda brings. Coffield (1999) has criticised treatment of the concept of lifelong learning for individualising the process and responsibility for it, removing the social element. Lifelong, informal learning is conceived as a continuous process, which may be self-directed yet is mediated by external as well as internal forces (Billett 2010). It refers to learning that takes place in everyday settings, that is tacit, often practical in nature and self-directed, perpetual and irregular (Livingstone, 2001).

Bélanger (2016, 243-44) argues that in knowledge intensive societies, ‘the life situations that call for lifelong learning are undergoing transformation, and the vision of lifelong learningmust therefore be transformed as well, that is, extended, broadened and deepened’. This makes an examination of lifelong learning in the changing landscape for people with intellectual disabilities timely and worthwhile. While lifelong learning is recognised as a vehicle for social inclusion and health benefits for older people (Hafford-Letchfield and Formosa 2016) and for people using mental health services (Stenfors‐Hayes, Griffiths and Ogunleye 2008), the literature on lifelong or informal learning in the lives of people with intellectual disabilities is limited. An early example of describing the informal learning of adults with intellectual disabilities came in a study of learning to parent, showing learning through people making mistakes, changing their routines, trying out alternatives and finding their own way, with or without help (Llewellyn 1997). Dee et al. (2006) adapted the four core purposes of lifelong learning identified by UNESCO (1996) – learning to know, learning to do, learning to be and learning to live together (having, being and doing) – when reviewing the literature on the learning and teaching of adults experiencing learning difficulties. Most recently, Nind (2016) explored lifelong, informal and community learning within inclusive research, arguing for the rich learning opportunities available therein to people with intellectual disabilities.

Peer learning ‘can be defined as the acquisition of knowledge and skill through active helping and supporting among status equals or matched companions … helping each other to learn and learning themselves by so doing’ (Topping 2005, 631). The literature on peer learning, encompassing peer training, peer facilitation, peer counselling, modelling, helping and so on (Parkin and McKeganey 2000), mostly focuses on peer tutoring under the guidance of teachers in formal contexts. Topping (2005) notes that peer mentoring is a particular kind of peer learning exchange involving a supportive, experienced other and taking place in ‘an encouraging and supportive one-to-one relationship’; it involves ‘positive role modelling, promotion of raised aspirations, positive reinforcement, open-ended counselling, and joint problem-solving’ (p.631).

The nature of peer support (social, emotional or practical) is debated; it may be for learning, or relatedly for community participation, and it is often provided by peers with similar difficulties or experiences (Bertilsotter Rosqvist 2019; Mead 2003). Increasingly, attention is being paid to peers connecting in online as well as offline spaces, development of self-knowledge, reciprocity within peer relationships, and the impact on identity development (Bertilsotter Rosqvist 2019; Guldberg 2008). Reviewing the literature, peer networks (such as Centres for Independent Living) were found by Hyslop et al. (2020) to foster collaboration, enhance communication and build confidence and specialist knowledge among personal budget users in the UK. Most work on peer learning recognises and builds on people’s strengths and ability to empathise and some extends to peer-run services. In the arena of peer support in mental health and intellectual disabilities, three models of adult peer support have been identified: ‘informal and ad hoc support among service users’ (peers); ‘organised but unpaid peer support generally undertaken by volunteers who take on roles as “mentors” or “peer buddies”’; and ‘paid peer support’ (Mental Health Foundation 2012). We return to these later in the paper.

# Methods

## Research design

We conducted ethnographic case studies in four geographical areas; one urban and one rural area in both England and Scotland. The study was designed with local advisory groups to adopt the most effective methods to authentically represent the experiences and the perspectives of people with intellectual disabilities and their allies. The advisory groups grew from the research team’s existing links with local disability groups and comprised people with intellectual disabilities and key informants, with some acting as gatekeepers to providers and authorities in the sector. The advisory groups were involved throughout the research process in regular meetings, monitoring and advising. We drew on their local expertise and with them trialled data collection and analysis methods and tested emerging findings.

Ethics approval for the study was given by the Universities of Southampton and Dundee. Informed consent from participants was gained and pseudonyms are used throughout the paper.

In phase one we conducted a scoping review of provision in each area. We interviewed local authority commissioners and visited services and organisations providing a range of day (and occasionally evening) community-based support and activities, conducting field observations and interviewing managers, staff and volunteers from 29 organisations. Organisations were predominantly micro-enterprises with small staff numbers, day centres transitioning to social enterprises, voluntary work and training initiatives, self-advocacy groups or groups specialising in retail, horticulture, arts and crafts and performing arts.

In phase two we selected two organisations in each area for closer focus, coordinating with key gatekeepers to conduct further fieldwork and observations, gaining trust and building rapport with a view to involving people with intellectual disabilities in focus groups. We conducted each focus group over two sessions and followed up with individual semi-structured interviews. In most cases, we consulted with staff to recruit participants with the type of self-building profiles that would best make a meaningful contribution to our research; this meant people with mild/moderate intellectual disabilities/support needs. While we observed some people with profound intellectual and multiple disabilities participating in activities in several of the sites, their engagement tended to be uncharacteristic of self-building, reminding us instead of the community who remain largely excluded from these organisationally mediated opportunities for self-building.

Interviews and focus groups with 43 people with intellectual disabilities (24 men and 19 women) were conducted in a site they regularly accessed. These were audio recorded and transcribed. In the focus groups we encouraged a supportive and collaborative environment for peer-led discussion and reflection, drawing on verbal prompts and visual cues. Using paper and pen the participants developed weekly timetables and support (or friendship) circles to help identify key activities, people and environments in their lives and how these may have changed. We gave them disposable cameras to take photographs of their daily lives to share, which were only used by some. The photos prompted participants who were initially nervous or cautious to engage in discussions. Questions related to learning were integrated throughout the exploration of people’s experiences, with a focus on new skills, increased knowledge and understanding, self-awareness, self-motivation, and self-confidence, and social engagement in groups and networks.

The dataset comprised the transcripts and participant-generated materials alongside the researchers’ field and observational notes, photographs and other artefacts. The research team worked inductively and iteratively to conduct a primarily thematic analysis process, meeting regularly and making memos to cross-reference specific lines of enquiry. Using NVivo software, all members of the research team conducted initial analyses of selected data to establish a coding book comprising codes and groups related to the main research questions. Learning contexts and opportunities, skills and knowledge development, and forms of facilitated and peer-based learning were all coded. Where necessary, codes were adjusted or added to during the main phase of analysis. We then developed key themes which formed the development of resource materials (including accessible content) which we shared online and in workshops.

# Findings

## Peer learning – supportive and unsupportive conditions

The dataset has many examples of peer learning, sometimes involving close peers in terms of social status and experience, and sometimes involving more novice-expert peer relationships, as there is scope among people with intellectual disabilities for learning from what Vygotsky calls a More Knowledgeable Other - someone with a better understanding than yourself. The data also indicate a role for non-peers – staff and volunteers – in mediating peer learning. This learning centres on building skills and confidence in others, sharing knowledge and experience, and jointly solving problems. The context is often one of peer support, though usually in groups rather than in mentoring situations.

Missed opportunities for peer learning were also evident, especially when day services were transitioning from building-based to dispersed arrangements. In one new Community Interest Company (CIC), for example, the staff had to engage in informal, work-based learning as they altered the environment and adapted to different funding streams, but they did not become user-led enough to involve the service-users in this journey with them. The biggest loss of opportunity though, came in the form of weekly routines sparsely populated by activities and outings. While at one end of the continuum people combined work, volunteering, campaigning and socialising, at the other end people might do no more than one or two activities per week. One person took a photograph of the four walls of their flat to show their week.

## Awareness of peer learning

In terms of the perspectives of participants with intellectual disabilities on when and how peer learning was taking place, identifying their own learning was challenging. This is common in any informal learning context (Eraut, 2004), but it meant data on learning had to be teased out from wider conversations. For those self-building their daily routines through involvement with a self-advocacy group, there were important planned and incidental opportunities for learning. One self-advocate (Kev), for instance, spoke of how he ‘gradually got more confident speaking up’ through engagement in a speaking up group. Elaine, who was learning to facilitate the group without staff support, observed

‘I recently noticed once you do something new, someone else will be watching you and they’ll be thinking, oh, I might like to do that. So, you’re influencing others as much as you’re building up on yourself**.’**

There was some awareness then of the reciprocal nature of learning among peers and some peers appreciated the strengths they offered others, such as being organised (‘Oh they rely on me for everything …’ (Eve) or helping people to read ‘longer words’ (Kev), thereby helping to create a supportive learning community. Dennis, from a community advocacy scheme spoke of his multiple roles and liking to ‘help the people that aren't able to do things themselves’ in learning to enjoy themselves (‘I take part in the activities myself but I also help the other ones that aren't able to do things as well’). One participant described self-advocacy as ‘just learning different things, just doing it together’.

## Peer support

Peer support was recognised and appreciated: ‘David’s help was a great help’, explained Eve who was beginning to enjoy time away from a day centre and in a self-advocacy group. She spoke of people opening doors for each other, specifically, ‘if it wasn’t for David I would be stuck’, that is, in a day centre in another town where she had been all her adult life. A participant who was self-building a life in the community through volunteering in an authentic work environment talked about the people involved there giving each other ‘pep talks’ as encouragement as they learned new skills. This was in a Book Shop project, set up for people with intellectual disabilities to volunteer and train while selling second hand books to the public in their local area. Similarly, Yvonne who was employed within her self-advocacy organisation reflected that, ‘you work best within a group with other people’.

People gained support from hearing of each other’s experience. For example, Eve observed ‘it’s nice to mix in with different people who’ve got experience’ and David, who was thinking about where he might work noted, ***‘***I want to hear what he [Kev] says about Tesco’. Peer support aided learning in that it could cultivate new skills or dispositions. The support could be more practical, about ‘maybe Universal Credit or people having to go to different interviews and things’, or emotional, such as discussing the ‘common experience’ of bullying and harassment (Janet). Participants often affirmed each other during focus group discussions, illustrating this peer support in action, for example, ‘I’ve learnt something about you today, because I didn’t know you did the [voluntary work] or the [community activity]’, and ‘It’s good when you’re with your peers … because they know what you’re talking about, we all understand each other’. Unsurprisingly, peer support helped solve problems: ‘You feel better, don’t you, when you do it in a group. You feel better, don’t you? … To explain any problems you’ve got, you can talk about it, can’t you?’ (David). We might conclude that such peer-supported problem-solving capability transferred to new situations and that the requirement to manage without day centres was not taking away mutual support for some of the better networked participants.

## Support from groups

Some of the peer learning was gained through belonging to groups and campaigning. Linda enjoyed this aspect of protesting and changing things, saying, ‘you feel you’re having an active role’. Daniel in the same group spoke of a peer succeeding in bringing him out of his shell. In another focus group, Elaine commented to her peer:

‘I am so impressed with you. You see a problem, you do something else about it. That’s fantastic, Yvonne’.

The peers spoke of respecting each other, needing to work as a team to get things done, and that ‘you learn from your mistakes’.

Participants were often conscious of who had more experience or skills at any given time to help others. An older participant, Matthew, readily took on the role of More Experienced Other with colleagues in the Book Shop Project. He explained:

‘people who are younger than me, … I know some people have trouble with the till work. I help them with that. Some people have trouble with pricing. I help them with that. Basically if they have trouble, I help, and I like helping people.’

As William from a disability rights organisation explained, long involvement and the development of friendships enabled peer support to flourish. He also described the role that social media played in enabling people to share problems, solutions and strategies, although as Eve discussed, ‘help[ing] each other out if we’ve got any problems’ happened face-to-face too. Though sometimes originating from a social worker or non-peer, passing on information about activities and events was also important to learning in these relationships. More knowledgeable people supported others with their decision-making too, as we saw in empathic dialogue between someone thinking about moving but facing parental anxiety and someone offering reassurance that ‘you’d meet up like I do now’. Becoming one of the more knowledgeable people was a transition that happened in various ways, including stepping into new roles, such as when one group member recalled, ‘If Elaine’s not there at the [speaking out] group, we do it for her’.

## Mediation of peer learning

While participants spoke at length about how they as peers were helping each other to negotiate the terrain of life in the community without day centres, there was considerable evidence of the role that non-peers played in facilitating and nurturing such peer learning. Even in user-led organisations the peers needed others for support as Yvonne relayed:

‘… last week we were helping each other, and we realised that we were all contributing and helping each other, but then we don’t know where to take the ideas we have.’

She continued,

‘we realised that we haven’t got all the skills, but we’ve got some good skills. … So, that invariably means coming back to the staff here and involving them’

Again though, the learning with non-peers as with peers was often mutual: ‘she’s [personal assistant] learnt about lots of stuff through me by helping me to do some of that work [on the National Forum]’.

The supporting staff similarly understood the power of connecting people so that they could support or learn from each other. The Good Neighbours group was set up to pay a local resident to support people with intellectual disabilities living in the local community by helping them to make contacts, get practical help and support each other. Jeff, who staffed the Good Neighbours group reflected on having a member of the network ‘who is able to read very well’ who they hooked up with someone needing support reading their mail, taking away the reliance on staff. He explained the peer learning facilitation function:

‘So we encourage the people in the network to think about the skills that they have and how they can use those skills to support other people in return for those other people offering support to them.’

Here progression in peer support was a planned process in which people moved from the centre of a support circle to the edge, from where they transitioned from being members of Good Neighbours to associate members. At this point the scheme’s ongoing commitment to mobilising around them ended, but they were asked to ‘lend the skills that they've learnt back to the network to support other people to make that journey’. This was the most explicit of the moves from staff-mediated peer learning/peer support to informal peer learning.

Frances, who worked at a volunteer centre, set up a community Book Shop Project which was rich in real life training opportunities and which included a peer support programme to develop confidence and skills in mutual ways. She commented on witnessing many occasions in which, once connected, people supported each other’s learning. Matthew, one of those involved reinforced this, speaking of the way ‘It’s given me more skills than I thought I had’, and of then supporting others to develop their skills’, perhaps reflecting the non-peer organisational force behind them. Similarly, staff from an organisation supporting on-the-job training were conscious of purposefully enabling, via buddy systems, an ‘awful lot of peer stuff … kind of mentoring’. But once initiated and after some time, the peers grew in their roles of supporting the learning of others, not necessarily needing the staff to sustain this. For William, a crucial part of the disability rights organisation was enabling the peers to raise each other’s aspirations and envisage different futures. For staff from a day centre in transition, it was crucial that the old hands became empowered from having a sense of responsibility in their roles as mentors.

## Working together

Often peers and non-peers worked together, in self-advocacy groups for example, to identify issues that were troubling people (housing, budgets, relationships) to give a mix of peer support and external speakers or resources to help. They might switch readily between peer and non-peer support when learning new roles. In Good Neighbours people would talk to other members and go to the paid worker if needed. For some, the staff were role models for them when they learned how to support others. Staff may work to foster skills and friendships, but as Ellie explained, self-advocates then transferred their skills to situations like tenants’ forums and different social circles.

To summarise the findings, all three of the Mental Health Foundation’s (2012) models of peer support were in evidence: informal and ad hoc, organised but unpaid, and - occasionally - paid. Moreover, these blended and shifted dynamically. Also fluid was how tacit, self-directed or planned the learning was, depending on the sociocultural milieu, as we go on to discuss.

# Discussion

We sought evidence of informal peer learning occurring in response to a new more complex and demanding sociocultural situation for people with intellectual disabilities as local authority block service agreements were phased out. The so-called modernisation of social care implies considerable learning challenges for people with intellectual disabilities, especially of the generations of people most accustomed to building-based day care. These essentially comprise:

* Acquiring knowledge about options available locally and how to fund them
* Making informed choices
* Planning and maintaining an adequate ‘programme’ of activities
* Travelling to and between venues.

Further, this learning project is being undertaken amid cuts to social care budgets; in fragile (and overburdened) voluntary sector organisations; sparse employment opportunities, and inadequate public transport. Statutory guidance (DHSC 2014) recognises that people may require accessible information and advocacy support, but does not explicitly recognise the learning involved.

For Roulstone and Morgan (2009), a key reservation about the policy shift to personalisation was that the enforced collectivism of the day centre would be replaced by ‘enforced individualisation’, directly threatening aspirations for greater social inclusion. While we saw some examples of this, mostly participants with intellectual disabilities were managing to stay socially connected. They were also learning as the change from attending building-based day care to navigating a diverse ‘market’ of social care options made high demands on the skill, knowledge, confidence and agency of people with intellectual disabilities and their allies. We found evidence of people learning from peers and non-peers in established community learning cultures, such as self-advocacy and disability rights organisations. We saw learning too in emergent learning cultures in new form social care settings and some old ones in transition. We also saw people with intellectual disabilities finding opportunities to learn from each other specifically to support self-building their daily lives, as when David, thinking about his employment options, wanted to find out ‘what Kev says about Tesco.’

The literature on informal and lifelong learning (e.g. Cullen et al. 2000; Biesta 2008) sees learning that harnesses motivation and that occurs within strong social relationships as having significant potential to ‘translate’ into agency. Such learning is also thought to have special potential for the social participation of marginalised and vulnerable groups (McGivney 1999; Bélanger 2015; Schuller et al. 2016). The new context for social care aims to strengthen the voices of people who use services and their allies in the planning and provision of such services, and in this sense the goals of lifelong learning and modernising social care are compatible. Local authorities are encouraged to support organisations that share this aim - social enterprises, micro-enterprises, CICs and user-led organisations. Our findings suggest that new opportunities for peer learning were opened up in these contexts, especially where they supported horizontal rather than hierarchical relationships amongst people with intellectual disabilities, staff and allies. While self-advocacy groups have been good at this way of working, it was emerging in new context groups too, such as Good Neighbours, where non-peers and peers worked together with the supporting role switching from one to the other.

Organisations adopting an inclusive approach purposefully challenge role definitions and status between staff, volunteers and users. This usefully conflates notions of support and facilitation with peer learning. The findings include examples where opportunities to learn from others arose naturally in non-hierarchical relationships and examples where peer learning opportunities were partially formalised and developed as part of the learning culture. Good Neighbours prompted members to think about how they could exchange skills and reciprocate support and staff reported linking members with complementary skills and needs. In pairing the member who read well with one who had previously received reading support from staff, they enabled a self-sufficient pairing with significant and sustainable learning opportunities on both sides. Fluency in using and giving support - relational agency - is thought to be a crucial factor in the development of agency (‘purposive identities’) and the building of resilience in the context of inclusion (Edwards and Mackenzie 2005).

To promote lifelong learning, the challenge is to create learning conditions in which motivation is triggered and social relations are strong (Bynner 2017). In self-building their daily routines in advocacy groups, participants with intellectual disabilities could experience strong social bonds and become motivated to take active, knowledge-seeking roles. As one participant emphasised, in campaigning for causes important to you, ‘you feel you’re having an active role’, you have peers who ‘know what you’re talking about’ and ‘You feel better … when you do it in a group’. The Book Shop Project planned a peer support programme specifically to develop members’ confidence and skills in mutual ways. When a self-advocate described both her group’s learning achievements and their further learning needs, she linked motivating conditions, strong social bonds and developing agency. These examples represent learning cultures that foster an ‘ecological’ understanding of agency – where agency is conceived as something to be achieved through people’s active engagement in aspects of their ‘contexts-for-action’ (Biesta 2008). These examples offer some support to the idea that the new contexts can generate learning opportunities conducive to the development of agency that were absent in older-style day provision.

While little previous research has specifically addressed informal, community and lifelong learning by people with intellectual disabilities, Dee et al.’s (2006) important literature review re-examined the purposes of learning for adults with intellectual disabilities, in response to what the authors believed to be the limiting influence of negative beliefs about their learning potential. The interlinked purposes they identified – learning for ‘being’ (agency and identity); learning for ‘having’ (skills, knowledge, access to opportunities) and learning for ‘doing’ (relating to participation), fit well with enhanced concepts of the human rights of people with intellectual disabilities and with higher expectations of agency and autonomy in the shaping of their lives in modernised social care. We found clear examples of each of these purposes.

The learning purpose of developing belief in identity (being) is emphasised in cases like Kev becoming gradually ‘more confident speaking up’ and Elaine noticing, as she learned to facilitate a group without support, how ‘influencing others’ by doing something new, also involved ‘building up on yourself**’.** Learning to have new skills, knowledge and opportunities was readily identifiable in participants like David, who wanted information about others’ work experiences, and amongst participants seeking practical support in relation to benefits. Learning for the purposes of doing (becoming empowered to participate) was evident in many cases too. For William, from the disability rights organisation, enabling peers to raise each other’s aspirations was a critical process, while staff in the Gardening Activities day centre in transition acted to empower ‘old hands’ by developing roles as mentors to less experienced peers. There was evidence from staff of these skills transferring from supported contexts (enabled by staff) to situations without staff facilitation, like tenants’ forums. The purpose of learning as a gateway to participation in new ways was served in cases like these.

A key factor in the legislation dictating the shape of the new social care contexts was the ‘choice and control’ agenda which refers, albeit implicitly, to the learning entailed - learning for the purposes of ‘having’ information and ‘being’ in control. Yet there is no explicit discussion of learning in the act’s statutory guidance. An important theoretical finding for adult learning at the informal end of the spectrum is that such learning is under-recognised, in society generally and by those directly involved (Eraut 2011). To understand the learning that occurs as people with intellectual disabilities self-build their lives, we have teased out findings from wider conversations about the participants’ lives. Our evidence suggests that in the kinds of community groups recommended for support by local authorities, people with intellectual disabilities are finding, making and promoting a range of learning opportunities (supported by non-peers) that remain largely under recognised.

Learning opportunities were also missed, especially where organisations were ‘in transition’. Though we have traced many examples of successful learning, we have not established that these opportunities are consistently available, especially when individuals’ weekly programmes of activities were sparsely populated. Informal, interpersonal learning may ‘translate’ into agency, but not in all conditions. When the match between the learning challenge and the learner’s resources is too great, people may learn that things are too difficult for them or that they cannot cope (Biesta 2008) and this is a clear risk inherent in the context of a complex social care market, and for some subgroups of people with intellectual disabilities.

# Conclusion

We conclude by returning to our research aim to understand how the changing landscape of social care was being navigated by people with intellectual disabilities self-building their daily lives when responsibility for daytime social care and support was handed to them, and to our question about how this sociocultural context is fostering informal, community and lifelong learning. Our findings reflect some of the mix of hope and despair we felt as we talked with people who were making the personalisation agenda work for them, those who were making small steps, and those for whom the conditions for learning and benefitting were not right. In some ways we were capturing history in the making, probing life experience at a time when there was a real mix of stability and change as landscapes of care and support were being shifted by the agendas of personalisation and austerity. In reflecting on the conditions in which people could meaningfully engage and peer learning could flourish we make three key observations: one, the human and physical terrain mattered in that having supportive people and schemes near enough to reach could be transformative; two, there was a strong temporal dimension in that sustained engagement within a network or scheme was necessary to progressing through different roles and learning new identities; and three, there was a structural dimension in that even self-directed learning benefitted from initial support to build the friendships and networks, skills and confidence for a positive onward journey as a lifelong learner.

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