Making Things Happen;

Young Disabled people; amplifying their voices.
Project summary report, August 2020.

About Allfie:

We believe in the right of all Disabled learners to access and be supported in mainstream education.

We work to;

- Educate the public about Disabled learners and their inclusion in mainstream education;

- Mobilise, foster and maintain the interest and support of the public in respect of the inclusion of Disabled learners within mainstream education;

- Promote equal educational opportunity for and the right of Disabled learners to inclusion within mainstream education;

- Provide services, training, information and advice for members, disabled learners, their families and others.

'... I feel that the social model of disability has helped me to see that I was not to blame when things were inaccessible for me in the past, instead it was society that confined me and caused life to be difficult...' **- Young disabled person.**
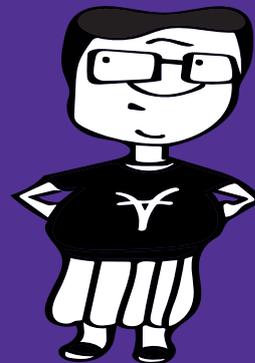
We would like to thank all the Young people, ALLFIE staff, volunteers and Nic Crosby that supported the success of Making Things Happen project and amplifying the voices of Young Disabled people.

Overview:
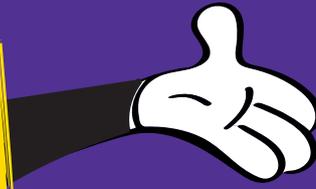
The Making Things Happen project is a 12 month project with a facilitated series of workshops and work experience for Young Disabled people within ALLFIE. The workshops explored how ALLFIE might better engage Young Disabled people in their campaigns work by understanding their current issues and enabling them to work with us to develop initiatives that promote inclusion and that are specifically relevant to Young Disabled people at a grassroots level.

Over August ALLFIE delivered a series of workshops, which presented a range of information covering identity, the social model of disability, understanding barriers and asserting solutions and rights. The purpose of the workshops was to enable Young people to share experiences while providing some key information about inclusion and rights relating to disability.

Due to the Covid-19 pandemic the workshops had to be delivered over Zoom. The five workshops were held during August 2020 and were attended by 8 participants. The project was funded by #iWill. ALLFIE recognised that holding a meeting remotely had advantages and disadvantages in terms of accessibility and digital exclusion.

All workshops were co-designed and co-facilitated with Young people. Young people led on the feedback of the all sessions and the production of this report.

This report presents the key themes emerging from the discussions, lessons learnt, a summary of each workshop and some suggested future work initiatives.

During the workshops a number of key issues were raised and discussed by those who attended. These include;

Claiming a disabled identity – with so many ways of talking about disability and so much of it highlighted as tragic, claiming a disabled identity can be a confusing thing to do and even more confusing to feel proud about. Understanding that barriers prevent Disabled people from going about their daily lives as non-disabled people do requires confidence and often the support of others with shared experience.

Naming and shaming disabling barriers – it is not always easy to say what a disabling barrier is, even though you might frequently experience. Equally, talking about it's impact and what should be done about it can also be difficult to speak up about. Having the chance to talk through with other Disabled people and allies about these experiences can be helpful in understanding and speaking up about them (repetition of 'speak up').

Asserting enabling solutions – while it is not only the responsibility of Disabled people to develop solutions, our experiences are key to this. As well as being able to call out barriers, being able to assert what needs to be changed comes from seeing Disabled people's experiences as a valid form of knowledge. Such knowledge, combined with an inclusive focus can help organisations to involve Young Disabled people to design in flexible ways, and to show that there are multiple ways of offering thing, like education and learning opportunities.

Understanding rights – knowing how Disabled people are protected, how things should adapt, and how this applies to your life is not easy to understand. Exploring UK law, European and International protections and how these might be applied in practice is a useful knowledge. Also, recognising these as 'how things should be', rather than 'how things can be fixed' is really important for Disabled people's identity and role in making things happen.

Workshops:

Five workshops were held during August 2020. A total of 8 participants attended the sessions. Each session happened by video conference call on Zoom and lasted two hours. A summary of each, along with the visual minutes captured at each session, is as follows.

As well as getting to know each other, the first workshop explored issues of identity, barriers and speaking up as Disabled people. Several key themes emerged from the sessions, including;

While there are challenges to 'coming out' as a disabled person and often people will avoid the term, it is recognised that it can be valuable to connect to a wider community. But this needs an awareness of the 'social model of disability', which can be hard to come across and difficult to apply practically to your life.

However, contact with people that share the experience of disabling barriers can not only help beat 'self-hate', it can also pave the way for understanding how to speak up and challenge exclusion.

The social model of disability.

The second workshop presented 'the social model of disability' and explored in particular how it can be applied to school, college and other learning environments, and is summarised below.

The social model of disability says that people are disabled by social barriers, not their health issues or impairments. It is the social barriers that Disabled people face that restrict them from taking part in society, not their diverse bodies or minds.

At school this can relate to broken lifts, a lack of easy read and a fixation on literacy. Additionally, 'velcro' supporters can create isolation by preventing friendships and social interactions with peers from occurring.

What is DISABILITY? broken bits or barriers, they told me to go faster, I've been FIGHTING back but the word, attitudes it's about DESIGN, LABEL they dont changes, take it seriously, causes unless you have a the wrong SUPPORT in the class ★★★ BARRIERs and FAVOURS, ★★★ there's people confuse ACCESS nothing SPECIAL about needs, we dont have, we experience disability, and thats our IDENTITY

The third workshop looked at some of the 'identity politics' of being a Disabled person and discussed how this can highlight injustice, as well as informing what needs to be done for inclusion to occur. Some of the themes are summarised here.

How you see 'disability' can influence what you think about both how society should be and what is or isn't achievable by Disabled people. Seeing the cause of disability as about 'broken bodies' or 'social barriers' is significant in how it is responded to.

While good design can unblock many barriers, negative attitudes will often limit access. This is especially true when it is framed as a 'favour', rather than something necessary to participate in everyday life. Disabled people challenge this with the assertion that they 'don't have a disability, they rather experience it'.

Barriers and Solutions.

The fourth workshop focused on identifying what some of the barriers in education might be, as well as what solutions are possible for Disabled people. Some of the themes covered are summarised here.

Barriers can take on a variety of forms. They can be about attitudes towards Disabled people that underestimate potential or limit learning opportunities. Additionally, they can relate to the environment; how any given space is designed and considers access for all. Finally, they can relate to policies, which may have a negative impact on Disabled people, such as segregated learning.

Tackling assumptions and fear about disability and considering access as standard not extra is important, to include people fairly and with dignity. In education, ensuring that Disabled people are involved in designing learning programmes, both the content and the delivery, will lead to better solutions.

The fifth and final workshop looked at rights for Disabled people, in terms of both the principles they aspire too, as well the actual protections offered. Some of the themes discussed are included below.

Laws and protections offered to Disabled people, such as the UK Equality Act, the European Court of Human Rights and Global and the United Nation Convention on the rights of People with Disabilities).

While each offer protections in different ways, they share basic values in what kind of world they seek for the inclusion of Disabled people.

Understanding the multiple forms of discrimination against Disabled people, especially in education, as unlawful is important for Disabled people to recognise.

Next Steps:

Based on the discussion during the workshops and the feedback received afterward, we note the following as possible future projects that might be useful to develop this work.

Sharing 'disabling' experiences – providing more opportunities for discussions between peers about their everyday experiences of 'barriers' and what can be done about them would be useful as an ongoing initiative for Young people. People who attended the workshops felt that sharing their experiences was a really useful way of developing proud and active identities

Building a 'lived experience' community – creating mentoring opportunities for Young Disabled people to explore, record and share their identities, and specifically their experiences within education. This could help tell the story of 'inclusive education' for Young Disabled people, to inform what works, and what doesn't. This could be facilitated by Disabled leaders, old and young.

Asserting solutions – providing more training sessions and accessible information about disability law and protections offer to disabled people. Specifically, this should cover how these apply to everyday life, and how they can be used, as tools of enforcement as well as applications for inclusion.
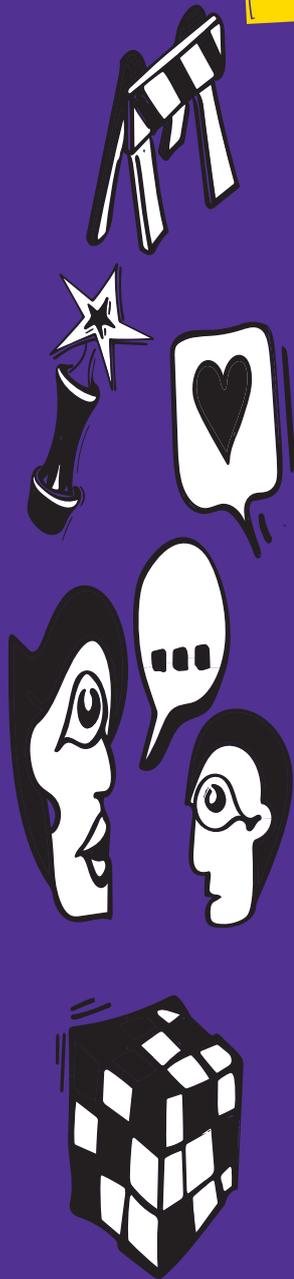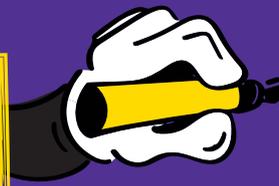
'...schools should make the environment as friendly and accessible as they can so that disabled young people are aware that they will not be judged, this will increase the likelihood of them asking for support when they need it and feeling included. ...'
- Young disabled person.

Lessons Learnt:

During this project we also reflected on the process of facilitating workshops and engaging with young people through audio and video digital platforms. While we recognise there are some benefits, such as increasing access from home, there are also some consideration to be made in order to support young disabled people appropriately.

These include;

Digital exclusion – assess how digital resources might exclude young disabled people. This might relate to accessibility for participants that require personal support. Or the accessibility of the platform being used, and particular features of it, such as complicated joining processes.

Advance preparation and support - provide advance support outside of the workshop with activities.

Small groups - keep group sizes small when working online.

Ground rules – work to an inclusive and appropriate set of ground rules that enable positive and supportive contributions.

Discussion - ensure that young people have enough time for discussions for sharing and reflecting on lived experiences.

Leadership – give opportunities to young people to facilitate discussions/activities sessions and other leadership opportunities.

Intersectionality - ensure that the discussions reflect and acknowledge intersectional issues, particularly to explore how multiple oppressions occur.

Summary:

Feedback from those that attended the sessions was positive and suggested that people gained a range of useful information.

The opportunity to explore topics such as the social model of disability, and legal protections relevant to disabled people, both in and out of the education environment was said to be useful.

Further sessions on these topics would be welcome, as well as the development of future work that enabled Young Disabled people to come together more regularly.

Such sessions and work would discuss the impact of disabling barriers, create a lived experience community to document identities and provide further training on legal projections for Disabled people.
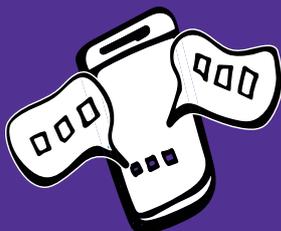
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