

SAFEGUARDING BOARD

# LEARNING DISABILITY WEEK

**Learning & Development Officer Andy Hodkin**

**writes about the power of meaningful engagement—led by the individual**



Jenny spoke with passion about her beloved West Bromwich Albion and her ambition to set up a women’s learning disability football team. Liam shared his deep love for his family and his enthusiasm for good food. Georgia expressed her passion for sign language and her desire to teach others—ending her talk with an inspiring signed performance of two of her favourite songs.

Three very different stories, but one powerful common thread: each speaker chose their own topic, their own style of delivery, and set their own agenda.

As part of Learning Disability Week (June 16th to 22<sup>nd</sup> ) Jenny Jones, Liam McCusker, and Georgia—all adults with learning disabilities—delivered their presentations to an appreciative audience at Keyll Daree. They were joined by a mother who gave a moving and honest account of her experiences as the parent of her son, a person with learning disabilities and autism. The session was confidently compered by another adult with a learning disability, Nicky Clarke.

This was an event shaped and led by people with lived experience—and, in many ways, it served as a call to action for all of us in the audience. While all the presenters received valuable support from the practitioners who helped organise the event (a well-deserved round of applause to Kennedy Thompson and Ealish McDonald), they had full ownership of their voices—their message, their method, and their moment. That matters. In fact, it’s fundamental.

### ***“Nothing about us without us.”***

You may have heard this powerful slogan before. It’s a cornerstone of the disability rights movement—and yet it equally applies to everything we do in safeguarding and beyond.

The key message here is not just about hearing voices. It’s about how we ensure those voices are not just heard, but listened to, acted upon and central to the process.

This incredible session offered several important takeaways:

- If we are serious about inclusion, we must be equally serious about co-production.
- Meaningful engagement is not an optional extra—it's a practice imperative.
- If we want people to truly engage, we must meet them on their terms: at their pace, with their agenda, and in pursuit of goals that matter to them.

We must not go with the principle of expecting people with lived experience to come to us- we must go them. We need to get out there....

This principle—engagement led by the individual—is at the heart of effective safeguarding practice. It cannot be treated as an add-on. It is essential. When people or communities feel unheard, unseen, or devalued, the risks of harm, neglect, and marginalisation increase.

In my own previous work across learning disability services, I've too often seen people excluded from decisions that directly affect their lives. This challenge extends beyond the learning-disabled community—it affects *all* vulnerable people. We cannot work effectively without the voices of those we aim to safeguard.

Events like this remind us that people should never be passive recipients of care, support, or protection. They are the experts in their own lives.

### **What Can We Do?**

As safeguarding professionals, we must ask ourselves:

*How can we amplify the voices of people with lived experience in future policy, practice, and planning?*

It's a question worth reflecting on—and one I'll be returning to in future updates.

But before we finish, the final words should go to those who inspired this article. I met with Jenny, Liam and Georgia to see if there was anything further they would like to say-

- Jenny asked everyone to keep an eye out for the poster calling for women footballers
- Liam simply said: "I said it all in the presentation. If you snooze, you lose."
- Georgia wanted you to know about her TikTok account, where she posts videos of herself signing along to her favourite songs. She hopes you'll follow her.

