



## Parents with Learning Disabilities Partnership Working Conference

...supporting parents with learning disabilities by working  
together

24<sup>th</sup> March 2010  
Renewal Conference Centre, Solihull, B91 2JR

# CONFERENCE REPORT

*'A free conference financed by the Solihull Children and Young People's Trust,  
supporting parents with learning disabilities by working together.....'*

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## 1) The Programme

**9:30 Registration**

**9:45 Welcome** – Nicky Hopkins, Manager, Solihull Action through Advocacy

**9:50 Opening Address** – Mark Rogers, Chief Executive, Solihull MBC

**10:00 Keynote Speakers:**

Anthony Lucas, Solihull Action through Advocacy  
‘A personal perspective on being a parent with learning disabilities’

Diane Simcoe, Elfrida Society  
‘The London Network of Parents with Learning Difficulties – parents and professionals working in partnership’

Jenny May, Dudley NHS  
‘The importance of early intervention and an integrated approach’

**10:45 Refreshment Break**

	<b>A</b>	<b>B</b>	<b>C</b>	<b>D</b>
<b>11:00 Workshops 1</b>	<b>Anthony Lucas/ Christine Spooner</b>	<b>Diane Simcoe Elfrida Society</b>	<b>Jenny May Dudley NHS</b>	<b>Catherine Carter Austin Bradshaw Change</b>
<b>11:45 Workshops 1 (repeated)</b>	What do parents say they need? A Question and Answer session	Developing support services for parents – lessons from the voluntary sector	Early intervention and an integrated approach	Involving parents in shaping services

**12:45 Lunch**

**1:30 Afternoon Speakers**

Allan Norman, Celtic Knot  
The legal framework for supporting parents with learning disabilities

Mike Scorer and Debbie Powell, Solihull Action through Advocacy  
‘15 years of advocating for parents with learning disabilities in Solihull – what we have learned so far’

	<b>E</b>	<b>F</b>	<b>G</b>	<b>H</b>
<b>2:00 Workshops 2</b>	<b>Allan Norman Celtic Knot</b>	<b>Lauren Hirst</b>	<b>Angie Smith Joy Richardson Action 4 Children</b>	<b>Mike Scorer Debbie Powell SAAtA</b>
<b>2:45 Workshops 2 (repeated)</b>	Using social care law to provide the support parents need	Addressing child protection concerns with parents with learning disabilities	Providing services for parents with learning disabilities – a practical approach	Working together as advocates to achieve change

**3:30 Coffee and Plenary**

**4:00 Close**

## 2) Key Note Speaker biographies

### **Anthony Lucas      Solihull Action through Advocacy** **Helen Pitt**

Anthony lives in Solihull with his partner and 6 year old son. They became involved with Solihull Action through Advocacy when Nicola was diagnosed with learning difficulties 7 years ago.

Helen Pitt is a parents` advocate based at Solihull Action through Advocacy. Her background is in independent mental health advocacy (IMHA) and counselling.

<http://www.solihulladvocacy.org.uk>

### **Diane Simcoe      Elfrida Society**

Diane has worked with people with learning difficulties for 20 years and worked with parents with learning difficulties for 10. This work includes developing support and advocacy services and facilitating the London Network of Parents with Learning Difficulties. She is currently adapting and delivering evidence based parenting programs and about to start a new project helping parents learn peer support skills.

<http://www.elfrida.com/>

### **Jenny May      Dudley NHS**

Jenny is a Parenting Enabler for Dudley Community Services (Health) based at Stourbridge Children and Families Centre which is managed by Action for Children. She was previously employed for two years as a Parenting Co-ordinator across Dudley, raising the profile of parents with learning disabilities. She is currently chairperson of 'Real Lives Real Choices' an advocacy scheme in County Durham for people with learning disabilities, which, in the last twelve months has seen an increase of parents being referred to the service.

<http://www.dudley.nhs.uk/>

### **Allan Norman      Celtic Knot**

Allan is a solicitor and a registered social worker with his own law and social work practice, Celtic Knot. He was formerly Principal Solicitor and Social Worker at Birmingham Law Centre. He qualified as a social worker 20 years ago and has been practicing in social welfare law ever since. He is a visiting lecturer in social work at Birmingham University and Warwick University, and in social welfare law at Birmingham City University.

<http://uk.msn.com/>

**Mike Scorer                      Solihull Action through Advocacy**  
**Debbie Powell**

Mike has been an advocate in Solihull for almost five years and also provides Independent Mental Capacity Advocacy in Birmingham. Mike was previously involved for ten years at a unique housing co-operative run by people with a learning disability and also provides respite foster care for Barnardo's.

Debbie has been an advocate in Solihull since 2001. The first people on her caseload were a couple with learning difficulties whose children had been removed from their care. Following funding from Comic Relief she worked as parents advocate in Solihull. She has recently been instrumental in securing funding and developing the current parents' advocacy work provided by Solihull Action through Advocacy.

<http://www.solihulladvocacy.org.uk>

### **3. Workshop Facilitators**

**Catherine Carter      CHANGE**  
**Austin Bradshaw**

Catherine Carter is a member of Parents Training for Change. Parents Training for Change are trainers with learning disabilities who deliver sessions to influence staff training and policy-making, to enable them to support people with learning disabilities to have a positive experience as parents.

CHANGE is a leading national equal rights organisation led by Disabled People. CHANGE produces books and other resources to support parents with learning disabilities. We campaign to get information accessible, using easy words and pictures, more support for parents with learning disabilities and changes in the law to make things better for all people with learning disabilities.

<http://www.changepeople.co.uk/>

**Lauren Hirst   Solihull Children and Education Services**

Lauren is team manager for the Children in Care team and the supervised contact team in Solihull. She has been a qualified social worker for 21 years working in both statutory and voluntary sectors. She used to manage a Parents with Learning Disabilities project in Birmingham and has brought that experience to Solihull to help develop good practice within Children's Social Work services and with professional partners.

<http://www.solihull.gov.uk/staysafe/>

**Christine Spooner**

Christine lives in Birmingham with her husband Martin; they have two children who were taken away when they were babies. Until recently Christine was chair of Birmingham People First. She is also a member of Grapevine's media team and CASBA. Christine sees herself as a campaigner for the rights of parents with learning disabilities.

**Joy Richards**                      **Action for Children**  
**Angie Smith**

Joy and Angie are family support workers with Action for Children in Solihull. Action for Children are the largest provider of family support services in the UK. Family centres give parenting advice, a safe space for families to play and the chance to learn new skills, subjects and information. The centres also help practically, with things like debt and housing difficulties, and offer self-help or family therapy for problems such as sexual abuse, domestic violence and anti-social behaviour.

<http://www.actionforchildren.org.uk/>

#### **4. The presentations.**

The delegates arrived on a rather grey day for the start of the conference, however, The Renewal Centre is such a splendid venue it more than made up for the poor weather and it was very gratifying to see so many people arrive from such a huge diversity of professional backgrounds. During the event a number of individuals commented that the day would not have been so well attended a few years ago. It was felt that the numbers present and the professional roles represented reflected an increasing and genuine desire across the board to improve services for adults and especially parents with a learning disability.

**Nicky Powell**, manager of Solihull Action through Advocacy (SAAtA), warmly welcomed everyone to the day. The opening address was given by the conference Chair, **Mark Rogers** who is currently Chief Executive of Solihull Metropolitan Borough Council. Mark explained a little about his previous career as a teacher at a school for children with special needs before talking about the future of services for adults with learning disabilities.

The first keynote speaker was **Anthony Lucas**, who was supported by his advocate **Helen Pitt** (SAAtA). Their presentation was entitled, '*A personal perspective on being a parent with learning disabilities*'

Via a question and answer presentation, the conference learned about Anthony and his partner's life story and where they felt that partnership working would have made a difference to them and their children when they were going through child protection proceedings.

The second speaker was **Diane Simcoe** from the Elfrida Society talking about '*The London Network of Parents with Learning Difficulties – parents and professionals working in partnership*'. Diane explained about a toolkit that parents working with her organisation have helped to design. The toolkit facilitates understanding and participation in decision making that will affect parents with a learning disability.

Speaker number three was **Jenny May**, of Dudley NHS who spoke about *'The importance of early intervention and an integrated approach'* Jenny's talk focused on the importance of partnership working.

**Allan Norman** from Celtic Knot then addressed the conference. Allan talked about child protection and the law. Dressed as a judge for a brief time, Allan posed a number of hypothetical questions to the conference to be further explored within his workshop.

and finally.....

**Mike Scorer** and **Debbie Powell** from Solihull Action through Advocacy concluded the talks by explaining about our services at SAAtA, what we are able to do to support parents and also by encouraging professionals present to understand how important advocacy is and how it can make such a positive difference in individual's lives. Mike confirmed how important it is to remember advocacy and make referrals to our service.

## **5. Feedback from the workshops.**

Recommendations from the workshops`

**`Two things that everyone should know.....`**

Honest and open communication and trust is paramount to working together, right across the board.

Services should be family focussed. There should be `home` assessments, (a bit like a foster care placement for grown ups,) instead of assessment centres.

Recognising parents` strengths at meetings and in court will leave parents feeling less like they have totally failed. We should focus on the positives.

Services should be available for the long term with accompanying long term funding of 3 – 5 years.

Ask parents, `what is the best way of communicating with you, delve deeper, involvement of other parents can help.

Early support is best, involving parents in a person centred way and peer support should be there via parenting groups.

Everyone needs to properly understand the role of the advocate.

There should be a “One Stop Shop” for professionals and families to obtain all the information they need.

Do not presume parents with a learning disability are incompetent.

Identify tailor made approaches.

*Good, snappy workshops kept things moving.*

*Great topics covered in the workshops. Excellent speakers, it was very informative and a fantastic day.*

*The workshops were really good. Workshop A (Anthony Lucas and Christine Spooner) was insightful because it brought a personal perspective to the day. This is what we need!*

*Workshop E (Allan Norman) was excellent. Really interesting and I learned a lot of new information.*

*Workshops were very useful, workshop A (Anthony Lucas and Christine Spooner) in particular.*

## **6. Comments and general feedback.**

### **About the venue.....**

*Superb venue, lovely food, helpful friendly staff, lovely cakes, good, hot coffee.*

### **About the speakers.....**

*The main speakers were great.*

*Tony and Christine were the best thing about the conference. Having people who are experts and willing to share their stories was brilliant. The question and answer session was very moving.*

### **General comments and feedback.....**

*What an absolutely excellent day, lots of clear, accessible information.*

*It was really interesting to see the focus of this conference looking at how mainstream services can adapt to meet the needs of people with learning disabilities.*

*We should all be speaking up for our families, no matter what profession we are in.*

*We should share knowledge.*

*I have gone away with some great new ideas.*

*We should find sponsor families who can support in the long term and create Positive Parenting Programmes.*

*Work with official solicitors to lessen the impact of court proceedings and liaise with the Family Justice Council.*

*Advocacy should be a statutory right for parents going through child protection proceedings.*

*Thanks for today, what an inspiring day! It was very positive and well worth the drive.*

*Can I have a job with you!*

*NB It should be noted that we also received two comments expressing frustration that two workshops had run overtime and that they had not addressed the expectations of the participant.*

## **7. The Working Party**

One of the desired outcomes of the conference was to bring together a working party and work towards a protocol for Solihull etc etc

Those individuals who registered their interest are:

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A representative of SAa will contact these individuals in the autumn of 2010 in order to call the first meeting of the Working Party.

## 8. Delegates and contact details

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## 9. Notes from a keynote presentation.

### **Anthony Lucas, Helen Pitt. Solihull Action through Advocacy 'A personal perspective on being a parent with learning disabilities'**

Good morning members of the conference.

My name is Helen Pitt, I work as a parents` advocate for Solihull Action through Advocacy.

I would like to introduce you to my co-presenter, Tony Lucas. Tony is a parent and in the past, he and his partner have lost four children to foster care and adoption proceedings. During these proceedings Tony`s partner was told by various professionals that her learning difficulty was so significant, it would mean that she would never be able to parent a child. This information shattered her confidence.

Around this time in his life, Tony had issues with alcohol which he successfully sought help for.

When Tony`s partner became pregnant with her fifth child, Solihull Action through Advocacy became involved to represent the parent`s wishes, views and hopes. The future of their baby was to be decided via court proceedings. Tony is dyslexic but in spite of this, he was told at that time that he was not in need of any further assistance. Tony disagreed.

With the support of Solihull Action through Advocacy, a residential parenting assessment lasting nine months was arranged at Dudley Lodge. Tony was to be assessed as the main carer for both mother and child. Tony recalls that it was only these two agencies that were prepared to stand up and state that the parents should be given a chance and offered the right kind of support, or otherwise their boy would most definitely have been adopted.

The children`s social work team felt that their baby son should be placed for adoption, the child`s Gaurdian ad litem did not think it could ever work out, yet it has. Thankfully, Tony and his partner are still the proud parents of a beautiful, six year old boy but not before they fought tooth and nail to keep him. They are also aware that they still have to go to the `extra level` and work harder to keep their child with them because he is a LAC or a `looked after child`. The involvement of various professionals is likely to continue until their son is 18.

In this presentation we shall be discussing some of the reasons why in Tony`s experience, integrated working has helped him and his family to continue to overcome some weighty obstacles.....

Questions to Tony followed:

Tony, what do you imagine would have happened to your family without the right kind of support?

*Tony responded that they would have lost their child for sure.*

How did you and your partner keep going when things seemed really bleak, what kept you forging ahead, what worked for you, in terms of support?

*(Dudley Lodge helped us to become better parents in many ways. Advocacy helped us by communicating our views across a broad spectrum of professionals. Open and honest support from a number of professionals has boosted my partner`s confidence.)*

Please can you tell the conference why you think that integrated working is better for your child.

*It encourages communication between the child and other professionals eg. teachers or social workers and increases security for the child and lessens feelings of isolation. Professionals get a much broader understanding of the needs, wishes and hopes of our child. It`s our hard work but it`s a joint effort now, a team effort to support our son. It isn`t about us, it isn`t about the professionals, it`s about our son)*

What important message would you wish to communicate to the conference audience today?

*Tony responded by reiterating the importance of advocacy and integrated working.*

## **10. Summing up the day.**

Someone said at the conference, “A few years ago you would never have seen so many people from such a diversity of backgrounds, attending a conference on partnership working to support parents with a learning disability.”

The encouraging thing about this conference is that today we were joined by representatives from all kinds of support agencies, health professionals, social workers, the police, even the fire brigade. That is incredibly uplifting and it is clear evidence that people do care and do want to make a difference.

One of the comments a colleague said was that in fifteen years of advocacy, we have not really seen many huge strides forward so perhaps the day offered us all an opportunity to go back to our colleagues and start a debate on how we might all improve the services we offer to parents and people with a learning disability.

**End.**