



A Tale of Two Journeys

All Wales People first have appointed Joe Powell as its new National Director. Yvonne Boxall describes the journey All Wales People First took to appoint a Director with a learning disability and, if you read 'Joes Story', how this is truly a tale of two journeys.

I'm sure it happens to everybody. One day you turn around and you notice that the world has changed. You look around at the people you work with and you see things in a completely new light. The thing with self advocacy is that growth occurs in small steps. The tendency is to only look forward to what seems like an ever increasing cycle of challenges and hurdles and you forget to look back down the road you've travelled. When you do look back you are surprised that the starting point is now well out of sight.

The Question

This is what happened in 2010 when the National Council of People First members started to plan our business strategy over the next few years. The question we asked them was: 'How does All Wales People First become THE voice of people with learning disabilities in Wales?' Amongst many other ideas, one specific suggestion emerged with unanimous agreement, 'get a person with learning disabilities at the head of the organisation!' Those of you who work in self advocacy and People First will no doubt be empathising with me at



this point (and, I don't want to dwell on this too much), but the praise for 'working yourself out of a job' did not stop me from feeling apprehensive. I knew we would face a great deal of scepticism from the wider world and there would be many cynics who would think this role tokenistic. I have to admit the thought of such radical change filled me with trepidation.

Able people

I looked at the members I had worked most closely with, past and present, and asked myself 'could they do the job as Director?' I thought about the roles they had held: Glayne Walker, vice Chancellor's medal for contribution to politics and Welsh policy and former co chair of LDIAG, Darren Locke, Chair of the National Council and public speaker, Sophie Hinksman, current co

chair of LDAG, brilliant facilitator and public speaker, Jonathan Richards, campaigner, trustee of numerous organisations, aspirations to hold a public appointment, or to stand for local government, and so on. I thought about our working relationships and how much these had changed since I started working for All Wales People First and was struck, most intensely, by a monumental shift – as active members within the movement they had made the progression from dependency to interdependence, from interdependence to independence. Now I think of them, quite simply, as work colleagues. My doubt was not about people's ability to achieve this position but anxiety about change itself.....and perhaps, convincing the sceptics!

Llais

The journey

And so the journey began, with lots of discussion that tapped into the National Council's talents, the skills of All Wales People First's Trustees, external consultants, the Welsh Government (who were not, by the way, in the least sceptical) and eventually we agreed on job descriptions, person specifications and finally the day when we formally advertised the position....

National Director - to represent the voice of people with learning disabilities for Wales, and to champion their place in a changing Wales.

.....and waited for whatever happened next.

It will be no surprise to hear that the advert caused big divisions of opinion; they ranged from over enthusiasm (the job would be a doddle... as long as there's support), to serious doubters, mostly from Health and Social Services, who emailed us to say they didn't know anyone with a learning disability who could do this job. But ultimately the serious contenders for the job found their way into the process.

National Council members designed the two-day interview. The recruitment process was uncompromised by the fact that candidates had a learning disability; there were leaderless discussions, individual tasks and presentations, a formal dinner with an overnight stay and then the formal interview the following day. Designing the recruitment process was very challenging for

all involved; we knew that on one hand we had to get the right person for the job, we knew that there were some people from outside the People First movement who wanted us to fail. Opportunities like these are so scarce for people with learning disabilities and we wanted to give someone that chance, without damaging them or their expectations in any way.

The National Council should be proud too for having the foresight and belief that a person with learning disability could lead the organisation

Long-list to short-list

We received about 25 applications, most of which were of a high quality - a further insight into people's individual achievements and a testament to work skills training - and we managed to sift down to a 'long-list' of ten. The ten came from a range of different backgrounds, some from People First groups but an equal number from individuals who were not part of People First, and some from other disability organisations and agencies. I cannot praise the candidates enough; they prepared well for the interview tasks, conducted themselves very professionally and rose to the occasion. They bonded well,

grasping any opportunity to have social time together (very little in actual fact) and when they left, thanked us for what they described as 'a brilliant experience'.

Then, ten became six and six became one

You will have just read the incredible personal journey of our new Director, Joe Powell and it strikes me that the most inspiring stories are the ones facing adversity from which insight, wisdom and inspiration are drawn. I am confident that all of the candidates will be feeling very proud of themselves - they should be anyway. The National Council should be proud too for having the foresight and belief that a person with learning disability could lead the organisation; they had no doubts that the time was right for this next stage in the journey of People First movement in Wales and their belief has enabled All Wales People First to put our principles of self advocacy into practice.

The next stage of the journey has only just begun and there is just time to pause for reflection. What this experience has taught me is that sometimes the ideas that seem the most improbable are the most worthwhile exploring, because it often only requires a small shift in thinking, a little courage, or at very least, a look back down the road you have travelled, to notice that the world has changed and the improbable has become perfectly possible.

Yvonne Boxall