**Joe Powell, Chief Executive – All Wales People First**

**Through our Eyes on Tour celebration event in Bangor, 2nd December 2024**

What’s in a picture?

I met the Project Manager/ photographer of the original Through Our Eyes project, Natasha Hirst some years ago when we were part of another project. I spoke to Natasha about my personal frustration that people with learning disabilities are often portrayed in the media in a tokenistic way and the images are usually chosen and designed by someone without a learning disability. We agreed that this would be a great opportunity to work with people with learning disabilities to design the images they felt best represented them and to challenge negative attitudes and stereotypes about learning disability.

We put this to our National Council, the member led forum who lead the strategic vision of All Wales People First and they agreed. They worked with All Wales People First on how they think the project should look and what it should contain. This informed a successful Big Lottery bid, and the Through Our Eyes project which produced the images you see here today.

We held a successful launch of the project in the Senedd in 2022 with the then First Minister Mark Drakeford in attendance. The feedback we got was excellent and it was very clear from that feedback that we should exhibit the pictures across Wales. This was also confirmed when we engaged with members of the public at this years Eisteddfod in Pontypridd. From that the ‘Through Our Eyes on Tour’ was born.

Projects like Through Our Eyes, look like they are a lot of fun. Exhibitions are fun, they are positive, and they feel like a good social engagement opportunity. And indeed they are.

But make no mistake about it, this project is not a vanity project. It is not a project about creating ‘pretty pictures’ for a back slapping celebration event like today. The purpose of this project is to address a fundamental core barrier that people with learning disabilities face in everyday life. And that is how they are perceived within society. That perception is still the main barrier that keeps people with learning disabilities excluded from society. The pictures you see here today are a façade, a route map to a much deeper fundamental truth. That truth is that people with learning disabilities can and are willing to play a wider role in society. They are more than just people with a learning disability.

Indeed, if you go back to our history. In the mid seventies a self-advocacy conference in Oregon in the United States of America talked about what they wanted for their future. For many self-advocates, this was a difficult question to answer. This was because they had previously had little opportunity to engage in society or have the choices and opportunities to build their lives. What they were clear about however was that they wanted to be seen as People First. As human beings above all else. Their learning disability did not define them. It was just a part of who they are. And hence the international People First movement was born.

For me self-advocacy is not just speaking up or learning how to speak up for ourselves it is also about being visible and present in society. By being visible and present we can challenge the negative attitudes and stereotypes towards learning disability. The people pictured in today’s exhibition are not just good examples of self-advocates challenging pre-conceptions about what people with learning disabilities can do. They are also ambassadors for what so many other people with learning disabilities have been excluded from doing. They don’t just represent what so many of our members achieve, they represent what so many other people with learning disabilities are being prevented from achieving. They represent what society and communities can gain from including us, and what society and communities are missing out on by excluding us.

I believe that attitudes towards people with learning disabilities were set years ago. During the industrial revolution, people with learning disabilities were institutionalised because they were not seen as being able to contribute to the new industrial age. Locked away for years and out of sight of society. It was not until the innovative All Wales Strategy of 1983 that we started to recognise that people with learning disabilities should live in their local communities and that a learning disability was not a medical condition. That people with learning disabilities should not be living in hospitals.

Forty one years ago sounds like a long time ago but it isn’t. It takes a long time to change attitudes. Within those last forty years we were still closing long stay hospitals and re-integrating people back into society. Those who have been integrated back into society have in some cases lived in their own houses with support but often people lived in residential care services and have used day centres. Whilst this was a better model than the long stay hospital system, we didn’t change the culture. We took that with us. The culture of doing to not doing with is still very prevalent. The fact that the decisions that affect the lives of many people with learning disabilities are still often controlled by those who support them. The lives of many people with learning disabilities still revolve around what their services can offer them, rather than what they want to do in order to live a good life.

What we have achieved within the third sector is to sell the ideas of how things should be for people with learning disabilities. Expressions such as voice, choice and control, person centred, and co-production are embedded in modern legislations such as the Social Services and Wellbeing (Wales) Act. They trip off the tongue from politicians and civil servants with ease. But unfortunately, those words have not really translated into actions on the ground. The system of support still embodies the culture we were supposed to have left behind many years ago.

This is especially clear when we take into account the fact that some people with learning disabilities are be placed into secure mental health units because the services they need cannot be provided. When I started my role twelve years ago, as someone who lived in care services and embarked on an individual budget, I hoped to be a poster boy for what can be achieved by thinking differently about how we do things. I never imagined that I would be part of a protest outside of the Senedd calling for people with learning disabilities to be freed from institutionalised settings. I believe that if this happened to any other citizen in society there would be a public outrage. But society seems to be largely indifferent when this happens to people with learning disabilities.

And this brings me back to the images and why raising the profile of people with learning disabilities in our local communities is important.

Some of the images show the positive experiences of some people with learning disabilities in employment. Why did we do that? Number one, it shows that people with learning disabilities can be successful in employment. Number two, it challenges the fact that only four percent of people with learning disabilities have any level of meaningful employment in the United Kingdom.

Some of the images show married couples with a learning disability. Why did we do that? Number one, to show that people with learning disabilities can be marred, live together and have the same needs as the rest of society. Number two, because it is quite rare that people with learning disabilities get the opportunity to have long standing relationships let alone be married. This is because quite often they have been treated like children, as not being sexual beings or the rules of their care services do not allow partners to stay overnight with them.

Some of the images show people with learning disabilities as parents. Why did we do that? Number one, to show that people with learning disabilities can be parents. Number two, because the vast majority of people with learning disabilities are not allowed to keep their children. Not because they have been assessed to be unfit as parents, but because of the label learning disability alone.

Do you get the picture?

I believe that actions speak much louder than words. If you want to understand someone’s values, look at what they actually do not what they say they do. One of my frustrations is that we often see people in the third sector who work with people with learning disabilities, championing the rights of people with learning disabilities and speaking out for them. To those who see the world within a charitable lense, this may appear a very kind thing to do on a surface level.

But to me, the image they portray is not of people who are kind or benevolent, but of people who lack faith in the ability of people with learning disabilities to speak up and advocate for themselves. White people don’t speak for black people, those who are straight do not speak for those who identify as being LGBTQ, men do not speak for women. But in the learning disability world, it is expected that people without learning disabilities should speak up for people who do not have learning disabilities.

People First is different. Our members run this organisation and our members are the voice of this organisation. That is the key to changing societies perceptions about us and treating us as active and equal citizens.

So, when you look at the images, either in the gallery or on your screens (if you download them), please be mindful not only of the positive image you are seeing, but what message that image is trying to convey. What barriers are they trying to overcome. They are not just a series of lovely pictures. They are a set of images that people with learning disabilities themselves have created with the intention of showing how they want to be viewed by society. They are self-advocacy in action.

Thank you very much!