



Mencap NI Briefing Paper No.5

Why youth work matters for young people with a learning disability

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In Northern Ireland there are approximately¹:

- **42,000** people with a learning disability
- **31,000** adults (aged 18 and over)
- **11,000** children and young people aged 0-17 years old

A **learning disability** is a reduced intellectual ability and difficulty with everyday activities. Learning disabilities are diverse in nature, ranging from mild to moderate, to more severe and profound. With the right support, most people with a learning disability can lead fulfilled lives.

Youth work supports the personal, social and educational development of young people across a diverse range of settings.

Introduction

Mencap's vision is a future in which the UK is the best place in the world for people with a learning disability to lead happy and healthy lives. Emotional well-being and inclusion within local communities are important factors in achieving this. Youth work has a vital role to play in supporting the personal development of young people with a learning disability, and providing them with safe spaces to socialise and make friends.

Access to free/low-cost youth services is especially important during the current cost of living crisis, and while young people recover from the pandemic's impact on their education and mental health. They are also an important resource for those young people in NI who are exposed to community violence associated with the legacy of living in a post-conflict society.

However, mainstream youth services are not particularly inclusive for young people with a learning disability, who tend to rely on specialist programmes provided by organisations such as Mencap NI. Against a backdrop of wider funding cuts to employment, education and youth services, and delays in the roll-out of further EU funding, Mencap's provision for young people has been significantly curtailed due to a lack of mainstream funding, placing our youth service at risk of closure.

Without youth services which meet their needs, young people with a learning disability do not have equal access to important personal, social, and educational opportunities. We believe they should have the same opportunities as everyone else to reach their full potential.

About this paper

This paper outlines why youth services are important for young people with a learning disability. Based on our extensive youth work experience, it also highlights what works well, discusses some of the main challenges, and offers recommendations for policy and practice.

Policy Context

In Northern Ireland, 'Priorities for Youth, Improving Young People's Lives through Youth Work' (Department of Education (DE), 2013) sets out the overarching policy framework for the delivery of a youth service that contributes to DE's vision of every child or young person achieving their full potential at each stage of their development. Within this Strategy, effective youth work has a significant role in raising standards in education.

Recently, a **Regional Needs Assessment** (Education Authority (EA), 2022a) was undertaken to establish the level of need for youth service provision for children and young people aged 4-25 years, and to inform future planning and funding of the service for the next three years. The associated **Regional Youth Development Plan 2023 – 2026** (EA, 2022b) states there will be increased early and continuous support for vulnerable children and young people who experience poor educational, health or social outcomes. It highlights participation as a key action through supporting Section 75 groups to have **increased** access to universal/generic youth provision. As part of embedding and delivering Community Relations Equality and Diversity (CRED) policy in youth work, one intended outcome is ensuring access to youth services for all Section 75 groups.

The Regional Youth Development Plan also aligns with wider policy and strategy, for example, the Children and Young People's Strategy 2020 – 2030, the Children and Young People's Emotional Health and Wellbeing in Education Framework, and the Special Educational Needs and Disability Framework which is underpinned by the SEND Act (NI) 2016.

Article 23 of the **United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)** recognises that every child with a disability has the right to play an active part in the community. Under **Article 29**, education must develop every child's personality, talents and abilities to the full.

Section 75 of the **Northern Ireland Act (1998)** places a statutory obligation on public authorities to have due regard to the need to promote equality of opportunity and good relations in respect of religious belief, political opinion, gender, race, disability, age, marital status, dependants and sexual orientation.

Learning disability and outcomes

Children and young people with a learning disability are at greater risk of poor educational, health and social outcomes. They are more likely to²:



Despite these vulnerabilities, children and young people with a learning disability can face many barriers accessing support. This includes key policy, services and funding often not corresponding to levels of need.

The role of youth work

“Youth work is the best methodology to unlock young people’s potential by providing high quality support and opportunities. Skilled youth workers build relationships that support young people to explore their personal, social, and educational development. Youth work enables young people to develop their voice, influence, and place within society.” (National Youth Agency)

Youth work is also one of the most powerful community-based assets available to help create a better society (Children’s and Young People’s Centre for Justice). Through non-formal educational activities, youth work “removes barriers, giving socially excluded children and young people a safe place to go, someone to talk to who can quietly understand and assess their needs” (EA, 2022a, p.5). Youth work also has many socio-economic benefits, with one study in England estimating that the indirect value of youth work exceeded £3bn, with more than £500m in savings from reductions in crime alone (UK Youth, 2022).

Youth work has been shown to have a role to play in providing opportunities for harm reduction and prevention amongst young people living in areas of elevated community violence (Walsh, 2023). Access to safe places, support and opportunities through youth services is important in Northern Ireland, which to some extent remains a divided society. The legacy of the conflict creates additional factors which impact on young people’s mental health (Children’s Law Centre, 2022). Many young people are living in interface clusters where inter-community tensions exist; and vulnerable children and young people are particularly susceptible to the influence of paramilitary and organised crime groups (EA, 2022a). These areas tend to have the highest rates of mental ill-health and child poverty, and the lowest levels of educational attainment (NI Commissioner for Children and Young People, 2018).

Tackling loneliness and promoting social inclusion

Research (pre-and-post pandemic) shows that people with a disability are disproportionately more likely to be affected by social isolation and loneliness, especially young disabled people (Sense, 2021/2017; Office for National Statistics, 2018). Loneliness is linked to a higher mortality risk (Holt-Lunstad et al, 2015), coronary heart disease and stroke (Valtorta et al, 2016). It is also associated with an increased risk of depression, anxiety and stress (Mental Health Foundation, 2022/2018).

Access to the friendship and leisure opportunities gained through participation in youth services is important for young people with a learning disability, to help prevent loneliness and promote social inclusion. A supportive peer group also strengthens their ability to develop important soft skills such as communication, managing emotions and teamwork. Positive direct contact through leisure activities can further help challenge negative attitudes associated with learning disability (Scior & Werner, 2015).

²Sources: Mental health (NICE, 2016; Emerson & Hatton, 2007); Physical health (See range of references in Webb, 2019, pp.5-6); Care experienced (DoH, 2016); CSE (Franklin et al, 2015); Poverty (JRF, 2016); Bullying (Fink et al., 2015); Educational attainment (Public Health England, 2015); Leisure activities / friendship (Taheri et al., 2016).

Barriers to youth services

Under-represented in policy

There is no specific detail in the Regional Youth Development Plan (EA, 2022b) as to how the needs of individual Section 75 groups will be considered, including young people with a disability / learning disability. The ‘Priorities for Youth’ Strategy (DE, 2013) indicated there would be targeted provision for young people at greater risk of social exclusion, marginalisation or isolation because they experience a combination of barriers to learning, including young people with special educational needs or disabilities. However, it is unclear how many young people with a disability / learning disability have benefited across both specialist and mainstream youth work provision, and what the outcomes are. There is no evidence of any evaluation having been undertaken to demonstrate the overall impact of ‘Priorities for Youth’, to share learning about challenges and successes, and to improve practice. Furthermore, the strategy is now ten years old and requires updating to suitably reflect societal changes relating to technology, mental health and wellbeing, and Covid-recovery.

Mainstream youth work is often not inclusive

Given its clearly identified role underpinning formal education in Northern Ireland, it is essential that youth work services are available for every child and young person who lives here. We know that youth work takes place in a diverse range of settings such as statutory youth clubs, uniformed /faith-based organisations, charities and via outreach projects. However, there are no available figures for the numbers of young people with a learning disability who engage across youth services in NI, so their participation rate is unknown.

Young people with special educational needs believe there is not enough specialised support currently available within youth services (EA, 2022a). In our experience, young people with a learning disability can be reluctant to participate in mainstream provision, often worried they will not be in a safe space where their needs are considered. Without mandatory learning disability awareness training for youth workers, it is unlikely that youth services can provide the reasonable adjustments required to meet young people’s varied and individual needs. Professional youth work qualifications do not tend to include learning disability awareness training as part of the curriculum.

Segregated services can reinforce differences between disabled and non-disabled people, therefore EA’s plans to make ‘generic’ youth services more accessible to Section 75 groups are welcome. Common barriers which will need to be addressed in mainstream provision to support young people with a learning disability, include:



Inadequate ratio of staff for level of support needed



Lack of learning disability awareness training for staff



A lack of appropriate activities / reasonable adjustments



Communication difficulties



Stigma



Bullying



Short-term and temporary funding

In Northern Ireland, the Education Authority (EA) is the main policy driver and statutory funder for youth services, including the majority of voluntary youth work providers. However, this work may be only part-funded, with most organisations accessing at least one other funding stream, and on average funding from three or four different funders (Kernaghan, 2021). This has been Mencap’s experience, with the majority of our youth work in recent years being funded through the EU PEACE IV Programme, in recognition that young people with a learning disability are a marginalised group at risk of poor outcomes. There has been a gap between PEACE IV ending, and applications opening for what will be a last round of EU funding through PEACEPLUS.

The EA’s traditional funding arrangements were recently phased out and replaced with a new regional and voluntary youth scheme which provides project, development and strategic funding on the basis of identified need to meet DE objectives. There is some (provisional) funding indicated in the Regional Youth Development Plan (EA, 2022b) for youth work which focuses on tackling paramilitarism, diversionary activities and cross-community camps. However, the funding line is unclear in relation to the delivery of targeted work with Section 75 groups, including young people with a learning disability.

In the absence of any EA funding, and when other funding sources draw to a close, the young people that Mencap NI supports are at risk of limited access to specialist youth work services. The short term and temporary funding cycle for youth programmes, as well as delays and / or reductions in funding, places significant limitations on organisations’ ability to plan for future work. It can lead to a loss of staff expertise in a sector where it is already challenging to recruit qualified and experienced youth workers. It also risks weakening long-established infrastructure and partnerships.

What works

Mencap NI has developed considerable expertise in empowering young people through a person-centred youth work approach which supports their personal development and aspirations. Our youth service aims to facilitate the abilities of young people to **think, act, change, create and grow**, so they can reach their full potential. The role of our highly motivated and dedicated youth team is central to young people’s enjoyment and successful participation in our programmes.

Mencap NI Youth Team

- Qualified, skilled and experienced youth workers
- In-depth knowledge and understanding about learning disability, and how it can impact a young person’s life
- Strong interpersonal skills, with the ability to communicate effectively and respond to different needs
- Passionate about inclusion, and committed to co-production
- Work collaboratively with stakeholders to maximise opportunities for young people
- Support influencing activities to bring about change to policy and practice

Mencap NI Youth Service



EU PEACE IV Programme

‘Children and Young People’ was a priority area of the PEACE IV Programme for young people aged between 14-24 years who are most disadvantaged and hardest to reach, and who have deep social, emotional, and good relations needs. The Programme’s Phase I Impact Evaluation reported evidence of significant positive change in each of the three outcome areas (Good Relations, Personal Development, and Citizenship), and for the majority of indicators within them (Special EU Programmes Body (SEUPB), 2022).



HEROES Project

HEROES (Helping Equality, Respecting Others, Enabling Success) was funded by SEUPB through PEACE IV, with match funding provided by the Department for the Economy in Northern Ireland, and the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth in Ireland. Based on a professional youth work approach, the project worked across three geographical locations in Greater Belfast, Fermanagh/border counties and Derry-Londonderry/Donegal. Young people were actively involved in co-producing and delivering activities, which were all based on their interests, and what they like to do.



Personal development was achieved through participation in taster sessions, field trips, coaching and mentoring, group work, peer-led activities, drama, sport, and practical exercises. Outdoor pursuits included zip-lining, archery, paddle-boarding, and bushcraft activities to develop survival skills. Group sessions on emotional well-being provided opportunities to discuss mental health, explore the associated stigmas, and learn tools to manage stress appropriately.



Good relations were an integral part of the project through practical exercises and peer-led discussions on different cultures, communities, abilities and orientations. Young people with different needs and abilities from both CNR, PUL³ and other backgrounds engaged with each other across the project.



Citizenship was understood and demonstrated through group discussion on social justice, equality and democracy; participation in environmental and other social action projects; and volunteering.

Case Study : Harry



Harry participated in the HEROES and Transform youth projects, which supported him with confidence-building, citizenship, First Aid training, leadership, and learning to be organised. These personal development skills helped prepare Harry to progress into Mencap’s employment service, and subsequently secure some paid work.

Harry’s proudest achievements at Mencap include:

- **Peer leadership** – Harry became an active team leader, accompanying young people on outdoor trips and in team building activities. He successfully presented a group session on the environment and climate change.
- **Paid employment** – Harry was supported through the employment service to produce a CV and prepare for interviews. As a result, he obtained a paid job for six months within Mencap’s personal support service. In this role, Harry assisted adults in supported living who have a learning disability with their personal care, food preparation, shopping and social activities.
- Harry enjoys travelling and writing poetry. With all the skills and experience he gained through his time with Mencap, Harry is positive about the future.

“Mencap has helped boost my confidence and to realise my purpose in life through the activities we have done. My leadership skills have improved, and my self-esteem is at an all-time high.”

Case Study : Odhran

Odhran says he “wasn’t in a good place” when he first joined the HEROES Project, and that “my self-esteem and confidence were practically ruined at that point.” He struggled to communicate with others and was unable to socialise as he wanted with his peers. Odhran felt very isolated and was unclear about what he wanted to with his life when he left school.

With encouragement from the youth workers, Odhran began developing his social and communication skills, and was encouraged to participate in a wide range of social and leisure opportunities. He undertook group work and team-building activities, First Aid training, cookery, and enjoyed many daytrips with the new friends he made. He says, “it wasn’t long before I shed my negative and broken shell in favour of a much more confident and much better outlook on everything and everyone around me.”

With his newfound confidence, Odhran gained some paid employment. As a talented artist, he then decided to pursue his dreams “of doing art to entertain others” and successfully applied to study for a degree at university. He now lives independently when studying, and is positive about the future.

“Overall, a lot of fortunate events have happened either due to the project or partially to do with it.... all the memories I have got of hanging out, of laughing, and working together, our experience of the HEROES Project will never truly leave us.”

HEROES Project - Feedback from 83 participants showed that:

82% had improved self-confidence

96% better understood the inclusion of others

95% better understood citizenship, diversity and community relations

90% better understood other cultures and traditions.

“I really enjoyed my time on the HEROES project. It was a lot of fun to make new friends and the activities we did were always amazing. It helped me to gain more confidence in myself. I was shy and did not talk to a lot of people before, but now conversations with members of the group increased my confidence.”

“HEROES helped me to connect with people I wouldn’t usually meet, as they were from different schools. We had a chance to talk about lots of things, including what challenges we all faced. Everyone was really friendly, and the activities were very inclusive.”

“The project helped my son to believe in himself, gain confidence and show him that he can be socially accepted.... It gives them a self-worth, appreciation and respect for others. They truly are their own heroes.”



Covid-19

The pandemic posed particular health risks to people with a learning disability, which required the development of comprehensive risk protocols and ongoing monitoring. Virtual experiential learning activities were quickly designed and implemented to ensure continuity of provision. Ongoing periods of lockdowns / restrictions led to staff having to find creative and innovative ways of working in order to deliver the core elements of the programme.

The move to home-based and online delivery presented both challenges and opportunities. Some young people did not have access to technology, or did not feel comfortable using this medium, and nearly all required support to use it effectively and safely. Others preferred this remote method of engagement. Although the majority of youth work is once again provided in-person, lessons learned from the pandemic have led Mencap NI to develop a blended model of virtual and face-to-face activities for some elements of programme delivery.

“Our Trip to Belfast Activity Centre. We learnt how to build a fire, did some orienteering and played games. It was the first time we met the other Youth Forum face to face and not online!”

Youth Forum

The Mencap NI Youth Forum is made up of young people who have a learning disability / autism aged 16-25 years. It meets every two weeks across two locations, in Belfast and, until recently, in Fermanagh. In their role, members regularly engage in consultation work and research projects on issues that affect young people with a learning disability, for example, health issues, mental health and education.

The aim of the Youth Forum is to:

- Promote the voice of young people in Mencap NI and beyond
- Take action to influence and improve the local community
- Assist Mencap NI to develop projects and events for young people
- Promote the rights of children and young people
- Promote understanding and awareness of learning disability

Case Study: Kirsty



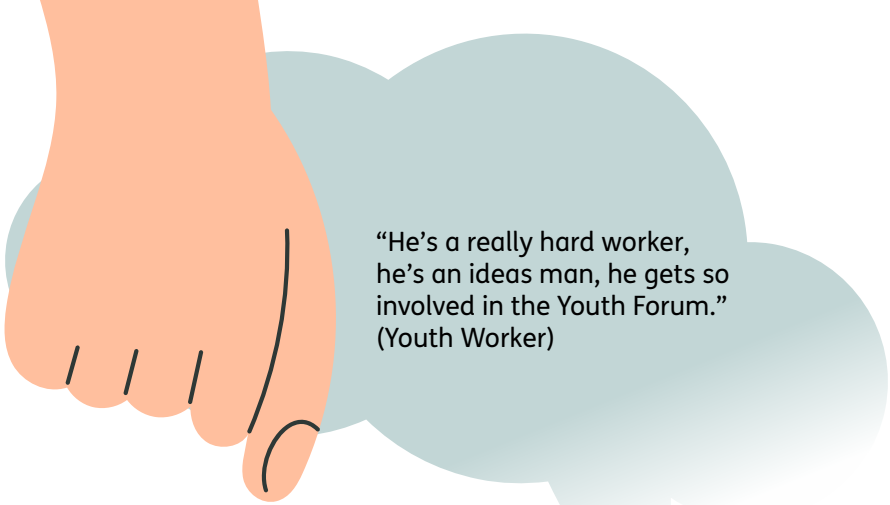
Kirsty has actively attended the Mencap NI youth service for four years. She previously participated in the Youth Club and HEROES Project, and is involved with the Youth Forum and young women's Dream Project. Kirsty receives support from the youth team to build her communication and inter-personal skills, and has really grown in confidence.

Kirsty's proudest achievements at Mencap include:

- **Leadership** – Kirsty undertook a leading role in organising the Youth Forum's 'Trashion' shows to promote sustainable fashion and raise awareness of climate change. Opening the catwalk, she also supported other young people to overcome their nerves and participate alongside her.
- **Public speaking** – Kirsty spoke positively and confidently at the 'Trashion' show event. Understanding that young people with Down's Syndrome can experience communication difficulties, she is passionate about encouraging and inspiring them to have their voice heard.
- **Volunteering** – Kirsty engages in volunteering activities to develop her skills and interests, as well as support the local community. For example, she volunteered at Mencap's 'Superhero' fun day for young children with a learning disability and their families; and took part in fundraising for a suicide prevention charity.

Kirsty especially enjoys the social aspect of the Youth Forum, saying **"I love being part of it and making new friends."** The skills she has learned through Mencap's youth services have helped Kirsty gain a pathway to a more independent life. She currently attends college, enjoys drama club, and hopes in future to work in administration, and mentor children with Down's Syndrome.

"She's gone from being the quiet young person to being the confident volunteer, peer mentor, and young leader."
(Youth Worker)



"He's a really hard worker, he's an ideas man, he gets so involved in the Youth Forum."
(Youth Worker)

Case Study: Ben



Ben initially took part in the HEROES Project, where he flourished before progressing on to become a committed and enthusiastic member of the Youth Forum. He has made many friends during his time with Mencap NI, and built new social and cultural awareness skills through participation in citizenship and cross-community activities. Ben has also been supported by the youth team to develop his inter-personal, leadership and problem solving skills. As a result, Ben is increasingly proficient at team working, being particularly well known for keeping everyone focused within planning sessions.

Ben's proudest achievements at Mencap include:

- **Event planning** – Ben took an active role in organising the 'Trashion Show'. He was a key support behind the scenes on the day to ensure everything ran smoothly, and also shared responsibility for selling refreshments. Ben says of his time so far with the Youth Forum, **"Planning and being part of the 'Trashion' show was the best bit."**
- **Volunteering** – Ben has grown in confidence to become a volunteer peer leader at Youth Forum social events. He also enjoyed volunteering at the Mencap Superhero fun day, where he sold Christmas cards to raise funds.

FIVE Project

Mencap NI received funding to deliver the ‘FIVE’ project through the RTE Toy Show Appeal Fund, which is administered by Community Foundation NI. This allowed us to widen our reach to young people who were unable to participate in other youth-based programmes, especially amongst the younger pre-teen age group. For some of the young people, this was their first engagement with youth work as a methodology for delivering developmental learning experiences.



The project’s wellbeing programmes provide mindfulness, mentoring and a range of inclusive, fun and interactive activities which help to develop the confidence and self-esteem of participants aged 10-18 years. They also aim to improve young people’s physical and mental health, and enable them to develop skills which support their wellbeing in the longer term.

FIVE is based on the ‘Five Ways to Wellbeing’ action themes originally identified by the New Economics Foundation (NEF, 2008). Through this, the young people are supported to **connect** and build friendships; to **be active** through sports/games; to **take notice** and be aware of the world around them; to **learn** about things which interest them; and to **give** back to their local community.

CONNECT

TALK & LISTEN,
BE THERE,
FEEL CONNECTED

BE ACTIVE

DO WHAT YOU CAN,
ENJOY WHAT YOU DO.
MOVE YOUR MOOD

TAKE NOTICE

REMEMBER
THE SIMPLE
THINGS THAT
GIVE YOU JOY

KEEP LEARNING

EMBRACE NEW
EXPERIENCES.
SEE OPPORTUNITIES,
SURPRISE YOURSELF

GIVE

YOUR TIME,
YOUR WORDS,
YOUR PRESENCE

Outcomes⁴:

100%

of young people had helped someone else

93%

felt more able to understand and express their feelings

93%

felt more confident to try new things

86%

felt more confident about talking and listening to others



Parents said:

‘The ‘Five’ project was extremely beneficial for my son. In particular, I can see a big change in his communication skills, his ability to be part of a group and make contributions and listen to others.’

‘I think it has contributed to his personal development and within that, a proper understanding of the importance of looking after yourself so that you can live a full life.’

⁴Of the young people completing the first two programmes.

Mencap NI Youth Service 2018 -2023

Each year, 200 young people aged 10-24 participated in programmes, activities, and events.

Programmes/Activities	Supported
Youth Forums <ul style="list-style-type: none">Belfast Youth ForumFermanagh Youth Forum (Funding ended April 2023)Young people with learning disability and autismAged 16-25 yearsGroup sessions; project work; advocacy	40 young people
Transform <ul style="list-style-type: none">EU PEACE IV funded until February 2022Mencap NI partnership with Youth Link & Youth InitiativesCross-border and cross-communityPersonal Development; Good Relations; Active CitizenshipIndividual mentoring / group work	129 young people
HEROES <ul style="list-style-type: none">EU PEACE IV funded until June 2022Mencap NI partnership with Derry/Londonderry YMCA; Devenish Partnership Forum, Fermanagh; Health Service Executive, DonegalInclusive for young people with and without a learning disability/difficultyCross-border and cross-communityPersonal Development; Good Relations; Active CitizenshipIndividual mentoring / group work	266 young people
FIVE Project <ul style="list-style-type: none">Funded by RTE Toy Show Appeal FundGreater Belfast and Fermanagh/TyroneFive Ways of Well-being programmeChildren and young with learning disability / SENAged 10 – 18 years	91 children and young people
Club Nights <ul style="list-style-type: none">Five evenings	20 young people
Summer Camps <ul style="list-style-type: none">Across five locations	53 young people
School Holiday Clubs	65 young people
Young Mens / Women’s Projects	13 young people
Learning Disability Awareness Training <ul style="list-style-type: none">Funded by Education Authority until March 2023	50 youth workers

Recommendations

1. The NI Executive should ensure that youth work is supported by appropriate levels of sustainable investment, so that every young person with a learning disability has access to youth work services which promote social inclusion, and support their personal development.
2. The curricula for professional youth work qualifications should include key knowledge, skills and competence-based learning disability awareness training.
3. The Education Authority should include learning disability awareness for all youth work staff within the EA Regional Youth Plan’s actions on workforce development; and clearly link professional training as a key underpinning factor in achieving greater access for Section 75 groups to generic/universal youth services.
4. The EA Regional Youth Plan should specifically include the needs of young people with a learning disability across all key actions, for example, within:
 - Planned research and piloting of training for staff to deliver youth work through online methods
 - Development of a participative structure through an online Youth Voice hub
 - Increased access to emotional health and wellbeing support, and physical health programmes
 - Support and information on sex and relationships
 - Increased delivery of life skills programmes.
5. An updated youth work strategy and fully resourced action plan should be produced, that includes a specific focus on achieving outcomes for young people with a learning disability. This strategy should include:
 - A clear timeframe and measurable outcomes
 - Improved data collection and information about the participation of young people with a disability / learning disability
 - An audit of the training needs of youth workers
 - Mandatory training on learning disability awareness for youth work staff
 - Routine use of reasonable adjustments in youth services.

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