



Together for  
the Journey

**BIG PLAN 2018 - 2020**  
**WORKFORCE AND PARTNERS EDITION**

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*It is not about standing still and becoming safe.*

*If anybody wants to keep creating,  
they have to be about change.*

Miles Davis



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## **Our journey means change!**

Journeys bring challenge, excitement and personal growth. We need, and believe in, **progress**: improving ourselves, and changing the world for the better. Our journey will make us more effective, so we make a greater difference to people.

And we are on a journey **together**. We are passionate about **co-production**: people with and without learning difficulties supporting each other. Working together as equals. We achieve great things in twos, in groups, in teams.

The woman on the front cover is excited and curious about what lies ahead. But she's not going without her companion. That's just like us. No-one racing ahead on their own. No-one left behind.

**This Big Plan describes our journey of change together for the next three years, and beyond. It says what we'll achieve, and how we'll do it.**

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## Our journey of change inside Skillnet

People with learning difficulties accomplish so much in our projects. People learn, create and campaign; they do what they love. People gain confidence and independence. People speak up. For some, Skillnet is the only place they feel a genuine equal. Let's be proud of this.

But let's be honest too. Some people don't progress from Skillnet into new opportunities. We shouldn't be satisfied when people are only involved in projects alongside others with learning difficulties. This is segregation. A small number of people are not developing and learning as much as they could. We need to make sure everyone is making progress.

This is why our Big Plan describes a person's 'journey' while in Skillnet. Every person is 'together for the journey' with others in their project. Through this journey, we're working with people to achieve new opportunities outside Skillnet. We're improving our teaching, so people learn more. We'll check everyone is achieving what they want to.

In the next three years, we also hope the great things people do in projects get seen and heard much more by the general public. There have been some brilliant examples of this in the past. For example, the arts installation **Our Great Charter**, co-produced and hosted by people with learning difficulties at Canterbury's The Beaney, invited the public to say what would make Kent a better place to live in. In 2017, one of our media groups produced the powerful anti-bullying film **Pushed**, premiered at the Curzon cinema in Canterbury. **Eco Shed** art has been displayed in galleries. **The Schools Project** makes sure people with learning difficulties are seen and heard by school children. We hope every project will be inspired to:

**Be regularly seen and heard in their local community**

**Invite people from their local community into their project**

We also want to develop stronger **self-advocacy**: people speaking up for themselves and taking control of their lives. We'll keep pursuing excellence in **supported employment**, so more people get jobs and volunteer positions they love and others value.

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## Change outside Skillnet

Despite great progress made by, and for, people with learning difficulties, the support people need has been damaged by funding cuts. Self-advocacy groups struggle or have closed down. Co-production is a popular word now, and featured in the Care Act. But little real co-production happens in health and social care. In fact, power is unequally shared almost everywhere we look. Too few people value working together as equals in all areas of life.

People with learning difficulties are still far from being true equals in society. How many politicians have a learning difficulty? How many well-known public figures? The cultural breakthrough we have yet to see is people being valued as achievers and contributors - *people with so much to give*. It seems no-one is arguing and demonstrating that people with learning difficulties are *necessary* to a good, healthy society.

This is why our Big Plan sets out how we'll begin communicating with power and impact. It'll be difficult. It'll take time. We have a lot to learn, but we must do this. What we believe in and practice needs to influence the world around us.

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## Our journey into the future

Think of the past 15 years primarily as **creating** and **doing** amazing things. And let's celebrate the way we have inspired others to work differently. At the same time, let's imagine how much more impact we could have.

Now, let's think of the next 15 years, and beyond, as focusing on **influencing for change**. Let's attract all kinds of other people and organisations to working in the same way:

Working together, side-by-side, as genuine equals.

Valuing people as achievers and contributors - necessary to a good society.

Working thoughtfully and compassionately for the good of all people and the natural world.

The ambition of our plan isn't to become big: expanding across Kent, or the South-East. We'll aim for continued healthy growth, but not to become another kind of Mencap, Dimensions or United Response - great as those organisations are. Instead,

Our vision through this plan is to become **excellent** and **influential**:

- ★ Renowned as a centre for excellence in how people with and without learning difficulties work together.
- ★ Powerful in our communications, and influential for change.

1. See <http://www.womenmakingadifference.org.uk/inspirational-women/451-1> for a very rare exception.

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# The situation we work in

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## National politics and economics

Many of us recall the hope and sense of progress brought by the Valuing People strategy<sup>1</sup> of 2001. A look at national politics today is more likely to invoke despair, but not without genuine hope for better times ahead.

Government funding for local authorities was cut by 37% between 2011 and 2016<sup>2</sup>. While Kent and Medway's councils have worked hard to protect social care, such deep cuts have inevitably affected frontline services. While joint health and social care commissioning has brought some efficiency gains, the NHS in England needs to achieve £22bn in efficiency savings by 2020-21<sup>3</sup>. It is very hard to imagine savings on this scale without damage to health care for the most vulnerable.

Despite the good intentions expressed in the DWP work and health green paper, people with learning difficulties suffer at the hands of the Department's work capability assessment, mandatory job search and benefit sanctions regime. Good people in JobCentre Plus work against the system to value people, but too often the support people need is simply not there. There are still no national employment support programmes that specialise in adult learning disability and fund the supported employment model. After rising for some years, the number of people with a learning difficulty in paid work has declined, from a peak of 7.1% in 2012 to 5.8% in 2016. Employment and Support Allowance (ESA) was cut by £30 per week for new claimants.

**This situation means we should stay committed to supported employment.**

Despite the ravaging effects of cuts, there are genuine signs of hope. The government has recently committed to investing over £9 million in supported internships<sup>4</sup>, following the 2014 Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) Reforms. This development confirms we were right to strategically focus on becoming a leading provider in this field. Education funding is as well protected as any area of national public spending. However, austerity is not over, and no government budgets are immune to cuts.

**This situation means we should develop our new work on supported internships within the education system, while staying very alert to the risk of funding cuts.**

The voice of people with learning disabilities into national policy was championed by Valuing People. Through our work co-ordinating the South-East Regional Forum of People with Learning Disabilities, we have seen firsthand the Department of Health's (DH) devaluation of that voice, as disinterest in engaging the National Forum's nine regions accompanied the end of funding from the DH for that work. Economically, the 2015 Spending Review's cuts to DH budgets paved the way for this reversal of Valuing People's breakthrough.

**This situation means we should work with other organisations to develop self-advocacy and a voice to local and central government.**

1. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/valuing-people-a-new-strategy-for-learning-disability-for-the-21st-century>
  2. <https://www.nao.org.uk/report/the-impact-funding-reductions-local-authorities/>
  3. <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/department-of-healths-settlement-at-the-spending-review-2015>
  4. <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/45m-boost-for-young-people-with-send>
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## Local politics and economics

Kent County Council (KCC) works against the pressures of austerity to pursue progressive social care and support. We value collaborating with KCC's Head of Learning Disability, Social Care commissioners, Care Management teams and the Cabinet Member for Adult Social Care.

During late 2015 and early 2016, we worked with KCC and the Cabinet Office to co-produce a new framework for Social Value, based on the Social Value Act 2012. This champions and guides commissioners and providers to creatively achieve benefits for people above and beyond essential services in social care and support. The framework complements KCC's Strategic Statement 2015-2020. Our experience in this partnership confirmed that senior leaders in KCC see people as people, not 'service users', and seeks to enable people to live their lives, not merely 'get a service'.

KCC's new framework for Day Opportunities took effect from April 2017. Our social care-funded group projects work in this framework. Preparing for it reinforced our commitment to quality, and better outcomes and opportunities for people. The framework requires people to move on within two years. It is very important to make sure people do not get stuck in projects, but some people's interests may be best served if they can stay longer. Against the austerity trend, the framework also increased funding, enabling higher quality work and improved employment for our workforce. This includes professional development.

**This situation means we should focus on developing each person's 'journey' while in Skillnet. We should ensure people move on from our group projects into new opportunities that are not segregated. If anyone needs to stay longer than two years, we should advocate for this. We should ensure everyone working in these projects is professionally qualified.**

Within this framework, KCC began to commission supported employment. This is a promising sign that KCC values what providers outside the public sector offer, complementing its in-house service Kent Supported Employment, with whom we are building a partnership. Our commitment to excellence in the supported employment model meant we could not respond to the tender opportunity at the price offered.

Medway Council is also seeking to commission supported employment. In 2016, we won a contract to develop supported internships for young people, and began working with eight interns in Medway in September 2017.

At the last count, just 10 of 531 adults with learning disabilities in Medway were in paid work, or 1.9% (ASCOF). This underlines what a vital difference our new project for supported internships will make, and the need to do much more in future.

**This situation means we should continue to work with KCC and Medway Council to encourage progress in commissioning supported employment.**

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## Social deprivation

We have historically focused on the most deprived areas of Kent. Skillnet began in Swale, expanding to Canterbury, Dover and Thanet. Of Kent's 12 districts, Thanet is the most deprived, with Swale ranked second. Dover ranks fifth and Canterbury eighth<sup>1</sup>.

We have recently extended our supported employment work to Medway, which has 32 neighbourhoods ranked in the 20% most deprived nationally, and 12 ranked in the 10% most deprived. Medway is the 86th most deprived of England's 326 local authority areas for education, skills and training<sup>2</sup>.

**Our Big Plan keeps the focus on these relatively deprived areas, with no intention to expand geographically.**

1. [http://www.kent.gov.uk/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0006/7953/Indices-of-Deprivation-headline-findings.pdf](http://www.kent.gov.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0006/7953/Indices-of-Deprivation-headline-findings.pdf)

2. <http://www.medway.gov.uk/pdf/Index%20of%20Multiple%20Deprivation%202015.pdf>

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## The markets we work in

By 'markets' we mean all the providers who offer the same or similar opportunities we do for people with learning difficulties. The word 'market' can be positive, suggesting people have choices. We affirm Valuing People Now, which says having choice and control over your life is a human right. At the same time, markets are a feature of capitalist economies, and assume competition against each other. The Social Value framework we co-produced with KCC acknowledged that "competitive markets can divide providers from each other." Our statement 'Who we are and what we do' says "We value co-working over competition."

In late 2016, we commissioned market research to find out who else is doing work like ours in Kent, as well as sketching the picture nationally and globally. This research understood other providers as 'potential collaborators', not as 'competitors'.

The research suggests that of our biggest strengths in group projects, music and media stands out as not offered by other providers. Swale and Dover have fewer daytime opportunities for people with learning difficulties than other parts of Kent.



The research also revealed that Kent has a wealth of exciting non-profit organisations we can explore working with. Many of them have faced serious difficulties with funding in recent years. We can be encouraged that we have grown stronger financially during this time.

The research also has inspirational challenges for us. For example, the self advocacy charity My Life My Choice in Oxfordshire has 15 trustees, all with learning disabilities. This challenges us to do more co-production in our own Board and projects.

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## What people think about us

In late 2016, we commissioned a Perception Study. The independent marketing agency Family Business Place asked people inside and outside Skillnet Group what they think of us. People with learning difficulties, parent/carers, professionals, and our workforce and Board, took part.

Very warm things were said about our values, way of working and relationships. We were described as *welcoming, fair, supportive, exciting, wonderful, highly thought of, organised and reliable*.

There were also important challenges for us. Many people said we are not well known enough. We were challenged to make sure people move onto new things and don't get stuck in our projects for a long time. Occasionally, projects have been launched without properly thinking them through. Some people felt we are *inflexible, judgemental and need an overhaul*.

## How should we respond to the situation we work in?

- ★ National government cuts and failures to value people, together with fresh commitments to supported internships, mean we should:
  - Develop and promote supported employment.
  - Continue developing as an education provider, but be very careful managing education funding.
  - Work with partners to promote self-advocacy.
  
- ★ KCC's new framework for Day Opportunities means we should:
  - Make sure people move on from Skillnet into new opportunities if this is right within two years.
  - Make sure our workforce is professionally qualified.
  - KCC and Medway Council's commissioning plans mean we should work with them to develop supported employment.

- ★ We should stay focused on Kent and Medway's areas of social deprivation.
- ★ Our Market Research suggests we should:
  - Expand music and media courses.
  - Focus our marketing on engaging care managers and being easy to find on the internet.
- ★ Our Perception Study shows we need to:
  - Get much better at communications, so we are well-known.
  - Make sure people move on from projects.
  - Plan and risk assess projects carefully before committing to them.
  - Be open, positive and flexible, not judgemental and stuck in our ways!

# Staying focused

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For most of our history, we have tried to excel in many different kinds of project: catering, music, jobs, sport, upcycling, drama, campaigning... and many more.

Many renowned organisations focus on being good at just one thing, for example:

**Heart N Soul**, who focus on creative arts. *heartnsoul.co.uk*

**Ways Into Work**, who focus on supported employment. *waysintowork.com*

We are trying to be good at both those specialisms, and others too! A lot of our work has been high quality. However, at times we have not done things well because of inadequate specialist skills.

At the same time, we must recognise the positives. We have offered different choices to people and responded to what people want to do. Working like this has helped us keep going because one type of project grows as another declines. But there are other ways to have varied income sources without trying to be good at too many things. For example, we are now funded by Medway Council, reducing our dependence on KCC.

## What does this mean for the next three years?

There are good reasons for and against running many types of project. Projects we have already started mean we have made commitments to people with learning difficulties and/or autism and people we employ.

This means we should not close down good projects and only do one or two things. Doing this would cause harm to people. It might also mean we rely too much on one or two kinds of funding. But at this point in our history, it also means we should not try to start even more types of project. Instead, we should focus on improving and growing the projects we run now, so they have more positive impact on people's lives.

## What about ideas for new projects?

People often have ideas for new projects, or see an exciting opportunity. We definitely want ideas to keep flowing! In the past, we have simply asked 'What do people want to do?', and tried to make it possible. This question was a radical challenge to the top-down day service provision of the time, which decided what people should do. Asking this question has given people choice. But it also means now we are trying to be good at too many things. We have spread ourselves too thin, which is unsustainable. By 'risk-assessing' an idea, we can make the most of the really strong ideas, and focus on them. We can avoid taking on projects we cannot sustain and do well.

When there is a new idea, we need to ask these nine questions:

1. *Demand, choice and control* : **Do people with learning difficulties and/or autism want to do this?** This is our most important question.
2. *Co-production* : **Can this be co-led by people with learning difficulties and/or autism?**
3. *Ethics* : **Can we do this without causing harm to people or the planet?**
4. *Market gaps* : **Is anyone else already doing this? Should we do this because there is no other good provision?**
5. *Competence* : **Can we provide strong Project Leadership for this idea?**
6. *Capacity* : **Does the Central Team have the skills and time to take this on?** It may be possible to provide for this by recruiting to the team.
7. *Operational Risk* : **Can we do this without any harmful effect on other important work?**
8. *Financial Risk* : **Can we afford to do this? Will it take money away from other work?**

We should only go ahead if we can answer a clear 'yes' to all the above questions.

A possible exception may arise if we then ask:

9. **Are there strong benefits that outweigh 'no' or qualified 'yes' answers to any of these questions?**

## **How will we stay focused in the next three years?**

- ★ We will focus on improving the projects we already run.
- ★ We have no plans to start new kinds of project, but will stay open-minded about this.
- ★ We will encourage new ideas. We will stay committed to asking 'What do people want to do?' We will test new ideas with our checklist of nine questions.

## **Staying local**

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Skillnet began in Swale and soon became a 'group' of projects spanning East Kent. This means we know Swale, Canterbury, Thanet, Dover and Folkestone well. However, as a small company, working across these areas has added workload in creating and maintaining so much local knowledge and so many local relationships. It has also added to our overheads

in travel costs, as well as the impact travel has on the environment. We find it difficult to gather our whole workforce, as well as people across all our projects. This is a major weakness in our way of working.

East Kent and Medway are worth committing to in the long-term, because they have greater deprivation than other parts of Kent. This means they have greater need that we should respond to, and also attract more funding.

Because working across such a wide area is causing strain, we should not expand any further in the next three years.

We know from line-management supervision and exit interviews that some people in our workforce feel isolated. They value chances to meet others in the workforce. The Big Plan commits us to setting aside at least two days every year for everyone in our workforce to meet. We will close projects for the day if necessary to make this possible.

We had a wonderful, memorable day in June 2015 when everyone in Skillnet Group met in Canterbury for our Big Gathering. People have also valued communication days in the past. These events take a lot of organising, but make a powerful difference. We commit to holding a Big Gathering at least every two years. We hope this can become an annual event in future.

## **Where and how will we work in the next three years?**

- ★ We will continue working in East Kent: Swale, Canterbury, Thanet, Dover and Shepway.
- ★ We will continue expanding work into Medway.
- ★ We have no plans to expand to any other areas in the next three years.
- ★ We will hold a Big Gathering for everyone at least once every two years, starting in June 2018.
- ★ We will gather our workforce together for a day, at least twice a year.

## **Doing good : Ethics**

**Board and Central Team lead:** Louise Allen, Director of Ethics and Communications

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Skillnet Group has always been passionately committed to ethics. Our work is built on deeply-held values which motivate and shape all we do.

Our co-produced Ethics Policy, revised in April 2017, states: "In our experience, many people with a learning difficulty who have been supported to think about their values naturally care

about the lives of other people, animals and the environment they live in. Many people want to speak up for other groups facing injustice or that are not being treated equally. A key principle of Skillnet is that people with learning difficulties should not be treated as needing charity. People with learning difficulties have the power to effect positive change and should be valued. By working to achieve positive change for other, less powerful, groups, people with learning difficulties gain more power.”

## What will we achieve in the next three years?

- ★ The ‘story’ of how we co-produce our ethics will be featured in a magazine / news outlet.
- ★ A short film to help promote our co-produced ethics.
- ★ A new accessible debate/discussion group.
- ★ An updated Environmental Sustainability Policy.
- ★ A published research article on how people with learning difficulties and/or autism engage with ethics.

# Working together as equals :

## Co-production

### Board and Central Team leads:

Tina Walker, Non-Executive Director and Self-Advocate; Matt Clifton, Chief Executive

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In Skillnet Group, people with and without learning difficulties work together as equals. This applies when an individual works on their goals, in how projects are run, and how we are governed. We have a strong reputation as a centre of excellence for co-production.

In early 2017, we won an innovation grant from KCC to pilot a co-production forum for Transforming Care in Kent and Medway. This enables **people with learning disabilities and/or autism, who display behaviour that challenges, including those with a mental health condition**, to engage with, and influence, planning. The grant is small and will only last for 18 months, but is an exciting chance to test authentic co-production with one of the most isolated and excluded groups.

## What will we achieve in the next three years?

- ★ A completed, evaluated project to co-produce local planning in Transforming Care. We will use this to champion co-production and do more work in this specialist area.

# Communicating with impact

Board and Central Team lead: Louise Allen, Director of Ethics and Communications

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This has been the biggest gap in the way we work. We have used a basic website and printed flyers to promote what we do. Our most effective marketing has been by word of mouth, reputation, and visits to care management teams by people with and without learning difficulties. These visits have always reflected our values and have been warmly received.

However, we have much greater potential to influence if we develop effective communications. Building on recent grants from the Cabinet Office Local Sustainability Fund and the Transform Foundation, this is a major focus during the next three years, especially building a strong presence online.

Central to our strategy for communications is the renaming and rebranding of the company from Skillnet Group to **Bemix**. Our new name will go live in April 2018. This change is foundational to ensuring we are not confused with other organisations, and have a strong, distinctive identity for the long-term.

## What will we achieve in the next three years?

- ★ A refreshed company brand, including the new name Bemix.
- ★ A state-of-the-art website: [bemix.org](http://bemix.org)
- ★ Frequent, high quality, tailored email communications.
- ★ High impact social media presence.
- ★ High quality printed resources for marketing.
- ★ A complete central contacts database.
- ★ Regular press/media coverage.
- ★ A bank of high quality photos covering all our work.
- ★ High quality promotional films.

# Campaigning for change

## Board and Central Team leads:

Steve Chapman, Non-Executive Director and Self-Advocate; Tina Walker, Non-Executive Director and Self-Advocate; Matt Clifton, Chief Executive

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The simple act of setting up Skillnet Group in the first place made its mark in Kent. People saw, and were challenged by, an organisation that did not give people a service, but instead asked “What do you want to do?” Our projects took shape accordingly. We have been part of the movement for change that has seen people be more valued, involved, consulted - and even at times, working together with professionals as experts and equals, although this is still too rare.

We also believe in ‘micro campaigning’. On a daily basis, we work in individual situations for fair treatment, choice, control and opportunity. This is typically unseen, unrecognised, but vital, work.

Recent years have seen some exciting, creative initiatives. In June 2015, the arts installation **Our Great Charter** co-produced and hosted by people with learning difficulties at Canterbury’s The Beaney, invited the public to say what would make Kent a better place to live in. We played a central role influencing commissioning of **Advocacy in Kent**, so the new service operates co-productively. One of our media groups produced the powerful anti-bullying film **Pushed**, premiered at the Curzon cinema in Canterbury. We led co-production of KCC’s new **Social Value Framework for Adult Social Care**.

However, our impact has been limited by weaknesses in public communications. These are addressed under *Communicating with impact*.

## What should we campaign on?

At the time of writing the Big Plan, we are not yet ready to confirm our main campaigning focus for the next three years. We know we need to do a lot of work to improve communications before we can campaign with real impact.

In Big Meetings held across our projects in late 2016, we asked everyone what we should campaign on. The discussions were lively, and at times emotional. The themes people want to campaign on come under these broad themes:

### Changing attitudes

People spoke movingly about the painful experience of being bullied and devalued. People often feel treated as second-class citizens. They feel their voice is not heard. People with learning difficulties should be seen and heard on TV.



## Employment

People have been treated badly in work capability assessments and in job centres. Sanctions have generated a lot of anxiety and stress. People want to work, but cannot get good support. The employment rate for people with learning difficulties is going down.

## Fair access to society

Bus passes are only valid from 9.30am to 11pm. Buses need conductors for people to travel safely. A lot of public services need accessible signs and documents.

We do not have the capacity to campaign on all of these issues. We will continue thinking about what to focus on as we develop campaigning during 2018.

## Language

We have consistently pressed for 'people first' language. We have campaigned at every opportunity against the term 'service user', and associated terms such as 'client' or 'customer'. A recent clear, measurable outcome of this work is that KCC's new Day Opportunities framework had the term 'service user' completely removed.

We know language is very powerful. It directly affects whether or not people are valued as equals. In Skillnet, we instinctively reach for language that achieves equality. For example, we are beginning to reduce use of the word 'support', moving instead to 'work with' or 'work alongside'.

To be truly visionary in the long-term, why shouldn't we take on the terms 'learning difficulty' and 'learning disability' themselves? Yes, they represent a huge leap of progress from 'mentally retarded', 'sub-normal' and 'handicapped'. Yes, we need terms that identify people who need specific kinds of care and support. But the words used become terms of identity in the minds of the public, and in people themselves. And, for all the great progress made, they still focus on what people struggle with, or cannot do. No signal is given of the vital, necessary gifts and qualities people have to bring to society. Let's make it our mission to find and champion new language that identifies people just as effectively, while celebrating and valuing them at the same time!

## What will we achieve in the next three years?

- ★ A new campaigning group.
- ★ A single major campaign that achieves measurable change.
- ★ A co-produced proposal for changes in language, with associated project ideas, including a language workshop for providers.

# Speaking up : Self-advocacy

## Board and Central Team leads:

Steve Chapman, Non-Executive Director and Self-Advocate; Tina Walker, Non-Executive Director and Self-Advocate; Matt Clifton, Chief Executive

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Tina Walker defines self-advocacy as: "People speaking up for themselves. Self-advocacy happens when people talk about the things that are important to them in their lives."

Early Skillnet projects focused on supporting people to speak up. This has meant all our projects habitually encourage people to say for themselves what matters to them, and take control of their lives. Following the closure of Voice4Kent, we took over co-ordinating the **South-East Regional Forum of People with Learning Disabilities**. This gave us strong links to other groups in the South-East, and the National Forum. The Forum and its nine regions have lost Department of Health (DH) funding. This has left them struggling to survive, and without influence in the DH. Tina Walker, the South-East representative, is presently leading talks to build a new partnership between the Forum and Learning Disability England.

## What will we achieve in the next three years?

- ★ New young self-advocates in leadership positions in Skillnet / Bemix. This includes two new self-advocate Non-Executive Directors.
- ★ A pilot self-advocacy training project.
- ★ A renewed voice to central government for self-advocates.

## A job and career

### Board and Central Team leads:

Steve Chapman, Non-Executive Director and Self-Advocate; Helena Jennings, Head of Supported Employment

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Following a fruitful partnership with JobCentre Plus supporting adults, our focus is now on the supported internship model for achieving high quality, sustained paid work for young people with learning difficulties and/or autism. We move into 2018 with 14 learners, having

achieved status as a Specialist Post-16 Institution with the Education and Skills Funding Agency, and approval as a provider for young people with special education needs (SEN) under Section 41 of the Children and Families Act 2014.

We have an outline model for supporting adults with learning difficulties to achieve jobs. This was developed in response to supported employment being commissioned within KCC's new Day Opportunities framework. Unfortunately, we could not accept KCC's price offer for our tender, so cannot proceed at this time.

The last five years of developing supported employment has shown us the number one barrier to achieving high quality, sustained, paid work is not a learning difficulty. It's employer engagement. It's the skilled, patient work educating and supporting employers so they see people with learning difficulties and/or autism as an asset to their business. The barrier we face as an organisation is that the funding systems we rely on do not understand and value this side of our work. In spite of this, we need at least one dynamic individual to focus all their energies on building relationships with employers. From early 2018, we will make it a priority to seek enlightened grant funders and social investors to stand with us in the vision to create the brand new role of employer engagement specialist.

## **What will we achieve in the next three years?**

- ★ Excellence and effectiveness in supported employment.
- ★ Growth in supported internship projects for young people in Medway and East Kent, from 14 learners in 2017-18 to at least 26 learners in 2019-20.
- ★ A major new employer engagement project, including appointment of an employer engagement specialist.
- ★ New supported employment projects for adults in East Kent, subject to suitable funding or commissioning.
- ★ A successful first OFSTED inspection.

# Life goals

## Board and Central Team leads:

Steve Chapman, Non-Executive Director and Self-Advocate; Steve Perry, Director of Arts and Education; Louise Allen, Director of Ethics and Communications (Wellbeing)

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'Life Goals' encompasses groups working on skills and courses, and individual support through our Life Choices project. The quality and impact of our groups has been raised with the development of accredited courses. Life Choices has gained a reputation for achieving outcomes and breakthroughs with people where other services have been unable to respond.

## Taking West Track Studios to the next level

We will develop a project linked with West Track Studios in Canterbury, so people are involved in running the studios as a social enterprise. This will include studio bookings, gig promotions and other aspects of the music industry (band and tour management, record companies, publishing, royalties and contracts). People can achieve a qualification and gain work experience.

## A person's 'journey' while in Skillnet / Bemix

Steve Perry, Director of Arts and Education, is leading the development of a new complete 'journey' model of individual progress while in our projects. The journey begins at the initial referral and taster day. It continues all the way through to celebrating achievement and moving on to new opportunities.

This model will be vital to ensuring no-one gets 'stuck' in a project and doesn't progress, either within the project or onto new opportunities that reflect their goals. We have identified two innovative kinds of support that promise to be powerful additions to the work done in group projects:

### Opportunities Coach

It is our vision to see people move on from our projects into 'mainstream' opportunities. It should be an outcome of our work that people are valued contributors alongside others without learning difficulties, in their community. Our big planning group realised that the skills to identify, and support access to, such opportunities are more likely to be found in supported employment coaches than in group supporters.

This led us to begin designing the new role of Opportunities Coach. Trained in the same employer engagement skills as our work coaches, this coach would work across our groups to find out what people want to move on to. Volunteering opportunities could prove a good match, or even paid work. The coach then engages organisations that could offer people the chance to get involved. In-work coaching techniques can then be used to ensure the person makes a great start and the role can be sustained.

We plan to pilot this role by proposing the idea to KCC commissioners and applying to Big Lottery and/or other grant funders. We intend to demonstrate that such a role could achieve both personal progression and cost savings to social care.

## **Wellbeing Support**

People with learning difficulties and/or autism often experience greater levels of mental ill health including anxiety, depression and other complex psychological distress.

Group time is often interrupted by people needing additional emotional support. Our workforce goes above and beyond to respond, but we hope to relieve some of that pressure by piloting the role of wellbeing supporter.

This supporter would respond flexibly to needs as they arise. They could also offer some regular one-to-one support. Their assessment may lead to matching the person with an external trained counsellor. We plan to develop partnerships with local Counselling training centres (of which there are several across Kent) where trainee counsellors are looking for people to counsel on a voluntary basis as part of their Counselling diploma.

## **What will we achieve in the next three years?**

- ★ New music and media courses and projects in East Kent.
- ★ People with learning difficulties experiencing the music industry through co-running West Track Studios.
- ★ New Gig Buddies project enabling people with and without learning difficulties and/or autism to go to events together.
- ★ People will be achieving their qualification within two years.
- ★ High quality, qualified support and tuition in all courses.
- ★ Growth in Life Choices individual support.
- ★ The fully developed 'journey' model, integrating Opportunities Coaching and Wellbeing Support.

# **Legal structure**

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Skillnet Group is a Community Interest Company (CIC). We do not use all the business-oriented features of a CIC, such as investment and shareholdings, but the structure enables governance where executives and non-executives, including self-advocates, work together as

equals. Unusually, we have self-advocate Non-Executive Directors (NEDs) who are also in paid work, which they greatly value. This is entirely right for our context, and would not be possible in a charity.

The CIC model was also a way to distance Skillnet from charity culture. Historically, people with learning difficulties and/or autism have been presented as passive recipients of generosity.

The Board has discussed charitable status before. The Big Plan's emphasis on communicating and influencing is hard to fund from contracts and grants, so it is time to consider again arrangements that maximise donations, and associated income streams such as legacies. It may not be case of either we are a company or a charity. It is possible to be incorporated as both, if this meets our governance needs. Alternatively, it may be best to operate as two legal organisations, one a CIC and the other a Charitable Incorporated Organisation (CIO), each covering appropriate areas of our work. These, and other options, need assessing.

## **What will we achieve in the next three years?**

- ★ A complete assessment of options for legal structure, and a change, if necessary, to different arrangements.

# **Leading together**

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Our Board of Directors has always sought to practice and model co-production. As of the end of 2017, we have:

- Three self-advocate Non-Executive Directors (NEDs)
- Two other NEDs, one of whom is our Chair
- Three Executive Directors

## **What will we achieve in the next three years?**

- ★ Revise the way the Board works to achieve:

Stronger co-production.

NEDs with the skills we need.

Good practice for working with NEDs.

- ★ At least four trained, skilled self-advocates on the Board.
- ★ Co-chairing by NEDs with and without a learning difficulty.
- ★ Improved inclusive decision-making involving the whole company using Big Meetings and internal communications.

## Staying strong

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This section is interested in 'business continuity'. This means being able to keep our work going even if something goes wrong, for example if a building we use is damaged by fire, or someone in our workforce unexpectedly has to step down.

In March 2017, we engaged Bradley Group to support the development of a business continuity plan, so we become a stronger organisation that can withstand shocks. The plan identifies the resources that are essential to running our projects:

- IT systems (hardware)
- Information stored in IT systems or stored in a physical location (data)
- The premises and equipment we use
- The people we have

### **What will we achieve in the next three years?**

- ★ A completed business continuity plan, with training annually refreshed for the workforce and Board.
- ★ An internal health and safety lead appointed and qualified.

# **BIG PLAN 2018 - 2020**

## **WORKFORCE AND PARTNERS EDITION**

Published in December 2017

### **ALSO AVAILABLE IN:**

#### **EASY READ**

6 A4 pages

#### **FULL DETAIL**

Including:

Strength, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats (SWOT) Analyses

Task lists with target dates

Measures of success

'Journey' schematic

Lead writer:

Matt Clifton, Chief Executive

With thanks to:

#### **The Big Planning Sub-Group**

Steve Chapman, Non-Executive Director

Tina Walker, Non-Executive Director

Peter Bland, Supporter

Louise Allen, Director of Ethics and Communications

Steve Perry, Director of Arts and Education

**Everyone who took part in Big Meetings**