WORKING WITH
PEOPLE WITH
LEARNING DISABILITIES

A POSITIVE CAREER CHOICE
www.ccwales.org.uk
It is estimated that about 1.5 million people in the UK have a learning disability. The impact on individuals can include a reduced intellectual capacity, difficulties in understanding information and learning new skills, making tackling everyday tasks more challenging.

Learning disabilities can vary in severity, requiring differing levels of support and care. These can be mild or moderate, requiring assistance with filling out forms or attending educational establishments, whilst individuals with more severe needs may require 24 hour care and support for them and their families. They experience greater day to day challenges, prejudices and social exclusion, due to such factors as:

- Less than 1 in 5 work, despite far more wanting to;
- Only 1 in 3 participate in education or training;
- Half of all adults with a learning disability in the UK live in the family home, with around 29,000 living with parents over the age of 70 who are often too old or frail to continue with their caring responsibilities; and
- Children with a learning disability often face social exclusion.

However with tailored, person centred support and the right encouragement, most people with learning disabilities in Wales will be able to lead full and independent lives, contributing to their communities and living full and active lives.
TYPICAL DUTIES

The ultimate goal is to support service users to develop decision making abilities, choose their own paths, feel respected and live as independently as possible within their community. This way of thinking has led to a person centred approach to care, where the individual is able to develop a package of educational and care services which meet their needs. This allows a far greater degree of independence and choice which isn’t always open when existing local services don’t meet exact needs, leading to frustration and social isolation.

This work can be challenging and stressful at times, as progress can be slow, but the satisfaction you feel is great when someone learns a new skill or demonstrates new confidence thanks to your involvement. There are numerous roles and settings where you can work with people with learning disabilities including support workers, specialist children and early years workers, residential care workers, service managers, personal assistants, social workers, learning disability nurses, psychologists, occupational therapists and advocates. Settings will depend on the severity of the learning disability and can include the family home, residential homes, hospitals, community centres, schools, adult education centres and even someone’s workplace. You could also get involved in promoting self confidence, independence or therapeutic techniques through the arts, where senses are stimulated through painting, drama, dance or music.

TO WORK WITH PEOPLE WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES, YOU’LL NEED TO:

- Possess a caring, positive disposition and get on well with people and also be comfortable interacting closely with people of differing intellectual abilities;
- Like working in a team with other carers, but also be able to work unsupervised;
- Be happy helping people with daily tasks like reading, filling out forms, shopping and preparing meals, as well as being comfortable providing personal care, such as bathing or assisting people to use the toilet;
- Remain calm and patient when somebody is distressed;
- Have good report writing skills and be able to follow procedures;
- Be willing to work differing shift patterns and sometimes work unsociable hours; and
- Be aware of the Code of Practice for Social Care Workers and have a commitment to abide by its principles.
Qualifications and Experience

Care practitioners or assistant support workers will normally possess a QCF Level 2 Diploma in Health and Social Care (Adults) Wales and Northern Ireland, or a predecessor equivalent. A qualification is not always required to start work - some personal experience of care or support work may be sufficient initially, and your employer may support you to complete the Level 2 Diploma.

Salary and Career Progression

Salaries tend to vary due to the vast range of jobs. Starting salaries may vary from close to the national minimum wage (plus shift working allowances) to around £21,000 p.a. for specialised roles such as a learning disability nurse within the NHS, or a social worker.

As you gain further experience and complete your Level 2 Diploma, you may be able to progress to roles with more responsibility, e.g. senior support worker, and then continue to study the QCF Level 3 Diploma in Health and Social Care (Adults) or (Children and Young People) Wales and Northern Ireland. You could progress to roles such as Residential Care Home Manager or Day Care Centre Manager. As you gather more experience and qualifications in the field, opportunities may arise to train for specialist roles such as a social worker.

Supporting people with learning disabilities can be challenging, but you will experience great satisfaction from helping service users achieve day to day tasks and gain independence. Demand for social care practitioners is increasing, meaning excellent career opportunities are available.
NEXT STEPS

- To gain an insight into the work and to see whether or not you are suited to it, you could volunteer as a carer under the supervision of a mentor, either in a day centre, accommodation providing respite care or supported living, or you could accompany a Personal Assistant as they go about their daily tasks. Whether you volunteer in either the public, voluntary or private sectors, it can improve your chances of gaining paid employment when you see positions advertised in the local press, certain specialist care provider websites, e.g. Community Care or at your local job centre or their Jobcentre Plus website.

- Undertake the QCF Level 1 Award/Certificate Introduction to Health and Social Care, Early Years and Childcare (Wales and Northern Ireland) to gain an insight to the social care sector and demonstrate your interest to employers. This is a knowledge based qualification available within schools and colleges for people over 14 years of age.

- Many roles will allow you to work part time, and you could consider looking for an Apprenticeship in Health and Social Care in conjunction with an employer. Careers Wales offer an Apprenticeship Matching Service.
CASE STUDY
CLAIRE TURNER, MANAGER, CEREDIGION PEOPLE FIRST (CPF)

MY BACKGROUND
Whilst studying for my art degree, I wanted to help disadvantaged people to improve their lives, but I didn’t want a role that involved providing hands on personal care and assistance with personal hygiene. With this in mind, I helped set up a community arts group that through the use of art, drama, dance and music improved the lives of many disadvantaged people. This voluntary group’s work in helping develop the confidence and life skills of people with learning disabilities was eventually recognised and led to a paid position for a colleague. After some travelling, I eventually ended up in London and again got involved as a volunteer in an East End community arts group which used the arts to develop skills for people with learning disabilities. I was then offered a paid position at Hampstead Garden Suburbs Institute and helped develop a number of courses which used the arts to explore issues affecting people with learning disabilities; courses which were extremely effective for people with Autism. The success of these courses led to the development of courses designed to improve the therapeutic skills and understanding of support workers, leading to huge improvements in the life and circumstances of people with learning disabilities in their care.

Having witnessed the positive impact that the use of the arts had in developing confidence and skills for both people with learning disabilities and their support workers I gained a Diploma in Psychotherapy, which allowed me to develop more advanced courses which I successfully ran for a few years. However, despite being fulfilled and enjoying this role I did start to miss Wales and looked for an opportunity to return here and improve the lives of people with learning disabilities; when I saw this post with CPF advertised, I applied and was successful. I’ve now been here for seven and a half years.
MY DUTIES
The Welsh Government (WG) has funded advocacy services for people with learning disabilities since 2003, and CPF receives a grant from WG, enabling it to promote advocacy services within the county to people with learning disabilities. My role is to ensure that people with learning disabilities receive all the support they need to allow them to speak up and communicate for themselves in all day to day situations, enabling them to challenge discrimination and be treated the same as others of comparable age and allow them to live independent, healthy and productive lives.

To ensure that this happens, I organise and run training courses which provide information on such issues as the rights to services, dealing with bullying and discrimination, using money and sex education. I also run courses for those with moderate learning disabilities teaching planning, preparation and running of meetings, production of newsletters, and development of self and peer advocacy skills, allowing people with learning disabilities to stand up for their own and others rights in discussions and meetings which affect them.

I organise a monthly members meeting in Aberaeron which acts as a forum for members to discuss issues that affect them, using tools such as the Care Council’s Code of Practice to evaluate how well support workers and managers treat them, as well as allowing representatives of various agencies to speak about relevant matters, e.g. Dyfed Powys Police discussing hate crimes.
For ideas about other roles involving working with people with learning disabilities, a number of video case studies are available on our website, including Angharad J, Sulayman, Stuart, Penny and Dewi. You can also read Mary Welch’s case study in the ‘Working in Mental Health Services’ e-leaflet as she was previously a manager of a residential home for children with learning disabilities.

**WHY I ENJOY MY ROLE**

“I gain immense satisfaction from seeing the personal development and improved confidence that members of CPF now demonstrate, going from sitting quietly in meetings to now organising and presenting items and writing articles for the newsletter. My role is so varied and I’m never bored, I have the responsibility of running CPF on a day to day level utilising administrative, planning, financial and negotiating skills as well as running training courses, and I also get to use my experience in the arts in developing their skills and confidence. I produced a play, involving our members, called ‘Breaking Out the Bus’, which toured through Wales, raising awareness and challenging people’s perceptions of people with learning disabilities. I believe that I’m really making a difference to the lives of the people with learning disabilities in Ceredigion, and helping to improve society by breaking down barriers and challenging discrimination.”

Claire Turner