

## Invited Guest Editorial

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# Supported employment: A catalyst for service development

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KARE is a not-for-profit parents' organisation in County Kildare, Ireland, which provides services to individuals with intellectual disabilities and their families. We currently provide services for approximately 400 individuals divided equally between children and adults. The organisation has been in existence for 30 years and from the outset, the ethos has always been to support families and provide services in community based settings. Over the years, KARE has endeavoured to provide a comprehensive range of services that are of high quality and reflect current best practice in the field. In many ways you might say the organisation is similar to many other providers in the field, in that we talk about a commitment to best practice and high quality. The question that faced us as an agency some years ago when we reviewed our adult services was this: Does the actual provision of services reflect the philosophical aims of the organisation? At that time, approximately five years ago, we were heavily invested in traditional vocational training and the outcome of this for the majority of our clients was placement into a sheltered workshop. In effect, the outcome for individuals within the programme was to participate in day services that primarily removed them from the mainstream of society and congregated them together in segregated facilities. Yet, the whole idea of best practice was speaking about inclusive policies, participation in mainstream activities and facilitating individuals with intellectual disabilities to live an ordinary life. Philosophically, as an organisation, we had absolutely no difficulty with these ideas; however, the way in which

we were allocating our resources was not likely to lead to these outcomes for the people we served. We decided something had to change and that change was likely to be radical.

At the same time, the organisation was learning a lot more about the concept of Supported Employment, which enabled individuals, including those with significant intellectual disabilities, to be employed in real jobs in regular settings, where training and other supports were provided in the company on an ongoing basis.

For many within the organisation, including myself, the introduction to this concept seemed to contradict most things that we had believed about vocational training; i.e., that people needed intensive preparation before entering the labour market, and this was best done in specialised vocational training centres. It has been said, that Supported Employment in fact "puts the cart before the horse" in that it's an outcome based model which emphasises finding the job first and then addressing the issues of training with regard to job skills and whatever other skills the individual needs to perform effectively within that environment. On further examination of course, the concept of Supported Employment is based on solid principles, particularly with regard to the whole issue of generalisation of learning. We have known for many years from research that individuals with intellectual disabilities in particular have difficulty transferring what they have learned from one situation to another. It is not surprising therefore, that the number of people with intellectual disability who have successfully made the transition from segregated

training to inclusive jobs are by far in the minority. As an organisation with a commitment to being open and testing new ideas, we decided that Supported Employment certainly warranted closer examination. We embarked on a pilot project in the first instance, for those individuals in the mild range of intellectual disability. Fortunately, at about the same time we had been awarded an EU Horizon Project, which had the aim of piloting the Supported Employment concept for people with significant intellectual disabilities. This involved us for the first time in the whole idea of employment for those individuals who had been labeled “profoundly disabled” in our Special Needs Unit. To say that the staff was sceptical about this idea is putting it mildly; none the less, as we had been allocated quite a significant amount of resources, we were comfortable that we were in a position to provide whatever level of backup and support these individuals required.

As I reflect back over the journey we have travelled, this Horizon Project was particularly critical in that it ensured the involvement of adults with very significant disabilities from the outset. The project which was called “Challenge” went on to win the EU Helios Gold Medal Award in the field of Economic Integration and successfully introduced three individuals from our service with the highest level of need into part-time employment in regular jobs.

This was fundamental in terms of changing many people’s attitudes. Both parents and staff started to ask the question: if these individuals with severe disabilities could succeed with a concept like Supported Employment, then surely all adults in the service had the potential to be in work at least part-time. As we continued to place individuals who had been labeled “mildly intellectually disabled” it was not long before clients who had been labeled in the “moderate” range started to come forward themselves asking when they would be getting a job. Some staff members were becoming very enthusiastic about what they were seeing with regard to the positive change in clients who had started working.

The consistent message coming back from all of the individuals we were placing in Supported Employment was that their lives were changing very much for the positive. From the staff’s point of view, many of them had known these individuals for several years and were surprised and encouraged by the significant positive changes they were seeing in these individuals. Parents also were giving us feedback. While they had been concerned and indeed, sceptical at the outset, they were seeing their son or daughter become more inde-

pendent, behave more like adults, communicate more effectively, etc., etc. Supported Employment therefore, was demonstrating within the agency a powerful impact on meeting the needs of the individuals we were serving. While this was a great success story for the organisation, it also created a significant dilemma. We now knew that it was possible to provide a very different form of adult service, which had a focus on inclusive employment. Supported Employment was currently only available to a relatively small number of the adults in our service. It seemed obvious that if we were to be true to our mission as an agency and our commitment to best practice, then we needed to radically change our approach to adult services and develop a new model that would take account of the new possibilities we were seeing. At the same time, we needed to acknowledge the limitations that we had as an organisation from the point of view of staffing, resources, etc. One of the early decisions in terms of the new model, was an acknowledgement that some of the old systems had to go. The most obvious impact of this was the decision by the Board to close the sheltered workshop and discontinue sub-contract work within our programmes on the basis that all future work activities would be carried out based on Supported Employment in regular companies.

The model we identified we called our “Adult Local Service” model. Based on smaller based resource units in people’s own communities, they typically serve approximately 7–15 adults on a daily basis.

At this stage, some adults in Local Services never come into the base unit other than maybe to visit staff or drop in for a cup of coffee, as they are out working full-time with ongoing support. Staff in the resource unit are available to visit the job site or advise co-workers or employers, should the need arise. Other adults come to the resource centre on a daily basis. However, the emphasis in the programme is not to attempt to provide services in the building, but rather to look to the community. We have two broad goals in Local Services:

1. It is our belief that all of the adults we serve have the capacity to be employed using the methodology of Supported Employment.
2. We believe that non-work activities should be community based and activities such as recreation, leisure, social development, etc., should take place in mainstream community settings.

We have closed our workshop, reduced significantly the size of our Vocational Training Programme and decentralised away from a large centre based programme

to a series of small units spread throughout our catchment area. Supported Employment is firmly embedded within the ethos and philosophy of each local service, as being fundamental to meeting the needs of the individuals in our organisation, as we believe that real work is valuable for all adults. Over 120 people, which is more than 60% of our adult population, are involved in some form of inclusive employment setting and by the end of this year we anticipate that this will rise to 70%. On an annual basis, the staff and the support team; i.e., clinical staff and management, sit down and review each Local Service to set goals with regard to how the programme will develop over that year. I see this as being critical to our success, as my experience in the past has been that programmes tend to take on a life of their own. They can drift from year to year on the assumption that everybody is clear about where we are going, which is not always the case. Without this commitment to a process of ongoing review and service evaluation, I feel it would not have been possible for us to achieve the process we have.

Formally reviewing and evaluating our progress as we went along enabled us to identify problem areas and provide necessary training. In some cases, it may have been revisiting values, training for staff, or more detailed training with regard to some aspect of Supported Employment. It also enabled us to learn from our successes, so strategies that were beginning to work in one local service could be transferred to other programmes, in order to achieve the same results. More recently, we were involved in a more comprehensive evaluation of our employment programme, which involved looking at the whole concept of local service using the Continuous Quality Improvement Strategy (CQI). This particular approach we have found to be of tremendous benefit, in that it not only allowed us to identify our strengths and weaknesses but also has enabled us to develop a comprehensive action plan that will take the service further. CQI as a process, is particularly impressive in that it allows all stake-holders to input; i.e., employers, co-workers, family members, board, staff, clients, etc. This has resulted in a greater ownership of the whole local service model, not just within the agency, but allowing us to work more effectively with other groups such as employers. The CQI approach also fits with our organisational belief that quality and evaluation is not a one time even, but rather something that needs to be a fundamental aspect of the service, which is ongoing.

The whole concept of being local and having smaller numbers of clients together was to ensure more flexi-

bility and individuality within the programme. In our case, this is achieved by a process called "Person Centered Planning." This involves a comprehensive assessment of each individual's needs, dreams and aspirations for the future. Fundamental to the system is the participation of the individual and their advocates; i.e., family, staff, etc., agreeing together what a positive personal future should look like. This process is documented, goals are set and reviewed on an ongoing basis to ensure that there is follow through with planned actions. We feel we are on a journey using this new concept of Adult Local Services and have made many compromises, due to our own limitations from a resource perspective. We are, however, convinced that this is a much better service to the needs of adult with intellectual disabilities. It may not be the ideal programme, but it certainly is a significant improvement on what we had been doing in the past. We continue to develop and implement this model and are likely to develop it and change it to reflect the changing needs of our adult population.

In looking over what we have achieved, it is clear we have fundamentally changed the organisation. Our Adult Services today, is in no way similar to the adult programme that we had five years ago. While many people involved now agree that the model of service is positive for clients, this was not necessarily the view at the outset. Not all staff felt we needed to radically change the organisation. Some held the view that all we needed to do was increase the number of staff in the traditional programmes or find better sub-contract work for the workshop, etc. As an organisation, we recognise that a critical element of a quality programme in a service like ours is our staff. The concept of Local Services resulted out of a major review of our adult programme, where we critically evaluated our value system with regard to dignity, choice and inclusion and measured that against the day to day provision of our service. It was very clear in this process that if we continued with the model, we then had these values that were unlikely to be achieved. In coming to this realisation, we had a choice of going in two directions.

1. To rationalise the difficulties that we faced with regard to levels of staffing, available resources, knowledge, etc.
2. Take the more radical route asking "how could we be true to our values and our mission and develop a model of service that would actually take us down that road."

As a result of this, we agreed to establish a task force which would be representative of senior management, clinical staff and middle management (middle management was requested to consult directly with their front-line staff), who would develop a proposal with regard to the future of adult services. It was this group therefore, who designed the concept of the Adult Local Service and decided to take the radical route. One of the significant aspects addressed by the group was the issue of staff roles and it was clear, that if we were to provide a more flexible, locally based, Supported Employment focused service for adults, then staff needed to become more generalists than specialists. This has meant the development of a new term for staff, which we call Facilitator rather than Instructor or Trainer.

It has also meant changes with regard to our transport fleet, the acquisition of new smaller buildings spread throughout the catchment area, new roles for our clinical support people; i.e., social workers, psychologists, etc., and a flatter management style within the organisation to reflect these "independent republics" that make up our Adult Local Services.

When the document outlining the Adult Local Services model was prepared and presented to all staff, concerns were expressed about the reaction of parents, the impact of such a change on clients and the limitations of staff with regard to their capacity to suddenly become Facilitators as opposed to Instructors in particular subject areas. It was therefore essential that the organisation commit to a high level of staff development and ongoing training, which has been critical in making the conversion from traditional service to the Local Service model. The document was also presented to the Board of the Organisation, which in our case is made up primarily of parents who agreed to support the new model. It should be noted that a number of the parents at Board level had sons or daughters who had been involved in the original Horizon Project for people with significant disability and some of the other Supported Employment Initiatives. They had seen first hand the positive impact it had for their sons and daughters. These parents were very influential in translating the words in a position paper into the practical reality that they were experiencing on the ground level. The commitment to Person Centred Planning was also a significant factor, in that it gave parents the guarantee that they would have an active involvement in whatever decisions were being made with regard to their son or daughter.

At this point each Local Service reflects the overall philosophy that we have implemented; but on a practi-

cal level, there are clear differences reflecting the fact that the clients in each setting have different needs. One Local Service, for example, has recently been established in a small village and serves 7 clients.

Of these, 5 are currently placed in Supported Employment and the staff have agreed with families that the service will be a 35-hour programme, not necessarily 9 a.m. – 5 p.m. This is negotiated with families and clients; e.g., the staff may decide to stay open late one evening to participate in some recreation or leisure activity. However, this means that they will close early an afternoon the following week. One Local Service located in an area, which has quite a high level of disadvantage and unemployment, has had greater difficulty finding jobs for individuals. Nonetheless, they have been successful and continue to place people. In this instance, it was felt that we needed to boost our efforts with regard to job finding, and one staff took on the role of dealing exclusively with local employers in order to boost the Supported Employment emphasis. Services and clients are involved in a wide range and variety of mainstream community activities such as football, yoga, church, etcetera. All of these are important in an agency that is committed to looking at the broad range of needs of the individuals we serve. However, the fundamental cornerstone of the positive changes we have seen have clearly been the Supported Employment aspect. Do we have all the answers? No. Has it all been plain sailing? No, but as has already been said, we are satisfied that from the perspective of clients and families, the Local Service Model with its emphasis on Supported Employment is a significant improvement in the quality of service that we provide. Interestingly, nobody was complaining about the old service; and, in fact, many people spoke of the great organisation we were and the great commitment we had to the people we served when we talked about changing. It's important to bear in mind, however that just because people are "happy" doesn't mean they might not be happier with a different, more progressive, approach.

We have not significantly increased the number of staff in the agency nor radically improved the ratio of staff to clients or received significant additional financial resources. It is true to say, that the assistance of Horizon Funding and mainstream European Social Fund monies has been a significant factor in helping us to make the conversion from the old service model to the current service model. Primarily, we are using the money we had in a different way to meet the needs of our clients using a more appropriate model. Supported Employment, as a methodology, reflects what we see as the current best practice in our field.

As we look at the current situation across Europe; i.e., sustained economic growth, an emphasis on equal opportunities in the broadest context to include people with disabilities, a commitment by the EU and Member State Governments to mainstream the disability agenda and the voices of people with disabilities looking for full participation, citizenship and a rights driven approach to services, then it is an opportune time for those of us who provide services to grasp this “window of opportunity.” As we enter a new millennium, it is essential that we can be confident in the knowledge that we

are making the best use of the resources we have in the best interest of individuals with disabilities. Apart from the “rights issues”, from an economic perspective, we need to ensure that all those individuals who can work and want to work are facilitated to do so. Mainstreaming is here to stay. More importantly, it offers a bright new future for citizens with disabilities. As providers, we need to ensure that we move away from the rhetoric of mainstreaming and inclusion language, to ensure that it becomes the life experience for individuals who avail our services.