

IN CONVERSATION

# In conversation with Keith Smith

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- Keith Smith is in charge at British Institute of Learning Disabilities (BILD). He has worked for people with learning disabilities for over 30 years.
- They now have four main areas to work on (See box below).
- He makes sure BILD involves people with learning

disabilities in what they do.

- He thinks Valuing People has a lot more to do and money could be spent better.

Keith Smith has been the Chief Executive at BILD for the past 5 years, so I thought it was about time we sat down and talked about it. It reminded me of the Lewis Carroll poem, 'The time has come,' the Walrus said, 'to talk of many things: Of shoes and ships and sealing wax – of cabbages and kings.' I caught up with Keith at last autumn's LD Today exhibition, as ever, this busy exhibition had attracted large numbers of people visiting, exhibiting and speaking, but we managed to get away from the hubbub and grab the corner of a conference room for half an hour.

I initially asked Smith to expand on what BILD does 'in essence BILD is trying to improve the quality of life for people with learning disabilities, but what we don't do is offer direct services. What we try and do is work out how to help people turn policy into practice. This is a good time because at the moment we've probably got the best policies we've ever had but that isn't reflected by what's happening on the front line and in services and supports. It is this gap between policy and practice that BILD tries to address.'

BILD was originally set up in 1971 by the psychiatrist Gerry Simon. He worked at Lee Castle Hospital, a long stay institution on the outskirts of Kidderminster, a small town to the south west of Birmingham. Although their old offices were based in two staff houses next to the hospital, Simon was committed to the concept of providing support to people to live in their own communities and not only have the ex-patients moved on. 'We are now in an old carpet factory in the middle of town. We've got lovely offices and a training area as well. What we do, in a whole range of ways, is share

information about best practice: through publications, information on our web site, conferences and seminars.'

Before we touched on those policies and practices, I wanted to find out more about Keith's background. 'I've actually been working for people with learning disabilities for, frighteningly, over thirty years now. I started off by supporting people in residential services'. Like many of us have seen, that period covers a huge amount of change in how people are supported, 'I look back at my practice then with enormous embarrassment and not a little shame in terms of offering people no choice or decision making!' Taken back by this frankness, I asked what sort of residential care this was? 'This was in a unit for sixteen teenagers, with the label of having severe challenging behaviour. It was a difficult environment to work in and actually provide good support; you were just coping constantly with people's unhappiness being expressed through their behaviour. This was hardly surprising, if I had to live in that environment I would also be showing my displeasure through my behaviour.'

Then as now, many front-line workers had little training, although there was a direct route into social work with residential social work being seen as having a better career path than perhaps it does now. Some of us even got grants! Before we got too nostalgic, Keith continued 'I trained as a social worker, and worked in Coventry with people with learning disabilities and their families. I then moved to Birmingham managing a specialist social work team for a number of years, and then back to Coventry as the lead for learning disabilities and HIV, which was an interesting combination; two very devalued groups of people.'

This was the 80s and then, as now, day services were under review. The issues were remarkably similar, 'how do you get good alternatives for people that are worthwhile and help people into work? How do you support people with very profound and multiple disabilities to have meaningful lives in the community and not just spending their time in day centres?' We agreed, there were a lot of committed staff around, but change was slow, Smith thought they were 'not being valued, not necessarily having the right training or support and really being fairly powerless in terms of setting any direction for their work.'

At these times, the missing element was any real voice from people with learning disabilities themselves and this Smith was keen to develop 'we supported people to have a self

advocacy group linked to every day service in Coventry. Those groups had training from Advocacy in Action, they were superb in getting people to think about choice, decision making and control. We also did a number of city wide advocacy conferences and reached a point where we had senior counsellors on question time panels agreeing that every time there was an item on their committee agenda about learning disability they would involve self advocates in discussing them. Now that, for the early 90's, was pretty powerful stuff. It gave me an inkling of just how powerful involvement and giving people the opportunity to make decisions for themselves was.'

These experiences had clearly laid strong foundations for Keith in his role as Chief Executive. Obviously coming into an established organisation as the new boss can have problems, not least in these times when tighter funding leads to greater competition between groups fighting for survival. Whilst BILD has always held a bit of a niche, that cannot be taken for granted. As with any small organisation, it needs to look at what it is doing to keep it up there, so Smith carried out a review. 'We looked at the way in which we worked and what we were good at and decided to concentrate on four priority areas.'

### **BILD's priority areas**

Human rights, 'which comes from the amount of work we've done around support advocacy organisations'.

The workforce, 'looking at the training and support staff need to provide good support now and in the future'.

Better lives, better communities, 'which is about how people can be supported to really link into their local communities'.

Positive behaviour support, 'supporting people who measure their unhappiness through the way they behave and making sure that they're supported by staff who listen to them, who get to know them well and who respond and make sure that everything around them is as good as it can be.'

Clearly, there is a lot of very practical work in these priorities and that could be seen as a move from the old view of BILD being somewhat academic or research based. As one would expect, with his background, Smith involved people with learning disabilities and family carers much more in the work they did including the appointment of three trustees with learning disabilities. 'This is still a learning curve for us, as for lots of charities. We haven't necessarily got it right in terms of making sure that all of our trustees are supported to understand everything that's happening within the organisation, that is still a challenge we're working on.' We talked about this being something that is not a reality for trustees in any organisation, learning disability or not. This

seemed a given, 'what we do is make sure that each trustee can contribute their specific skill, knowledge and experience in ways that are meaningful for the organisation. Not everybody has to know everything. We felt that having people with learning disabilities as trustees was really important. When I joined BILD there wasn't much contact with people with learning disabilities, we now have an advisory group called 'BILD for the Future' which consists of people from six advocacy groups from around the country, we involve them in any consultations that we are taking part in and people share what's happening in their lives. That is really important because I think that everything that BILD does needs to have an impact on the lives of people, otherwise the bottom line is we're just doing it for ourselves. I feel that if we can't show there's a direct link between the work that we do and an improvement in people's lives then we shouldn't be doing it. 'BILD for the Future' acts as a critical friend to us in terms of the work that we're looking to develop and making sure that we keep it rooted in the reality of people's lives.'

We talked on, but space dictates I just record Keith's views on learning disability policy. How does he think Valuing People is going? 'I think it's a massive agenda. Without Valuing People the lives of most people with learning disabilities would be worse off. The difficulty with Valuing People was that only some have benefited, so what I'm pleased with in terms of Valuing People Now is it's concentration on people with complex needs, offenders, people from BME communities and people with autism. I think that these groups haven't benefited from it. Valuing People Now has got a much tighter delivery plan. However, it's dependent on its delivery from local authorities and NHS trusts at a time when clearly finance is going to be an issue and I see the potential for a widening gap between policy and what's happening on the front line.'

We are now well into Valuing People Now's 3-year term, already we have seen cut backs in anything that is not nailed down tightly in the delivery plan for the next financial year. And those that are will face cuts thereafter, few, if any, get contracts for longer than a year now, including government policy leads. I wondered if we were being too accepting of these financial restraints rather than fighting hard for our corner as others will be doing? Smith thought one point was that 'there is a lot of money in the system already, whether it's in the right places and I don't necessarily think it is, is one of the issues. So, for example, if you're looking at residential care then you know some authorities are only spending twenty percent of their learning disability budget on it and some are spending eighty percent of their budget on it.' Clearly, such dramatically different figures were a major indictment of the policy implementation to date. We wondered how well any of the other government initiatives were being implemented? Smith thought we had gone rather policy mad over the last 18 months. 'I think there have been over thirty policies relating to learning disability, that is difficult for anyone to enact. I would be especially worried if I didn't see much happening with Jim Mansell's excellent challenging behaviour report, which really

*identified what needed to be done to support people much better, I think we've got an eighteen month window in essence.'*

BILD was a founder member of the Learning Disability Coalition that had budgets as a core aim. *'The future demography figures around learning disability confirm a potential growth of between four and five percent each year in the numbers of people requiring services. This is opposed to what was believed to be one percent! The coalition's been doing some good work in terms of identifying the potential need for some new money and will also be working to challenge any cuts in services. However, I think we have to be really good at actually coming up with real evidence of ways in which people can be supported better and*

*possibly supported cheaper. If we continue to support people in the ways that we always have, there is no doubt in my mind that that will lead to cuts in services. For me it's about linking people better into the community. It is about driving through the Valuing Employment Now initiatives and about making sure that individual budgets are developing in ways that improve people's lives and also can be cheaper.'*

Keith believes that there is a lot of work for BILD to do still and he says he is *'sticking round to do it'* especially in those four priority areas, *'we want BILD to be seen as the experts in those areas, but obviously with wide ranging partnerships.'*