

# WELCOME TO OUR WORLD

**Public murals by disabled people tell the graphic truth about their lives in the UK**



Disabled asylum seekers in Bristol

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**[www.disabilitymurals.org.uk](http://www.disabilitymurals.org.uk)**

# Research summary

Traditional qualitative research methods and community art were used to consider:

- (1) The experiences and key messages of disabled people living in a diverse range of circumstances in the UK.**
- (2) The power of community art as a research tool.**

## Design and Purpose

More than 100 disabled people living in London, Norwich, Bristol and Frome discussed their ideas in focus groups before working with artist Andrew Bolton to create murals in public spaces. The artwork served to convey their messages in an accessible way and to enable each group to claim a physical space in their locality.



*London*

*Norwich*

*Bristol*

*Frome*

Each mural was created by disabled people with specific living experiences in common, including: asylum seekers, ex-servicemen, parents, people with learning difficulties in residential accommodation.

In many community art projects each person is allocated an equal segment. Such art can never be more than the sum of its parts. In this project, people's ideas and messages are combined, conveying the similarities and differences within an aesthetically and intellectually cohesive design. This research methodology was first developed in Bolivia (Yeo and Bolton 2008).

## The context

This project was devised in 2008, at a time when personalisation was coming to fruition. That is, service users were to be given control of resources, enabling them to choose the activities, services and hence lifestyles that suited them. The issue was expected to be dealing with the wide possibilities that would open up.

The social and political context changed dramatically during the project (2010-2013). The potential opportunities of personalisation were seriously jeopardised by the

- unprecedented level of cuts to services and benefits for disabled people,
- negative portrayal of disabled people from the government and media.

The work served as a means for people to promote their messages in a public space, so challenging the myths portrayed in some branches of the media.

## The Findings

### **1. The lived experiences of disabled people living in a diverse range of circumstances in the UK**

Huge variation was found on the impact of personalisation on different people's lives. Improved choice and control for disabled people are inherent to successful personalisation. These qualities are key themes expressed in the context of access to a number of key aspects of people's lives including:

- **Housing**

Other issues become insignificant in the face of homelessness. An asylum seeker drew a picture of herself with her daughter looking at a house,

*'We are walking, we are tired...We don't have anywhere to go...this is not our house, we are just looking. We have no house to go to'.*



Her ideas were combined with other people's to design a big house separated from asylum seekers by a guarded fence.

For other disabled people, home was a safe and happy place. A man with learning difficulties spoke of his desire to stay in the residential accommodation where he was for the rest of his life. He drew the trees that he loves in the garden. These were reproduced in the hopes section of the Frome mural.



## • Transport

For personal choice to be meaningful depends on having accessible, affordable and reliable transport.

When people from a residential centre all attend the same organised activity, then travelling in the centre's own transport is straightforward. But if each person is following their own interests this becomes more complicated. One person with a learning difficulty living in residential centre explained,

*'a lack of buses stop me going where I want to, there are not enough buses.'*

He asked to be photographed waiting for a bus. This was included in the barriers section of the Frome mural.



## • Money

Financial deprivation prohibits choice and control. An asylum seeker spoke of how, *'people are suffering, they are really suffering ... they are on the streets, begging, doing things they shouldn't ... because there is no other way. People are eating from dustbin, picking food from dustbin, eating it...'*

In contrast to UK citizens, asylum seekers are not entitled to any funding to acknowledge the costs of being disabled. A Home Office representative explained 'the amount of money we give to them would be the same as an able bodied person because they don't need anything more.' (emphasis added – interview 30/4/2012).

## • Family

The importance of family to people's sense of well-being, across the research groups, cannot be overestimated. As a disabled parent put it,

*'you have to be strong to be a disabled person because life is so hard. I have stared into the abyss of loss and have clawed my way out through sheer will ... alive and kicking for my son.'*

The loss of family impacts on every aspect of a person's life. An asylum seeker explained, '*I never forget my family. I always love them*'. He reports his key worker saying to him, 'you've lost your brain'. To which he responds, '*it's not my brain I've lost, it's my family*'.



He drew a picture of himself tending his two brothers' graves in Iraq, something that in reality he was unable to do. He asked for support for his suffering, 'Please hold my hand, don't hate me'.

### • **Social isolation**

People talked of the need for recognition of social needs and the pain of isolation. Disabled asylum seekers used a fence and the juxtaposition of the sun and the clouds to convey their segregation from other disabled people, non-disabled asylum seekers and the wider community. Wheelchair users in London complained of being unable to visit friend living in inaccessible housing.



In Norwich, people showed that their need for love and friendship is as strong as anyone else's.

### • **Importance of peer support**

The need for peer support was expressed particularly strongly among the most marginalised groups. People believed some level of common experience is necessary to understand each other's pain. A disabled asylum seeker believes,

*'if people have not felt pain themselves, they do not feel others pain. My heart cries every day for other people's pain ... psychology doctors ... lots of qualifications but stupid people because they don't know what pain is.'*

## **Similarities and differences**

This study was intentionally designed to consider the experiences of disabled people living in a diverse range of circumstances. It is therefore not surprising that a diverse range of issues were raised. Perhaps more surprising are the experiences that cut across great differences in living conditions.

- **Living with constant fear**

One notable finding was the commonality of the experience of constant fear across groups of disabled people living in a wide range of different circumstances including ex-servicemen, mental health service users, asylum seekers and others.



Such constant fear severely limits people's sense of choice and control.

### **Positive experiences**

Not all the messages from disabled people were negative. A group of disabled people in Norwich were keen to stress that disabled people enjoy life. They created a separate mural to ensure that these positive messages were clear. A blind woman modelled a globe out of plasticine, saying 'the world is my oyster as long as I get the right services.'



## **2. The power of community art as a research tool**

Community art was used as a research tool to bring people together, to encourage discussion and to promote the key messages.

These tools proved to be particularly effective in the context of the negative portrayal of disabled people in the media, as well as the institutionalised segregation particularly of disabled asylum seekers.

More specifically, the art was effective in terms of:

- **Bringing people together.** The artwork was enjoyable, reduced social isolation and enabled people to feel proud of their contribution.

*'It was so good what we did together. All of us disabled people. We will never forget. We can't ever forget because we have proof, there it is what we did. It is so good. We won't forget.'* (asylum seeker)

- **Developing ideas.** People spoke of how much they had learned through the exchange of ideas with other disabled people both in their own groups and those involved in murals in other parts of the country.

*'We use the art to exchange ideas, issues, problems, solutions. We all learn from each other.'* (ex-serviceman)



- **Reducing the inequality of power.** Most research involves participants giving their time and energy to something which they have no control over and which has no benefit to them.

*'It makes a real difference seeing the end product. In other projects ... you give all this information but you don't get anything back.'*

- **Promoting the reality of disabled people's lives.** This is particularly important at the present time of negative portrayal by the media.

*'Words cannot express my feelings. It blows your thoughts and feelings away. It will keep me thinking for ages'* (passer-by)

- **Enabling the research to reach the relevant people – both in terms of a targeted audience...**

*'You challenged us today because many of our homes are not actually accessible, although we make a commitment to providing lifetime homes for our tenants. So it's really something that all housing providers need to think about.' (Chief Executive, housing association)*

**...and a public audience.** Having the artwork in a public space encourages far wider consideration of the research messages than would be possible from a written report alone.

*'I walk past that mural maybe 4 or 5 times a week. Every time I walk past it there's at least 2 or 3, sometimes more, people stood in front of it, talking about it' (ex-serviceman)*



- **Promoting community cohesion.** The deprivation and segregation described by disabled asylum seekers is barely acknowledged by the wider population. It is as if asylum seekers are perceived as so different that different standards are acceptable. Yet, when seeing the mural, passers-by commented on the similarities,

*'I didn't realise it was about disabled asylum seekers at first. Actually it's about much more than that. That fence is there for most of us, just to different degrees.' (passer-by)*



This study shows the reality of life for groups of disabled people living in a wide range of different circumstances. It exposes the harsh impact of the cuts to benefits and services on the everyday lives of people themselves. While some people note positive change in their lives as a result of personalisation, for others, the potential gains are unrealisable due to lack of access to wider services. The deprivation experienced by some groups of disabled people, most notably disabled asylum seekers provides little or no element of choice and control. The choice and control of personalisation is shown to be entirely incompatible with cuts to services.

The common themes as well as the diversity of disabled people's lives are highlighted through the murals, ending any notion of disabled people as a homogenous group with homogenous needs.

The power of community art as a research tool is shown throughout. It serves to bring people together, helps with developing key messages and enables those considered 'participants' in traditional research to use the work as a tool for change, taking their messages to a wide audience. As a disabled asylum seeker put it at a mural opening event,

*'We all together trying to move forward to a better life for all disabled. I'm happy right now. Well done all our team. With our team we are going to be strong'*



For a copy of the full report including conclusions and recommendations please contact [Rebecca@disabilitymurals.org.uk](mailto:Rebecca@disabilitymurals.org.uk)