

Human Activism: Debbie's story of employment

When I left school I went to a Job Centre and they said to my mum that I wouldn't be any good doing any work because I've got learning difficulties.

Worked in two nursing homes doing things like cleaning the bedrooms and stuff like that. But there was problems because I was made to carry all the teas and coffees on a tray, and I get a bit shaky with my hands and I was finding it was spilling everywhere and I was a bit uneasy about that. Then some of the people there were picking on me and making fun of me because I couldn't get on with it very well. I just felt it wasn't the place for me.

And so we find out where peoples' skills lie, the types of work that they might be interested in, their preferences in terms of workplace environment, that sort of stuff. And then we match that with our knowledge of local employers who might be recruiting at any one time, what their headaches might be, what positions they might find difficult to recruit to, and it is essentially a match between those two that creates successful and sustainable outcomes.

We believe it to be the first company in the country to be run by people with learning disabilities. So they set up in the mid 90s, set up as a co-operative, which is a type of social firm these days, social enterprise, which is a term that wasn't used widely at the time.

It involves people going and being trained in the beginning to go to different contracts all over Bristol and cleaning basically.

Fairly quickly it became apparent that she also had a great many skills that we could use, helping the company with the admin, invoicing and finance side of things, and that's a task she undertook for many years, in addition to becoming one of the directors and the company secretary.

There is good evidence that when we get the support right and we can match peoples' skills and interests to local employers we get good outcomes and that is happening in some areas, but we've still got to keep working to ensure that there's a better spread of support available.

I would say if you need a job you could go to a Job Coach or Supporting Worker. Be sure it's the right job for you. Make sure that you know it's important to you and go and get it.