

# Our Voice



A COVID-19 national participation project, to amplify Disabled Young people's voices, and address erasure of their education experiences.



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'Our Voice' is a COVID-19 national participation project, to amplify Disabled Young people's voices, and address erasure of their education experiences. Support for Disabled people's **independent living** needs and control over what support remains has decreased during the pandemic. ALLFIE feels that this has increased the levels of Disabled Young people's isolation. During March, April and May 2021, ALLFIE facilitated a number of discussions groups with Young people, aged between 16 and 25, to share their experiences of the pandemic.

This document presents a summary of the discussions, experiences shared, positions asserted and future ideas for change.



Identity and Intersectionality

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## Identity and Intersectionality



### Who are we?

Identity is something to be both claimed personally and shared within a community of interest. It includes the labels we take for ourselves, as well as those given to us by others. We craft aspects of our identity through our lived experiences, choices and preferences. As well as being shaped through the way we are perceived, assumptions made about us, and the barriers we face as we attempt to participate in society.



*'... I am a Disabled human ...'*

Identity cannot be reduced to a single thing, and yet often it is. While people live lives with multiple identities, through an equality lens we tend to see merely nine. That is; age, disability, gender, marriage/partnership, pregnancy/maternity, religion and sex.

### Are we, as Disabled people, oppressed?

Yes – but how we answer that is not always straightforward. The oppression experienced by disabled people comes from ideas and values about 'ability'. Disabled people experience barriers through inaccessible systems and structures.



*'... I avoid going out, because of the hassle and stress of it all ...'*

The disability identity is often misread and misunderstood. Disabled people often have assumptions made about them as to what they can or cannot do, what they can achieve or where they should be able to go.

The Social Model of Disability says that people are Disabled by the social barriers they experience going about their daily lives. People are disabled by the barriers they experience, not their diverse bodies or minds.



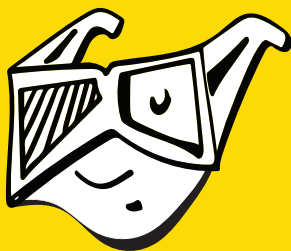
***'... People think because you are Disabled you cant have romantic feelings ...'***

Barriers can be physical, psychological, organisational and institutional. They are external, but also can be internalised through negative attitudes and experiences of discrimination.

### **Do we have power, as diverse people who experience multiple oppressions?**

Intersectionality is about looking at the many aspects of a persons identity together. This can help to acknowledge the multiple impact of barriers encountered and experienced. It is not just racial injustice plus disability discrimination, but rather the multiplication of oppression.

Claiming a disability identity can be seen as an act of resistance to speak up against disabling barriers and injustice. Claiming an identity as a 'queer Disabled human' not only speaks up against multiple oppressions, but also challenges the idea that we can be reduced to a single identity.

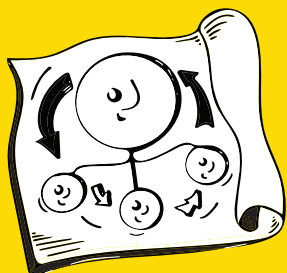


***'... What I like about intersectionality is that it helps to think about people as more than being 2d, as having many things about them ...'***

## Independent Living



For Disabled people, Independent Living is about essentially, freedom. Freedom to choose, participate and have control over the way you live your life. It is about self directing yourself in the way that suits you best. It is not about doing everything for yourself, but rather about being the leader of you.



***'... There's a lot of planning needed to be able to take part in day to day activities ...'***

Independent living is based on some fundamental principles, or pillars that if available, would enable Disabled people to participate in all aspects of society.

These include, an accessible environment, enabling technologies and equipment, personal assistance, accurate information, advocacy and peer support.

The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) Article 19 is about Independent Living and being included in the community. It recognises the equal right of Disabled people to be included and participate in the community.

It states Disabled people should be able to choose where they live, be supported to live independently and that community resources are accessible to them.



***'... However, Disabled Young people are not included, they are not often part of the conversation ...'***

Enabling Disabled Young people through the support and assistance appropriate to them is a key goal of independent living. Being able to access the support needed to help with day to day living activities and having choice and control to manage that support is a human right.

## The Impact of COVID-19



***'... Young Disabled people have been forgotten about, and COVID has reinforced this ...'***

COVID-19 and lockdown has had a big impact on everyone. For Disabled people there have been specific challenges, including the increased health risks, the greater need to shield, the associated isolation, negotiating support and adjusting to new communication methods.



***'... I've been very isolated. I've really missed seeing my friends. Routines have changed, activities have stopped. The rules were confusing. The restrictions caused a lot of stress...'***

There has been significant difficulty, and a lack of clarity regarding the lockdown rules. While many Disabled people have faced additional restrictions because of the need to shield, further isolation has been caused by community based activities having to stop.



***'... There has been a zoom revolution, and people's reactions have varied. Not having to travel has been positive, but getting the tech to work has been stressful and affected wellbeing. I think I still prefer face to face meetings ...'***

Online video meetings have helped many connect, and have made continuing work possible. The positive possibility for home working, and online education has been well made through the pandemic. Though this has also highlighted the digital divide and the many problems of access to technology that Disabled Young people face.



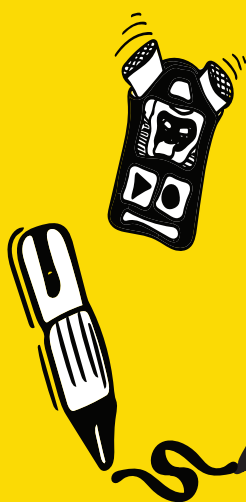
*'... COVID has shown a snapshot of disabled peoples lives, and highlighted this to non disabled people. Shielding was really hard. There has been a lot of misunderstanding and lack of knowledge about shielding ...'*

As restrictions were eased for some, many Disabled Young people needed to continue to self isolate. This appeared to be overlooked, with the lifting of restrictions being celebrated, without consideration of those that were not able to.

## Inclusive Education



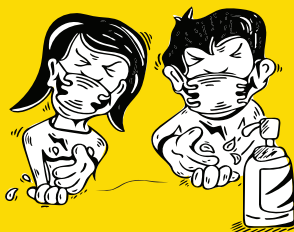
Speaking up for inclusion and changes to the education system is a core belief for ALLFIE. While COVID-19 and the lockdown brought many restrictions and disruption, the need to continue to campaign for inclusion remains important.



*'... Before lockdown I asked for all lectures to be recorded. Not everybody can hold a pen and take notes during lectures. I didn't succeed in making this happen, but COVID did because it put everyone in a similar situation. I hope it will remain this way ....'*



Many Disabled Young people have found remote learning isolating, with little assistance provided in terms of educational support. Not all Disabled Young people have access to laptops, internet, or both. This has meant they have received no learning during lockdown.



Some Disabled Young people said missed out spending time with their friends and learning alongside their peers. Returning to school after lockdown has been equally difficult, adjusting to the new requirements needed to provide a COVID safe space.



The power of working together, finding common ground, identifying the right people to raise issues with, choosing the right time and direct action are crucial tools for achieving change.



*'... I campaigned for more support and assistance. My Mum and PA's helped me write and speak up. This helped me in my music course ...'*

Here are some examples of recent inclusive education campaigns led by Disabled Young people.

### The Claude's SEN Law - Making a New Law for Education



Led by Aquayemi-Claude Garnett Akinsanya's personal experiences of education and a lack of support, this campaign calls for the Government to conduct a review to investigate the curriculum's approach to Special Educational Needs. ***See here.***

### Neurodiversity Celebration Week



Developed by Siena Castellon to promote and celebrate neurodiverse students, switching the narrative to be focused on strengths not deficits. This includes ensuring that appropriate teaching resources are made available in learning environments. ***See here.***

### GSCE British Sign Language



Led by Daniel Jillings, whose first language is British Sign Language (BSL), this is a campaign to get BSL put on the curriculum as a GCSE. ***See here.***

## Future ideas for change



Based on experiences shared during the discussions, the following suggestions were made as things that could be done differently in the future.



**More disabled people in planning and decision making positions** – ensuring lived experiences are well represented to inform judgements and responses.



**Less confusing, more accessible information** – all rules and guidance should be clearly and accessibly presented.



**A collective shielding group** – develop a peer support group to share experiences and inform policy responses.



**More flexibility** – adapting and changing quickly yet safely, so rules are followed but everyday activities can continue, even if in different ways.



**Better access to support** – making sure support continues and is not cut short or restricted.



**Better face to face options, even if they are socially distanced** – develop guidance so like support groups or activities can adjust.



**Build on the innovation** – review what has worked well, learn and develop options for the future that benefit Disabled Young people in learning environments.

## What's Next?



From these discussions ALLFIE will be supporting participants to write blogs, articles and other resources, that will be posted on ALLFIE's webpage and in other publications. This will cover their experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as other things they want you to know about.

Look out for articles with the **#OurVoice** hashtag and if you want to know more, please contact project lead **Armineh Soorenian**, by email - [armineh.soorenian@allfie.org.uk](mailto:armineh.soorenian@allfie.org.uk).

Thanks to all that took part. In solidarity.

Sign up for ALLFIE updates here.



Support our campaign for an inclusive society here.



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