How people think about learning disability

Opportunities and challenges for how to communicate about learning disability

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About FrameWorks UK

FrameWorks UK is a not-for-profit communications research organisation. We work with mission-driven organisations to communicate about social issues in ways that will create change.

Our research shows how people understand social issues, and we use this knowledge to develop and test strategic communications to help organisations shape public conversation. We're the sister organisation of the FrameWorks Institute in the US.

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Introduction

We should all have a place to call home, access to education, the opportunity to work, connection to friends and family, and healthcare and support when we need it.

Right now, for too many people with a learning disability, that is not the case. People with a learning disability are dying on average 20 years earlier than they should, as a result of being under-diagnosed, mis-diagnosed or neglected by health professionals. They are less likely to have a job, with only 1 in 20 being in paid employment, despite most wanting to work. And a lack of appropriate housing means many people with a learning disability cannot live independently, with some staying in hospitals or mental health units because the support that would enable them to leave is not available.

Many of the foundational assumptions members of the public make about what a learning disability is, and how it impacts people's lives, are challenging for communicators. People assume that when we're talking about a learning disability we are talking about challenges in school. Dyslexia is cited as the most common example despite dyslexia not being a learning disability, according to experts. As a result, people assume that all we need to do is give people a bit of extra time with academic tasks and everything will be fine. The varied ways in which people with a learning disability are currently excluded from society are too often missing from view.

This is why we need a new story about learning disability. One which increases understanding of what a learning disability is and what it means for people's daily lives, at every age and stage. A story which can build public support for greater action to ensure that people with a learning disability have access to the things we all need: a home, a job, connection to friends and family.

Mencap and FrameWorks UK have worked together to get to the heart of how people in the UK think about learning disability and how these ways of thinking help or hinder our goal to build understanding and improve support for people with a learning disability.

The work involved original qualitative research with a broad sample of the UK public to reveal how people think about learning disability, and how this differs from what experts in the field understand to be true.

Alongside revealing how people think about learning disability, this briefing makes initial recommendations for a new story. One that can build understanding and build support for action.

Findings in brief

Challenges

- **#1 People apply an academic model of learning to how they think about learning disability.** People assume a learning disability is primarily about challenges in

school. Dyslexia was the most top-of-mind example for people, despite it not being a learning disability. This misunderstanding leads people to assume that things like extra time in exams is the only support needed. These foundational assumptions obscure the wide-ranging challenges people with a learning disability face at all stages of life and make it harder to communicate the need for change beyond the classroom.

- **#2 People take an individual view of disability and what it means to live a full life.** The public tends to view disability as a medical condition located within the individual, rather than thinking that about the ways in which society disables. The idea of living a "full life" is also understood in individualistic terms – as earning enough money to do what you want. This emphasis on the individual, both in terms of disability, and what it means to live a 'full life', obscures the role of our surroundings, and the systems that currently exclude many people with a learning disability. These assumptions make it harder for us to make the case for structural change.

- **#3 People with a learning disability are sometimes seen in dehumanising ways.** For the public, disability is seen as 'not normal' and when it comes to thinking about learning disabilities people are sometimes viewed as incomplete people. Not only do these models of thinking lead to negative stereotypes which likely further discrimination, but they also create psychological distance making it harder to build a movement for change.

- **#4 People think we don't need to do anything.** The public assumes that ***things are better now*** for people with a learning disability. They also assume that people with a learning disability ***don't expect more*** from life and we therefore don't need to do more. That there is a 'threshold' of what people with a learning disability can achieve. All these assumptions undermine the case for change.

- **#5 People assume that learning disabilities are a financial burden and there's not enough money to do more.** There is an assumption that there are not enough resources to meet everyone's needs. Our public systems are overburdened and breaking under pressure. It is therefore unfortunate, but inevitable, that many people with a learning disability will face challenges due to this lack of resources. There is also an assumption that people's value in society is measured by their ***economic contribution*** and those who cannot, or do not, work are seen as failing to contribute. This leads people to reason that people with a learning disability are a financial burden on society.

Opportunities

- **#1 Sometimes people can see that the way society is designed excludes people with a learning disability.** The experts know that many barriers stand in the way of people with a learning disability – at every stage of life – reducing their opportunities and negatively impacting their lives. Sometimes the public can identify these ***societal barriers*** and understand that our society is designed in ways which exclude people with a learning disability. This is a useful opening for communicators to expand and build upon.

- **#2 People see that learning disability includes a range of experiences and requires personalised support.** People understand that learning disability is a broad category organised by the degree of severity, ranging from mild to more severe. This mindset assumes that there are different levels of ability that translate to varying levels of impact on people's lives and therefore varying support needs. This model of thinking matches the expert view and is helpful for normalising the idea that people have different experiences and levels of need, which require personalised support.

- **#3 People recognise that humans are social animals and that we all need the opportunity to connect with others.** For the public, ***human beings are social animals,*** and we all share an inherent need for social connection. This mindset is helpfully universalising – showing how people with, and without, a learning disability share the same need to build relationships and connect with others. It also helps to build understanding that social care support which provides the basic minimum of care is not enough, if it leaves people isolated and alone. This helps to make the case that we need the right care, support and infrastructure to enable relationships to flourish.

- **#4 People recognise that the government has a moral duty to support people with a learning disability.** Helpfully the public assume that the government has a moral duty to provide care, support and safety to all its citizens. The public also see that the government has a responsibility to provide funds to support people with a learning disability. Whilst these mindsets were not top of mind for people and did not come up until directly asked about the role of government, they are nevertheless helpful mindsets which communicators should work to strengthen to build greater public demand for government action.

Recommendations in brief

1. Lead with the things we all need in life and explain why it's harder for someone with a learning disability to access these things.

By leading with the things we *all* need in life – a place to call home, enough money to pay the bills, connection to friends and family, support when we need it – we universalise the issue and bring more people into the conversation. This reduces othering and stigma and helps to build a bigger movement for change.

> For example: *"We all need enough money to pay the bills, a place to call home, and connection to friends and family. But right now, too many people with a learning disability don't have access to these things due to a lack of understanding, opportunities and support."*

Focusing on our shared need for human connection may be a particularly powerful way to show our similarities and bring more people into the conversation.

> For example: *"We all want to be connected to friends and family and have the support and opportunities to achieve the things we want to in life. Mencap exists to make sure everyone with a learning disability has the right support, connection and opportunities."*

2. Explain the challenges faced by people with a learning disability.

We cannot assume that everyone understands the challenges that people with a learning disability face. We need to spell it out step-by-step using words that link cause and effect (terms like: so, this means, this results in, this leads to etc). This helps people see the seriousness of the challenges and point towards appropriate solutions.

For example:

*"Right now, there is poor understanding of learning disabilities among medical professionals. This **means** that GPs do not ask the right questions, or take the time to understand a patient's symptoms, and often do not provide information in a way that can be understood.*

*"This **leads to** many people with a learning disability being under-diagnosed, mis-diagnosed, or neglected. Which **results in** people with a learning disability dying on average 20 years younger than they should.*

"We need better training for GPs and specialist consultants in every hospital to increase understanding of how medical professionals can appropriately support people with a learning disability and prevent people dying years earlier than they should."

3. Highlight concrete, tangible solutions and that the government has a responsibility to act

Explain the impact of solutions and *how* they would make life better for people with a learning disability, their families and our wider communities. This helps to show that change is possible, and the benefits it would bring to many of us. Tapping into people's assumption that the government has a moral duty to support people with a learning disability, also helps to build buy-in for greater government action.

For example:

"Providing better support in classrooms – from resources provided in Easy Read to more teaching assistants and a lower staff to student ratio – helps every child, including those with a learning disability get the support they need to learn.

"The government has a responsibility to make sure that all children get the right support in school to enable them to reach their potential."

4. Use collective language

Where possible use 'we' 'us' and 'our'. Avoid using they/them to describe people with a learning disability, instead try people-first language ie. 'people with a learning disability'/'people we're supporting'/'people we're working with'.

Methods

A rapid review of key literature was undertaken. This was followed by a listening session with people with a learning disability, and interviews with academics and professionals working in the field of learning disability. Together, these were used to understand **what** needs to be communicated about learning disability. This established a clear set of core ideas that we want people to understand about what learning disability is, why it matters, the impact of a learning disability and what we can, and should do, to better support people with a learning disability. Throughout this report, this set of core ideas will be referred to as the expert view.

In depth **cultural mindsets interviews** (n= 20) were conducted with a broadly representative sample of the public to understand **how** people reason about learning disability. Cultural mindsets interviews are one-on-one, semi-structured interviews lasting approximately two hours. They were designed to allow researchers to capture the foundational assumptions that participants use to make sense of learning disability.

To analyse the interviews, researchers identified common ways of talking across the sample, exploring the assumptions, relationships, and connections that were commonly made but taken for granted throughout an individual's dialogue. The analysis involved discerning patterns in both what participants said (how they related, explained, and understood things) and what they did not say (assumptions and implied relationships). Analysis centred on ways of understanding that were shared across participants. While there was no fixed rule or percentage used to identify what counts as "shared," mindsets reported were typically found in a majority of interviews.

The gaps were then mapped between what experts – by experience and profession – think about learning disability and how people currently think about this issue. From this analysis, the mindsets which are challenging to building greater public understanding of learning disability and which offer opportunities have been identified.

This report sets out the implications of these challenges and opportunities in public thinking for future communications. Further research is needed to test framing strategies capable of winning hearts and minds for action on learning disability.

What are cultural mindsets? And why do they matter?

Cultural mindsets are the mental shortcuts that guide our thinking without us realising it. They are deep, assumed patterns of thinking that shape how we see the world and how we act within it. They are shared across a culture – like the UK – and are activated by the things we see and hear.

Cultural mindsets research explores these deep, underlying patterns of thinking that shape and explain patterns in public opinion. Whereas public opinion research examines *what* people think today, mindsets research examines *how* people think – and so where their thinking could go if we communicate differently.

To successfully reframe an issue, we need to understand and navigate the cultural mindsets people hold. This research then sets the direction needed to win hearts and minds for change.

When we move mindsets, we shift hearts and minds and open the space for lasting cultural change.

Challenges

There is a lack of public understanding about what a learning disability is, how it impacts people's lives and what we can, and should, do to enable people with a learning disability to live their lives fully.

Challenge #1
People apply an academic model of learning to how they think about learning disability

Experts agree that a learning disability is a lifelong intellectual impairment that affects a person's understanding and everyday life. It is something that affects every age and stage of a person's life.

For the public, there is an assumption that when we talk about learning disability we are primarily talking about challenges in school. Learning is about things like reading, writing and arithmetic. A learning disability therefore is assumed to be the difficulty in acquiring school-based skills like literacy and numeracy.

> *"If you have a learning disability, you may have something like dyslexia, or, some other issue, which makes it harder for you to learn, and so you might be at school, and you might be a particular age, and everybody in your age group is more advanced and doing better than you."*
>
> – Research participant

For the experts, a learning *disability* is not the same as a learning *difficulty* such as dyslexia or dyscalculia. For the public, dyslexia was the most salient, top-of-mind example of what a learning disability is. This ***dyslexia prototype*** shapes what people think of a learning disability and what it means for people's lives. This is a challenge for communicators and advocates because when people are thinking about the lived reality of someone with a learning disability, what the challenges might be and how they can be better supported, they are imagining these responses in terms of helping someone who is dyslexic. This obscures the multiple and significant barriers faced by someone with a learning disability and makes campaigns for better support seem disproportionate to the level of need.

Even when provided with a definition of what a learning disability is, the ***academic model of learning*** and ***dyslexia prototype*** remained. The word 'learning' appears to strongly trigger an association with school and academic attainment that doesn't significantly shift even when the current Mencap definition of a learning disability was introduced[1]. This is because once a mindset is triggered and brought front of mind, it is very hard to walk it back and

[1] A learning disability is a lifelong intellectual impairment that affects a person's understanding.

bring alternative thinking to the foreground – especially when trying to move away from a very dominant mindset like the ***academic model of learning***.

In terms of thinking about what can, and should, be done to better support people with a learning disability, this ***academic model of learning*** leads people to assume that work-arounds for limited academic skills – like extra time in exams – already help people overcome the limitations of having a learning disability. It therefore obscures the need for any further support outside of a school setting.

Linked to these ways of thinking, there is an assumption that the major effect of having a learning disability is that things take longer. Whilst this would appear to match expert thinking that people with a learning disability can learn new things, but it usually takes longer to understand concepts, retain information, make decisions, and communicate. For the public this ***speed of learning*** thinking assumes that speed is the *only* limiting factor.

> *"You could still have the same... the same outcome as someone that, say, doesn't have [a learning disability]. You might just take maybe a bit longer... to do it"*
>
> – Research participant

In this way of thinking, solutions are about providing people with extra time to complete tasks, rather than changing any of the other systems and structures which are holding people with a learning disability back.

These foundational assumptions about what learning disability is make it harder for us to communicate about the lived reality of people with a learning disability, and how current systems and structures exclude them.

How to address this challenge

1. **Explain how a learning disability impacts everyday life.** Give tangible examples of the ways in which a learning disability can impact life, from a lack of understanding among medical professionals leading to misdiagnoses and resulting in poorer health, to a lack of accessible information – including things like job application forms, transport timetables, bills and health information – making it harder for people to live independently and get on with their lives.
2. **Use examples which focus on homes and health, rather than education,** to explain the barriers people with a learning disability currently face. Talking about homes and health helps to move away from a focus on an academic model of learning – that might be both used to understand how people succeed in school and the workplace. Homes and health are both particularly salient topics that the public understand to be things we should all have access to.

Challenge #2

People take an individual view of disability and what it means to live a full life

People think in individualistic ways about what a disability is, how it impacts people's lives, and in what it takes to achieve a full life.

For the public, the view is of ***disability as a medical condition***, which equates disability with ill health. This fits with a medical model of disability which views disability as an issue located within the individual, rather than thinking about how someone is disabled by a society not designed for their needs. In this way of thinking, individuals are 'not normal' and in need of being 'fixed'.

In addition to this, there is also a model of thinking that suggests someone with a learning disability just needs to try harder, and any differences in outcomes are down to differences in attitude or willpower. This ***individual responsibility*** mindset suggests that barriers and discrimination are surmountable with the right amount of grit and willpower.

> "...they've got some kind of disability, but you've just got to overcome it, do you know what I mean?"
>
> – Research participant

When this mindset is active unequal outcomes can be viewed as part of the expected variation that comes with different personality types. Challenges experienced are a test of character, rather than a situation requiring structural adjustments and responsibility is placed squarely on the shoulders of the individual, rather than institutions.

People with a learning disability face barriers in health, in education, in employment, in social care, financially and more. For the experts, enabling people with a learning disability to live a 'full life' means overcoming these structural barriers and achieving this will require joined-up strategies at many levels, starting with the government.

In current communications 'full life' is often used by experts as a shorthand to explain all the different ways in which people with a learning disability should have the same rights, enjoyment and opportunities as everyone else.

For the public, living a 'full life' is about being able to shape your own destiny and do what you want to do by ***living out personal choice.***

> *"You're the one that's in charge of your life, basically. So, it's the choices that you make, the path that you choose, everything that you do as an individual."*
>
> – Research participant

Full life is also seen to be about having enough money to live out this personal choice, a mindset we've termed ***money = choice.*** In this way of thinking, it is primarily the role of the individual to earn enough to live a full life.

There is also a way of thinking that assumes ***full life = good health.*** In this way of thinking you cannot live a full life if you are not healthy. Given people often view ***disability as a***

medical condition, which equates disability with ill health, in this way of thinking it is assumed that people with a disability cannot live a full life.

In these models of thinking, the phrase 'a full life' primes a very individualistic understanding of what it means to thrive. It is not, as the experts think, about equality of opportunity and rights but earning enough money to do what you want, and this is achieved by grit and determination or, sometimes, a bit of luck. Instead of opening up thinking about the everyday things we all need, like a home, job, and connection to friends and family, and the barriers, and gaps in service that prevent some of us from accessing those things, it keeps the focus on what an individual should do to create their own full life.

This emphasis on the individual, both in terms of disability, and what it means to live a 'full life' obscures the role of our surroundings, and the systems that currently exclude many people with a learning disability. These assumptions make it harder for us to make the case for structural change. To overcome this, our communications need to do more to bring systems to the foreground, and to background individualistic thinking.

For communicators there is a balance to be struck between countering individualistic thinking without diminishing people's individual agency and doing so in a way which highlights how our society has been designed to exclude people with a learning disability.

How to address this challenge

1. **Start by talking about the things we all need** and explain why it's harder for someone with a learning disability to access these things. By leading with the things we *all* need in life – like enough money to pay the bills, a place to call home and connection to friends and family – we universalise the issue and bring more people into the conversation.

   For example: *"We all need enough money to pay the bills, a place to call home and connection to friends and family. But right now, too many people with a learning disability don't have access to these things due to a lack of understanding, opportunities and support."*

2. **Give examples of how our surroundings shape our lives.** To move people away from an individualistic understanding of learning disability, we need to bring systems and environments to the foreground. Give examples of how our surroundings shape our options and opportunities.

3. **Avoid using the phrase 'full life' as a shorthand without explaining what we mean by it.** Further testing will be needed to find the best way to bring this idea to life, however focusing on connection and opportunity are likely to be useful openings.

   For example: *"We all want to be connected to friends and family and have the support and opportunities to achieve the things we want to in life. Mencap exists to make sure everyone with a learning disability has the right support, connection and opportunities."*

Challenge #3

People with a learning disability are sometimes seen in dehumanising ways

The experts agree that people with a learning disability have the same rights as everyone else. That we should all be able to enjoy life without discrimination, and to pursue our hopes and dreams. 1 in 4 people in the UK have a disability, and 1.5million people have a learning disability, making both disability, and learning disability, part of the fabric of UK society.

For the public, however, disability is seen as not normal. This ***disability as not normal mindset*** positions disabilities in contrast to the normal standard, with the benchmark of what is normal being set by what the non-disabled majority can do. This thinking extends to how people reason about learning disabilities too.

> *"Their brain isn't functioning like a normal person, and it's not registering."*
>
> – Research participant

When disability is understood in contrast to ability, it creates a perceived separation between people with and without disability. This view leads the public to think about people with disability as "other" or "different" from the rest of society.

The public also see ***disability as deficit*** where disability is defined by what a person cannot do. In this way of thinking a person's capacities fall short of what is considered normal or expected.

When people apply ***disability as deficit*** thinking to learning disabilities, they view ***learning disability as incompleteness.***

> *"There's something missing in their brain."*
>
> – Research participant

> *"Our brain is like a jigsaw... like jigsaw pieces. And then sometimes, you know, things are messed up in your head, and it's all, like, jumbled up, and all the wires are in the wrong place."*
>
> – Research participant

These mindsets are challenging for communicators. They stigmatise and dehumanise people with a learning disability and risk positioning people with a learning disability as 'incomplete'. In this way of thinking, any challenges people face are a result of individual deficits, rather than a deficit of our environment which has been designed in ways which do not meet their needs.

Not only do these models of thinking lead to negative stereotypes which likely further discrimination, but they also create psychological distance. When an issue is perceived to be about "other" people, people who are different to us, it makes it harder to make the case for why we should all care.

How to address this challenge

1. **Build a bigger 'us' by talking about the things we all need first.** Lead with the things we all need to get on in life, before then highlighting the particular challenges faced by people with a learning disability (see challenge 2 for a further example).
2. **Use inclusive language.** Use words like 'we', 'us', and 'our' where appropriate, rather than 'they/them', to help overcome othering and reduce psychological distance.
3. **Avoid describing people with a learning disability as 'vulnerable'** as this is likely to reinforce the 'otherness' of people with a learning disability.

Challenge #4
People think we don't need to do anything

The experts are clear that people with a learning disability face multiple and significant barriers – at every stage of life – which reduce their opportunities and negatively impact their lives. This results in people with a learning disability dying, on average, nearly 20 years younger than they should, in part due to being under-diagnosed, mis-diagnosed or neglected. It means that only 1 in 20 people with a learning disability are employed, despite the majority wanting a job, resulting in poverty. To name just a couple of examples.

For the public, they assume ***it's better now.*** 'Better' is defined relative to a remembered or imagined past, and it is assumed that improvement continually happens over time.

> *"I think they're... treated much better. I mean, people used to be so dismissive... As a society, we have moved on so much over the years, you know... I think we're far more tolerant and accepting."*
>
> – Research participant

This way of thinking makes it harder to drive forward action that would improve the lives of people with a learning disability, as people assume it's not needed – things have largely improved already – and will continue to do so. This thinking diminishes any sense of urgency or pressure for change.

Coupled with this there is an assumption that people with a learning disability do not need more because ***they don't expect more***. The public reason that people with a learning disability have lower expectations of life because they know no different. In this way of thinking, barriers, exclusion and discrimination can be perfectly compatible with living a full life, if expectations align. There is no minimum standard of opportunity or participation that is required.

> *"I think you can be happier if you're disabled, because you've not got the expectation [of more]."*
>
> – Research participant

> *"[It's] an ignorance is bliss type of thing. If you know no better and you're happy every day, then you're sort of like, okay."*
>
> – Research participant

Linked to this, is a mindset we've termed ***threshold thinking***. This is the assumption that there is an inherent ceiling on what someone with a learning disability can achieve. Where this threshold sits may vary depending on the severity of the learning disability, but it was always assumed that what someone with a learning disability can achieve in life will always be less than what someone without a disability could achieve.

> *"If you have a mental or physical disability you can lead a life that is good, but only up to a certain point."*
>
> – Research participant

These mindsets are a challenge to communicators as they once again diminish the need for action. The reasoning follows that if people with a learning disability do not expect more, and are not capable of more, then we do not need to do more.

There is also an assumption that there is a ***universality of limitations*** – that we all have strengths and weaknesses and that this is not unique to people with a learning disability but a shared human condition.

> *"I don't have learning disabilities... Doesn't mean I can be an astronaut. I know what my limitations are."*
>
> – Research participant

Whilst this model does helpfully soften 'us vs them' thinking, building a more inclusive understanding of our similarities, it also flattens important differences. By implying that we're all the same, it risks downplaying the distinct barriers faced by people with a learning disability, and the specific support needed to enable people to thrive.

Together these mindsets are a challenge for communicators as they downplay the need for action.

How to address this challenge

1. **Do not assume people understand the barriers facing people with a learning disability or the consequences. Instead, explain the challenges faced by people with a learning disability step-by-step** using words that link cause and effect (this means, this results in, this leads to etc).

   For example: *"Right now, there is poor understanding of learning disabilities among medical professionals. This **means** that GPs do not ask the right questions, or take the time to understand a patient's symptoms, and often do not share information in a way that can be understood.*

   *"This **leads to** many people with a learning disability being under-diagnosed, mis-diagnosed, or neglected. Which **results in** people with a learning disability dying on average 20 years younger than they should.*

"We need better training for GPs and specialist consultants in every hospital to increase understanding of how medical professionals can appropriately support people with a learning disability and prevent people dying years earlier than they should."

2. **Describe how people's assumptions about what a person with a learning disability can and cannot do is one of the things holding them back.** Explain how this happens.

   For example: *"There are many stereotypes about people with a learning disability, and media portrayals which show people as simple two-dimensional characters. This affects our attitudes and behaviours in ways that we don't even realise. When we assume that people with a learning disability can't achieve things, we don't give them the opportunity to try, which in turns restricts people's options and opportunities further."*

Challenge #5

People assume that learning disabilities are a financial burden and there's not enough money to do more

Experts agree that public spending cuts have weakened the services that people with a learning disability rely on – in particular health, social care, housing and employment. Experts also explain that welfare is frequently insufficient to cover the extra costs that people with a learning disability face as a result of their disability, compounding poverty levels and reducing people's ability to be independent. However, it is not funding alone that causes challenges for people with learning disability.

Indeed, experts, including those with a learning disability, pointed out that a lack of understanding of what a learning disability is and how it impacts people's lives, and the less visible nature of some learning disabilities, means that people with a learning disability sometimes do not get the support they need.

It is this lack of understanding which compounds funding cuts, meaning decision-makers sometimes don't understand both how investment or cuts will impact people's everyday lives, or understand the kinds of non-financial support required to make sure people with a learning disability have what they need. For example, the importance of easy-to-understand health information, like Easy Read materials, and training for health professionals so they understand how to communicate with, and support, patients with learning disabilities.

For the public, there is an assumption that there are not enough resources to meet everyone's needs. Our public systems are overburdened and breaking under pressure. It is therefore unfortunate, but inevitable, that many people with a learning disability will face challenges due to this lack of resources.

> **Participant:** *"I don't think it [support] exists everywhere, and I don't think it exists as much as it should."*
> **Interviewer:** *"Why?"*
> **Participant:** *"Money. Funding, I think, is a lot of it."*

This ***scarcity*** mindset is a challenge for communicators as it risks activating fatalism, with people assuming that this is just the way things are and cannot be changed. There is also a risk that it triggers zero-sum thinking, with people assuming that when resources are scarce, support for one person must come at the expense of the other. With social care support often pitted against the NHS for example.

Linked to this, there was a mindset of ***care as commodity.*** In this way of thinking services exist in a market economy where our ability to pay determines our access to support.

> *"If you've got money... If people have money, they might employ carers... money gives you freedom to do what you want, doesn't it?"*
>
> – Research participant

Together with the ***scarcity*** mindset, this thinking assumes that the state cannot guarantee access to support and so it is up to individuals. This thinking normalises the idea that those with money will have options, and those without will not, and that is just the way things are. To help build public support for change, our communications must help people see that change is possible.

There is also an assumption that people's value in society is measured by their ***economic contribution.***

> *"A disabled person may not be able to contribute in a tangible way. And that's just the way it is."*
>
> – Research participant

If ***economic contribution*** is seen as the main measure of someone's worth, then those who cannot, or do not, work are seen as failing to contribute.

Experts know that, with the right support, people with a learning disability have much to contribute to society, to the economy and to their community. However, the idea that people with a learning disability can contribute like all of us, and not just take, is entirely absent from public thinking. People with a learning disability were repeatedly seen as passive recipients of society's resources, not as people with agency who can contribute and work. This cognitive hole is a challenge for communicators as, combined with the ***economic contribution*** mindset it leads to the assumption that ***learning disability = financial burden***.

> *"I know it sounds awful, but some would say they're a burden to society... They don't... they can't... some can't work... So you, you just... Like, getting paid from taxpayers, that's how some think of it."*
>
> – Research participant

How to address this challenge

1. **Lead with solutions to show that change is possible.** Talk about specific solutions – such as better training for GPs – often and early in our communications and *explain* how this would improve lives.

   For example: *"Better training for GPs about learning disability would save lives. If all doctors had training about learning disability, they would better understand their patients' needs. Training would support doctors with how to improve their communications so they can understand their patients' symptoms and their patients can understand their options – and would mean that GPs recognised that additional time might be needed to explain. This would result in fewer misdiagnoses, improved health, and fewer people with learning disability dying* **earlier than they should."**

2. **Talk about non-financial solutions at least as often as financial ones** to show there are a range of ways that we can better support people with a learning disability.

3. **Explain the difference that solutions would make to people.** Explain the impact of the solutions and *how* they would make life better for people with a learning disability, their families and our wider communities.

   For example: *"Providing better support in classrooms – from resources provided in Easy Read to more teaching assistants and a lower staff to student ratio – helps every child, including those with a learning disability get the support they need to learn.*

   "The government has a responsibility to make sure that all children get the right support in school to enable them to reach their potential."

4. **Use a tone which balances urgency (we must change this) with a sense of efficacy (we can change this)** to help people see that change is both necessary and possible.

Opportunities

Some of the ways that the public think about learning disability, shared needs, and our wider society, offer opportunities to build understanding.

Opportunity #1

Sometimes people can see that the way society is designed excludes people with a learning disability

The experts know that many barriers stand in the way of people with a learning disability – at every stage of life – reducing their opportunities and negatively impacting their lives.

Sometimes the public can identify these ***societal barriers*** and understand that our society is designed in ways which exclude people with a learning disability.

> *"[They] have to fit into a world that is... not designed for them, [it's] designed for normal people, normal bodies, normal brain function. Everything's designed for normal people."*
>
> – Research participant

> *"People that have disabilities, they're gonna have more struggle to fit into society as we've created it."*
>
> – Research participant

Though this mindset was recessive, it provides an important opening for communicators because it shifts the focus from the individual to the systems and structures around us. This understanding makes it easier to make the case for action to address the barriers in, for example, housing, employment and healthcare, that are currently excluding people with a learning disability.

How to make the most of this opportunity

1. **Expand this thinking by explaining how society currently excludes people with a learning disability.** Use specific examples to bring these barriers to life.
2. **Use the metaphor of design/redesign** to explain how our society is currently designed in ways which exclude people with a learning disability, and how it could be redesigned differently.

For example: *"Our society wasn't designed with people with a learning disability in mind. By redesigning public communication – from health information provided in Easy Read to accessible bus timetables – it would make it easier for everyone to get the information we need."*

Opportunity #2

People see that learning disability includes a range of experiences and requires personalised support

Experts describe how the nature and experience of learning disability varies from person to person. Even the nature and experience of a particular kind of learning disability can vary very widely. For example, some people with Down Syndrome are non-verbal, while others are highly articulate. Learning disabilities can be classified as mild, moderate, severe or profound to indicate their impact on a person's life and their potential need for support.

People understand that learning disability is a broad category organised by the degree of severity, ranging from mild to more severe. This ***learning disability as a spectrum*** mindset assumes that there are different levels of ability that translate to varying levels of impact on people's lives and therefore varying support needs.

> *"I've seen people that have Down syndrome that have... you know, they're lawyers, or they have degrees ... But, you know, others they ... need care... round the clock. They can't be left alone."*
>
> – Research participant

> "*The level of support that people are going to need is going to be different, depending on that individual... Like a sliding scale."*
>
> – Research participant

This model of thinking matches the expert view and is helpful for normalising the idea that people have different experiences and levels of need, which require personalised support.

However, by locating differences along a spectrum of individual functioning and need, challenges can still be understood as solely due to the relative abilities of the person – not the barriers put in place by society. The aim for communicators is to expand this thinking to also include an understanding of the structural barriers facing people with a learning disability.

The experts recognise that wider characteristics and identities – including age, gender, ethnicity, class and level of wealth – all intersect with the barriers faced by people with a learning disability, shaping different experiences. Expanding the mindset ***learning disability as a spectrum*** could help to deepen this understanding among the public too. For people who had a more expansive understanding of learning disability they were more able to identify how these characteristics intersect with learning disability – for example that women with a learning disability were at increased risk of sexual abuse.

How to make the most of this opportunity

1. **Don't assume** people know how characteristics and identities such as gender, ethnicity and levels of wealth interact with and exacerbate barriers faced by people with a learning disability. **Instead, explain** how these factors impact people's lives using words that link cause and effect like 'this leads to' 'this means', 'this results in'.

Opportunity #3
People recognise that humans are social animals and that we all need the opportunity to connect with others

Experts describe how reduced budgets in social care mean people with a learning disability are less able to get out and about in their communities. This means people are losing their social networks, relationships and independence. Stretched services, and limited appropriate housing, can also mean that families become separated when people with a learning disability are housed far from family.

For the public, ***human beings are social animals,*** and we all share an inherent need for social connection.

> *"[We all need] love and support, someone to go to, to chat, if we've got something on our mind, to feel that we can express it... it's good to be heard. I think it's a need to, you know, we're a relational race."*
>
> – Research participant

> *"It all comes down to connections with other humans, and I think that's what it comes down to... I think you need love, and I think you need other people to have shared experiences with, if you have a good support network of friends, of people who you can rely on, and who rely on you."*
>
> – Research participant

This mindset, ***human beings are social animals***, is helpfully universalising – showing how people with, and without, a learning disability share the same need to build relationships and connect with others.

It also helps to build understanding that social care support which provides the basic minimum of care – such as help with personal care or shopping – is not enough, if it leaves people isolated and alone. This helps to make the case that we need the right care, support and infrastructure to enable relationships to flourish.

Communications should build on, and strengthen this mindset, to help show why people should care about the lives of people with a learning disability and reduce the impact of more individualising and othering mindsets.

How to make the most of this opportunity

1. **Use the value of interdependence** to show how we are all connected. This value taps into the sense that that when one of us struggles it affects those around us. Conversely, when one of us thrives, our friends, family and society benefit too.

   For example: *"We're all connected and when one of us is struggling, it affects our friends, family and wider society too. Right now, only 1 in 20 people with a learning disability has a job despite many wanting to work. This is in part due to inaccessible recruitment processes, discrimination and a lack of support. This makes it harder for people to live independently, puts financial pressure on families and our communities, and workplaces miss out on a variety of perspectives and talents. Making sure that everyone with a learning disability, who wants to work, can benefit from paid employment, means individuals, families, and our society all benefit too."*

2. **Talk explicitly about the need we all have for love, relationships and connection.** This helps to highlight the things we all have in common and taps into a shared sense of humanity, helping to decrease 'othering' and building a greater sense that people with a learning disability should have the same opportunities for connection.
3. **Describe examples of how connection can be cut off when we do not have the right support.** For example, when people are moved far away from their families because of a lack of local appropriate housing, or when social care support hours are reduced and people no longer have the support they need to go out and see friends and family.

Opportunity #4

People recognise that the government has a moral duty to support people with a learning disability

The experts know that with the right support, people with a learning disability can lead a life filled with the things we all want and need; like paid employment, relationships, and a home of our own. But that to achieve this requires action at many levels, beginning with central government, with a strategy to ensure people with a learning disability get the support they need, and which runs through every aspect of their lives. It also requires co-ordination across local and central government to invest in and provide the right support and services across health and social care, employment, social security, education and housing.

Helpfully, the public assume that the government has a moral duty to provide care, support and safety to all its citizens. This ***government responsibility = moral duty*** mindset is useful for communicators.

> *"[The government is responsible] because we want to create a society that is safe for everyone to have a sense of belonging, to have a sense of education, to be able to learn in the right way. Whether you've got a learning disability or not."*

– Research participant

The public also see that the government has a responsibility to provide funds to support people with a learning disability. This mindset – ***government responsibility = funder*** – is a useful counter to the assumption that it's up to individuals to pay for their own care and support.

> *"[The] government, they have the core funding pots, and that can trickle down to local councils and what have you."*
>
> – Research participant

Whilst these mindsets were not top of mind for people and did not come up until directly asked about the role of government, they are nevertheless helpful mindsets which communicators should work to strengthen to build greater public demand for government action.

How to make the most of this opportunity

1. **Talk explicitly about what governments can, and should do, to support people with a learning disability.** Provide specific examples of what both national and local government should do differently to better support people with a learning disability.
2. **Tap into this sense of moral duty** by talking explicitly about the government's *responsibility* to ensure that all its citizens have what they need – a home, a job, healthcare.

Conclusion

This research reveals a significant gap between how members of the public understand learning disability and the expert reality of what it means to live with one. But it also shows us something more hopeful: the public's thinking is not fixed and there are clear opportunities to shift thinking, build understanding, and build support for change.

First, and most vitally, we need to test new frames for labelling and describing a learning disability. The word "learning" currently does significant damage, triggering an academic model that reduces learning disability to a school-based struggle with reading or writing. If we can find language that bypasses this association and builds a more accurate picture of what a learning disability is, and how it shapes a person's life, we can unlock a very different conversation.

The public currently sees people with a learning disability as "other" – as different from the rest of society – and places responsibility for overcoming barriers on individuals themselves, rather than on addressing the ways in which our society has been designed to exclude. But these positions are moveable. By starting our communications with the things we all need in life, from access to healthcare and education, to enough money to pay the bills, to support and relationships – and building on people's instincts that we are all social animals, in need of connection, we can begin to challenging these assumptions.

People already think that the government has a moral duty to support people with a learning disability. They can sometimes see that society has been designed in ways that exclude people with a learning disability. These ways of thinking can be deepened and expanded to increase understanding about learning disability, and support for action to address the barriers currently holding too many people with a learning disability back.

Endnotes

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