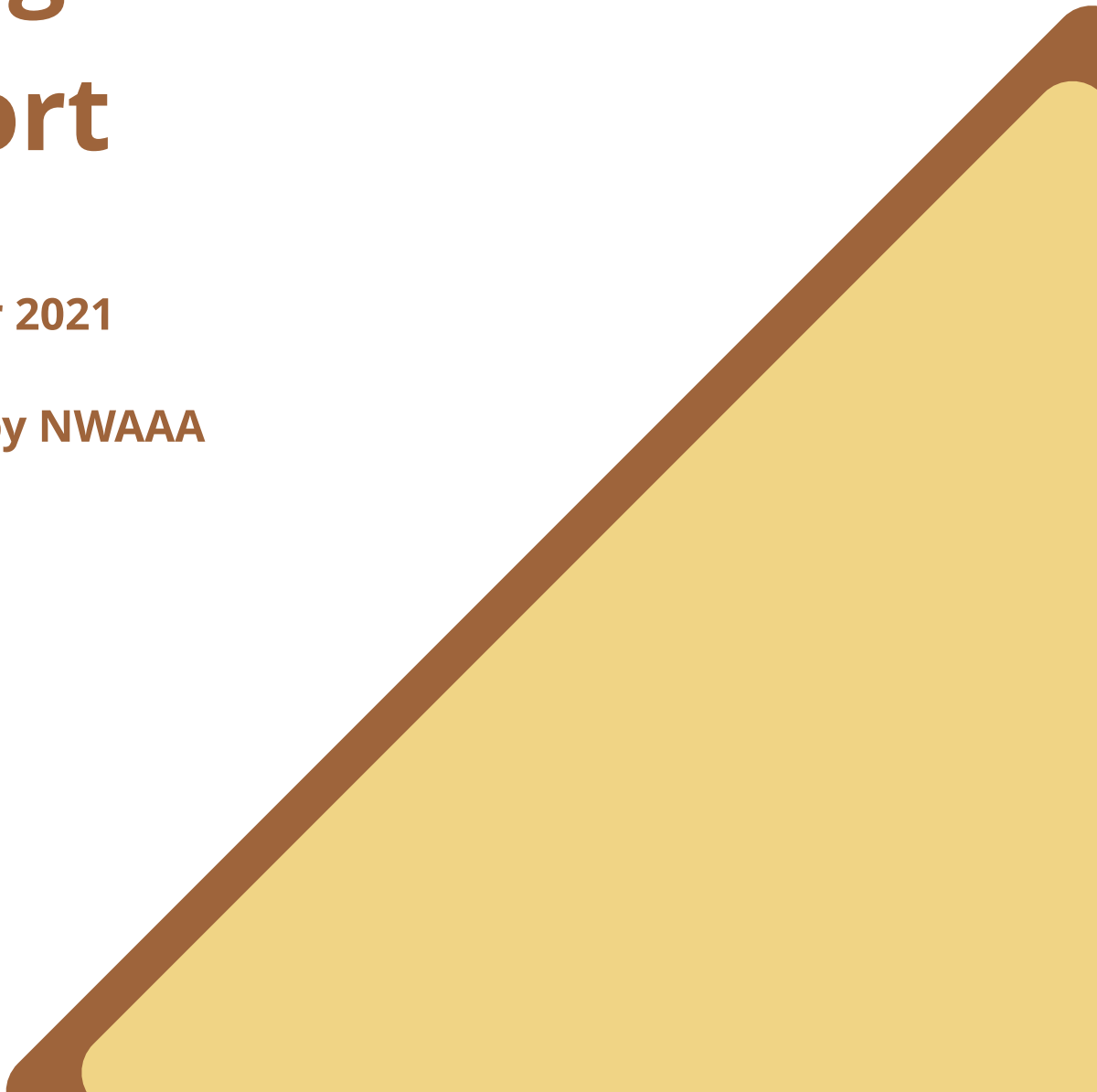


Meifod Wood Products Engagement Report

September 2021

Prepared by NWAAA



Introduction

NWAAA are an independent advocacy provider with expertise in public engagement with marginalised groups. We were commissioned by Denbighshire Council to design and undertake engagement sessions with members of the public with experience of using and working at Meifod Wood Products, i.e. people with learning difficulties.

Denbighshire Council asked NWAAA to find out what people thought about Meifod Wood as a service, what their thoughts are on work opportunities in Denbighshire and what their own aspirations for work might be.

NWAAA were set a timescale to undertake the work based on the local authority elected members schedule of works.

Method

NWAAA designed an accessible range of discussion tools to facilitate engagement with people with learning

disabilities and communication needs.

NWAAA initially hosted three (3) in-person engagement sessions at Hwb Denbigh between the 31st of August and September 3rd. Also offered was the possibility of in-person 1-to-1 sessions and online video sessions.

Due to low uptake, only two consultations were held (31st and August and September 2nd), with 5 participants in total. The approach was adapted to try to reach out to people who did not, or could not attend the face to face sessions arranged.

One person engaged via phone call, while another engaged via an online Zoom meeting.

The total number of participants was seven (7).

Stories, experiences and answers provided have been re-presented in this report in the context of the Social Services and Wellbeing Act's personal wellbeing outcomes as most relevant to work and occupation.

I can learn and develop to my full potential

Education and training wellbeing outcome

Through our conversations and interactions, NWAAA heard that Meifod Wood provided opportunities to develop and grow technical and complex skill-sets in a variety of roles. Due to its nature, Meifod Wood focused on carpentry and joinery skills, but people also spoke about skills such as working on deliveries, sales and supporting colleagues by making tea. Participants expressed their skill development in different ways:

"because I was most able I got good jobs", "some jobs were too dangerous, but I got help", "I was driven, doing this work"., "before I didn't have skills, now I do". One person with very complex needs who was not able to verbalise their work was able to identify incorrect use of a saw when watching a video, showing that they had knowledge and understanding of relevant work tasks.

Meifod Wood was a training environment that allowed people of varying ability to learn skills that would otherwise be unavailable to them. Participants recognized the level of skill required in order to work safely and with competence. Most people looked at the furniture produced with pride and a sense of accomplishment - *"Ask anyone, I know exactly what I'm doing ... I am motivated", "I made this...we made this table here"*

At Meifod Wood people felt trained and trusted to use machinery and do jobs that non-disabled people would do. Comments were made about being given interesting, important and skilled jobs and people clearly expressed self worth in relation to this. One person felt that they could have done more complex tasks if trusted to do so by all support staff: *"Some staff trust me and some don't, I could probably do a bit more."* Some participants also felt that there should be more work options for people with learning disabilities and that woodwork or gardening were too limited.

Participants asked had not given much thought to doing similar work but in a paid role.

“ When I first went there, there was a special person who taught me how to work [the machines] and I got used to those people. It was really important to me ”

*My best future?
Doing things I'm
good at*

I love to work

I can learn and develop to my full potential

Education and training well-being outcome

Point for consideration

Education and training is of vital importance to people, and many people spoke of missing working on their carpentry and joinery skills. With the regional shift to transform day service and work opportunities, it should be noted that this has, in fact, left people with learning disabilities with even fewer opportunities than they have now. These concerns reflect the worries participants shared

Potential decision makers should be aware that the 2016 Mencap Report¹ that 32% of local authorities have closed services in the preceding 3 years, with only 20% of the local authorities that have closed day-services replacing them with appropriate services.

Furthermore, the 2018 Is Wales Fairer?² report found that people with learning difficulties have the lowest employment rates of the population and that they continue to face discriminative and ill equipped work places. In the context of changing work opportunities and enabling people to reach their full potential decision makers must be aware of the potential for leaving people with learning disabilities with even fewer opportunities than they have now.



I contribute towards my social life and can be with people that I choose

Social and economic well-being

“Money is important to me because I can go to the pub with my family and I can buy myself a drink and my family (too)”

Meifod Wood produced furniture sold to both the local community and the public at large. Those that worked in the center were given an attendance payment for their work. Those individuals who attended Meifod Wood on a daily basis earned £15 per week (a rate of £3 per day).

Many participants expressed how important having an attendance payment was to them, as it showed recognition for their efforts at work and allowed them to feel that they had earnings to spend: *"It is very important to get paid"*.

£3 a day? It's not worth getting out of bed for.

However, it was also vocalized by some participants that they recognised that this money was not a proper wage and did not provide them with financial autonomy or stability to sufficiently impact their choices around hobbies or social events: *"We work very hard, and we should get more money"*. Further to that, participants also expressed concern and sympathy for those who did not receive such a payment: *"It's important to get paid, and I feel sorry for people who do not"*.

Point for consideration

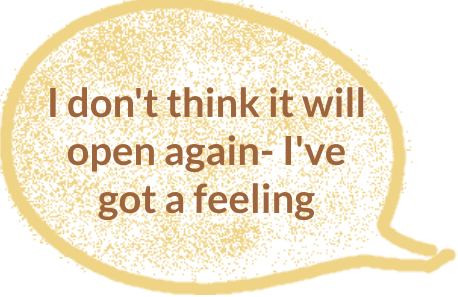
The feeling of valued employment is important to lots of people with learning disabilities and the comments from participants demonstrate this. Paid work allows for individuals to have a sense of self and dignity through financial independence. Furthermore, paid employment fosters an inclusive work agenda. With only 6% of adults with learning disabilities in paid work³, Meifod Wood offered a rare opportunity for people to earn some level of income. While this was in the form of attendance payments, multiple participants communicated that while nice to have some money in their pockets, it was short given the level of technical expertise and training that they had. It has also been stated that some people would prefer *"... to do a course and get a job with proper money"*.

I am supported to work

Participation in work

Most participants identified their place at Meifod Wood as 'work' in that they recognised that they had job specific skills, tasks to complete, colleagues, pay and

needed to adhere to work place rules like health and safety. Words like *"driven"*, *"motivated"*, *"skilled"* and *"team"* were used to describe experiences of being in Meifod. The more articulate participants could identify the difference between Meifod Wood work and the type of job a non disabled person might do. *"We work very hard, we should get more money"*, *"giving up benefits for a paid job is a risk"*, *"I've been thinking about other jobs, but not really liked them"*.



I don't think it will open again- I've got a feeling

People also talked about Meifod Wood in a non-work place context, seeing their mates, being able to choose how often they went and feeling dependent on the council for the future of Meifod, and in turn what they could do next if it closed. *"I'll try anything except gardening, but I haven't got a choice"*, *"if it opened, I'd go for one day"*.

When asked about work aspirations some people found it difficult to think of anything other than Woodlands or Meifod. Norwegian research⁵ into work inclusion for people with learning disabilities found that participants found it difficult to understand and express aspirations. This was due to limited life experience and limited opportunity to express and develop the language of "dreams and aspirations". This could account for why most people found it difficult to speculate about their future or an alternative future of Meifod Wood other than saying that they don't like change.

“It's difficult to think of other jobs because of losing benefits”

Point for consideration

In planning and developing the work landscape for people with learning disabilities in Denbighshire, it is likely that service users will need to be supported to overcome institutional experiences and world views. The North Wales Together strategy states that more people with Learning disabilities should be in paid work and research suggests that 'real jobs' combined with work opportunity placements work well for most people with learning disabilities. A blended worklife would require investment in both more traditional work opportunity services as well as supporting employers to be inclusive.

I can contribute and engage with my community

Contribution made to society

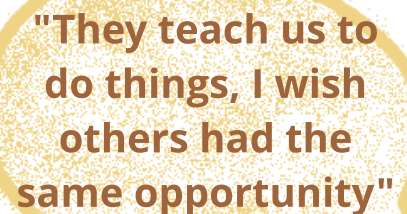
In this context participants recognised and spoke about their work community but few were able to talk about how their Meifod Wood life intersected other aspects of

community and societal life. One participant talked about having made an effort, during the Meifod closure to meet local co-workers in the pub. They were able to achieve this with those who happened to live close by. This person also described how they knew and chatted to many local pub goers who had no connection with Meifod Wood.

Some participants talked about the items they had made being sold into the community, and the value of seeing those items in gardens, or in their own homes.

They spoke about being *"happy"* and *"proud"* of the work they do, but not of the impact or value of their work at Meifod on society and community. Two people felt strongly that they need to be in work to feel active and valued; *"I was going crazy [during lockdown], I'm an outside person"*, *"ask anyone, I know exactly what I'm doing"*. One person felt a strong sense of belonging towards Meifod, and said they felt sorry for people who don't get paid for working. Most people recognised that the service that Meifod provides is good but not necessarily that they are contributing or a part of wider community through their own work, and were indifferent about whether Meifod was the best place to work.

For some participants being at Meifod was more about seeing people than doing a job, therefore Meifod was their community. Two people talked about missing the people, the banter and the laughs but not necessarily the work or the role of being a worker.



"They teach us to do things, I wish others had the same opportunity"

Point for consideration

Participant experience does not appear to include an asset based outlook, that is they did not generally see themselves as people who contribute to wider society. This is likely part of a broader identity issue for people with learning disabilities who are not often treated as people with assets by society or service providers. Well thought out day service, work and employment opportunities could contribute to a culture shift in this area.

Some participants viewed their Meifod associates as a significant part of their community, but most people did not appear to rely on Meifod for community interaction, and had wider interests and friend bases.

I have control over day-to-day life

My voice is valued and heard

“Because of lockdown I got thrown into gardening, I wouldn't have chosen that”

Many of the individuals had attended Meifod Wood for many years, one person told us they have been going for eight years. The closure of the center due to the Covid-19 pandemic has meant the loss of not just an occupation, but losing contact with their friends that many have seen on a daily basis for years. There were expressed deep emotional bonds by some participants about Meifod Wood: *"Meifod is my heart", "Meifod feels like something stuck in me, and I notice when it's not there"*.

With Meifod Wood closed, some people have occupied their time with various other activities, ranging from country walks to gardening - but in the process have lost regular connections with friends that they had seen every week for years *"Some things are ok, some things are not", "my wi-fi is terrible, so I couldn't join in with things", "I miss all me mates"*. However, many individuals felt that they had no choice in their new activities and that their life and routine were disrupted without any input from themselves. Participants also stated that there is a strong dislike of change, with a lack of open communication often paired with feelings of concern about isolation. *"I don't think it will open again, I got a feeling, no one has been in touch", "I'd love to know what's happening"*.

Crikey, I miss people!

Point for consideration

The 2021 Welsh Government report *Locked Out, Liberating Disabled Peoples Lives*⁵ stated that that people with Learning Disabilities had experienced far greater isolation and loneliness than that of the general population. This was further compounded by a sluggish restart of day-services in the aftermath of the Covid-19 Pandemic.

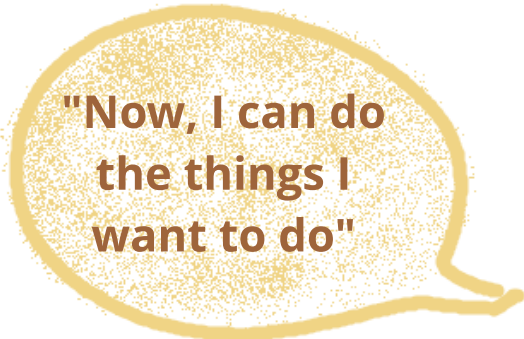
While not unique to Meifod Wood, many people who access day-services are still awaiting restarts of previous activities.

Meifod Wood was a main point of contact for many people. Its closure has been keenly felt by those who worked there to the exclusion of all other activities. Variety of service across the week is key in order to minimise potential shock from sudden change. Most participants expressed a feeling of not having a say in the future of Meifod, despite having an opinion. People seemed to feel that the lockdown closure had distanced them from having any control or influence.

I have control over day-to-day life

Pt.2

My voice is valued
and heard



**"Now, I can do
the things I
want to do"**

Some people have been vocal in that they are feeling forced to do activities that they have no interest in, with participants vocalizing that new activities have been what they wanted to do for years: *"Music is important to me, and now I can dance and that makes me happy"*

The Covid-19 Pandemic has meant that new and creative solutions for alternative activities have been offered in a social or recreational context. People have spoken about how they now have access to creative outlets that were previously not available to them. Also, many talked about how going to Woodlands was a nice change of pace, and an opportunity to regularly go outdoors without it just walking around: *"I love Woodlands!"*

Point for consideration

A person-centered focus is vital for the health and well-being for anyone who uses day-services - as stated by the North Wales Learning Disability Strategy³: an individual should have something that is meaningful and chosen by the individual. Meifod Wood was considered very much an establishment within the community for many years, which in turn seems to have created an over-reliance on it as a day-service over the years. The sharp change into new unfamiliar activities has created feelings of discomfort and upset by most participants. Communication is key in minimizing emotional and mental stress from change and fostering an environment of trust and mutual respect as expressed during our engagement.

Recognizing what people love doing and related finding vocational opportunities, as happens with the wider population where work and careers are concerned.

Closing thoughts

Meifod Wood's impact to those that worked and attended the service, as well as its impact on the wider community, was important. Over the course of the consultation it was apparent the depth of emotion and care that Meifod Wood carried with each individual we spoke with.

It is clear that the skill-sets learned in carpentry and joinery, being part of a team, working in a workshop environment are ones that individuals are immensely proud of, and recognised the role that staff played in training and supporting them. There is a real sense of camaraderie when Meifod is talked about, and on the part of almost all participants, a hope for the environment to return in some capacity, for *"the money to be spent"*.

The messages of change are similarly clear: it is deeply uncomfortable and has been often unclearly communicated. There are many instances of participants stating they have little to no choice in their new activities, and how some are unhappy with their new routine.

Service development and the impact of Covid-19 has presented an opportunity for Denbighshire Council to re-imagine the work landscaped for people with learning disabilities who are clearly saying that they want to be involved, and that they want more choice, and that many of them want more ordinary opportunities for work and employment.

This engagement process has not provided an adequate opportunity for most of the Meifod attendees to participate. It is likely this is partly due to the tight time frame and partly due to the closure having been well established already. The low participant turnout has limited the range of views and experiences that we are able to present for consideration.

While in-person participation was enlightening and engaging, other mediums offered were either refused or lacking in the level of engagement that was hoped for. As stated at the beginning of this report, only 2 individuals engaged via remote offers. Other individuals that had expressed interest in participating had no interest in talking remotely, or we were informed that an individual would be unable to actively communicate remotely.

Going forward a better planned engagement programme in line with the National Principles of Public Engagement ought to be the goal.

References

- 1. Changing Attitudes to Learning Disability** - Mencap 2016
- 2. Is Wales Fairer? The state of Equality and Human Rights in 2018**, EHRC, 2018, p36-45
- 3. North Wales Social Care and Well-Being Services Improvement Collaborative**, 2017. *North Wales Learning Disability Strategy*.
- 4. Learning Disability and Work Inclusion: on the Experiences, Aspirations and Empowerment of Sheltered Employment Workers in Norway**, Marit, Rustad & Kwesi A. Kassah, 13 April 2020, *Disability & Society* Voi.26 Issue 3.
- 5. GOV.WALES. 2021.Locked out: liberating disabled people's lives and rights in Wales beyond COVID-19** | *GOV.WALES*.

Appendix

contains photo's of discussion tools. Removed to reduce size of file

