



Our Past, My Future

Celebrating 70 years of Enable





Contents

Welcome	4-5	2015-2024	20-21
Pre-1954	6-7	Today	22-23
1954-1964	8-9	The Future	24-25
1965-1974	10-11	Support	26-27
1975-1984	12-13		
1985-1994	14-15		
1995-2004	16-17		
2005-2014	18-19		



Welcome

Founded in 1954, Enable has been working for an equal society where everyone has the right to live, work and participate in the communities of their choice for more than 7 decades.

Employing 2,500 staff, serving 13,000 people and with 12,000 members and supporters, Enable is one of the largest non-public sector employers in Scotland.

The organisation began in 1954 when five sets of parents who had children with learning disabilities met in Glasgow determined that their children would have the opportunity and support to live the life they choose.

When more than 300 people turned up to the first official meeting to join them, the charity which became Enable was born.

As we celebrate our 70th anniversary, we remain resolutely true to our values and mission to work for an equal society where everyone has the right to live, work and participate in the communities of their choice.



This exhibition – Our Past, My Future – marks 70 years of Enable and is made possible by the National Lottery Heritage Fund.

Connecting our past to our present through stories will allow future generations to understand the history of learning disability in Scotland and continue to inspire our mission.

We are grateful to those who have shared their stories and paved the way for us to work for an equal society for all.

“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful committed individuals can change the world. In fact, it’s the only thing that ever has.”

Margaret Mead, American anthropologist

Pre-1954

Before the formation of the NHS in 1948 and the charity now known as Enable (then The Scottish Society of Parents of Handicapped Children), navigating life in Scotland with a disability presented many challenges.

Mrs Janet Finlayson recounted experiences of parents raising children in this post-war era in *Memories*, a pamphlet published to mark Enable's 40th anniversary in 1994.

"A parent, worried about the lack of progress of their infant or child, would search around for information which seemed non-existent with no National Health Service while specialists commanded high fees, and their advice was questionable and contradictory at times.

When our child had to be hospitalised, visits were restricted to one hour once per week on a Saturday or a Sunday. I will never forget, after two weeks when my infant was discharged. I was handed a skeleton of a child whom neither my husband nor myself recognised. I found out later that the baby was being discharged as "dying" and the best thing as she was so deficient. A nightmare life followed, living one day at a time."

These personal experiences illustrate the prevalent atmosphere at that time however hope arose when our founding parents got together to see if they could do anything to ease the situation.



"Hope arose when our founding parents got together"



Life for people with learning disabilities was very different in the days before Enable was established, as Dr Angela Turner, senior teaching fellow in history at the University of Strathclyde and an expert on the history of disability, explains:

"There was a whole cohort of children who weren't being provided with education or anything unless they were being institutionalised. You were institutionalised or you were at home."

"There are obviously grey areas. There were some people who made their way into school in one way or another. But in the period before Enable was established, there were a lot of children who weren't being provided with much at all."

1954–1964

Enable expanded rapidly in its first ten years after the initial meeting of the founding parents, which included the physicists Joan Curran and Samuel Curran, whose daughter Sheena had learning disabilities.

The Currans were also known for important work in their professional lives. Joan Curran invented what became known as Chaff, the strips of silver paper that were dropped from aeroplanes to confuse enemy radar during the Second World War and credited as being vital to the success of D-Day. Samuel Curran was the first principal of the University of Strathclyde.

Six years after Enable was founded, the Mental Health (Scotland) Act 1960 was passed and the organisation established its first office with a member of staff.

By 1964, the charity had grown rapidly across Scotland with 40 branches, and the addition of respite services.

During the 1960s, the charity also established the Thomas Fortune Work Centre – now run by Enable Glasgow Branch and known as Fortune Works. Seventy years on, it is one of Scotland's largest social enterprises for people with learning disabilities, offering the opportunity to train for work and get the best opportunities from life.



“Something needed to change”



Professor James Curran, whose parents Joan and Samuel were Enable founding members, said:

“My parents were one of the five families who came together and decided that something needed to change.

“Having my elder sister, who had quite severe learning disabilities, gave them the impetus and the motivation to do everything they could throughout their lives to help those who were challenged with learning.

“70 years on, Enable has created the world-first Breaking Barriers programme in which people who are challenged in their learning abilities can achieve a qualification from university business or science skills. Both my parents would be so delighted.”

1965–1974

By the mid-1960s and into the 1970s, Enable was at the heart of the campaign to change attitudes to children and young people with learning disabilities and their right to education.

Disability historian Dr Turner says large groups of people were still being classed as ineducable meaning a great number of children were not in school. However, special schools were also starting to emerge.

“Particularly in Scotland and in Glasgow, there was the emergence of lots of ‘special schools’. If you look at the urban areas, there were lots of special schools in the 1960s and 70s so maybe not as many children would have been institutionalised as you would think. From the state there was a progressive attitude towards the idea that children with disabilities could be educated.”

A major breakthrough came in 1974 when, after a hard-fought campaign by Enable, all children in Scotland were given the right to go to school with the passing of the Education (Mentally Handicapped Children)(Scotland) Act. It meant that children who had learning disabilities now had a basic right that many families took for granted but which had been denied to them.



“I’ve made lots of friends”

Peter McMahon, 60, believes there’s been huge improvement in services for children with learning disabilities since growing up in the late-1960s and 1970s.

“I think things have got better as the years have gone on. When I was young, there weren’t many social work services or education services.”

From an early age, Peter and his family were members of their local Enable branch in Glasgow where he attended an Enable nursery.

“I go to the Glasgow branch, to the social events, where I’ve made lots of friends. They have a lot of good nights; we have discos, parties and karaoke but I prefer to sit and listen to other folk singing!”

1975–1984

The mid-1970s into the 80s was a period of further change for people with disabilities. The Chronically Sick And Disabled Persons (Amendment) Act 1976 required local councils for the first time to provide certain services to people with disabilities in their communities, including practical assistance, home adaptations and educational facilities.

There was also discussion and public debate about large-scale institutions, particularly after the powerful TV documentary *Silent Minority*, which exposed the often plight of thousands of people living in institutional care. People began to question whether such institutions were the right place to support people who had a disability.

Enable was at the heart of the campaign for change.

“Enable had their hands in lots of different areas. It’s a charity and an organisation for people rather than of people, and if you look at the early policies, they are often the ones who were leading the change,” says Dr Turner.

By the 1980s, the debate about learning and education for people with learning disabilities was gathering pace but the change that was needed took time. In 1984, Enable encouraged 33,000 people to sign a petition to the Secretary of State for Scotland which called for a properly costed and comprehensive strategy for learning disability services. It would take 16 years and a new Scottish Parliament before one was delivered.



“We’ve met wonderful people”

For Bill and Anne Learmonth, bringing up their daughter Lesley, who has Down’s syndrome, in the 1970s and 1980s wasn’t easy.

“The night she was born,” says Bill, “the doctor told me ‘your daughter is never going to be able to do anything, don’t have any expectations’. Those were his words and I was appalled.”

Bill and Anne formed a local branch of Enable in Baillieston and Bill served as Chairman twice. Lesley, who is now 55, went on to have several jobs in offices and now works as an administrator for Enable.

“We’ve met wonderful people through Enable who were very helpful to us as parents,” says Bill. “And I clung to it like there was no tomorrow.”

1985–1994

Building on the Warnock Report which created a presumption that children with additional support needs should be integrated into mainstream schools, the 1980s was a decade of change with an increasing focus on care in the community.

“There was a humanitarian idea that education is for all and everyone has needs,” Dr Turner says “but in reality the funding wasn’t put into mainstream education to accommodate it.

“There was an element of it that was humanitarian, it’s about improving lives, but actually it was about a cost-cutting exercise, the money that was saved wasn’t put into the community. Reducing what they have in terms of residential care wasn’t transferred into community care, a lot of the time that money disappeared and left families to fend for themselves.”

By 1993, the charity that had started with a small group of parents 40 years before was continuing to evolve and had changed its name to Enable Scotland, as a new era of rights-based campaigning and advocacy was born.

The same year, Enable set up a committee for adults who have a learning disability: National Self-Advocacy Forum. This group still advises Enable, and others, about the subjects that matter to people who have a learning disability.



“I’m getting more and more confident”

Kirsty Kennedy-Hyman was born in 1985 and it wasn’t until she was 18 that her learning disability was diagnosed. Her first experience of Enable was through her local group in Stirling where she is now co-chair of the National Self-Advocacy Forum.

“We like to campaign. We want people who have learning disabilities to get the same rights as anybody else. I was bullied at school but Enable has brought me out of my shell and I’m getting more and more confident.”

“Compared to 1954 when it started to what it’s become 70 years later, the voices that are being heard are getting louder and louder. But there’s still a long way to go.”

1995–2004

By the mid-1990s, the campaign to end the use of long-stay hospitals was gathering momentum, with more people with learning disabilities living, working and participating in their communities.

The Disability Discrimination Act 1995 was the first UK legislation protecting people with disabilities against various forms of discrimination.

Members were also at the forefront of the long-awaited review of learning disability services in 1999. The Scottish Government's report in 2000 placed people who have a learning disability, and their family and carers, at the heart of learning disability policy and plans.

This was the decade when all of Scotland's long-stay hospitals finally closed. Lennox Castle in Lennoxtown was built in the 1830s and bought a century later by Glasgow Corporation as a hospital for "mentally deficient" people. It only ceased to be a hospital in 2002.

Enable helped many people make the transition from hospital to a home of their own and supported people living with a disability to live more independent lives outside of institutions. The charity provided advocacy services and community-based support, and developed supported housing.



"I always feel free"

Hughie McIntyre knows the personal damage that institutions such as Lennox Castle did to people with learning disabilities.

"I was brought up by foster parents but they took unwell. They had to put me in the castle," he says.

"16 years of my life."

"I didn't have any visitors. I didn't have any brothers or sisters come to see me and I didn't know who I really was. I thought I wasn't going to survive, I thought I wasn't going to live. It was horrible."

"Since I've come out of the castle, I feel like my whole life has been free. I felt like William Wallace; I always feel free."

2005–2014

Another decade of growth and impact in which there was significant campaign successes on issues as diverse as transport, education and accessible voting. This decade also saw the birth of Enable's Personal Assistant (PA) Model, which allows individuals to fully control their care by choosing and hiring their own PAs.

Enable Cares also provides human rights-driven self-directed social care for more than 1,100 people across 27 local authority areas in Scotland.

Members of Enable helped to shape the Social Care (Self Directed Support) Scotland Act 2013, and our PA (Personal Assistant) Model was developed as a key innovation in the delivery of human rights driven, self-directed support for all.

Enable Works, which serves people who are facing barriers to employment to obtain and sustain high quality and rewarding careers, was created in 2011. It has increased Enable's capacity to deliver specialist employability support to local authority areas and has supported 7,000 individuals per year with disabilities to develop their employment skills.

Enable Communities mobilised award-winning campaigns to get supporters online, and to fundraise in their largest ever numbers through events such as the Kiltwalk.



"I think attitudes have improved"

Heather Gilchrist, 34, who grew up in Bearsden describes how it was a sometimes lonely and isolating time.

"I didn't have many friends – as a result of my learning disability, I had to get speech therapy when I was young to help me to communicate better and this made it harder for me to make new friends."

Leaving school in 2009, Heather completed a foundation course at college and became involved with Enable.

"I was able to go to my local group and meet other members in the same situation, and they also helped me to get my job in theatre, working as an usher."

"It's still hard to be a person with a learning disability in 2024 but I think attitudes have improved. We all feel like family at Enable and everyone is supportive of each other."



2015–2024

In 2019, Enable celebrated its 65th anniversary with a reception in the Scottish Parliament, attended by Scotland's First Minister.

In the same year, the charity's Scottish Council elected its first ever convenor who has a learning disability.

The innovative Breaking Barriers programme was launched to create opportunities for people who have learning disabilities to access higher education, graduate and access employment opportunities.

In the 2020s, Enable supported people, communities and employees through the impact of the global coronavirus pandemic. Since that unprecedented time, the focus in the early 2020s has been on work to end the practice of delayed discharge and out-of-area placements for people who have learning disabilities.

The Enable Cares team facilitated some of the most complex hospital discharges, true to the charity's historic commitment to deinstitutionalisation, and demonstrating that better is possible.

Enable secured a commitment for the world's first Learning Disabilities, Autism and Neurodivergence Bill, and have been at the forefront of policy and practice development to build Scotland's National Care Service.



"It has changed my life"

Ivan Cohen, 52, made history at Enable in 2019, when he became the first person with a learning disability to be elected as Convenor of Scottish Council.

Born in Manchester, Ivan often found mainstream school difficult and came to Edinburgh when he was 17 years old with his parents.

"I went to Enable events and met my partner through an Enable disco," he says. "It has changed my life for the better. I work at The Astley Ainslie Hospital as an admin assistant since 2004, and this job is important to me.

"I think there are still some negatives out there and there's lots of work still to do. Enable is important because it's helped me grow in confidence."

Today

Enable celebrated its 70th anniversary by hosting Inclusion Europe's Europe in Action conference in 2024, bringing over 600 delegates from 40 countries to Glasgow to share learning, knowledge, insight and networking to advance our cross-border commitment to disability inclusion.

Bill Learmonth, who helped form a branch of Enable in Baillieston in the 1960s and is still involved with the charity to this day, has seen the changes close-up. He says: "It's changed completely now – I joined Enable when it was young enough that I met the founding parents. I thought the world of them as they were inspiring people.

"More provision is there for people with learning disabilities and new parents don't have the battles we had. Things have improved in lots of ways and for the better. The founders had the pioneering spirit to fight to achieve what they thought was necessary. I'm convinced they would look at it now and be astonished."

Seventy years on, Enable is established as one of the fastest-growing charities in the UK, committed to realising the rights of every citizen through:

- Enable Cares: Self-directed, human rights driven health and social care
- Enable Works: Inclusive employment, education and training
- Enable Communities: Empowering inclusive communities for all



"Enable is one of the fastest-growing charities in the UK"

Conner Meechan is a graduate of the Breaking Barriers programme, which was established in 2018 and creates opportunities for people who have learning disabilities and additional support for learning needs to access higher education.

"Breaking Barriers made such a difference to my confidence," he says. "I just wanted to be able to do the same things and have the same opportunities as my brother and sister."

His mother Angela has also seen the positive effects.

"It is really heartwarming to know that somebody can see what we see in Conner. We know he's capable of learning and he's thriving in an environment where people expect him to achieve."



The Future

There have been significant changes in the 70 years since Enable's founders met for the first time.

Today, Enable is recognised as one of the most impactful charities in the UK, and in 2024, we celebrate 70 years of pioneering self-directed social care that gives individuals real choice and control over their care and support in the community where they want to live; life changing employability support for people to overcome multiple barriers to the workplace to achieve and sustain paid work; challenging and changing perceptions in public bodies and businesses to embrace diversity, equity and inclusion.

There is more to do in the years ahead, and we will continue to influence key decision-makers at home and abroad to advance the rights of people who have a learning disability.

Enable CEO Theresa Shearer says:

"We have built many of the blocks we need, but too often these are not explained clearly or genuinely offered to those who have the right to support. Social care is still often experienced as a process where local authorities make decisions for people; this needs to change, so that we can truly deliver human rights-driven self-directed care and support which gives people choice and control over their own lives.

"The PA Model has demonstrated its success; I would like to see it being adopted in a wider range of contexts to offer opportunities for a far greater number of people. DEI is in our DNA here at Enable, and we continue our drive to make that commitment to diversity, equity and inclusion the foundations of an equal society. We are excited to see what progress the next 70 years will bring."



"We are excited to see what progress the next 70 years will bring"

Support

There are over 175,000 people in Scotland who have learning disabilities, many of whom face social isolation, discrimination, and exclusion.

Barriers to education, employment, and inadequate public services make it incredibly difficult for them to lead fulfilling lives.

Fewer than a third of adults with learning disabilities can name a single friend, and over half report feeling lonely.

At Enable, we work for an equal society where everyone has the right to live, work and participate in the communities of their choice. We are committed to breaking down these barriers, but we need your help. By participating in one of our thrilling Charity Challenges, not only will you experience an adventure like no other, but you'll also be making a profound difference to the lives of those we support.

Every pound you raise will go towards empowering people with learning disabilities to participate fully in their communities, make friendships, and feel valued.

Your fundraising efforts will help grow our vital community groups, ensuring no-one is left behind.

Whether you're leaping from the skies, conquering the trails, or racing on two wheels, you'll be making a real, lasting difference. Join us on an exhilarating journey, and together, we can transform lives.

Thank you for your support, and we can't wait to see you take on our Charity Challenge!



**“Join us on
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