

Letter to Edinburgh City Councillors

I have twin 20 year old sons who are partially sighted and have learning difficulties due to brain damage around the time of birth. One of my sons is due to finish his 3 year training placement at the Engine Shed, my other son spent 2 years at Jewel and Esk College, followed by a placement at Woodhall at the Inch run by Enable and is now on a work choice programme with The Conservation Volunteers. My sons are very similar as well as very different. College would not have suited Ewan but the Engine Shed has been fantastic for him.

The Engine Shed is not a day care centre, it is a real social enterprise that trains young people with learning difficulties for up to three years and helps them on the road to employment. From the trainee's point of view – it allows them to enter the world of work in a supported environment. They learn about time-keeping, turning up on time, working a full day and a full week and working as part of a team.

They gain an understanding about customer service, deadlines, pressures at certain times of the day to fulfil orders and what is involved in pulling together so that when a customer such as East Coast or Earthy turn up for an order it is ready. My son will come home and say “we were really busy today, we had to get an order ready for East Coast”. He has also come home and said a business they supply is closing and why that is bad for the Engine Shed, or Earthy in Portobello has reopened so that is great for us. He is learning and is interested in issues that are important in the real world of business.

At the same time he has only been able to learn and stay at the Engine Shed due to the support and dedication of the staff who are determined to make it a success. Please do not think that any of this is easy – there are ups and downs – staying on task is not easy for someone like Ewan, persevering with a task that you find a bit boring is not easy, producing a quality product that meets the standard required by the customer is not easy – Ewan's oatcakes must have tried the patience of the most patient baker in the world, not to mention using the wrong flour for the gypsy creams! My point here is that if Ewan had gone into work with a support worker I don't think it would have been a success, in fact, I think there may have been many failures and that by this point in his young life he would be an isolated, unhappy young man as opposed to a positive, cheerful, confident individual who gets up each day full of enthusiasm for life.

Another strength of the Engine Shed is that my son has been training alongside his peers. A diverse group of young people from different backgrounds who learn from each other, experience similar things and help each other through situations they find difficult. They can be themselves with each other - that is what we all did at college or university or as apprentices or in our first jobs and that is not something that is readily available for young people with learning difficulties and it wouldn't be the case in a supported employment situation. They also regularly socialise with each other – going to the cinema or the gym after work – again an important part of growing up and developing – not something I anticipated - but what a fantastic bonus - and I would argue unlikely to happen in a supported employment scenario.

In addition to working within the Engine Shed, the trainees get the opportunity to go to a work placement. This work placement is supported by Kath at the Engine Shed - she accompanies the trainee to the placement and works with them there until it is deemed that they will manage to do the set job on their own with just the support of a person or people within the organisation.

My son has had two placements – one at the City Chambers and the current one is at the Marriott Hotel. He told Kath he wanted to try work in a hotel and she managed to persuade the Marriott that they wanted to give him the opportunity. Kath has had to work hard with

the Marriott to try to tailor a job that Ewan can do and has worked with him on those jobs for quite a number of weeks. That has not been plain sailing and he is only managing a morning but both the Marriott and The Engine Shed have stuck with it – my point here is that the combination of the training place at the Engine Shed which allows for, in my sons case, very slow but steady progress and the support of the Engine Shed at a placement has probably been my son's best chance at possibly being able to work. School straight to a supported employment model would never have worked – going to the Engine Shed has given him a chance to develop and a chance to learn the skills required.

In addition – what about the sterling job the Engine Shed does in breaking down barriers between learning disability and the population at large. This is a café, bakery and conferencing facility in the heart of the community. They have regular customers both local and from further afield – I met a friend for coffee there and bumped into my aunt, uncle, cousin and her husband – I had no idea they travelled from Balgreen and Slateford to meet there but apparently they had been doing so for many years. They went because they thought it was excellent value for money, you get a lovely cup of coffee and it's a nice place.

When I mentioned to a neighbour that Ewan had a training place at the Engine Shed she told me she was there often – as a midwife in the NHS they use it for meetings and conferences. My point is that this is a forward thinking organisation – it's not a day centre with people behind closed doors – members of the public come and go all the time – the reason the public are there is that it provides a service that meets their needs – and that service is in part provided by enthusiastic, polite, charming trainees like any other successful business.

Please lend your support and see things from the perspective of real people who have their own aspirations and really do not need to be at the mercy of narrow definitions and fashions and have the rug pulled from under them at regular intervals. We as non-disabled people require a diverse range of opportunities to cater for our diverse range of skills and needs – why on earth suggest that all disabled people can be served by the one model – it makes no sense at all.

One other thought – even people with learning difficulties aspire to and need a full time job – their carers feel the same. The Engine Shed is the only organisation I know of who provide that. Life after the Engine Shed from what I can see is very part-time – not good for anybody, this issue also needs to be addressed. Once again – the Engine Shed are way ahead of everyone else.