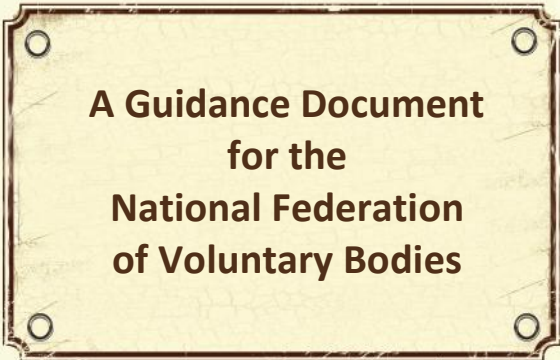




# *Real Life* **Connections**

*Taking the First Steps into Community Together*



**A Guidance Document  
for the  
National Federation  
of Voluntary Bodies**



## Welcome

Early in 2010 the National Federation Real Life Connections Group decided to explore how people who avail of intellectual disability services could have real life opportunities within their community. The group was made up of people who avail of intellectual disability services and staff from services, supported by the National Federation Secretariat. The group developed this guidance document to start the conversation. The aim of the guidance document is to carefully consider how we can best support each person who avails of intellectual disability services to connect with their own community and have positive valued social roles within their community.

This document aligns with the strategic agenda of the National Federation of Voluntary Bodies to support each person to live a full life. It also harmonizes with the *Summary of Key Proposals from the Review of Disability Policy* published by the Minister for Disability and Mental Health in 2010 which supports the provision of individualised services that no longer exclude people from their communities and the natural supports that are inherent in that community.

The guidance document is accompanied by a DVD, where Anne-Marie McDermott shares her journey into community. The DVD also features the vital role played by the service in supporting Anne-Marie's journey.

We would like to sincerely thank Anne-Marie for sharing her inspiring and life-changing journey with us and Lavinia Donoher and Theresa Doyle for their tremendous support.

We would also like to thank all the members of the Community Inclusion & Participation Sub-Committee and the Volunteering Sub-Committee (Real Life Connections Group) for their great commitment and dedication in producing this guidance document. We hope you will find it a useful first step.

Brian O'Donnell  
Chief Executive  
National Federation of Voluntary Bodies

June 2011

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# What is the background to this document?

In 2010, the National Federation's Community Participation & Inclusion Sub-Committee and Volunteering Sub-Committee decided to work together to publish this document as both groups were looking at ways we could support people to have *real lives*. We decided we would call ourselves *Real Life Connections* and this document is the result of:

1. Our debates and discussions over the past year.
2. *People Connecting* (2007) which examined the Barriers, Incentives and Solutions to Community Participation & Inclusion of People with Intellectual Disability, made a number of recommendations to encourage services to build up Community Awareness, Education & Support, for example:
  - Be proactive in fostering good community connections i.e. enable people to get to know their community and highlight the importance of interdependency in all our lives.
  - Be conscious of the importance of real meaningful relationships in people's lives i.e. facilitate social networks for people we support to help develop long lasting, freely chosen relationships.
  - Support people using services to maintain existing relationships or reconnect with family or friends when moving from one service to another.
  - Develop strategies to raise awareness of disability issues in communities and involve people who use services and their families in the development of these strategies.
3. The National Federation Volunteering Survey *Volunteering in Intellectual Disability Services in Ireland* (2008) also made a number of recommendations to support people to have better lives, including:
  - Natural Supports: Examine the development of natural supports around each individual person e.g. relationships with families, friends, neighbours, people living in the community
  - Civic engagement of people with intellectual disability: Examine the benefits/barriers of people supported by services volunteering in their own community and benefiting from having positive valued social roles within their communities.

We also examined lots of resources in Ireland and internationally. We have listed a number of these resources on pages 16 and 17 for your information and further reading. We hope we have acknowledged all the authors – we apologise for any omissions.

Each of these discussions and publications looked at ways we could support people who avail of intellectual disability services to live an ordinary, everyday life.

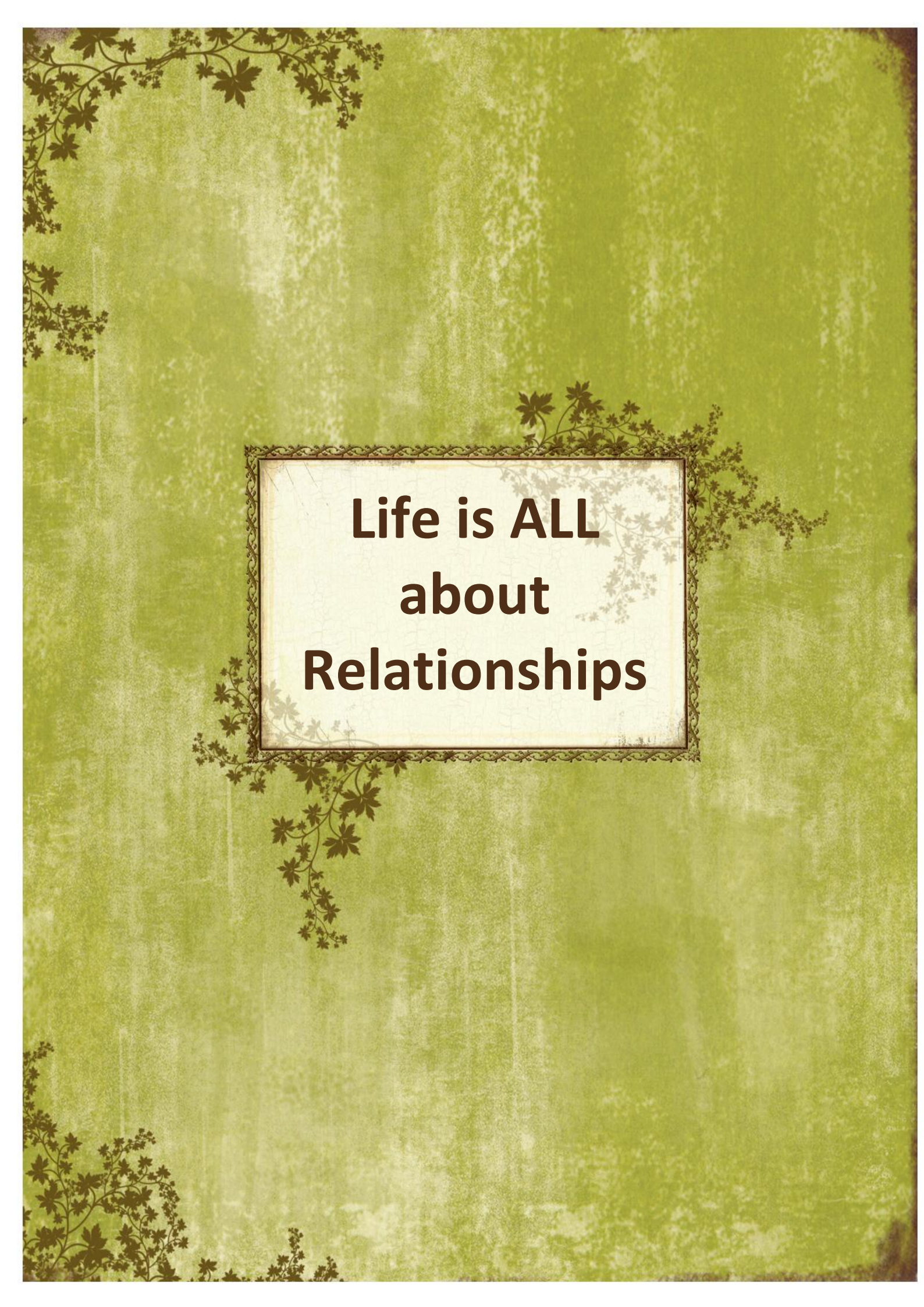
We also looked at the *UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities*, in particular:

- Article 3: Dignity, freedom of choice, independence of persons, full participation in society, equality of opportunity, accessibility
  - Article 8: Awareness Raising
  - Article 19: Living independently and be included in the community
  - Article 21: Freedom of expression and opinion, and access to information
  - Article 23: Respect for home and the family
  - Article 24: Education
  - Article 25: Health
  - Article 27: Work and employment
  - Article 30: Participating in cultural life, recreation, leisure and sport
- 

**The UN Convention gave us a clear picture that everybody has the *Right* to have a *Real Life* in their own community.**

**Finally, we invited feedback from four advocacy groups and their comments are included in this document.**

**We hope this guidance document will help you to start the conversation within your own service and with each person you support.**



**Life is ALL  
about  
Relationships**

# What do we mean by “Community”?

**Your community is the town, village or parish you live in.**

- It is made up of yourself and all the people who live there, including your family and your neighbours.
- It thrives on interdependent relationships with people talking, listening and helping each other
  - It is a place where you can call on a neighbour for help.
  - It is a place where a neighbour can call on you for help.
- It is a place where you feel welcome
- It is a place where you feel safe
- It includes people from different backgrounds and cultures
- It includes people with different abilities and skills
- It includes the things you need in your everyday life, for example, a shop to buy your food, a post office to buy stamps, and lots more
- It includes places where the community get together to meet each other, to celebrate with each other, for example, a community hall, a pub, a sports field, a community garden, a club, a music venue, a church, a school.

To be truly included in your community, it is not just enough to be physically present; you need to be actively engaged and contributing to your community.

It would be very difficult for any of us to experience an ordinary, everyday life if we weren't included in our community.

**Your community should be a place where you feel you truly belong and where you can truly flourish.**

## The Essential Elements to a Good Life



# The Essential Elements to a Good Life

*(that lead to a sense of belonging)*

We consider that each of these elements is essential to a good life for all of us:

- **Family:** Having people in your life who love you and care about you – both immediate and extended Family
- **Friends & Relationships:** Long Lasting, Freely Chosen, Personal, Loving, Close, Enduring, Intimate
- **People I can Rely on:** People who “get” me and understand me
- **Valued Social Roles:** The roles we have in life that are valued by society. For example, “I am a Neighbour”, “I am a Student”, “I am a Photographer”, “I am an Artist”, “I am a Volunteer”, “I am an Employee” etc.
- **Education:** Primary, Secondary, Third Level, Lifelong Learning
- **Paid Employment:** Paid, meaningful, valued employment
- **Hobbies and Interests:** Meeting with people who share the same hobbies and interests
- **Respect and Dignity:** Being treated with respect and dignity
- **Good Health:** Physical, psychological and spiritual wellbeing
- **A Home of my Own:** A place of my own and where I belong
- **A Chance to Contribute:** To help another person, to help my community, to volunteer

And I may need extra supports from intellectual disability services and other services (depending on my own needs).

*“Being acknowledged as an Adult”*

*(Feedback from one Advocacy Group)*



**Take the first step .....**

---

# Get to Know Me

The first step is for you (my supporter) to get to know me:

- Sit down with me and listen deeply to what I want and need in my life.
  - We will take it slowly and build a respectful, trusting relationship
  - The supports in my life are unique to me and will change over time.
  - I have many gifts which are unique to me. These gifts will emerge over time when I've had a chance to experience different life situations.
  - I may need extra support with some things but sometimes I may not need any support at all.
  - I can learn how to do things for myself. But I need you to show me how so that I can learn for myself.
  - Like everyone else I may have a bad day now and again. Sitting with me and listening to me will help me a lot.
  - Like everyone else I may need to say "No" or "Maybe" or "I need more time to think about it" or "I've changed my mind".
  - Sometimes things won't work out. We may need to find new ways of looking at things. But we won't give up.
  - We will take it slowly – developing networks and connections takes time and patience.
- 
- It will be well worth the effort and I will get a chance to experience a *Real Life*.

*Life is about the ordinary and the everyday,  
fused with a little of the extraordinary*

*(author unknown)*

**What can you (my supporter) do to get to know me?**

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# Supporting a person to be truly included in the life of their community

To support a person to be truly included in their community you (their supporter) needs to:

- Believe in the gifts and abilities of the person you support
- Take it slowly and walk beside the person you support
- Remember that the person you support is the expert on their own life
- Find out what the person you support is interested in:
  - Are there people in the community who have similar interests?
  - Where do they meet?
  - How can you join them?
- Find out who are the connectors in the community – the people who are “in the know”
- Are there opportunities for the person you support to contribute to their community by doing some volunteering?
- Look for opportunities for involvement in resident associations, town councils, tidy town committees, festival committees etc.
- Supporting a person to be included in their community can foster networks that lead to paid, meaningful employment.
- Supporting a person to be included in their community takes time, patience and commitment. And it’s an ongoing process.
- Wherever people gather in the community, that is our place

*True inclusion feeds the deeper things  
of life – identity, relationships, joy,  
belonging and lifelong friendship  
(Peter Bates, 2006)*

**How can you support a person to be truly included in the life of their community?**

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# Including Families

Each family member has a shared history that creates a unique bond right through their life.

And family members can provide each person we support with the greatest possible access to community networks.

We need to make sure that:

- We respect the natural authority of families
- We provide the opportunity for family members to be included in the lives of each person we support (both immediate and extended family). In doing this we also need to respect the wishes of each person we support.

In partnership with the person we support, we can:

- Welcome and encourage the involvement of family members
- Involve family members in decisions affecting each person's life

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*“ ..... ordinary life is lived in community  
where people spend their days doing very  
ordinary things”.  
(Judith Snow, 1988)*

**What can you, and the person you support, do to include family members?**

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## What can Services do (at an organizational level) to create welcoming communities?

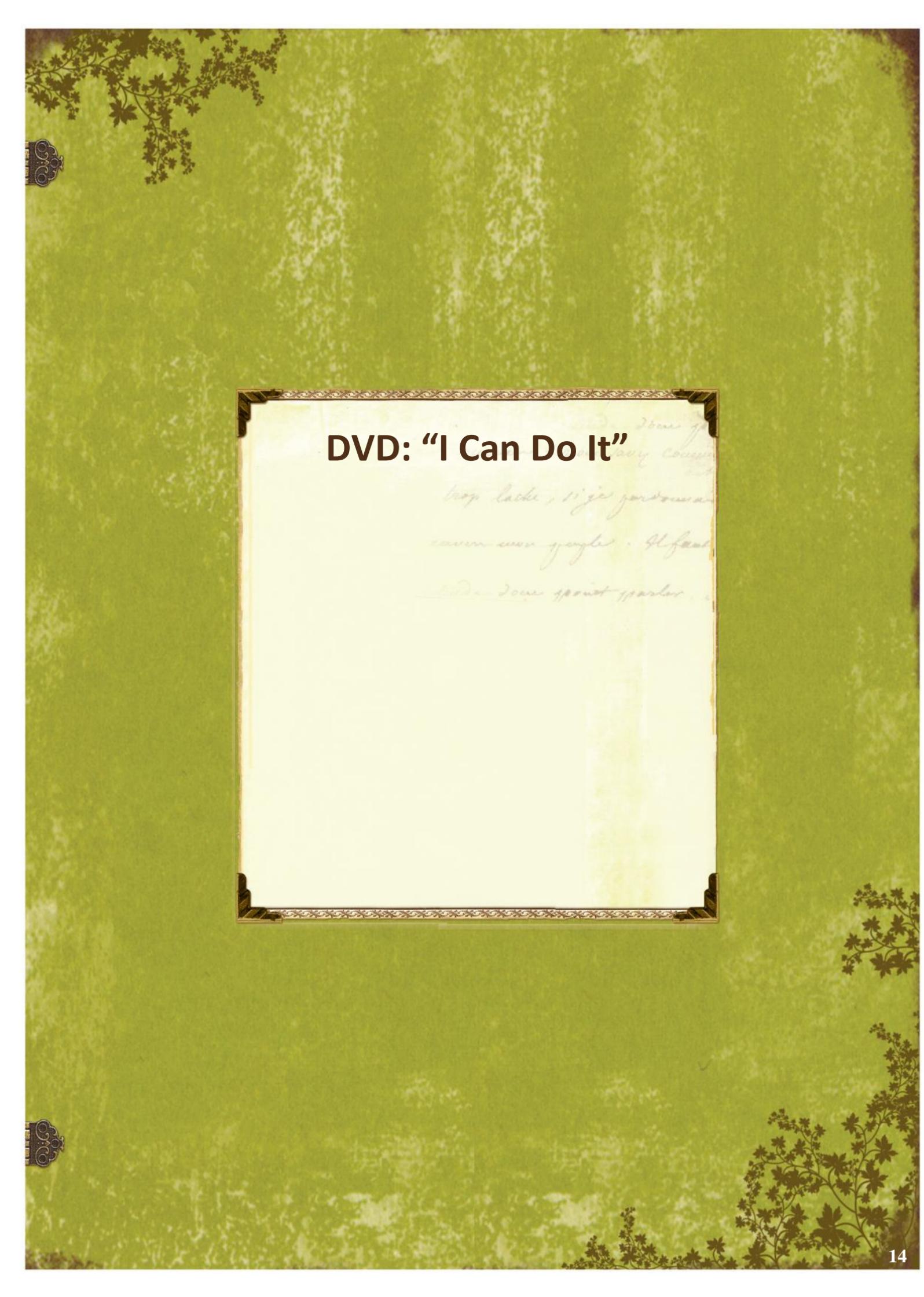
As a service you can do lots of things (at an organizational level) to create a welcoming community for each person you support:

- Identify your vision for creating welcoming communities at a policy level
- Establish what typically takes place in a community. You can use a number of Community Mapping Tools to do this (see resources section)
- Place yourselves as contributors on local committees, e.g. Chamber of Commerce, Lions Club, town halls, community centres, festivals, tidy towns committees, local radio station etc. Be vigilant for opportunities to contribute and support staff members to explore them.
- Establish relationships with key individuals within local community groups. Start small and develop the relationship slowly over time.
- Concentrate on developing lasting, enduring relationships with individuals you can trust.
- Support local causes that affect the whole community, e.g. housing issues, environmental issues. Are there local projects you can be part of that may be mutually beneficial?
- Develop partnerships with groups in the community to source funding for community projects. Staff from services have lots of expertise in sourcing funding and preparing grant applications.
- Host an event or a celebration, outside of your services, in the community and invite everyone e.g. summer barbeque, local festival etc.
- Encourage staff to use their own local connections to build networks. These will have a very positive impact on building relationships
- Get involved in community celebrations, no matter how small.
- Your success in creating a welcoming community will depend on the time and effort you put into it.
- Creating a welcoming community is an ongoing process .....

These steps will nurture the evolving reciprocal relationship between the service and the local community, paving the way for a more welcoming community for each person you support.

**At an organizational level, identify what your Service can do to create a welcoming community?**

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**DVD: "I Can Do It"**

I have just  
received your  
letter of the 11th inst.  
and am glad to hear  
that you are well.  
I am doing just  
as well as  
could be expected.

## **Anne Marie and her supporter Lavinia talk about how they worked together to develop the role of “Volunteer Coach in a Football Club”**

- We identified various clubs within the locality, and saw a poster for an upcoming AGM for one club.
- We attended the meeting.
- We knew we had connections with this club through personal associations.
- We identified a key person within the club and talked with him.
- He gave us information on becoming a coach with the underage team.
- We identified dates for an upcoming training course and what this entailed.
- We completed the course together with the required skills needed.
- We researched and developed a clear understanding of the culture, skills, knowledge and clothing needed to fulfil the identified role successfully.
- We bought the club jersey, fully participated in the training course, visited the club grounds and went to underage games.
- We talked about the role and commitment required to prepare for a valued participation within the club.
- We figured out transport to the club.
- We planned for ways to reduce service supports as natural supports took over.
- We went through the training drills each week until Anne Marie was competent
- Anne Marie commenced in the role as underage coach with four other people.
- Anne Marie started to get known by other coaches, supporters and families.

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### **Advice from Anne Marie and Lavinia**

- Identify who is best suited to support the person. It is very important to get this relationship right.
- Work with the person to discover their interests, gifts and skills.
- Don't rush the process, take it all at the person's own pace, work with intent to achieve each step
- As a volunteer you have to be completely reliable i.e. Anne Marie always turns up for training sessions on time and supports the team at matches.
- Relationships will happen when people hold valued roles that are held in high regard by others i.e. coach of a football team.

## Resources and Further Reading

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- National Development Team for Inclusion. NDTi works to promote inclusive lives for people who are most at risk of exclusion and who may need support to lead a full life. Website: <http://www.ndti.org.uk/>
- National Federation of Voluntary Bodies (2007) *People Connecting: Barriers, incentives and solutions to community participation & inclusion of persons with intellectual disabilities*. Available at [http://www.fedvol.ie/\\_fileupload/People%20Connecting%20-%20June%202007.pdf](http://www.fedvol.ie/_fileupload/People%20Connecting%20-%20June%202007.pdf)

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- Poll, C., Kennedy, J. and Sanderson, H. (eds.) (2009). *In Community - Practical lessons in supporting isolated people to be part of community*. Available for purchase at <http://www.hsapress.co.uk>
- UN (2008) *UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities*. Available at <http://www.un.org/disabilities/default.asp?navid=14&pid=150>
- Western Care Association (2008) *Policy Guidelines for the Development of Natural Supports and Volunteer Networks*. Written by Noreen McGarry and Marian Murphy, Western Care Association, Mayo, Ireland

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*“Hold the person’s story in a way you would  
want your own story held”.  
(David Pitonyak, 2010)*

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The National Federation of Voluntary Bodies Providing Services to People with Intellectual Disability is a national umbrella organisation for voluntary/non-statutory agencies providing direct services to persons with intellectual disabilities in Ireland. Member Organisations provide services to 22,000 persons with intellectual disabilities and their families in the Republic of Ireland. The services provided are rooted in the rights based perspective that persons with intellectual disabilities have the right to live full and active lives, and be active participating members of their own community.