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Awards Category: Category 5: The Courage To Take a Risk

Awards Entry Number: C50018

Name of project, service, individual entering or nomination,
: dates-n-mates Scotland

1. Overview

Please provide a short introduction to the person, project or service. Briefly mention any aims and objectives if you think they are relevant. You must clearly outline how it relates to the [category](#) you are entering. You should answer any questions we have asked in the [introduction](#) for this award category.: dates-n-mates Scotland is Scotland's first dating and friendship agency run by and for adults with learning disabilities. Since its inception in 2008 in Glasgow, dates-n-mates has stood up and continued to make a change by meeting the needs of hundreds and hundreds of people across Scotland that would otherwise be socially isolated and continue to lack confidence and self-esteem in their everyday lives. dates-n-mates provides opportunities for people to connect, make friends and build meaningful relationships through hosting a regular calendar of social events in a safe, comfortable and inclusive environment thus improving overall health and well-being.

The courage to take a risk came from the evident, considerable need to challenge perceptions of adults with learning disabilities and help them to make friends and build meaningful relationships. C-Change, the host organisation are pioneers of self-directed support, and since its inception have supported hundreds of people to live the lives they choose through its supported living service. Looking adversity in the face, they took an inclusive, user led approach and established the dates-n-mates project by recruiting project Directors with learning disabilities. From the outset this has provided strong leadership from people with experience of having a learning disabilities.

2. What did you do?

Please describe the work carried out and explain how it meets the [criteria](#) we have asked for in the '[what we are looking for](#)' section for this award. Highlight any practice which was distinctive, innovative or creative and include details of on-going work still in progress.: We used our learned experience from Glasgow dates-n-mates to take a risk and developed plans to tackle this problem more widely in other areas of Scotland- Aberdeen and Renfrewshire (Collectively known as dates-n-mates Scotland). We worked alongside our colleagues in other like-minded organisations and our funders that also shared our vision for dates-n-mates to develop a strategies that would help us to ensure that adults with learning disabilities in the local and wider community would have an improved quality of life through greater access to a range of social events and activities. This has created a long-term network of support and increased social inclusion and the presence of people with learning disabilities in everyday places, events and activities in Scotland. This was enabled by hosting a regular calendar of social events in the local community (including bowling nights, valentines ball, creative workshops and speed meets) as a forum for people to meet new people, make friends and possibly personal relationships. We provided support to enable these connections between members in the form of one-to-one matched dating, event support, training on relationships, sexual health and social etiquette. By its very nature the concept and model of dates-n-mates is innovative by way of being the first dating and friendship agency for adults with learning disabilities, ran by and for adults with learning disabilities in Scotland which has now successfully branched out to other areas of Scotland and is also in addition being replicated by other organisations in localities including Lothian and Ayrshire. A key innovation and courage to take a risk can be evidenced by the development of the projects club 'LATE', Scotland's first inclusive club night for

adults with learning disabilities. Held in ordinary club night venues such as the Glasgow Arches and more recently the O2 ABC, this high profile event is run quarterly and has a regular attendance of over 250 people.

We have also an established volunteer strategy for dates-n-mates with 50 volunteers at any one time providing their time and expertise in a range of disciplines such as graphic design, event support, workshop facilitation and media. This includes our 'champions' scheme where all members have the opportunity to contribute to the running of dates-n-mates.

3. What did you achieve

Please describe and provide evidence of how the work has made a positive impact to the lives of those you have helped to support. Evidence can include research, practice, wisdom, service data or lived experience. Aim to reflect the criteria in the '[what we are looking for](#)' section where possible.: There has been a number of positive results achieved from the project.

Over the years we have benefited over 1700 members and the wider community with learning disabilities to make friends, find love and be better connected to their communities. Over the past year this figure is 285 where we have hosted over 100 social events and activities of which 75 were for members only, 7 were information evenings, 4 were specifically for new members and 8 were open, larger events open to all. We have been working towards our LGBT charter mark and are going for a Gold Standard. From positive feedback from focus groups we can say that 90% of members reported increased confidence and independence. The 12 week Relationship Training Course was devised and delivered by dates-n-mates successfully to members with 3 members co-facilitating the training shortly, acting as a good example of inclusion and meeting the mission of the project 'run by and for adults with learning disabilities'. 84 members also contributed to dates-n-mates through bi-monthly focus groups, the advisory group, the quarterly newsletter and website content. We have had 4 articles published in the national press, a national TV advert 'play makes it possible' produced and aired by ITN, TV interviews at STV Glasgow, were finalists in 'The Great Scot Award', highly commended finalists in The Charity Awards and facilitated a number of national and international presentations and workshops based on our knowledge and experience of running a dating and friendship agency for adults with learning disabilities. Our external Aberdeen evaluation 2015 reported very positively on progress towards our outcomes but also raised awareness of the need to use venues within a wider variety of localities which we have asked our members to help us source. We take on board the learning and feedback from project participants and develop thinking about what we do to ensure continuous improvement and that what we are providing is worthwhile and effective.

Quotes:

Prem Goyal, Charity Awards Judge stated that dates-n-mates is "A well-managed project with excellent potential to keep growing", and "definitely one to watch".

"dates-n-mates very much helps you find friends and dates". R and G (couple), members of dates-n-mates Aberdeen

"dates-n-mates has been fantastic! M. never really had friends, or not a big circle of friends; she had a few but they were ladies older than her. She loves going to dates-n-mates events and there are so many different events happening outside of working hours now which is great, and she can go on her own. M really looks forward to each event." J.P(Ms Mother)

"What I get most out of life is the people I meet, I make sure that the people I meet, the people I spend time with and the people that I know are always there for me as well as I am there for them. I enjoy the great company, socialising, all the lovely friendly faces, the lovely people to be around." (M, member of dates-n-mates Aberdeen).

4. Why should you receive an award?

Please summarise the reasons you feel this person, project or issue deserves an award in no more than 100 words.: Dates-n-mates deserves to win an award because by challenging adversity it has successfully made a significant, lasting and life transforming difference to the lives of many people with learning disabilities. Members of dates-n-mates have had the opportunity to conduct and form relationships. dates-n-mates has proved that by taking the risk to establish this service in 3 geographical areas of Scotland and by listening and learning to its members that much can be

achieved to address the need to give people the chance to make and sustain friendships and relationships to help to significantly improved their well-being and quality of life.

