



the project

When hate crime is mate crime

Name	The Safety Net Project
Background	Some people with a learning disability find it hard to make friends and maintain relationships
The idea?	The project will develop free tools and resources that can be used nationally to help people make friends and stay safe
Funded by?	The Department of Health
Where?	Pilot sites in North Devon and Calderdale, Yorkshire

David Grundy, project worker with the Association for Real Change, highlights a scheme aimed at tackling mate crime

There are (thankfully) rare and extreme occasions, such as the murders of Stephen Hoskin and Kevin Davis, when the exploitation of people with learning disabilities by members of the wider community make headline news.

However, the daily events that can make it hard for people who have a learning disability to live productive and happy lives within their communities often go unreported, unnoticed or uncared for.

The Association for Real Change (ARC) has started work on a three-year, Department of Health funded project looking at the exploitation that some people who have a learning disability are subject to when they are befriended by people who go on to take advantage of them.

Having friends, making new ones and maintaining the ones we have can be difficult for anyone. This can be especially difficult for people who have a learning disability, who may have less control and less ability to create, maintain and develop friendships.

For those who have little contact with others, any connection can seem better than none. Their main human contact may be with people they live alongside – but who they had no choice over – or with people who are paid to support them.

This can lead to unequal relationships where someone befriends a vulnerable person and takes advantage of them. For some, this may be little more than people spending time in someone's house or flat and using their heating and lighting, eating and drinking their food, and leaving them to clean up afterwards. (Most of us have had friends like these!)

However, when people are clearing out the cupboards and taking the contents with them, drinking all the alcohol, smoking all the cigarettes, and leaving the place in a mess, this is exploitation. When it leads to being asked to steal on behalf of someone, carry a knife, share drugs or threaten someone else – possibly unknowingly becoming a gang member in the process (all examples that the Safety Net Project has heard about already) – then, clearly, illegal acts are taking place.

Sometimes people with learning disabilities find it hard to tell the difference between friendship and exploitation, especially when the incidents take place over a long period of time. Being picked on, bullied, abused or stolen from because

you have a disability, are gay, come from a different ethnic background, or follow a different religion, all amounts to hate crime. Hate crime is defined by the Home Office as “any incident which constitutes a criminal offence, which is perceived by the victim or any other person as being motivated by prejudice or hate.”

Hate crime does not only affect people who have a learning disability, but there is an increasing national focus on how to support those affected.

A ‘mate crime’ (as defined by the Safety Net Project) is when vulnerable people are befriended by members of the community who go on to exploit and take advantage of them. ‘Mate’ covers a wide number of people including friends, family and supporters. Sometimes the exploitation may not be an illegal act but still has a negative effect on the individual.

The Safety Net Project aims to promote national awareness of the issue with two pilot sites, one in North Devon and the other in Calderdale, Yorkshire. The project workers in these two areas will work closely with local organisations, both voluntary and statutory, to develop systems, processes and training that will be useful nationwide.

People with a learning disability will be recruited to these local groups to plan and organise the project work. This will include raising awareness within the local



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learning disability population and those supporting them, raising the issue within local communities, and offering them guidance on what they can do and who they should contact if they have concerns about neighbours or anything they have witnessed.

A number of national organisations with an interest in this area are members of the steering group, including Stop Hate and Voice UK.

We are also very keen to ensure that we do not reinvent any wheels, so we need to know if you have or are working on a similar or related project. Would you be able to share ideas, resources and research to help the project? ■



Can you help?
We would like to hear from anyone who has experienced any of these issues. Have you worked with someone who has been the victim of 'mate crime'? If so, what happened? Can anyone else learn from your experience? Please email: safetynet@arcuk.org.uk
For more details see: www.arcsafety.net