

What is the future of campus-based services for people with a learning disability?

John Heritage

This article was first published in the December 2025 edition of Learning Disability Today

There is ongoing debate around “campus,” “village,” or “congregate” communities for people with learning disabilities. While policy and public opinion have largely shifted away from larger settings in favour of community-based provision, this shift may be driven more by ideology than by current evidence or lived experience.

Critics view campus communities as outdated and restrictive, while advocates see them as vibrant, supportive environments offering safety, belonging, space, and access to specialist support, particularly for people with the most complex needs.

There is a significant gap in contemporary research, however, especially research that centres the voices of people who live in campus communities and their families.

My Doctorate Journey

I am partway through a truly fascinating journey. I am about to embark on the thesis stage of a Professional Doctorate, and what will, at the end (if I get that far), be a 5-year journey of curiosity, knowledge, challenge and discovery, with a fair bit of emotion, I am sure.

At this point, I must declare a potential conflict of interest. I am Chief Executive of [David Lewis](#), a registered charity which provides several of its services from a beautiful, nearly 200-acre site in Cheshire, which feels like a small town with care homes, a school, a college, a gym, a café, a park, a swimming pool, allotments, a Forrest School, as well as much more. People occasionally call it a village or a campus.

We prefer to call it a town. The David Lewis “Town” offers wraparound access to great healthcare, therapists, and a range of other support teams who work side by side with the people they support to help them live great lives.

An important and incredibly special part of my job is spending time with the people we support at David Lewis to understand their experiences, what is working for them and what we need to change. Another important part of the job is meeting parents to get to know them and what is important to them.

In my varied discussions with parents, who come from all over the UK, there is one consistent theme that keeps cropping up – the struggle they experienced to find somewhere that could meet their son or daughter’s needs in an environment they feel is right for them, with the right wrap-around care to support them with their range of needs, including learning disabilities.

Hearing parents’ stories and talking to the people we support inspired me to question how well we really understand people’s perspectives “today” about campus or village communities, and whether current policy, practice, and available research genuinely reflect their voices and experiences.

This article shares some of what is starting to shape my research and the next steps of my doctoral journey!

Progress and some prejudice about campus communities

There have been some fabulous books written about the history of learning disabilities, including the really impressive book recently published by Stephen Unwin, called [Beautiful Lives: How we got learning disabilities so wrong](#). If you haven't read it...I urge you to get a copy!

The shift from large-scale institutional care to community-based services is one of the defining stories of social care reform. This enabled people to live more independently and enjoy much more fulfilling lives. We have come so far, but we know we have so much further to go.

With changes in how services are provided, commissioned and understood, people continue to hold different opinions and experiences about village, congregate, or campus-style services for those with learning disabilities. For the purposes of this article, I will use the generic term "campus communities" to refer to this broad collection of services.

The number of campus and village communities has declined, with campaigning groups such as [Our Choice Our Life](#) estimating that forty communities have closed in the past two decades.

Whilst one of the criticisms levelled at larger settings or campuses is that the service's size affects individuals' choices. Whilst the view exists, there is no convincing evidence to support this. It is also interesting to consider that the current view of campus communities and what some argue is an ideological rejection of campus services risks reducing, rather than expanding, real choice for people with learning disabilities and their families.

Unlike those with dementia, mental health conditions, or physical disabilities, people with learning disabilities are potentially being denied the choice of campus or village living, regardless of their individual needs or preferences.

The problem of a definition

The research evidence about whether smaller or larger service settings deliver better outcomes for people is mixed. I am becoming increasingly of the view that one of the key obstacles to informed debate on this subject is the lack of clear, commonly agreed definitions about being described, reviewed or compared.

Terms like "campus," "village," and "congregate" are used inconsistently and interchangeably in the literature and generally by commissioners, providers, regulators and the public. The term campus is usually associated with former NHS long-stay hospitals for people with a learning disability.

Most places described by this term have never actually been NHS hospital sites. They neither resemble nor function like hospitals and typically operate within the social care sector. Many of what are classed as campus communities were developed by families or philanthropists to fill gaps in local provision, but now provide specialist care and support, and in many cases, education too.

One thing that is evident from the literature is that there is little available research or perspective on what it is like to live in campus communities from the people who actually live there. There is a larger gap in the contemporary views and experiences of parents and families who have a family member living in a campus community about what these communities offer their family members, compared to other available services.

Choice and the realities of service provision

For many families, the question of where their relative with a learning disability will live is deeply personal and often fraught with anxiety. While independent or supported living is right and achievable for most of the learning-disabled population, a relatively small number of those with the most complex support needs often struggle to find suitable services in the area where they live.

This has led some people to use what is called an out-of-area placement, not because families want them, but because the right support and environment simply are not available nearby.

Historically, and to an extent to this day, campus communities have sometimes played a role in supporting people whose needs cannot be met by local services, or individuals or their families who want a different environment to live in.

Advocates of the campus community believe they offer safety and a sense of belonging and community that can be more difficult to replicate elsewhere, and, in some cases, the wraparound clinical and therapy support that the individual requires. This is the view I hear regularly from parents of the people we support at David Lewis. Despite this, current policy trends, commissioning practices, and the availability of such services risk making these options increasingly scarce.

Ideology versus individuality: the risk of a one-size-fits-all approach

The debate about campus provision is not just an academic one – it has real consequences for people's lives. The lack of contemporary research makes it difficult to draw firm conclusions. Much of the literature is dated and focused on the transition from hospitals to community settings, rather than on the current realities of campus and village communities.

There is a need for a fresh perspective and insights into the key questions about what campus communities offer in a diverse range of provisions. My interest does not stem from suggesting that new campus communities should be developed, but from understanding what exists now and what that means for the future of service provision. Without this policy, availability, choice, and control risks are influenced more by ideology than by evidence or experience.

Moving beyond the current narrative: learning disabilities and campus provision

The journey of learning disability services over the past half-century is marked by progress, yet also by complexities and contradictions. The transition from institutional care has undoubtedly transformed lives.

It is striking that the current perception of what existing campus communities offer is that they are outdated, and that an individual's choice of how to live their life is somehow reduced within a campus community. This risks impacting the very choices it seeks to promote, where someone lives and how they live their life.

What is needed is a shift in perspective: to move beyond ideology and towards truly understanding what campus communities are and what they offer through the eyes of those who arguably know best – those who live in campus communities, their parents, and their families.

I am looking forward to my journey of discovery.
