

Awards for All – Northern Ireland

Project Report

October 2022

INTRODUCTION

Communication Matters partnered with Mae Murray Foundation who are based in Northern Ireland. National Lottery Northern Ireland provided an Awards for All grant to support seven Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) users to complete an Entry Level 3 Award in Personal & Social Development.

Four workshops run by Creativity in Practice Ltd were held in Belfast on Saturdays between May and October 2022. The workshops were based on themes and topics for each of the units within the qualification. We are delighted that all seven learners achieved the qualification. It is evident that the sessions were not only enjoyable, with the much longed for face-to-face interaction, but that they provided participants with the opportunity to:

- Increase the use of the communication device
- Develop literacy skills and vocabulary
- Meet and work together
- Gain confidence



<https://www.maemurrayfoundation.org/>

<https://www.communicationmatters.org.uk/what-we-do/projects/>

Participant feedback and comments:

During the sessions, the participants told us 'What has gone well'.

A wide range of themes emerged through our discussions:

The participants felt that the **social aspect** was important; *"Getting together again, having a laugh. I enjoyed working in a group and meeting new people."*



Another theme was **increased confidence** in using communication devices. Participants told us having the opportunity to work together encouraged discussion; *"Using my communication aid made me happy. Last week I learned to take my time using my device and asking people to wait. I learnt that I really like this device as people can see what I write on the second screen. I took time to listen to everybody."* Two participants had met up for coffee, outside of the course, with the more advance AAC user giving confidence to the other to order coffee publicly – a great goal achievement!

Participants also told us how the sessions had helped to provide an **increased awareness of interpersonal skills**; *"Hearing about what everyone wants to work on, venturing into new things. I enjoyed listening to everyone's goals and having the space to stop and listen. There was great patience in the room. I completed the workbook by Zoom with my brother and his girlfriend who joined in the conversation. When having a conversation with friends I have learnt to ask open questions to keep the conversation going."*

On the last day, the group shared how this opportunity (all four workshops and completing a qualification) had helped them:

"I am better at using my communication aid. Having the confidence to be independent, order food in a restaurant. I can now add words and phrases to my device independently." "The course has helped me to use my device more. Because of what I have learnt, I am excited to help other AAC users. I feel proud of the work I have been doing over the last six months."

Consultee feedback and comments:

On the last day, the participants hosted a consultation event with family members and Personal Assistants (PAs) to ask for their feedback and any observations in relation to AAC usage since the start of the course.

Consultee #1: *"Since my daughter came home from her first day on this AAC course, this has been a life saver. She was very worried about starting at a new college the following week, yet she came home from AAC and there was a complete change. She felt empowered to talk to new people and said to me 'Mum, I accept the place to go to college'. This course*



has given her courage and confidence which has lasted from day one. I keep saying this is the best thing ever."

Consultee #2: *"These sessions have made a massive difference. I have observed more confidence and expression. The interest in supporting each other (during the sessions) has been great. AAC use brings so much potential, thank you."*

Consultee #3: *"This qualification is a big tick; it didn't come easy. I can see how hard all the participants had to work. Confidence has changed so much from week one until now."*

Mae Murray Foundation:



"We've seen everyone come on tremendously in a short space of time, with more experienced device users helping new device users. It's been great to see the confidence growing and just lovely to be in a room with lots of AAC users just chatting away. This pilot is a first for Northern Ireland. Technology is trendy. We can definitely see this group of participants growing their skills and offering peer support to other AAC users in Northern Ireland."

NEXT STEPS

Following on from the consultation event on 8th October 2022, we will be seeking further funding to continue to offer similar opportunities to more people within Northern Ireland.

