

**The British Institute of Human Rights Brief
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Helen Wildbore, Research Assistant at the Centre for the Study of Human Rights, LSE, attended VIA's annual conference on 7 October.

On Friday 7 October the aptly named Values Into Action (VIA) held their annual conference in London. This important event brought together people with learning difficulties, their supporters and carers, advocacy groups, social and health care professionals and voluntary and human rights organisations to discuss the human rights of people with learning difficulties. The conference was a call to action. It demanded "It's Time to Act!" and called for people with learning difficulties to have control of their lives. VIA's three-year project to teach people with learning difficulties about their rights under the Human Rights Act is due to end shortly. The conference was a chance to celebrate what the project had achieved, but more importantly to raise awareness of the fact that many people with learning difficulties in the UK are still not treated with dignity and respect and continue to suffer human rights violations.

VIA's conferences are unique. The word conference does not do justice to them. They are fun and welcoming. They include stories, role plays and drama and the audience is encouraged to actively participate in debates, games and workshops. However, VIA's conferences are still highly informative and cover significant and sometimes sensitive topics extremely well. It is VIA's ability to cover such serious issues in an engaging way that makes their conferences so unique and so important.

This year's conference included keynote speeches by Francesca Klug, Professorial Research Fellow at the Centre for the Study of Human Rights, LSE, and Louise Christian, co-founder of Christian Khan solicitors. Both speeches aimed to inspire the attendees to stand up and claim their rights. Francesca spoke about equality as a key human rights principle and likened the fight for the rights of people with learning difficulties with the fight for rights by groups throughout history, including the black civil rights movement in the USA and the suffragettes. Louise encouraged people to speak out about abuse by stressing that human rights are not just about what is written in law books but are about what people claim for themselves.

The conference also included a very lively 'rights and risk game and debate'. The audience were presented with different scenarios, such as a fall in the bathroom by a resident of a home which results in her being accompanied every time she has a bath. The potential rights and risks raised in each scenario were debated and the audience were asked to vote for their preferred outcome by waving coloured cards. The game was a very entertaining way to end the conference but had a serious message. It encouraged us to think about everyday problems affecting the lives of people with learning difficulties in terms of their rights. However, it also called for us to consider the responsibilities of carers and where the balance should lie. This was

a simple, yet very effective, way to engage the audience in the human rights approach to problem solving.

The conference raised several issues affecting the lives of people with learning difficulties, including lack of control over money, bullying and harassment and lack of privacy. For me, the most striking issue to arise was the lack of support for parents with learning difficulties to care for their children, with the result that they are often removed and placed in care, sometimes at birth. This was raised by several participants who had experienced the problem first hand. A workshop on families and rights run by parents with learning difficulties outlined the problems faced by parents, such as the lack of accessible guidance on parenting skills, dealing with social workers who are required by law to consider the 'best interests' of the child and the lack of appropriate sex education for people with learning difficulties. These problems require urgent address and VIA's conferences are crucial for raising awareness and debating solutions. They give people with learning difficulties a platform to air their opinions and demand action.