



Person-centred, Local, Small Solutions: Deinstitutionalisation is a Global Challenge



November 2025

Background

On Friday 17th October [IRSSV](#) (Slovenia) and [NDTi](#) (UK) hosted an online Roundtable event. The event was chaired by Steven Allen ([Validity](#), global) and Clenton Farquharson ([Disabled Activist, UK](#)) with Alexis Quinn ([Restraint Reduction Network, UK](#)), Ines Bulic ([European Network for Independent Living / ENIL](#)), Milan Sverepa ([Inclusion Europe](#)) and Thomas Bignal ([European Association of Support providers to Persons with Disabilities / EASPD](#)) members of the panel.

We were joined by over 60 people from across Europe and further afield with over 120 people registered and many requests for a recording. Here are notes covering the discussion and to accompany the video / transcript.

For further information about the NDTi Small Supports Programme, please visit our [Home Page here](#).

For further information about the work of IRSSV and the Ten-Year Deinstitutionalisation Strategy in Slovenia please visit the [DI programme home page here](#).

A Message from the Co-Chairs, Steven Allen and Clenton Farquharson CBE

For us both, this Roundtable represents more than a discussion it is a step in a growing movement for change. Across Europe and around the world, too many people with complex lives remain hidden behind institutional walls. Yet wherever communities invest in *person shaped, local, and small supports*, we see a different story: one of belonging, joy, and dignity.

Small Supports prove that community living *is* for everyone. When people have a home of their own, teams who know them well, and relationships built on trust, life becomes not just possible but good. These approaches also make sense economically: doing the right thing by people delivers better outcomes for all.

We are grateful to every contributor who shared insight, evidence, and lived experience. Together we are planting seeds of a more connected future; one where every person, in every place, can live freely and be included.

Please read, share, and stay part of this movement. Both IRSSV and NDTi would welcome conversation with anyone who wishes to turn these lessons into local action.

Steven Allen, Validity (Global)
Clenton Farquharson CBE, United Kingdom



Introduction

Deinstitutionalisation continues to challenge countries across Europe, including in the UK. Some countries have advanced further than others; a common block to complete closure is sufficient good quality support for those currently institutionalised who will need intensive, skilled 24/7 support to enable them to move out and begin to build a more independent life in their local community.

Frequently the challenge is made that community living is not for everyone, that some people are happier in the institution, and some people should always be in institutions. One reason for this challenge is that there is no knowledge or awareness of approaches to support that can enable everyone the opportunity to live in the community. Other reasons usually relate to prejudice, misunderstanding, or sadly, blatant opposition. The premise of this Roundtable is to profile and discuss community-based support that does work, where the evidence is very clear, and that any deinstitutionalisation strategy will have to incorporate 'person-centred, local and small solutions'.

This challenge has united efforts in Slovenia with work in the UK and explains the co-hosting partnership of IRSSV and NDTi.

Deinstitutionalisation in Slovenia

Dr Andreja Rafaelic, Lead Deinstitutionalisation Programme, IRSSV

We do not have Small Supports in Slovenia, but we have hopes and plans. For us this event is about the future and how Small Supports will be a key part of our offer of support in the long term.

Our collaboration with NDTi started some years ago, we have hosted online events and also a number of people from IRSSV and institutions have visited the UK to spend time with those running Small Support organisations.

Our past experiences of deinstitutionalisation have mostly been about moving people out of large institutions into small group homes; however, we are starting now to support people individually into their own homes. Work though has centred on those with lower levels of support need, not those supported by Small Support organisations in the UK who have more complicated lives and support needs. Our systems including funding are not set up to make this a straight-forward approach.

Yesterday (Thursday, 16 October 2025) though our government took a big step in adopting new law that enables community-based support (supported living). We are yet to see this pass through parliament but this is already a big success and major positive development for DI in Slovenia.

We believe strongly that we need to start small when we are thinking about new supports for people with complicated support needs, to do things 'right' and to prove its possible. We need to take a much wider community of people, professionals and politicians with us.



We strongly believe we can succeed; we are a small and fairly wealthy country, the numbers of those in closed/locked wards are relatively small and we have a real chance of success in developing Small Support organisations for this group.

This event is about our future work.

Small Supports: Person-centred and local solutions UK

Nic Crosby, Programme lead: NDTi Small Supports programme

[Link to Slide set](#)

The [NDTi Small Supports programme](#) is a three-year programme of support to local areas across England part funded by National Health Service England. Using a tried and tested model of support developed during the closure of Lennox Castle¹ a long stay institution for people with intellectual disabilities on the outskirts of Glasgow, Scotland in the late 1990's.

The model is centred on the development of 'Small Supports'; these are organisations that develop bespoke person-centred support for people with intellectual disabilities, autistic people most of whom have enduring mental health support needs and have experience of institutionalisation. The organisations make a commitment to stay small and local, cherishing at their core the fact that 'everyone knows each other' from which they build long-term stable supportive teams enabling people who carry huge trauma to live in the community. The model is one of supported living² and not residential care; this means the house and the support are owned / delivered by different people.

The characteristics of Small Supports:

- **Voice:** The person and their loved ones are at the centre – *No Compromise*
- **Relationships:** Investing in positive and supportive relationships
- **Connection:** Matching a team of people with the person
- **Home:** 'A home of my own' – Supported Living

This approach is based upon person-centred approaches to planning, funding and support and a focus on the 'whole person, what works for them and 'never walking away'.

¹ ['From Institution to Community Living: Five case Studies of Complete Closure'](#) Crosby, N. Furzei, P. and Rosken, A. EASPD 2022 (Chapter 5.3)

² [What is supported living?](#) Social Care Institute for Excellence, UK





Evidence is compelling³; people report good lives⁴ and are much happier and positive about the future, support costs are reduced and more widely ‘doing the right thing by people’ means positive economic value across the wider system i.e. less reliance on doctors, multi-agency teams, and emergency response.

Discussion

Small Supports change the narrative, from a person identified as difficult, a challenge as distressed and angry to a person who has dreams, wants, likes and clear ideas about how they would choose to live and be supported. From a deficit to a strength-based approach. It becomes a journey into ‘what is possible?’.

Small Supports start with each person as an individual, acknowledging that everyone is different. This is completely at odds with most national approaches to deinstitutionalisation which centre on a one-sized solution will fit all and where those with more complicated support needs get left behind.

The challenge of scaling up and the way that when governments get hold of good ideas, they very quickly turn them into approaches that both fail and don’t look anything like the original.

The importance of having both testimony from people on the difference Small Supports have made to their life, as well as economic evidence of changes in expenditure of efficiency.

Small Supports work, that is clear but how, when considering the 1.5 million people across Europe can such support be scaled up without losing its values and retaining the small local approach. As much as Small Support organisations are good, there has to be a way that the practice at the core can be shared and made available to as many people as possible; ‘if you want to support people well then this is how you do it’.

Housing, nothing else needs to be said just ‘housing’.

Often too much attention is given to closure as opposed to getting good support options established within local communities.

Importantly, too often the focus is on the difficulties, the challenges, the opposition and the reasons for not doing something, Small Supports enables people to have joy in their life. We need to be loud about the fact that joy is important, vital for us all as human beings and people who have been institutionalised should have joy!

³ [A Deep Dive into the Plymouth Small Supports Experience](#)’ Mason-Angelow, V. Richardson, M. NDTi 2024

⁴ [Homes not Hospitals: Mark’s Story](#). NHS England 2024

Small Supports presents a useful and vital challenge; there has been a stagnation in the support offer available and Small Supports is a timely challenge. One that is person centred, local and centres on the support that works for individual people.

However, is it sensible to think of hundreds of new Small Support organisations or is it useful to think of what Small Supports are based upon and their practice and seek ways to share this as ‘support that works’ across support providers in Europe.

The flat hierarchy, involvement of leaders and the relationships built across the organisations where everyone knows everyone is a clear strength.

This approach where personal planning links to personal funding challenges the traditional and less flexible approaches to how support providers use funding.

Small Supports are or can be a ‘disrupter’ i.e., challenging the status quo, not only proposing but evidencing a better approach to support that is currently available.

What is transferrable? What can Small Supports demonstrate that can be shared ...and what will always stay as part of a genuinely Small Support organisation. There is and will be a need for organisations well placed to support people currently in secure/locked/closed wards.

A stand-out point is the development of ‘relational security’, something so often missing in institutions and in many support providers, working to enable sustaining respectful relationships between a person and those supporting the person that will be there long term, is such a vital part of any offer of support that works.

Small Supports in Slovenia

Jus Skraban, Deinstitutionalisation programme, IRSSV

Adding to Andreja’s introduction; we don’t have Small Supports in Slovenia, but we are clear that they can provide part of the solution to developing community-based support for people moving out of institutions. This is particularly true for those currently placed in ‘locked/secure’ wards in our social welfare institutions.

Our hopes for Small Supports are based on learning from two pilot closure programmes running from 2020 to 2023. Two institutions set out to close, however despite our advice to start by supporting those with more complicated support needs they started with those needing much less support. This has resulted in those with more complicated needs, i.e. those on locked wards being stuck.

We see Small Supports fulfilling two roles within the DI Strategy in Slovenia:

- Informing practice, i.e. the core of being person-centred, how this shapes the support provided and approaches to building relationships and connection.



- Specific new Small Support organisations able to support small numbers of people currently in locked/closed/secure wards to move out and live in the community.

A key recent success for us has been the government adopting and pushing through new legislation that makes the provision of community-based support / supported living a legal possibility. This is a major step forward for us, it has taken a huge amount of work, and it paves the way for Small Supports and community-based support separated from the provision of support from institutions. We are happy to discuss this with anyone who would like to learn more.

Whole group discussion: Breakout Rooms

A question was posed by the Chairs, **“What does it take to drive a deinstitutionalisation agenda that is person-centred, local and high-quality in your country/area/community?”**

Attendees including panel members and chairs split into breakout rooms for a 15-minute discussion.

A summary of the feedback from all the groups and panel members:

1. Advocacy and self-advocacy is essential

Strong and independent organisations of disabled people, survivors and family members are essential to advocate for people currently institutionalised and for change.

2. Working together as a community across borders

Sharing knowledge, experience, success and solutions to challenge across borders. Acknowledging the support you can get from others and often the simple experience of being part of a community working for change in a difficult environment.

3. Culture and social transformation

From focusing on risk to focusing on good lives; from the separation caused by institutions to the connection within communities. People need stories of what works, of success as opposed to ‘another exposure of abuse’. People need to learn about what is possible, thinking about the audience and how we present DI is vital. There must be an overwhelming positive focus that dispels the myth that community living is not for everyone. Stories not only illustrate positive outcomes for people but how ‘doing the right thing by people’ has positive impact on finances and much wider well-being (families and loved ones).



Conclusion

This report is more than a record of a roundtable; it's a call to keep building communities where every person can describe their own gloriously ordinary life. Deinstitutionalisation is change that people have been tackling for many years, those of us who joined this online event stand on shoulders of many giants of the independent living movement and many, many, committed allies, supporters, academics and activists. We thank everyone for the ongoing effort to 'free our people' now to quote a UK based disabled people led campaign.

All this effort; the writing of strategies, the sharing of good practice, the action plans, the reviews, the risk management can lead us away from the human centre. Clenton and Steven acknowledge, it is *joy, connection, and belonging* that should be at the centre of all we do, when it comes to supporting people to live on, move out and build their own life. Deinstitutionalisation is about the realisation of human rights, not only the right to live independently and be included, the right to privacy, the right to a life free of discrimination or torture, the right to a family life, but those more emotive personal rights that we *free* people take for granted; the right to joy, laughter, a shoulder to lean on, friendship, relationships, holidays and support from people who love and care.

Person-centred, local, small solutions' is not a start but a further contribution from a community of people who are committed to continuing to share effort and work that will speed the closure of institutions for disabled people. **Please join us, email NDTi, email IRSSV and join the community.**

With thanks to Clenton, Steve, Alexis, Ines, Milan and Thomas whose support made for a great conversation and whose reputations and respected voices undoubtedly generated great interest and sign-up.

Andreja Rafaelic, IRSSV
Nic Crosby, NDTi

November 2025

Further discussion: [Nic Crosby](#) and [Andreja Rafaelic](#)

