We’ve come a long way
Helping families flourish for 60 years
ENABLE Scotland is grateful to everyone who contributed to the production of this booklet. Quotes are taken from interviews with members and staff and we would like to thank everyone who shared their memories of ENABLE Scotland and learning disability over the years.
Our thanks also go to the members of Renfrew Branch for their kind donation towards the cost of this booklet.
In 1954, five families met to talk about forming an organisation in Scotland to support parents like themselves who were raising children who had learning disabilities.

60 years later that organisation – ENABLE Scotland – is celebrating its Diamond Anniversary with a network of membership branches and support services across Scotland.

Much has changed in those 60 years. ENABLE Scotland is proud of the role it has played in connecting families and improving the life chances and opportunities of people who have learning disabilities and their families.

We have campaigned with and on behalf of our members on issues like education for all and the closure of long-stay institutions, and have played a significant role in the development of disability policy.

We have fought to ensure that people who have learning disabilities have the same human rights as others, enabling them to play a part in their communities, to have an education and a job, and to develop the friendships that others take for granted.

This booklet cannot cover everything that has happened in the past 60 years. It gives an idea of the determination of our members, branches, supporters, volunteers and staff who have all worked hard to ensure that people who have learning disabilities can live the lives they choose.
ENABLE Scotland has its roots in the post-war period – a time of social change and great expectation with the emergence of the National Health Service in 1948, and government promises of a ‘cradle to grave’ welfare safety net for all. Across Europe in the wake of the war, there was also a new appreciation of human rights and dignity.

The early 20th century saw the growth of institutions for those regarded as unable to care for themselves or contribute to society. By the 1970s there were more than 7,000 people in Scotland who had learning disabilities living in long-stay hospitals such as Lennox Castle. Many people went into institutions as children and remained there all their lives.

Despite this, most children and adults who had learning disabilities lived with and were cared for by their families. However, education and support services were not universal and attitudes were poor. The more disabled the child, the less likely there were any services or support. Many families felt stigmatised and left to cope alone.

Five families in the Glasgow area decided to do something about this. With the help of the local education department, they held a public meeting on 9 April 1954 in the education offices in Bath Street, Glasgow. 300 parents packed into the building and, by the end of the meeting, the Scottish Association of Parents of Handicapped Children (SAPHC) was born.

Right from the start it recognised that families would need to roll up their sleeves and support one another. Local branches sprang up around Scotland, all founded on mutual support principles. Within 10 years, 40 local branches, all run by volunteers, were connecting 4,000 members.

Volunteer-run services were set up to give children stimulation and their parents a break. Day centres in community halls were established for children with complex needs who, at that time, had no right to go to school. The gift of a small castle in 1955 led to three years of fundraising and DIY to turn it into the Stewart Home — Scotland’s first short-stay holiday home for disabled children.
Key dates

1948  National Health Service established.  
      National Assistance Act 1948.  
      Universal Declaration of Human Rights.


1954  The first meeting in Glasgow formed an organisation, Scottish Association of Parents of Handicapped Children (SAPHC), to support families and registered this under the National Assistance Act.  
      The first local branch opened in Blairgowrie.

1955  Accepted gift of Craigrownie Castle, Cove, from Miss Ella Stewart.  
      Set up day centre in Glasgow for children with complex needs – an idea quickly copied by other local groups and branches.

1959  20 branches and 18 day centres for children.

1960  First office and first member of staff.  
      Mental Health (Scotland) Act 1960 was passed.

1961  Changed name to The Scottish Society for Mentally Handicapped Children.

“Dad wanted to see people with learning disabilities treated like ‘normal’ people because he knew that their fundamental needs were the same as everyone else’s and that they deserved to be loved, respected and nurtured.”
— Anne
It was not until 1974 that all children in Scotland were given the right to go to school regardless of the level of their disability. Before then, some children were regarded as ‘ineducable’ – something that parent-led organisations such as ENABLE Scotland fought to change.

Even where provision was made, children often went to junior occupation centres where they were kept busy but not taught the same curriculum as children in school. Throughout the 60s and early 70s, parents battled to change this and to gain acceptance that their children could learn and had a right to go to school. The passing of the Education (Mentally Handicapped Children) (Scotland) Act 1974 gave all children recognition at last.

As their children grew older, families began to ask where they would live in future. There were few choices other than the family home or a long-stay institution away from family and friends. Many families did not want their son or daughter to live in a hospital after they had gone, so started campaigning for community-based housing.

Various reports into institutional care in the UK in the 1960s uncovered poor practice and living conditions – increasing the realisation that long-stay hospitals were inappropriate and demeaning places for people to live. Individuals and families wanted better experiences and the same lifestyle as any other person – not to be hidden away.

The first social work departments were set up after the 1968 Social Work Act. ENABLE Scotland offered local councils interest-free loans to set up hostels in local towns where a small number of adults who had learning disabilities could live together in companionship with support. By 1973, there were hostels in Ayrshire, Elgin, Linwood and Glasgow, with 20 more in the pipeline.

The government began to respond to the need to make more social provision with a Scottish policy statement in 1972 – ‘Services for the Mentally Handicapped’ which called for more care in the community.

In 1973, the organisation changed its name to signal an organisation for all ages – the Scottish Society for the Mentally Handicapped.
“All of his friends from the area were going to the ‘normal’ school and I wanted him to go with them. So I ignored everyone who said I was making a mistake and I took him along.”

— Jean

Key dates

1964  40 local branches now being run by volunteers.
      SSMHC made its first film, “Room for More”.
1966  Opened second respite care home
      – Viewpark Home in Alyth, Perthshire.
      Edinburgh Branch opened a market garden workshop to provide training and employment opportunities.
1968  The first Scottish Mentally Handicapped Children’s awareness week held.
1969  Report of the Committee of Inquiry into Allegations of Ill-Treatment of Patients at Ely Hospital, Cardiff.
1970  Edinburgh Branch of ENABLE Scotland bought property to set up a hostel.
1972  “Services for the Mentally Handicapped” government policy statement.
1973  Changed name to Scottish Society for the Mentally Handicapped (SSMH).
1974  Education (Mentally Handicapped Children) (Scotland) Act was passed.
Following the 1974 Education Act all children aged 5-16 had the right to go to school, ENABLE Scotland immediately funded a research project at Glasgow University into the education of children who had profound disabilities. Most children who had disabilities were sent to special schools, isolating them from their siblings and peers.

Parents began to demand post-16 educational opportunities for their children and more integration in local schools. The UK government commissioned an inquiry into special education and the Warnock Report (1978) recommended a move towards educating the majority of children in local primary and secondary schools – though it was to take another 25 years before this was substantially achieved.

Meanwhile ENABLE Scotland turned to the education and training of adults with complex needs after they left school. It opened two day centres as pilot projects, Levern and Easterhill, for adults in Glasgow who had complex disabilities. The aim was to show what was possible and to encourage all local authorities to develop similar facilities in their area.

As their children grew older, parents increasingly worried about the future. Where would their sons and daughters live and how would they be cared for when parents died or became too frail to care for them at home? This question continues to vex many family carers today. In 1978 ENABLE Scotland applied for funding to set up Key Housing Association. It continues to flourish today and offers housing and support to more than 1,400 people who have learning disabilities from Annan to Thurso.

ENABLE Scotland members realised that a bigger and more strategic plan for learning disability services was needed. It mobilised 33,000 people to sign a petition to the Secretary of State for Scotland in 1984 calling for a properly-costed and comprehensive strategy for mental handicap services in Scotland. It would take 16 years and a new Scottish Parliament before one was delivered.

Meanwhile ENABLE Scotland focused on making sure that families understood their rights by publishing ‘Scots Law and the Mentally Handicapped’ — the first book for parents explaining the laws relating to learning disability and how these could be used to support families.
Key dates

1975  21st anniversary of ENABLE Scotland (then SSMH).

1975  Funded research project at University of Glasgow into the education of children who had profound disabilities.

1977  Opened two day centres in Glasgow for adults who had complex disabilities.

1978  Set up Key Housing Association to enable adults to live independently.

                      Warnock Report on special education was published by UK Government.

1982  Stewart Home closed.

1983  Cumbernauld Branch opened a residential home.

1984  Submitted a petition, signed by 33,000 people, to the Secretary of State for Scotland calling for a comprehensive strategy for learning disability (mental handicap) services in Scotland.

                      Published ‘Scots Law and the Mentally Handicapped’ by Adrian Ward.

                      Mental Health (Scotland) Act 1984 brings in new arrangements for care for those who need it, as well as provision for day centres and related services for adults.

“Taking people out of the institutions hasn’t necessarily meant that people are then allowed to be part of things. People confuse the notion of people being present with people being accepted and active members of the community.” — Andrew
Parents had battled for their voices to be heard. Increasingly people who had learning disabilities wanted a voice too when decisions were taken that affected their lives. Adults who had learning disabilities began to ask questions about the care services they were receiving. “It’s our life” became a banner call.

In 1986 Tom Clarke MP (for Monklands West) got the chance to raise a Private Members Bill in the UK Parliament. Along with other disability organisations, ENABLE Scotland was proud to support him to achieve the Disabled Persons (Services, Consultation and Representation) Act 1986. It recognised that disabled people should have stronger rights and was the forerunner of much of the subsequent legislation on advocacy and discrimination.

The disability civil rights movement grew as more people found the confidence to voice their anger and speak up about discrimination. In 1993 ENABLE Scotland members sent 7,000 cards to their local MPs in support of MP Roger Berry’s Civil Rights (Disabled Persons) Bill, which paved the way for the Disability Discrimination Act in 1995.

Care in the community started to become a reality for many as long-stay hospital populations began to shrink. People wanted an ordinary life in an ordinary home. ENABLE Scotland began to develop community-based services that enabled people to realise their ambitions for jobs and a homely place to stay.

Its Legal Service ensured families got help with future planning and knew their legal rights. In Fife, ENABLE Scotland offered one of the first family-based short break services in Scotland, Lend a Hand, opening up new experiences for children while giving their parents a break and an enhanced support network.

Making sure people with profound disabilities and their families were better supported was always a key aim. In 1985, Carisbrooke, a developmental service for adults who had profound disabilities opened its doors in Airdrie. Two years later, ENABLE Scotland started to develop small family-sized homes for adults who had complex disabilities, many of whom were moving out of long-stay hospitals. By 1993, it had opened six homes across Argyll, Ayrshire, Edinburgh and Glasgow.

Listening to people who have learning disabilities and their carers is at the heart of ENABLE Scotland. In 1993, it set up a national committee of adults who have learning disabilities, ACE (Advisory Committee of ENABLE), to advise ENABLE – and others – about the things that matter to people who have learning disabilities.
Key dates

1985   Lend a Hand family short break service opened. Carisbrooke opened – a developmental day service for adults who had profound disabilities.

1986   Disabled Persons (Services, Consultation and Representation) Act 1986 (Tom Clarke Act) – right to advocacy and consultation. Funded a 5-year Chair in Learning Disabilities at University of St. Andrews.

1987   Set up SSMH Homes (later known as ENABLE Homes) — community-based housing for adults who had profound disabilities. Appointed an Employment Development Officer to find and promote job opportunities for people who have learning disabilities.

1989   Set up a Legal Service to advise parents on future planning and provide legal support.


1993   Opened five SSMH (ENABLE) Homes. Changed name to ENABLE and set up ACE (Advisory Committee of ENABLE).

“The assumption had been that not all people with learning disabilities could be cared for in the community. ENABLE Homes was revolutionary because it showed that they could. That really pointed out that the hospitals were redundant.” — Norman
In the 1990s ENABLE Scotland expanded its range of services – always with a view to delivering best practice support and the ordinary day-to-day experiences that people wanted.

From supporting people to get skills, training and jobs, through to helping people to set up home and live in their local community, ENABLE Scotland was there.

ENABLE Scotland’s Legal Service was active in making sure that people, and their families and supporters, knew and understood their rights – especially at a time of great change in government policy and public services.


Other legal publications followed including a series of easy-read leaflets encouraging people who have learning disabilities to take part in elections and vote.

Following local government reorganisation new councils got underway in 1996 and the Scottish Parliament reconvened in 1999. ENABLE Scotland was keen to make sure that people who had learning disabilities got the chance to raise issues with candidates and understood that democracy is for everyone in Scotland.

ACE kick-started ENABLE Scotland’s anti-bullying work by making a video, ‘Don’t Call Us Names’, in 1994. Later it would develop and promote the Thistle Travel Card to alert transport staff to the fact that some travellers need extra time or support. As ACE got into its stride it became increasingly confident about raising issues with politicians and decision-makers on behalf of people across Scotland who have learning disabilities.

ENABLE Scotland members were at the forefront of the long-awaited review of learning disabilities services in 1999. When ‘The same as you?’ was published by the Scottish Government in 2000, it placed people who have learning disabilities and family carers at the heart of learning disability policy and plans. Amongst early recommendations was the closure of the remaining long-stay hospitals, giving people personal life plans, local area co-ordinators, and a new Scottish centre for learning disability. In partnership with 12 organisations across the voluntary and academic sectors, ENABLE Scotland established the Scottish Consortium for Learning Disability in 2001.
Key dates

1994  ‘Don’t Call Us Names’ film produced.

1995  Published ‘Their Face to the Wind’ by James Hogg and Loretto Lambe — research into needs of older people with learning disabilities in Grampian.

1995  Published ‘The Care Maze’ by Colin McKay and Hilary Patrick.

1996  Local government reorganisation in Scotland led to 32 new councils.

1997  Published ‘Are You Ready to Vote?’ leaflet to help people with learning disabilities take part in the general election.

1998  Thistle Travel Card launched by ACE.

1999  Scottish Parliament reconvened.

2000  ‘The same as you?’ published by the Scottish Government.

2000  Adults with Incapacity (Scotland) Act passed.

2001  Scottish Consortium for Learning Disability set up by 12 partner organisations.


2003  ENABLE Scotland set up National Young Person’s Self-Advocacy Group.

“My boss always says that the place would run like clockwork if all his staff were like me. All I ever wanted was the chance to prove that I could work the same as anyone else so that I could live my life properly.” — David
The past 10 years have seen people who have learning disabilities come to the fore within ENABLE Scotland. In the wider society, ‘The same as you?’ also helped to shift attitudes and service development.

Adults who have learning disabilities now play a leading role in shaping services and plans for learning disability, contribute to government committees, help to train professionals, and continue to tell policy-makers what needs to happen. The programme to close Scotland’s long-stay hospitals continued throughout the 2000s and now people live in and contribute to their local communities.

ENABLE Scotland helped many people to make the transition from hospital to a home of their own by providing advocacy services linked to some hospitals and by developing supported housing and community-based services. As people blossomed in the community, group homes were gradually phased out. Now people are more likely to be a tenant in their own home. In recent years, services have become more personalised, with people given greater choice and making more decisions about their lives.

Although hospital closure was important, ENABLE Scotland did not forget the needs of the majority of people who have learning disabilities who still live at home with their families. Many of those families have been caring and sharing their lives with a relative who has learning disabilities for 40 or 50 years – almost the whole life of ENABLE Scotland.

Thanks to Big Lottery funding we were able to run ‘Lifelong carers’ projects to support families in Ayrshire and Dumfries and Galloway.

Since then our ‘Picking up the Pieces’ campaign has highlighted the anxieties of older families about the future. In 2012 we published a research report about the support with emergency and long-term planning offered to families by local councils. We continue to press councils for more attention in this area.

ACE and ENABLE Scotland’s self-advocacy networks for young people continue to work on the issues that are important to them. Public attitudes have improved enormously, helped by anti-discrimination laws and an increasing focus on human rights. The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities has strengthened the case but more needs to happen. Our members still raise issues such as bullying, inaccessible transport services, lack of social activities and friendships.

Parents remain concerned about adequate support in the classroom for their children, lack of suitable housing for those who are ready to leave home, and uncertainty about the future.

As ENABLE Scotland heads in to its seventh decade its job is not done. The Scottish Government’s new learning disability strategy ‘The Keys to Life’ (2013) highlights the challenges still facing people who have learning disabilities and their families.

The health inequalities experienced by people with learning disabilities, negative public attitudes and the need to tackle bullying and harassment, and the continuing strain felt by older families are high on the agenda. ENABLE Scotland will continue to push for the human rights of children and adults who have learning disabilities to be fully recognised.
### Key dates

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<th>Year</th>
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<td>2005</td>
<td>Launched ENABLE Link to help people have social opportunities and friendships.</td>
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<td>2009</td>
<td>Launched Employment Projects in schools and colleges.</td>
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<td>2011</td>
<td>Co-operative Group Charity of the Year. Launched Inspire Me training programme.</td>
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<td>2012</td>
<td>Darling’s Coffee Shop opened in Arbroath — a social enterprise employing and training people who have learning disabilities. Published ‘Picking Up the Pieces — Supporting Carers with Emergency Planning’.</td>
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<td>2013</td>
<td>‘The Keys to Life’ published by Scottish Government. HUBS (Help Us Be Spontaneous) campaign launched to make train travel more accessible and flexible for people who have disabilities. Hazeldene Horticulture opened in Kilwinning — a social enterprise offering training to people who have learning disabilities.</td>
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“Everything I have achieved is through the confidence and independence the group has given me. I have made friends here that I know will be friends for life. I love the sense of community, the laughs and the banter.”

— Kenneth
The Keys to Life

2014 and beyond

At the last count there were more than 26,000 adults who have learning disabilities and over 130,000 children who have additional support needs in Scotland. ENABLE Scotland’s work is as relevant and necessary now as it was in 1954.

The past 60 years have seen a great deal of positive change. People who have learning disabilities no longer spend their lives hidden away in institutions, excluded from their communities. Many live independent lives but they and their families can still face difficulties and challenges.

ENABLE Scotland was founded on the principles of mutual support and community involvement. Our members have been pioneers in this area since our founders came together to improve the lives of people who have learning disabilities.

We will continue to fight alongside our members and the people we support to bring in an era of improved health, more independent living, greater choice and control and a return to the co-operative principles of mutual support and partnerships that can achieve a fairer Scotland for everyone.

Advisory Committee of ENABLE (ACE) members in Stirling, August 2013. ACE celebrates its 21st birthday in 2014.

ENABLE Scotland

Leading the way in learning disability

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