

A discussion was held with members of the Working for Justice group, run by KeyRing and supported by the Prison Reform Trust. Members of the group have learning disabilities, and one member has autism. At some point in their lives all of the group have found themselves in the Criminal Justice System as suspects, defendants, offenders and/or prisoners. The discussion was based on, but not restricted to, a number of key themes.

Understanding the AA role

While there was a general understanding that the role of the AA was to 'help', this was essentially limited to support with communication in interviews. The AAs purpose was viewed as helping detained people to understand the questions being put to them by the police. Members of the group said:

- *'They are there to help me when the questions were difficult'*
- *'To help stop misunderstandings'*
- *'To help with communication'*
- *'So you don't incriminate [yourself]'*

Experience of support

Four of the six had not received help from an AA. Of the two that had, one group member said:

- *'They helped to explain the questions.'*

Who should be an AA?

Relatives and friends

Service users were asked about the advantages and disadvantages of having a relative or friend as their AA. Moral support was by far the strongest reason for having someone they knew. One group member said:

- *'My mam was there; she made sure they asked the right questions.'*

A number of downsides were expressed, the most significant being that they would not know what the role involved or 'how to behave'. However, the issue of potentially complex relationships between people with support needs and their family members was also of importance to the group. There was agreement that there were risks inherent in having previously fallen out with a family member who might then be called or agree to act as your AA. Group members said:

- *'What if you don't have a good relationship with them?'*
- *'Some people don't want them to know what's going on.'*
- *'What if there are torn loyalties?'*
- *'They might be judgmental. They are not independent.'*
- *'It shouldn't be a family member but it should be someone who knows you.'*

Trained professionals

All those taking part felt people should be trained to be an AA. Independence, confidentiality and a non-judgmental approach were seen to be important attributes of a successful AA. Group members felt that training should cover what help and support should be offered by an AA. Group members said:

- *If they just sit there they won't be much good. They won't know how to help you'*
- *'So they know what to say and how to direct you'*
- *'They need to know confidential things'*
- *'They should be an independent person and they should be non-judgemental.'*

Personal choice

The group thought that everyone with a learning disability should have an AA. However, the issue of personal choice was an important theme.

Under PACE Code C, it is a matter for the police alone to decide whether an AA is required. On this basis the AA is a safeguard for the police, mitigating the risk that evidence (for example a confession) will be ruled inadmissible at court. However, there was a strong view amongst group members that it should be the choice of the individual as to whether or not they had an AA.

The group also discussed previous poor experiences, either with relatives (see issues above) or professional workers (whom they did not think were effective or, for whatever reason, they found them hard to get along with). In this context, group members felt they should be able to exercise a degree of choice on who would be acting as their AA, potentially being able to turn down one person in favour of another.