



Global Progress on Self-Directed Support

July 2026



About the Self-Directed Support Network

The Self-Directed Support (SDS) Network is a global community working to define and improve best practice in self-directed support. The network has hubs in 12 countries (Australia, England, Finland, France, Ireland, Korea, New Zealand, Northern Ireland, Scotland, Slovakia, Spain and the USA) plus the SDS Research Hub based at the Human Services Research Institute.

The SDS Network developed out of the 2015 Vancouver Conference on self-determination and is hosted by Citizen Network. It is the publisher of the **[17 Global Standards for Self-Directed Support](#)** which were launched at the Global Leadership Exchange in Brussels in 2024.

Stay in touch by joining our **[mailing list](#)** and get in touch if you wish to develop a hub for self-directed support in your country.

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Introduction

The SDS Network is the global network for the development of self-directed support and currently has 12 national hubs, plus a hub for global research.

This is a summary of notes from the Ottawa Global Leadership Exchange event in June 2026, organised by the Self-Directed Support Network and hosted and supported by Karis Disability Services.

33 people met in Ottawa representing 9 different countries: Australia, Canada, England, Ireland, New Zealand, Norway, Scotland, Slovakia, USA. The list of participants is shared at the end of this paper.

The event lasted 2 days and most people were present throughout. The group included disabled people, advocates, researchers, government colleagues, providers and people working in community organisations. Despite all this diversity there was a consistent message.

At its simplest self-directed support is about people having more say over their own lives. It is not just about budgets, forms, policies, services or clever system design. Those things matter, but only if they help people live a life that makes sense to them.

Although people came from different countries and different roles, yet the same message kept coming through: The language of choice and control has travelled a long way, but the reality is still patchy. In some places there are strong laws but weak practice. In others there are good pilots but no real route to scale. In others there are personal budgets, but not enough help for people to use them well.

That is why this conversation felt important. It was not just people comparing systems. It was people asking a bigger question: How do we stop self-directed support becoming another system phrase, and keep it rooted in real life, real choice, and real power?

This is not a formal research report; it is a plain English summary of the main things people seemed to come back to across the Match. It draws on the transcripts, the table notes, the lived experience session, the implementation conversations, and the later discussion about research and action.

The main message

Self-directed support works best when people are trusted, when they have flexible resources, and when the right help sits around them. That means clear information, planning support, peer support, advocacy, supported decision making, good providers, accessible communities, transport, housing, communication support, and safeguards that protect people without taking over their lives.

Without those things, self-direction can easily become a promise on paper. People may technically have a budget, but still have to fit into old service menus. They may be told that they have choice, but only from a short list of approved options. They may be given responsibility, but not the practical backup to make good decisions, employ people, challenge poor practice or try something different. There were several themes that people returned to.

1. It is about life, not services

This was probably the strongest theme. People were not talking about self-directed support because they love funding mechanisms. They were talking about it because people want ordinary lives, not lives organised around services.

That means being able to choose where you live, who supports you, who you spend time with, how you get out, whether you work, how you contribute, and what you do with your day. It means relationships, belonging, spontaneity and dignity. It means people being able to stop asking permission to live.

The phrase “life shaped support” says this well. The support should fit the person’s life. The person should not have to shrink their life to fit the service.

2. People need to be asked, listened to and trusted

The lived experience session grounded everything. People who were trying to live their own lives, from different countries and in different systems, explained what helped, and what also seemed to get in the way.

Mo reminded us that good support starts with asking the person. Ray showed how communication, belonging, staff knowledge and transport can make the difference between being part of a community and feeling stuck. Fionn and Jonathan showed what can happen when people reject the narrow menu and create something of their own. Clenton spoke about moving from service-shaped lives to life-shaped support. Joe showed how the right support at the right time can open up work, confidence and a future.

This is not complicated in principle. Do not talk past people. Do not make people tell their story again and again. Explain decisions. Support communication properly. Make sure people have a real chance to say yes, no, or “I want something different”. Trust is not a soft extra. It is the starting point.

3. Power still sits too much with systems

A lot of the discussion was about the same tension. Self-directed support says power should move towards people. But many systems are still built around eligibility, risk, compliance, scarcity and control.

People described systems that ask, “What service are you eligible for?” rather than, “What would help you live well?” They described systems where professionals, commissioners or funders still decide the menu, the rules, the timing and the acceptable uses of money.

This is why the Match kept coming back to model integrity. The question is not just whether a country has personal budgets, direct payments or individualised funding. The question is whether people actually have power, agency and practical control

4. Infrastructure is the missing middle

One of the clearest themes was that a budget on its own is not enough. People need infrastructure around them. That sounds like a technical word, but it really means the practical things that help self direction work in real life.

It includes accessible information, independent advice, planning, brokerage, peer support, advocacy, supported decision making, budget support, help with employing staff, good communication, trusted providers, transport, housing, community connections, and a way to complain when things go wrong.

This came up in different ways across the countries. Canada talked about good intentions but missing infrastructure, block funding, waiting lists and limited portability. The research discussion highlighted admin burden, inaccessible language, rural barriers and people needing trusted support to navigate the system. The same basic point kept coming back: self direction is not just about handing over money. It is about building the conditions that make control possible.

5. Flexibility is precious, and easy to lose

People talked a lot about flexibility. The whole point is that people should be able to use support in ways that make sense for their lives. Sometimes that may mean personal assistance. Sometimes it may mean transport, technology, support to work, a family member being paid, community activities, or a creative solution no service planner would have designed in advance.

The problem is that systems often start with flexibility and then slowly narrow it. Rules grow. Purchasing lists get tighter. Reviews become more defensive. Safeguarding becomes control. Fear of misuse becomes a reason to limit everyone. Several countries described this drift, often linked to austerity, political pressure, public anxiety about fraud, or attempts to “stabilise” systems.

The challenge is not to ignore risk. People do need good safeguards. But safeguards should help people live safely and freely. They should not quietly rebuild the very bureaucracy self-directed support was meant to challenge

6. Equity has to be designed in at the start

A big concern was that self-directed support can work best for people who already have the most help around them. People with confident families, money, education, professional knowledge, strong networks or good local services may be more able to make it work.

That leaves a serious question. What about people without those advantages? What about people who communicate differently, people with fluctuating mental health needs, people in rural areas, people without family support, people who are isolated, people with complex needs, or people who have been badly served by systems for years?

A self-directed system that only works for the best connected people is not good enough. Equity cannot be added at the end. It has to be part of the design from day one.

7. Providers are part of the answer, but their role has to change

There was a healthy tension in the room about providers and markets. People were rightly worried about provider capture, profiteering, weak regulation and systems that pretend people are empowered consumers when the market is not really fair.

At the same time, good providers can be part of the solution. Some of the strongest examples came from organisations trying to do support differently: personal assistant models, host agencies, micro boards, support for independent living, peer led quality work, and providers who see their role as helping a person build a life, not filling a rota.

The issue is not whether providers exist. The issue is what they are there to do. Good providers should move power closer to the person, not pull it back into the organisation.

8. We need evidence people can actually use

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9. We need each other

One of the nicest things about the Match was the sense that people are not fighting these battles alone. Different countries are facing the same patterns: progress, pushback, austerity, confusion, missing infrastructure, good local practice, weak national learning, and the constant risk that the values get watered down.

The SDS Network can help with that. It can connect people, share practical examples, support local hubs, amplify lived experience, translate research, protect the standards, and help build a stronger public argument for choice, control, rights and citizenship.

This matters because no country has got this completely right. But everywhere, there are people who have worked out part of the puzzle. The job now is to learn from each other faster.

What this asks of us now

The discussions point to some clear next steps. These are not finished recommendations, but they feel like the direction of travel.

1. **Keep bringing it back to life:** When systems get technical, ask the human question again: does this help someone live the life they choose?
2. **Build the practical support around people:** Build Information, advice, planning, advocacy, peer support, budget help, transport, housing and community connections are not extras. They are what make choice real.
3. **Protect flexibility:** Rules are needed, but they should not turn freedom back into permission seeking.
4. **Make equity the test:** The model has to work for people who do not already have strong networks, money, confidence or system knowledge.
5. **Use providers well:** Support organisations need to help people direct their lives, not simply repackage old services.
6. **Turn research into useful tools:** Plain English evidence, stories, practical examples, standards, scorecards and learning resources can help people make the case.
7. **Grow the movement:** The SDS Network can help people stay connected, compare learning, support each other and push back when the values are at risk.

A closing thought

The Match showed how much work has already been done, and also how much work is still needed. Self-directed support has travelled a long way. The words choice and control are now familiar in many places. But people still face systems that are hard to understand, hard to influence and too often shaped around services rather than life.

The next stage is not just about proving that self-directed support is a good idea. We know it is. The next stage is about protecting its heart. That means keeping trust at the centre, building the infrastructure that makes choice real, making sure it works for people who are most often left out, and telling a stronger story about what becomes possible when people are trusted and supported to direct their own lives.

At its best, self-directed support is beautifully simple. It says people should have the support they need to live, love, work, contribute, belong, take risks, stay safe, and build a life that feels like their own. That is the thing we need to keep hold of.

Participants

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Stefan Thomas	Karis Disability Services	Canada
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Thank you

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