



# “Our Story”

A personal experience of the Cheyne Thera supported living programme

Only an individual can tell you their story - their life and how changes in society impacted on it, both good and bad. People within that person's immediate circle can tell you what they heard and saw but it will always be from their perspective – from the outside, looking in.

## This is OUR story

We are three men who have been friends for a very long time. We were all born in the 1950's, in a time when people with a learning disability like us were labeled as idiots, mentally defective and imbeciles. Families in those days had very little support and were often told by professionals to 'Forget about him - put him away. He won't live long



anyway.' People in the local community didn't know what to say to people who had a child like us. As children we were invisible, only being seen by others when out with our families.

Eventually our families gave into pressure from 'experts' and in the mid 60's we were amongst 250 people who were moved into the Ida Darwin Hospital, which was specially built for people with learning disabilities. No one asked us how we felt, what we wanted. This was where we first met. The hospital was named after the lady whose achievements included founding the 'Cambridge Association

for the Feeble-Minded' in 1908. Her work with the particularly vulnerable, 'feeble-minded' women inspired her to campaign for legislation, such as the Mental Deficiency Act of 1913.

In 1971 the White Paper 'Better Services for the Mentally Handicapped' which advocated a reduction in the number of people living in institutions, was released. Once again, our lives were shaped by forces outside our control, and due to changes in legislation, we were moved out of hospital and into a house in a small town in Cambridgeshire.

## Our New Lives

Having spent most of our lives so far in hospital, we moved into a house together and lived there for the next 20 years. Initially, it was meant to be a temporary measure, until more 'suitable' accommodation was identified. No-one asked us how we felt about the change. But at least we were able to stay in contact with our families.



The years progressed and the search for a more suitable home dwindled away. As we aged, we increasingly needed more support with our health and physical needs. The house aged with us and eventually no further adaptations could be made. On top of this, we

were living in a shabby environment that was outdated, uninviting and depressing to be in.

For several years family and staff tried to make the best of a bad situation but eventually the decision was taken to consider finding alternative accommodation. Sounds simple, but again legislation had changed and the rights of people with a learning disability had been acknowledged. This time, our opinions had to be sought, and a decision would only be taken on our behalf if we were unable to understand e.g. Mental Capacity, Best Interest Decision, Court of Protection etc. all had to be considered.

### The Search for a New Home

In April 2017 the process to find a suitable home that would meet our needs for the rest of our lives started. Everyone agreed that it was in our interest to stay together but move to a bungalow, ideally in the same area due to networks, family and staffing. Again, a fairly simple request until property prices in the area, plus the cost of the works were factored in. Above all else, the property had to be affordable and sustainable, in terms of Housing Benefit.

Detailed Housing Needs Assessments were completed, and Forward Housing was asked to look for properties in the area. Over the next eight months, six properties were considered and discounted for a variety of reasons. The seventh property, which was in the same town, ticked all the boxes for us and our families. Funding for the purchase and the works were agreed with Cheyne and the property was purchased on the 26<sup>th</sup> February 2018.

### Our New Home

But buying the property was just the first stage. The property had to be made fully wheelchair accessible throughout, with a bathroom and a second, level access shower room supplied. We chose the colour schemes for each of the rooms. The works took eight weeks to complete. During this time our staff worked to prepare us for the move, as we find any change difficult and a major move like this was very challenging.



The 9<sup>th</sup> May 2018 marked the start of a new chapter in our lives. The move went much more smoothly than anyone expected and we settled quickly. We now have a warm and inviting home in the place where we have lived for most of our lives, in a community which knows and accepts us. What a difference a year makes!