“I did it my way”

16 tales of transformation, personal choice and success

“GDA is the rainbow bringing the colour and sunshine back into our lives – My Choices is the pot of gold at the end of it!”
I am delighted to introduce the first series of inspiring personal stories from Glasgow Disability Alliance’s ‘My Choices’ project. Disabled people have been involved at every stage- from designing the overall project to the extraordinary results! Each participant has taken an active part in ‘My Choices’, developing their own outcomes, designing the support needed to achieve their goals, gathering evidence and being “researchers” reporting on progress as part of the action research study.

‘My Choices’ provided participants with the opportunity to agree their own personal outcomes with GDA staff and the resources to meet these outcomes. These resources included funding for transport, equipment, personal assistance, course fees, subsistence, and in some cases spending money. Critically, support was also provided via informal coaching, tutoring, advice & information. All participants had a dedicated member of the GDA team to support them on their ‘My Choices’ journey.

GDA hoped to demonstrate the impact of supporting disabled people to define and meet their personal goals, building on their strengths, self-esteem, confidence and improving quality of life. But even we were amazed by the stories and analysis of experiences that very small amounts of financial and/or practical support can be life changing for some disabled people. The Action Research Report is clear in assessing that people whose lives have come to a halt, without choice and control, without access to opportunities to try new things and make new friends, may not ‘dare to dream’. They may need considerable support to take a first step.

“I am amazed at how much my life has changed, all thanks to some straightforward support from My Choices. This has given me more freedom, not only to actually go and look for work but to get to University for my course, take part in voluntary activities and live a life where I can afford to travel.”

At the heart of ‘My Choices’ was the inbuilt support through access to Personal Assistants, transport, equipment and other access provided,

“My Choices helped me with transport, PAs and funding for classes. I’ve built up so much confidence and gained new skills. Before I was bored, sitting about the house all day, with no friends or hope for the future. Now I can’t believe I’m back at college again three days a week and I believe I have a future now and could have the career I’ve always dreamed of.”
Providing access went hand in hand with the support of GDA as a disabled peoples’ organisation using community development approaches. Critical to the success of this project was helping people to raise their aspirations, make connections and access support from other disabled people - we call this peer support.

“The My Choices project has made me feel liberated and free. It’s made me feel more confident and happy again.
I was isolated and felt my life was over. Meeting others in the same position really helped and as importantly, talking to people who’d been there and had found ways round things. I have my independence now.”

‘My Choices’ is evidence that providing support and access together with participation and capacity building can lead to positive outcomes for disabled people. Much of this demonstrates prevention in action and none of this is rocket science: the answer is frequently about approach - not just resources.

‘My Choices’ builds on the strengths and talents of disabled people and supports them - not just to be safe from harm or meet their basic needs - but more importantly, to have choice and control, a sense of meaningfulness, fulfil their potential and make vital contributions to society. These approaches build personal confidence and resilience. Additional gains include disabled people participating as active citizens and making contributions to their families, learning environments, workplaces, communities and wider society: it is clear that inclusion of disabled people in society creates opportunities for everyone.

Ultimately ‘My Choices’ demonstrated what life could be like if disabled people had access to Self Directed Support and real choice. It also shows, in practical terms, how this might be delivered at a time of very limited resources. SDS can enable disabled people to live the lives they choose to lead and pursue personal outcomes.

Tressa Burke, GDA Chief Executive
About GDA

Glasgow Disability Alliance was set up in 2000 and has been a charity formally constituted since 2001. It is a vibrant and growing disabled people’s organisation with disabled Members involved at every level of the organisation, including an elected Board. With over 2000 Members, GDA is, by far, the biggest groundswell of disabled members in Scotland, if not the UK. Our mission is to act as the collective, representative voice of disabled people, promoting equality, rights and social justice. GDA has a small staff team, some of whom are disabled people themselves.

Acknowledgements

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A special thanks to Noreen – our amazing Project Assistant who supported older participants in a variety of ways and who went above and beyond at all times helping people to “dream bigger” – even when these seemed like modest goals – putting supports in place and offering unwavering dedication, warmth, encouragement and support.

To Sally Witcher who carried out the Action Research which accompanies these journeys and who produced a report which is rich in learning, reflections and considered analysis. Sally ensured both that learning, experiences, views and ideas were captured and that these shaped the evolving project model.

Above all, GDA wishes to thank all “My Choices” participants for enthusiastically and honestly sharing their experiences, aspirations, knowledge and reflections. This has been crucial in understanding barriers and working together to remove these. Most importantly these finding hope to influence models which can enable maximum choice and control, enable disabling disabled people to live the life they choose with the support they need, participating in their communities and having the same chances and choices for equality and fulfilment as other citizens.
Chris and Rosaleen’s story

We met at a local day centre and one day we picked up and read a GDA newsletter that had been sent in. Even though we didn’t know each other that well then, we both knew we wanted to do something more than just spending all our time in the centre. We wanted to learn new things and try to take back more control over our lives.

We joined GDA and regularly attended events, courses and conferences which we really enjoyed. We found that joining in boosted our confidence and self-esteem. It was through a GDA taster session that we discovered how much we enjoyed first aid training. It became an ambition for us to train to be a qualified “First Aider” so we could use our skills to help people. When we found out about ‘My Choices’, it seemed like a perfect opportunity to realise our goal.

We got support from a ‘My Choices’ worker to find and register on the St Andrews ambulance certificated First Aid course. Then we were able to use our ‘My Choices’ budget to fund help and support from a personal assistant, plus the accessible transport that we needed to take part in the training programme. With this support and funding we completed the whole course.

On the day of our final exam, Chris was ill and unable to attend. This meant Rosaleen, a retired school teacher, had to attend on her own:

“I was quite apprehensive. However, I passed with flying colours, the best in the class! I was so proud of myself. At 83 years of age and having been retired from work for a number of years this is a great achievement. I used to be a teacher, years ago. I felt like I was doing nothing, stagnating. Now I am out doing things and learning new things which is so important, not just for mental wellbeing but all the bits of your health.”

Chris then had to finish the class on her own as she’d missed the final session due to her illness. “Despite the fact that I was on my own, nervous, and with a completely new group of people, mostly young people, I got on really well with the folk in the class. I also passed the exam to get my qualification. I’m delighted with myself!”
Margaret’s story

“I feel amazing!”

I’m 85 and have cerebral palsy. I go to the Fred Paton Day Centre in the West End of Glasgow. I have no family in Glasgow anymore, but I have relatives in Australia who write to me every month. No-one had ever taught me to read or write so when a postcard comes in from Australia, I sometimes have to wait days for someone to read it to me and I have never been able to send a postcard back.

When I found out about ‘My Choices’, I was adamant that I wanted to learn to read and write. GDA set up an innovative partnership with the Glasgow Women’s Library, who provide specialist literacy tutors that visit me at the day centre twice a week. It was amazing how quickly I progressed – within a few weeks I was recognising letters and before long I could write my own name, in my own handwriting, for the first time in my life. I was quickly recognising words, writing paragraphs and reading. I enjoy the lessons so much that I don’t want to have a break during them. My tutor said my progress has been incredible. I completed my first letter to my family in Australia and was able to write and send Christmas cards to each of them for the first time. I planned what I would write, practiced, and enclosed my letter with the calendar.

I have visited Glasgow Women’s Library, where one of my teachers is based, to meet staff and look at learning materials for my future literacy sessions. It was brilliant to visit the Library and feel so welcomed.

I have learned to read and write in just a few months, proving that impairment and age do not have to be a barrier to literacy. I am very keen and eagerly look forward to my twice weekly learning sessions. Support staff at the Day Centre have commented that on these days I am very cheerful all day. Learning to read and write has had a positive effect on my general health and wellbeing. I feel amazing!
Leah’s story

I’ve been getting support from GDA for a good few years. I’ve done a lot of courses and I’ve really enjoyed meeting people and learning new skills. I like the support you get from GDA – I can trust them and they provide access support like taxis, PAs and easy to understand information. GDA supported me to build my confidence, life skills and abilities. When I was learning to drive, they were great, encouraging me when other folk around me kept saying I’d never do it.

I’ve got learning difficulties, ADHD and depression. I need support to take part in activities, like help with taking notes, listening, understanding the information and sometimes with my behaviour, which can be a bit erratic when I’m stressed. I’ve needed this support from GDA for years - this is just how long it takes.

I’ve been to Spain on holiday a lot and I really like Spanish food and culture. I always wanted learn the language but I never got the chance to do that at school. So when I got a place on ‘My Choices’, I knew exactly what I wanted to do. I planned it out with a ‘My Choices’ worker and we found an evening class on basic Spanish. I went with a PA to the class and it was going ok, but after a while I felt the class was too long for me and it wasn’t holding my attention even though I was keen to learn.
Normally I’d just give up, but GDA staff helped me to stay focussed and find a solution – a one to one tutor. I now have lessons with the tutor every week, paid from ‘My Choices’ funding and I get a taxi there and back. When I started the lessons I had a PA with me, but I now go on my own as I’m much more confident and getting on really well with the tutor. To make it more fun, we’ve added in Spanish activities like going to a tapas restaurant and salsa dancing. We’re also going to do some cookery too – I can’t wait!

I really love creative writing and I find it much easier to express myself through short stories and poetry. I was supported by ‘My Choices’ to go to a radio station to read my poem to be broadcast on air. I was so excited but really nervous and I’d never have been able to do it without support. I’ve recently joined a local mainstream poetry group and although I don’t get ‘My Choices’ support with that, it’s because of the confidence I’ve built up through GDA that helped me feel able to go along and take part.

I’ve also used ‘My Choices’ support to access other support services, like counselling, social work and housing services, where a PA has attended with me to make sure I stay focussed and understand what’s going on. I just got the exciting news that I’m finally going to move into my own flat. I’m going to use my experiences of ‘My Choices’ to apply to find out if I can get Self Directed Support to help me with day to day activities and tenancy support. I’ve already told my social worker that I know what it’s like having a PA and what’s possible when I get the right support because I’ve experienced it with ‘My Choices’!

There’s a lot of folk out there who don’t think independent living is possible. There’s folk who don’t know how to access services or support to live independently. Through GDA I’ve found out it is possible with the right support.
Kathy’s story

“I belong to Glasgow!”

I had seen so little of Glasgow before becoming involved in ‘My Choices’. I used to walk with sticks, but now I use a wheelchair and it is really difficult for me to travel about, and I don’t want to keep asking my family. I love getting out and about but inaccessible transport and not having access to personal assistance made it difficult for me to go out and do what I want to in life. There are loads of things I want to go to, but I can’t because I can’t walk down the road. I’m 81 and I’ve not seen half of Glasgow, and my second name is Glasgow, it’s *my* city!

I first got involved with GDA when they came to the day centre I attend. GDA have been fantastic, putting on classes for us, paying for tutors to come in and help us build skills and confidence. We’ve had exercise classes, cookery, crafts, home safety and more. I’ve even been to big conference events in the city and really enjoyed meeting loads of new folk. GDA always pay for transport and provide personal assistance so I trust them to make it easy for me to take part. So when I saw the information about ‘My Choices’, I felt confident to ask for a place on the project. I spent time with the ‘My Choices’ worker planning what I wanted to do and what
support I would need. I knew I wanted to explore the city, but I was afraid to do so as a wheelchair user as it’s been years and years since I was last able be a “tourist” in my own city. Having the back up and support from the GDA staff was great and I was able to choose how to spend the ‘My Choices’ budget. For me, I knew I needed transport and help to get around. I learned about having a PA, a personal assistant and how this could enable me to feel safe and get the help I need, when I need it.

I took great pleasure in designing my own programme of visits and events, knowing I had the right support, meant I could choose freely for once. From the Kelvingrove Museum, to the Charles Rennie Macintosh tea rooms, to a Play, a Pie and a Pint, I have seen more of Glasgow than I ever had before. What I liked the best was the city tour bus. It’s never been advertised that wheelchair users can go on it, but GDA encouraged me to make enquiries and I was delighted to find how and where to access the tour. I’ve told them they need to tell disabled people that the bus is accessible; it’s not enough to stick a wee wheelchair sign on the side!

I feel more connected to my city again. ‘My Choices’ and GDA provide ongoing support to enable me to identify and access other groups and organisations. I’ve been involved in community organisations for years in my neighbourhood but I still felt I needed to boost my confidence more. I am already telling more folk about my experiences, encouraging them to do more things, like the tour bus and to get involved more with organisations like GDA because they can change your life!
I’ve been involved with GDA for years. At first I attended lots of their courses, then I joined the GDA Purple Poncho Players drama group too. It’s always been really difficult for me to travel by public transport as I have a physical impairment and a visual impairment and public transport is not accessible to me. This is really annoying because I live close to a bus stop, but bus numbers and routes are not clear. I don’t “look disabled” so other passengers and even bus drivers are often very unhelpful, and can even sometimes be quite abusive. This really knocks my confidence and makes me scared to go out on my own.

I love to do social things and meet up with friends, but I find this so difficult. Young disabled people really do need ongoing support to deal with all the barriers we face. As well as transport, lack of money is often a barrier to me. Through ‘My Choices’, I got transport, personal assistance and sometimes even some spending money to
help me get back out and socialise as anyone else my age would do. I love playing pool, so one of the things I did was go out on a Sunday with a PA. I’ve loved being able to go out and about with a PA. We’ve been able just to hang out, go shopping, play pool and have fun.

I’ve also been supported to join a Saturday art class, where I meet up with Merissa, who’s also getting support from ‘My Choices’. This gives me the chance to learn art skills and get to know other young disabled people.

It’s been good to get the peer support from the other ‘My Choices’ participants too. We all help each other out, learn from each other and inspire each other. The GDA staff are great too, giving us support and encouragement and arranging things for us.

I’m getting some support at the moment to help me identify what future support I’m going to need once ‘My Choices’ ends. I really want to learn more about independent living and I know I’m going to need some help with information and support to enable me to have more control over my life in the future – things like managing my own money and making the right choices, as well as how to keep safe and well.

I have improved and strengthened my social and family connections through ‘My Choices’. Overcoming fear, with support, and trying things out one step at a time, has all had a massive boost on my confidence. I even applied to be a volunteer at the Commonwealth Games.

My days before ‘My Choices’ were dull and boring. Now I have lots of things to do and I’ve joined other organisations, like my local Access Panel and “Shopmobility” scheme. I go to their meetings regularly and help out with them when I can. I feel a lot more ready to take on more control over my life and all of this increases my confidence in my ability to get a job in the future. ‘My Choices’ has given me my life back again!
Merissa’s story

I got involved with GDA when I was in my last year at school. I live in a rural area and went to mainstream school, so I’d never really met many disabled people. It was wonderful to meet so many people my age who’d had a lot of the same experiences as me as a young disabled person. I was supported by my school to have time off to attend GDA courses and events and these really built up my confidence.

Public transport in my area is really difficult and not accessible to me so I felt really isolated and unable to do all the things young people my age would normally be doing. I left school and was struggling to find something I wanted to do and didn’t know where to start. I love art, animation and design. I’m always drawing and coming up with ideas for short films, but my art teachers at school didn’t do much to encourage me to pursue art as a career.

When the ‘My Choices’ project started, it seemed like a brilliant opportunity to get the right support to continue to build my skills and confidence and make the right decisions for my future career. I met with GDA staff to think through and plan what I wanted to do and what support I needed. It was brilliant to have people I could relax with to share my dreams and I knew I could trust them to help me.

I met with an art teacher who helped me to develop an art project. I had transport and personal assistance to visit museums and galleries for information and inspiration. I was also given a budget to buy art materials for my project. I also got an animation app and learned how to use this. It was so exciting and I’d never been able to do anything like that before. Once I had all the ideas together, I spent time working on my project, developing an animation and putting together my project portfolio. I’m looking forward to reviewing the portfolio with the art teacher again. I’m also getting some advice and support for putting together a professional portfolio that would give me a better chance of getting into an art course in the future.

“Amazing!”
‘My Choices’ provides support to attend an art class every week and it’s great to meet up with lots of other young folk who are interested in art and have guidance from fantastic tutors. One of the other ‘My Choices’ participants attends the same class so it’s good to have a pal there too.

Glasgow had its first major “Comic Con” event last year and I was able to get support from ‘My Choices’ to attend the event with a few of my friends. I couldn’t believe it, it was amazing!

Life Changing

‘My Choices’ has further boosted my confidence and given me opportunities to meet other disabled people and get the right support. I’ve recently started college to do a “steps to work” course. We’re currently arranging a work placement for me with an arts organisation. I’ve very recently started trying out travelling short journeys on my local bus, and while this is a bit scary, it’s fun and I’m managing to do it as I’m generally more confident. All of this increases my skills to get a job, is helpful for my CV and will really help me pursue my choice of future career.

I’ve had a really tough time recently but it’s been made a bit easier because I have so many good friends and GDA staff who have supported me. Being involved with GDA and getting support from the ‘My Choices’ project has been life changing!
Chelsea’s story

Being able to drive would give me my independence. Public transport is just not accessible to me. At the ‘My Choices’ events I met other disabled people who’ve learned to drive. It’s good to know this is possible and find out what support is out there.

Through ‘My Choices’, I’ve been getting transport and personal assistance to help me study and practice for my driving theory test. I needed to work out the best way to learn and remember the information as it’s difficult for me because of my brain injury. The PA helped me to make cards with pictures on them for all the theory test information and this was an excellent way to help me take all the information in. It was also more fun to learn this way rather than just reading myself with the book.

“When she started, Chelsea doubted she could pass the theory test, but through helping her with different ways to learn she has come on leaps and bounds and is far more confident. At first she was only getting 12 out of 50 on the online test, now its full marks every time!” (Chelsea’s PA)

I want to get my own house and I’d like to volunteer to build up my skills and confidence. ‘My Choices’ also gave me transport and personal assistance to meet with the Volunteer Centre to find out how to apply and what’s available in my area that interests me. I’m looking forward to getting more support to follow this up.

I also got help to complete lots of forms for housing applications and send them off. I will get support to arrange and attend any meetings that happen as a result of my applications.

It’s great knowing that sort of support is there if I need it and I feel better knowing I don’t have to do it on my own.

I’ve met loads of brilliant people through GDA and ‘My Choices’ and have some fantastic new friends, like Merissa, who’s now one of my best friends. We meet up and spend time together which is amazing.
Kirsty’s story

Even though I’ve been involved with GDA for many years, building my confidence, making new friends and learning new skills, with all the access provided, I still lacked a lot of confidence when going out and about as I don’t have a support package. I also didn’t get to do the things other people my age would normally do because of lack of money, support and transport to get places.

‘My Choices’ was so exciting for me. I worked with a PA to plan out a range of activities I wanted to achieve. For me, the goals were about being able to “be me” but also to do something that improved my fitness and wellbeing.

I was supported to go swimming and join my local gym. I was able to use the ‘My Choices’ budget to pay for sessions that helped with fitness and upper body strength, plus I bought some suitable gym clothes too. This all made me feel great and I really want to keep all the exercises going.

With transport, personal assistance, and some spending money, I was also supported to go out and about in Glasgow, to the theatre, bingo, the cinema, out for dinner and around the shops. My favourite experience by far though was the time I went out with a PA to see the Rocky Horror Picture Show at the theatre, which is my absolute favourite show! I’ve developed a real love for the theatre and drama and as well as being in the GDA drama group, the Purple Poncho Players, I also joined a drama company, going to their classes and attending shows with them.

‘My Choices’ greatly increased my independence and brought a richness and variety into my life. I really feel my general confidence and skills have been boosted massively with all this support. Being able to get the right support at the right time has shown me and my family what is possible and I really want to explore the possibility of Self Directed Support for me in the future.

The support I’ve had from GDA and ‘My Choices’ has also made me feel so much more able to believe I can get a job and develop a career and I am continuing to develop my employability skills. I’ve now got a part time admin job with a care agency and I totally love it! This was made possible because of ‘My Choices’.

“I believe in myself now”
We have been friends for many years and have supported each other through relationships, illness, cancer, and recovery.

We both suffer due to a real lack of confidence. We attend a self-help group together and found out about ‘My Choices’ through a talk given by a member of GDA staff. We really liked the thought of building our confidence, learning new skills and getting out and about more, meeting new people.

We wanted to work on our ‘My Choices’ project together, to support each other and make best use of our budget as this was all so new to us. We didn’t know what we could do and what would be possible or even what we might achieve as a result of ‘My Choices’. However, we got lots of support, encouragement and ideas. We explored many different places, learned new skills and gradually started to get our old selves back. It’s amazing the difference it makes, having the right support, someone to encourage us and not having to worry about the cost of travel, entry fees or even the cost of lunch – all things folk normally take for granted, but for us as disabled people are huge barriers.

We have gained lots of confidence through attending GDA courses and events. We now volunteer with ‘Cancer Support Scotland’. We attend meetings and we’re now even on the fundraising committee! We definitely have found that everything we do results in other doors opening for us and we now have full diaries – our families will soon need an appointment to see us!

“I survived breast cancer and had a stent inserted due to heart trouble. I suffer from really bad panic attacks and depression and I didn’t get out much. I have nerve damage at the bottom of my spine and travelling on public transport is very painful and virtually impossible.”

Anne
We completed the First Aid Certificate course and we couldn’t believe it when Edith had to put her newly learned skills into practise: “A customer took ill while in a restaurant and I was able to step in and help out. It felt totally amazing, being able to be the “expert” for those few minutes and to help someone in real need!”

GDA delivers courses at our local lunch club which is brilliant. GDA invited us to assist and speak to the others about our positive experiences. We were very nervous but afterwards so glad we’d done this. We couldn’t believe we’d got up in front of a group and made a presentation. We thoroughly enjoyed it! We felt very involved and enjoyed sharing our experiences with others.

Most recently we’ve been supported to attend sewing classes, something we’ve wanted to do for years. We were able to use our ‘My Choices’ budget to buy sewing machines so this means we can make soft furnishings and clothes to save money as well as having fun together practising our new skills. We are so glad we had the courage to join GDA and get a place on the ‘My Choices’ project. It’s been totally life changing for both of us.

“It’s taken me out of the isolation I was in. I’d felt like my life was over, then with the right support, we started going out and I’ve got better and better. I feel like I have my independence now.” Edith

“We did the first aid course and I thoroughly enjoyed it. And we did the Glasgow bus tour; saw the old tenement house which I had never been to before - even though I used to live in one like that!” Anne

“We went to the People’s Palace and that was the first time I had been there since I took my kids many years ago.” Edith

“When you’re a mother and you’re disabled, you swap roles with your kids, and they are the ones that look after you. Now I have some of my independence and confidence back, I feel I can be the mother again.” Edith
Jacqueline’s story

I have a neurological impairment which makes it very difficult to be in brightly lit or noisy rooms. It is virtually impossible to sit in an office, go to a training course, event or even visit a shopping centre. Almost everywhere in the modern world is lit by bright, fluorescent lights, and almost everywhere I go, I am affected by this poor lighting design.

I identified 2 key outcomes for the ‘My Choices’ project: I was determined to improve my employability and further develop existing skills. In addition I hoped to find some way to resolve the issue with lighting. Through ‘My Choices’, I worked with GDA to identify a specialist optician who supplies glasses specifically for my condition. I used the ‘My Choices’ budget to purchase 2 pairs of customised glasses. I then applied for and was accepted onto the COSCA Counselling Skills Certificate course. I am not entitled to free travel and could not afford travel costs to attend training. Via ‘My Choices’, I was able to buy a monthly Transcard, something that is out of reach of many of those, like me, on JSA.

I am making good progress on my counselling course, with only 2 modules left to complete. I feel that I have gained transferable skills from the course and my social skills have also been further developed.

I have attended a number of job interviews recently and although these have not yet resulted in a job offer, I feel I am now at least being considered. Also I am more confident that if I was successful, my specialist glasses will help me maintain a job in a modern office environment though other adaptations will also be required.

Positive Future

I am amazed at how much my life has changed, all thanks to some straightforward support from ‘My Choices’. The Transcard has given me more freedom, not only to actually go and look for work but to get to University for my course, take part in voluntary activities and live a life where I can afford to get out of the house.

The specialist glasses that I bought via ‘My Choices’ have literally changed my life. I can now spend more time in any brightly lit environment. ‘My Choices’ has thus improved my quality of life. The counselling skills course has updated my CV and I look forward to a more positive future.
Lilian’s story

“Life Saver!”

For me ‘My Choices’ was a “life saver”. Being able to plan and control the support I needed enabled me to get my confidence back after an extended hospital stay. I’d been involved with GDA for years and I trusted that they could support me and help me find the right solutions to the difficulties I was experiencing.

I’d been stuck in hospital for months following an operation and related complications. I finally got home, only to find I was stuck there too as I had little or no support and no means to get out and about. I was glad to be home though, but my confidence was severely dented and I felt really low. Because I trusted GDA, I felt I could approach them for help and I knew they wouldn’t judge me or make me feel like I had to jump through loads of hoops to get the support I needed. In fact, they were able to suggest equipment and support that I hadn’t thought of.

Setting up the support was very straightforward and quick – that’s what it should be like! I was able to get a wheelchair sorted out so I could leave my house, with support from a Personal Assistant (PA) and an accessible taxi to travel to where I needed to be. For the first time in ages, I could go out and meet friends for lunch, go to the cinema, theatre or just to the supermarket to choose my own shopping. At Christmas time I was able to buy some cards and gifts to send on to family. I was even able to volunteer at a fundraising stall at a Christmas Fair. I’ve also found out about other organisations and services that support disabled people, like the cinema card that entitles a PA or carer to get into the pictures free of charge.

‘My Choices’ has been really liberating. Being able to make all the arrangements myself, meant I could be flexible about where I wanted to go and when. I’ve been able to get back to being involved in GDA courses again too, so I can continue the learning that I’ve always loved. I’ve even re-joined the GDA drama group and relish being back on stage again!

GDA has been there to support me over the years. I’ve made many good friends, some of whom were able to visit me in hospital and keep my spirits up when I really needed it. ‘My Choices’ has taken this to another level, with personalised one to one support I can control myself. I’ve finally got my life back!
I live with a number of health conditions including Ehlers-Danlos type 3 Syndrome (EDS), Meares-Irlen Syndrome and adult ADHD. I describe my daily challenges as “trying to climb a 20 foot wall without a ladder!”

I recently got a place on a unique programme of rehab to develop techniques and approaches to managing EDS at The Royal National Orthopaedic Hospital in Middlesex. The thought of having to arrange travel and stay away from home filled me with dread – not only the travelling, but financial aspects too.

Through the ‘My Choices’ programme I wanted to explore ways to manage my conditions more effectively so I can concentrate on living my life and develop a career. GDA assisted me to make the transport arrangements and I got some ‘My Choices’ funding to meet the costs of travelling and staying away from home. I absolutely loved my time at RNOH and for the first time I met others who share my experience of living with little understood conditions. I learned a number of exercises, stretches and activities which I can now use to help me manage my physical condition.

I am now exploring options to develop my physical strength and joint stability through joining a gym or climbing club. I’m also researching the support available from an ADHD Coach to help me more effectively manage my daily routines.

For many, many years I’ve always joked that someone needs to buy me a bucket of superglue to put me back together because I am falling apart! Not just in relation to my physical issues, but also generally, the way my life crumbled year after year into something barely recognisable – my physical deterioration, financial decline, neurological lack of control and influence, my steady decline of involvement socially, and so on. The request for superglue really refers to seeking the means to somehow rebuild those little tiny shards into a form that is recognisable to me as something resembling living instead of merely surviving.

**GDA is the first real superglue I have found.** Nothing else in the past has had any substance to it or lasting effect. Yet all of those little shards came back together
just enough for me to negotiate every obstacle in my way on the trip. I was not affected by my financial decline as I could afford to pay for simple things like food and drink to prevent me going without eating. I did not shy away and sit in the corner, not speaking with anyone all evening. Instead I went to a busy, popular tourist attraction and spent nearly 4hrs there! My confidence and fairly relaxed, stress-free experience on that trip is all down to ‘My Choices’. I was able to travel comfortably and confidently far from home, all on my own, with multiple journeys, including navigating the London underground in rush hour.

My eyes were truly opened to the possibilities of what my life could become. It was only 36hrs, yet in that small window I experienced the way I would love to feel every day of my life. It wasn't perfect. I was still exhausted by lunch, and barely able to walk by the end... But it felt amazing and I cannot remember the last time I was so relaxed and totally sure of myself.

That confidence I experienced and almost complete lack of anxiety was the polar opposite of how my daily life usually plays out. It shows that with the right support I can achieve far bigger things than I would have ever dared dream before. Next I plan to forge ahead, and with the ‘superglue’ support from GDA and ‘My Choices’ I can continue to piece more of my life (and myself!) back together, working to make that confidence the ‘norm’, and anxiety the long forgotten memory!

“GDA is the rainbow bringing the colour and sunshine back into our lives – My Choices is the pot of gold at the end of it!”
Rebecca’s story

“...makes a huge difference”

I was undertaking a post graduate diploma in counselling when the impact of Welfare Reform hit me really hard. The training and supervision sessions for the course cost even more on top of the fees. I was worried that I would be unable to complete my practical sessions and thus have to drop out of the course. With support from the ‘My Choices’ project I was able to identify the extra support I needed to complete my course. Through ‘My Choices’, I was able to pay for the training and supervision sessions and I completed these successfully and graduated from my course as a result.

I recently trained with an organisation to volunteer as a group facilitator to deliver an emotional literacy programme in secondary schools in Glasgow. I will shadow another facilitator initially then next academic term I will lead sessions on my own. I will be supported by ‘My Choices’ to meet the travel costs for this volunteering activity as the organisation cannot pay for taxis. GDA is supporting me to access the services of Volunteer Glasgow to identify further suitable opportunities to develop my counselling skills.

Support and encouragement

I have greatly improved my employment prospects by completing and graduating from the post graduate course, something I could not have done without the support of ‘My Choices’. I like to support the other folk on ‘My Choices’ and I encourage them by explaining how I overcame barriers and completed my course. I have really enjoyed the ‘My Choices’ peer support days and these have given me lots of opportunities to support other people and make new friends. My experience is a great example of how a little bit of financial support and encouragement can make a massive difference to a disabled person’s life.
Margaret’s story

I have always loved music and singing, especially Celtic music. Many times I tried to learn to play the guitar but due to my impairment and deteriorating vision I was unable to continue as it was too much of a challenge. I live in my own home and I travel to Ireland often to stay with family. I have friends in Glasgow I can rely on, but I was really missing being able to participate in regular musical activities.

I decided that I would like to learn to play the guitar and ‘My Choices’ opened up the possibility for me to learn this new skill, something very close to my heart and important to my culture. Using GDA’s local knowledge and contacts, we managed to find a guitar teacher who has worked with visually impaired people in the past. I used the ‘My Choices’ budget to pay for transport and personal assistance so this meant a PA could travel with me, attend the lessons with me and then help me get back home again. Because of this fantastic support, I have been able to attend my guitar lessons every week.

My teacher is amazed at the progress I have made. I can now play some songs on the guitar and feel confident enough to practice on my own. This project has opened up further doors for me. I now have increased confidence to go back to a singing group I was part of years ago. I feel I am now able to take part in other activities such as GDA computer courses and creative writing which I also enjoy. With the ‘My Choices’ support, a visual impairment is no barrier to participation.

The guitar has had a huge impact on me, especially as I had just lost the remainder of my sight when I started the lessons. I could focus on learning the guitar instead of going into a deep depression. Also it gave me a reason to get up in the morning. I feel that playing the guitar has had a knock on effect on my general wellbeing. The music is very enjoyable and therapeutic, I feel happy and get up in the morning, exercise and I have more energy. I now play guitar and sing and this means I feel generally more positive.

“The My Choices project has made me feel liberated and free. It has made me feel more confident and happy again. For years I was very depressed, I didn’t do anything and I had no motivation. The guitar lessons have made a huge difference to me. I feel so much better. I have my confidence back and feel like trying other things.”