



Growing up with Disability

The Voluntary Organisation PLUS

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Plus is a voluntary organization based here in Stirling. It was formed about 20 years ago now, nearly 20 years, by a group of families who were very concerned that their children with disabilities were not able to get involved in ordinary local play activities particularly at that time, they were concerned about the summer holidays and the fact that their children were stuck at home when others were able to get involved in getting out and about and doing things with friends. It started with just a 2 week play scheme back in 1988. The parents managed to get a fair bit of support from the local authority to borrow a school and borrow a van and that sort of thing, and it was such a success they decided they wanted to carry on and do more than that, and they formed the voluntary organization. Managed to get funding to employ staff and since then it's grown into a number of different projects. It still works with children to provide play opportunities in a way that original play opportunity was organized back in 98 but it does a number of other things as well.

Plus works now with young people aged 5 to 25 but we tend to divide that work up into natural age groups. The work with the youngest group, the primary school age children, falls into 3 or 4 main areas. We still do the work that was started those years ago offering play opportunities to young people. A lot of that we try to do in collaboration with other organizations, particularly Stirling Council. So where they are organizing summer play schemes we can support children to attend those. Those play schemes include some outdoor activities where for example there might be something up to 20 young people involved altogether and 4 or 5 of those could be young people that Plus has got places for and is particularly supporting with some additional staff. The staff work very closely with the council staff. Some of the opportunities are ones that we organize just ourselves although for those we do include for example, the children are very welcome to bring friends and siblings and a lot bring siblings, a few bring friends, but sadly a lot of children with disabilities don't have close friends and that's really the reason that Plus exists. The other projects have been more recent and have been particularly aimed at seeing if we can overcome some of the barriers to them forming friendship and two place we're working on this, one in school because that's where most children actually make most of their friends and the other is in the sorts of clubs that children go to, the Cubs, the Brownies, the Youth Clubs and so on. In schools we work by having a Circle Support Inclusion Officer and her job is to go in and help children within the class support the children with disabilities within that class and so rather than it all being kept a secret that 'this little child's got a disability', it's actually more straight forward. There's a lot of talking about what the young person might need in terms of extra support. The ways that children might get involved in doing that and particularly in the kind of social support, the invisible sort of support, that just having someone to play with in the playground, which is not the sort of thing that goes on in a formal support plan but is actually the sort of thing that really seems to make such a difference to children.

It's a strange area to be working in, because we're really working in the area of people's social lives and social lives are private matters but because they need support, children and in fact other, you know, people with disabilities generally, their social lives become almost a kind of public, and almost the object of public policy. Interestingly if you look at most forms that would be assessing children's needs, you don't see much about their need for friendship or their need for play and so on, which is where our organization has been particularly strong and where the voluntary sector is particularly strong in that we have filled a gap that I don't think it would have been filled just by the statutory sector alone thinking, 'oh this is something children need we really must do it'. They acknowledge that what we are doing is very, very valuable and indeed they purchase some of it now but I don't think it's something that the statutory sector, because there aren't legal requirements to make sure children have friends

or make sure they get out and have a bit of fun. And actually that's the basis of them, for example, succeeding at school. If you go to school and you're lonely and miserable, the chances of you learning a lot are pretty slim. If you're very bright I suppose you might learn a lot to compensate for lack of friends, but if you've got learning difficulties and no friends where do you go at school, what do you do, what is your focus?

The people we recruit to do the face to face work with the children are almost entirely sessional staff and being in a university town a lot of them are actually students and quite young people although we do have quite a wide age range. We're looking for people who have some experience of children although people who don't have that experience we can offer them volunteering opportunities if they seem appropriate and the qualities we're looking for I suppose are particularly about people who enjoy the company of children. We're not looking for experience of disability and so on in the first instance, because the additional support needs that people have they can be trained to meet those needs. If they have to administer some medication because someone's got serious epilepsy, that can be done, that's a technical matter. I suppose we're looking both for people who can really enjoy themselves with children but also have the self-awareness and the awareness of the situation that while they're down there having fun with the children they're also up there somewhere watching what's going on and observing and making sure that everybody's included or they're supporting other staff if they're needed, that they're not totally absorbed in what they are doing but they, at least from the children's point of view, they seem totally absorbed in what they are doing.

Plus has to work with other agencies, so whether we like it or not, partnership working is absolutely essential and yes, it has it's moments. What makes it successful? I suppose it works well where we know a) that it's a real partnership and it isn't that there's a very unequal power relationship going on and that people are really wanting to achieve the same things that we are wanting to achieve. It doesn't work where, for example, it hasn't worked with one or two youth clubs who've said yes, we'd really like to be more inclusive, we'd like to work with the youth inclusion project and then throw up all sorts of barriers and when you keep coming back to where we're involved with you because we're all trying to achieve the same thing, we aren't trying to force you to do anything that you haven't signed up to, you find they haven't really signed up to them. So I suppose the key is that people are trying to achieve the same thing. I guess probably a big key is around money as well. I'm suspicious that real partnership working doesn't always work where there are competing budgets. I think it often gets in the way of things, I've seen it too often in things like the transition between children and adult services or between school and social work services, and so I think that's a real barrier. I suppose it's not to us in that we're not usually looking for partnership funding, and I think that probably makes it a lot easier.

I suppose there's two sides to the way we evaluate our work. One is what we do for our own purposes as an organization because we obviously want to find out how well we're doing and build on the good things and change the not so good things and so we do make sure that we build in feed-back from the young people at all the activities that we get involved in usually not terribly direct. We found that young people don't particularly want to sit down with checklists and so on – but we get a lot through observation and through making sure that staff report that at de-briefs. We get direct information from families – we also, because we are a voluntary organization and a lot of our funds come either from, well for example, the projects we have just been speaking of, Play Plus is funded by the council. Children in Need fund the Circles project and the Youth Inclusion Project is funded by an organization called the Laidlaw trust. They all have their own particular demands they make on you in terms of what they want fed back and so there is an evaluation undertaken sometimes to meet their needs – usually there's a pretty good overlap between what they need to know about us and what we need to know about ourselves and the gathering of the information is dual purpose. We're also subject to the usual Care Commission scrutiny and we're registered with the Care Commission and so we're under all the other scrutinies, as a charity we're registered with Oscar the Scottish Charities regulator and our financial dealings particularly are watched in that way, so there's both a mixture of external scrutiny and we would want to look at because we would like to do things better. Our Board are quite involved in that in that the Board is around 12 people. There are about half of those are parents of children using the service so

they obviously can give us a more direct feedback and other parents have got a feedback in at that level in the organization rather than necessarily coming to paid staff. But the Board also have a little working group called the Quality Group and that looks particularly at the feedback we get from children and from families and from Care Commission inspections and so on, and it does sit down with the staff once a year to review performance against the objectives that have been set.