CHUMS – a community network taking shape

CHUMS began with a simple but powerful idea: that families who understand the reality of caring for children with additional support needs can be one another's best source of support, encouragement and practical knowledge. Formed by a small group of parents and carers in the Hillfoots, the group has grown out of lived experience, friendship and the connections created through the Make It Happen Fund. At its heart is a belief that communities already hold many of the answers they need, if people are given the chance, the confidence and the space to come together.

Dawn McPhee described CHUMS as a group that wants to bring together much of what the What Matters 2 You and Make It Happen Fund has been encouraging: support for families, children and the wider community.

> *"Eventually we want a building to kind of bring it together," she explained, "so that the community supports the community."*

In the shorter term, CHUMS is preparing to begin offering support from August, using library space at the primary school for two hours a week. The first focus will be parents and carers of children with any kind of additional support need.

The group's aim is not to replace formal services, but to help families find their way to the right support sooner, especially when waiting lists, circumstances or uncertainty make it difficult to know where to start.

> *"We're trying to tie in with a lot of the services and different groups… an information directory so we can try and connect people sooner to what they need. We kind of want to be like a central hub that people can come to all the time."*

CHUMS, which is supported by Alison Young (CLD), hopes to offer a friendly first point of contact: somewhere parents can have a cup of tea, talk to someone who understands, be listened to, and be helped to navigate services, advocacy and local opportunities.

The Make It Happen Fund was central to how CHUMS formed. It gave people a platform, some initial support and, just as importantly, a place to meet others with overlapping interests and experiences. Helen said the fund had "elevated us to an awareness of people knowing what is actually needed". It brought together groups that were newly forming, already established or still testing ideas, and allowed people to recognise connections between them. For Helen, who had only recently moved to Alva, that sense of connection was transformative. She said she had been trying to find community support for her daughters, who have medical needs and learning difficulties, and the experience "had blown me away".

That personal experience is part of what gives CHUMS its strength. Helen spoke about the difference it made to feel welcomed so quickly into the area.

> *"I have only lived her since last August, and I feel like I've been here for so much longer. People are there for you and listen to you, they care. I found my community basically."*

Through the fund and the friendships that followed, she said she had found people who wanted to help, and now knew where to go for support. CHUMS is also important because it sits at the centre of a wider network of local groups and activities.

Together, the four current CHUMS members form more than one group; they are part of a web of community action, where one idea leads to another and people are able to signpost, support and strengthen each other's work. This includes Hillfoots Hearts, the primary school community garden, Lachlan's Legacy, and Arts Included which includes work with New Scots.

Dawn and Helen are involved in Hillfoots Hearts, a group run by Katie Sinclair (CWP Family Support Worker) that offers carers the chance to step away from their caring roles for a while, laugh, talk and support one another. Helen described being invited along and discovering the value of that release.

> *"I have never laughed so much in my life… being able to allow yourself to put down your medical role, your mum role, your job role… and just for two hours, just go and have fun."*

Other members bring further connections. Nina is involved in Lachlan's Legacy, which helps schools, parents and children understand Type 1 diabetes. And Lesley is linked to Arts Included and creative, environmentally minded work that supports mental health, including activity with New Scots.

The longer-term ambition is to secure a permanent community base, potentially at Glentana Mill in Alva. CHUMS sees the need for a shared space where groups can meet, develop and sustain their work without constantly having to find money simply to hire rooms. Dawn said one of the clearest lessons from the Make it Happen Fund was that "there's lots of groups doing lots of amazing things, but there's not a lot of space for them to live in". Helen added that many groups end up "chasing funding just to keep pay for space", when funding should be supporting the service itself.

For CHUMS, the vision is both practical and hopeful. It starts with parents and carers in the Hillfoots, but the ambition is to expand across Clackmannanshire and to create a place that supports children, families, older people and community groups. As Helen put it, the aim is that it can "stay in the community forever". CHUMS has grown from relationships, from shared need and from the opportunities created by the Make It Happen Fund. Its next chapter is about turning that network into a lasting, welcoming community hub.