Dawn McPhee

Dawn first became involved with What Matters 2 You (WM2U) and the Make It Happen Fund (MIHF) initiative after meeting Jane (WM2U Coordinator) at Homestart. At the time, Dawn and her family were struggling to support her youngest son, Eric, who is neurodivergent and finds typical play and childcare settings overwhelming. The Health Visitor had suggested connecting with Homestart, which led to Eric gaining an eligible nursery place and the family joining various support activities, including Play Roots, a playgroup for neurodivergent children run by the Council in partnership with Action for Children.

Homestart have been very supportive to Dawn, making sure she and Eric could attend appointments and groups

> *If we couldn't they checked in on us. Even to the point of helping occasionally if day to day home things have been too much and helping with school collection. This is how we were able to be supported for Play Roots where I met Jane.*

Encouraged by her Homestart worker, Dawn attended a MIHF information day and felt that the project could benefit the local community, especially if the funding was shared fairly across different areas, rather than concentrated in Alloa.

Dawn joined the funding panel for the first round and found creating the MIHF really interesting.

> *It was nice having so many different people on the panel with different experiences. We could all kind of bounce off each other. There was a lot of work went into us, like designing the application and teasing out what information we wanted from applicants, and it took a long time. But going through the process helped us understand why funding is so important and why it's so hard for people to actually go out and apply for it.*

She and the other panel members were surprised by the applications that came in. They had expected toddler and coffee and chat groups, yet many proposals came from groups already connected with the schools. They saw the positive potential and funded a range of initiatives, from the Brownies to allotment improvements and the school community garden – even the Esports team from the Academy.

The celebration event was very well attended, and people started to chat and network, demonstrating the growing sense of community.

> *We were expecting a few people and nearly 100 turned up. They actually all went and talked to each other and started connecting and going, oh, well, we could help you do this, or we could help you do that.*

During this period, Dawn was under significant personal strain. She suffers with chronic back pain, 24/7. She was forced to give up driving and was unable to return to work after

having Eric. Her eldest child is also autistic and dyslexic and has hypermobility. She not only cares for her boys but for her autistic brother too, and the pressure eventually overwhelmed her. She confided in a supportive teacher who helped her find support she needed to regain her own wellbeing.

> *I was really getting into probably quite a dark place, and then I'd had a bit of a breakdown at the school and spoke to Samantha Currie, who is one of the Principal Teachers, and she said you need help and support too; I'll see what I can do.*

Samantha connected her with Katie (Family Support Worker, Child Wellbeing Partnership), who was starting a new parent group, and Dawn agreed to attend. For the first few weeks it was just the two of them talking over coffee.

> *When I went for the first time, and it was just myself and Katie and I trauma - dumped everything, absolutely everything on her. And then I was like, am I going to go back, you know, because sometimes with oversharing you think maybe I shouldn't have said that part, and I thought, do you know what, I am going to keep going back.*

As the weeks passed, more parents joined, and the group slowly grew. The meetings blended conversation, humour, and playful activities - such as welly throwing – which helped the parents reconnect with their own sense of fun. For Dawn, the experience began to restore parts of herself that had been pushed aside under the weight of her family responsibilities. She and her husband realised that most of their conversations for years had centred on their children or her brother. Having space that was just for her made their family interactions healthier and more expansive.

> *Katie has given us a local space with no pressure on attendance, and no pressure on structures. Just space to be.*

There was money left in the MIHF, so it was decided to have a second round.
When recruiting additional panel members for the second round, Dawn realised there was also a profound unmet need for ASN parent support. Many parents in similar situations struggled alone, dealing with anxiety, burnout, and the complexities of navigating services.

> *As an ASN parent, you're always running on railway tracks and you never know if you're doing the right thing, and you're always trying to get the tracks down in front of what's happening.*

> *As I said, my brother has been autistic his whole life, and I'm still fighting the same battles for him that my mum had to fight 30 yrs ago. At the same time, I'm dealing with similar challenges for our boys, just like so many other families, and it feels increasingly ridiculous that these issues still exist. That's why I started thinking about creating a peer support group where we could share our*

frustrations and actively work with the council and schools to close these gaps and fix the problems we keep facing.

As conversations developed among Dawn and two other parents, the idea expanded into a bolder vision: a long-term community space offering support for parents, life-skills opportunities for children, and a hub for collective problem-solving. They began reaching out to partners who supported her - Homestart, Action for Children, Educational Psychology teams, local schools - and received encouraging responses.

At present, Dawn and the two other parents are focused on establishing the ASN peer support group as the first step. They aim to secure initial funding - potentially through the MIHF - and build a network of parents who can eventually shape and deliver wider community activities. Dawn believes strongly that community grows when people feel they are gaining something meaningful from the experience, and her involvement with the fund has shown her how momentum can build when people are empowered to take small steps together.

Without any of these supports I would have not been able to remain engaged. I am good at advocating for my boys. As an adult, I don't tend to ask for accommodations for myself, even when I should. But with these things I didn't need to. Because the people involved made them all accessible to begin with, not as an extra thing, but the norm. That's a big part of the reason they are working.

Dawn's journey reflects how meaningful change can begin with a single connection and grow through shared purpose. What started as her search for support evolved into a powerful commitment to strengthening her community, one relationship at a time. By channelling her lived experience into advocacy, collaboration, and collective action, she is working on creating a space where families feel understood, empowered, and less alone. As she and her fellow parents take the next steps toward establishing the ASN peer support group, Dawn's story stands as a powerful reminder that community is built through small, courageous acts of showing up for one another.