Nicola Green

Nicola first met Jane at The Hive, when Nicola was on student placement for her HNC in Working in Communities at Forth Valley College. Nicola organised the placement after having read in the paper about a new project opening locally. Although it wasn't yet called The Hive, she immediately felt it was the perfect opportunity for the kind of youth work she wanted to do. After approaching Tony McMinn (Project Manager), she arranged to complete her placement there, gradually taking on tasks and settling into the project.

Jane introduced Nicola to What Matters to You (WM2U) and invited her to join the Make it Happen Fund (MHF) panel which was being set up to support community based activity. At first, Nicola felt unsure - she still saw herself as 'just a student' - but Jane encouraged her and eventually Nicola agreed to join. Looking back, she is grateful she did, as the experience allowed her to meet new people, build friendships, and grow in confidence.

Before embarking on her community work course, Nicola spent several years working as a dinner lady, a job she chose because it suited her children's routines and allowed her to build strong relationships with the young people she met in school. These connections sparked her interest in youth work, as she realised how rewarding it was to support and encourage young people in everyday settings.

At the same time, Nicola was coping with extremely difficult personal circumstances. She describes coming out of a challenging 5-year relationship, a period that left her with very low confidence and poor mental health. The decision to start rebuilding her life began with going back into education, encouraged by her mum. Despite her fears about returning to study at the age of 35, she was determined to take a new direction, and so doing became the turning point in her development.

As a member of the MIHF panel, Nicola and others from the Alloa area met every Friday to discuss community needs, set funding criteria, and decide how much money each organisation applying to the fund would receive. They received training to ensure they were making informed decisions, all of which helped Nicola's personal and academic development. Her college tutors were supportive and encouraged her continued involvement.

> *Saying yes to the panel let me meet new people, build friendships, and really grow my confidence.*

On completing her course, Nicola began working at the Hive, firstly employed by the Wasps Community Club and later expanded her role through funding from Planet Youth in Scotland/Winning Scotland which includes further partnership work with Clackmannanshire Family Wellbeing Partnership (FWP). She credits Tony, Janet Adam (Senior Lead, FWP), and the wider team with helping her rebuild confidence after a very difficult period in her life. Their encouragement, support, and belief in her made a huge difference and helped her recognise her own abilities again.

After five really hard years, The Hive team helped me rebuild my confidence and believe in myself again. Their encouragement and belief in me made a massive difference.

Nicola's youth work includes running the community café on Wednesdays and Fridays, supported by an S5 group from Alloa Academy. She helps the young volunteers gain health and hygiene certificates and they even secured MIHF funding to celebrate their achievements. One young woman, aged 16 or 17, gave a speech at the celebration event - something she would never have had the confidence to do before. Nicola took the group for a celebratory day out as a reward for their hard work, which the young people loved.

Seeing a young person who once struggled now stand up and speak in front of others -moments like that stay with you.

Her involvement at the Hive has also inspired others into work. A young man, who had volunteered in the café is now employed part-time, helping with the youth club on Fridays and with the Hive's *Match Day Buzz* programme on Saturdays. Another young woman, aged 18, now works in admin and marketing after Nicola supported her through her initial anxiety. Watching their confidence grow has been enormously rewarding for Nicola.

Watching young people earn certificates, give speeches, and become more confident – that's what makes it all worthwhile.

She also spoke about DJ Scooby's visits and The Hive's applications for DJ equipment - part of an effort to offer positive role models and creative opportunities for local young people.

Nicola's experience of the MIHF encouraged her to became involved in the Transformation Space. Again, she was initially unsure but signed up after attending a recruitment evening at The Hive. She has since served on panels for Mental Health (Under-25s) and the Women and Girls programme – and has also gone on to join the Family Wellbeing Partnership's Oversight Board. She believes passionately in the importance of having local voices involved in decision-making, especially those with lived experience of the community. When community members saw Nicola's transformation space video online, many felt encouraged to take part themselves.

Having local voices involved in decision-making is essential. When people saw my Transformation Space video, it encouraged them to take part too. That meant a lot.

She sees similarities between the *What Matters to You* panel and the Transformation Space - both bring together people who care deeply about making Clackmannanshire a better place. In the Transformation Space, panel members set out the needs of the community and their long-term vision, which informs how funding is allocated. Applications are reviewed collectively, with panel members ranking and discussing each one.

Nicola believes even more could be achieved by involving greater numbers of local people, including young people, though she acknowledges that work and life commitments make

daytime meetings difficult. Online meetings have helped make participation more accessible.

Her own son, about to turn 12, attends the Hive on Fridays and loves it. Nicola reflected on how valuable these social spaces are - when she was young, there were discos and clubs, but for years there was little available for local children. Now, young people from different towns and schools are forming friendships that carry into weekend football matches and beyond, helping to ease the transition into high school.

Looking to the future, Nicola wants to keep contributing to positive change in Clackmannanshire. She wants her own children, and others, to see that it's possible to improve your life, to return to education, and to pursue work that genuinely helps people. At 35, she never imagined going back to college, but doing so transformed her life. She encourages anyone who feels a pull toward community work to "just go for it."

> *I want young people to know you can turn things around - you can go back into education and change your life.*

Nicola also hopes more local people will come to understand how much the council and community organisations are doing for families and children—something she only realised after becoming directly involved. She now spreads the word wherever she can, sharing opportunities and trying to ensure others feel able to engage too.

> *Once I got involved, I realised how much the council and community organisations are doing for families. Now I want everyone to know about it.*