



Building Circles; Background and Current Position

In 1965 a small group of people who had worked with adults with learning disabilities and become very aware of the social isolation many experienced, decided to try and do something to alleviate it. With the help of a grant from Barnwood Trust we took the first steps to develop friendships between lonely individuals and volunteers in their communities. Volunteers were recruited and police checked, given training and support, and went on to spend time with their focus person. It quickly became apparent that going out for coffee, a little shopping or a drive was very rewarding for both, and changes in the focus person's levels of self esteem, confidence and ability to make choices were noticed. We had something valuable to contribute to the lives of people with learning disabilities.

Building Circles was registered as a charity under the name `Circles of Support, Gloucestershire` on 4th October, 2006. We later discovered that there was a Government sponsored group in county operating under the same name, so to avoid the risk of confusion our name was changed to `Building Circles in Gloucestershire` at a meeting on 2nd July 2007.

The Declaration of Trust stated: `The objects of the Trust are to provide support and assistance to people with learning, sensory or communication disabilities and in particular but not exclusively those with severe and multiple disabilities. In fulfilling these objects the Trustees may exercise the following powers-

- a. to identify focus people who are likely to benefit from the provision of a circle of support...
- b. to recruit volunteers able and willing to act as facilitators in the creation of circles of support...`

We learned over the next few years how difficult it was to recruit volunteers and adjusted our sights to matching a focus person with a single volunteer friend rather than several. In 2008/9 we set up bi-monthly activities to provide social opportunities for people we could not immediately match. These proved to be extremely popular.

In 2015 at the request of some of our younger focus people we developed hobby workshops in Quedgeley, which provided opportunities to develop peer friendships as well as creative skills.

In 2016 we were given the opportunity by Gloucestershire County Council to develop and run training for all people with learning disabilities to help protect them from sexual abuse. From this has developed a wide programme of training designed to inform and support individuals in life situations.

In 2017/8 we took on allotments in Quedgeley and Cheltenham, which offered opportunities to combat social isolation as well as providing worthwhile outdoor activities.

On 29th May, 2018 the Charity Commission approved our application to convert `Building Circles in Gloucestershire` to a Charitable Incorporated Organisation, renamed `Building Circles.` (With a view to extending our operations outside the county as opportunities arose).

Our objectives as a CIO were redefined in legal parlance as follows: `The promotion of social inclusion amongst those who may have additional sensory or communication difficulties and are excluded from society or parts of society as a result of their disability, to enable them to experience more fulfilling lives through such training, education and services as the Trustees deem appropriate. The relief of those in need with learning disabilities to enable them to live safer lives through the provision of



training to protect them from abuse in their communities`. The word `friendship` does not carry legal weight and we were not allowed to alter the wording they prescribed. However, we now had our training role written into our core objectives.

Our Mission Statement in the 2018-2022 Business Plan stated: `it is our mission to provide life enhancing opportunities for socially isolated people with moderate to very complex needs. We aim to be a quality provider, ensuring excellent training and continuing support is given to volunteers to establish and maintain friendships with individuals and their families. We seek to extend opportunities for social interaction by offering a range of community activities for all participants. In addition we run a range of projects all designed and delivered around the crucial aspect of keeping people with learning disabilities safe and free from harm, whether out in their local community or at home.`

Current Situation

Covid had a severe effect on our Charity. We lost funding, staff and volunteers, and even more importantly we were unable to run the activities on which many people depended. Our training programme also had to be severely curtailed. Under our new CEO, Helen Kay, and with a new office and a new Training Manager, we are gradually rebuilding and developing new approaches.

Trustees

Our current Trustee group consists of five committed people, four of whom have direct experience of working with people with learning disabilities in Social Services, Health or the independent sector. We have an excellent Treasurer, but lack input from anyone with personnel, advertising or the wider business field. We can buy in expertise, but would welcome new members to join the Committee.

Observations

Over the fifteen year life of the charity the emphasis on the need for friendship has not changed, despite the often challenging requirement of finding volunteers, and keeping them. The attempt to develop a circle of friends around each focus person was found to be too difficult to achieve but many of our 1:1 friendships have lasted five or more years. We have realised the importance of providing opportunities for peer friendships and group friendships. We have also realised the vital importance of providing appropriate training opportunities for people with special needs to help them keep safe in the community. Feedback from our friends with learning disabilities constantly assures us that their friendships and the social events we provide are needed and valued. We are all, staff and Trustees, absolutely committed to continuing this work.

Frances Watson, Chair,
Building Circles, November, 2022