

## Wavemaker Spotlight:

### Hannah Whitehead

Head of Community Ministries - St James Church  
Muswell Hill

Hannah Whitehead has been a part of Wave since the very beginning. She was one of the first people to get involved in Wave Club when it was started by her friend's mother, Bernice Hardie. Hannah was used to being with people with learning disabilities and at Wave Club she helped to plan some of the activities that would appeal to both those with and without learning disabilities.

Over the years, Hannah has been involved with every Wave initiative. From helping to oversee Wave Church and attending Wave Cafe to leading on many of the operational aspects of Challenge Group.

'Wave feels like a family,' she says, and the relationships that come out of it are priceless.

Seeing the progress that children make at Challenge Group is one of the most rewarding aspects of being part of the group. 'When a child can't walk or speak, the parents come in so upset and worried about them. But then you see them on the journey to being able to walk or talk and you help them through that journey.'

The Covid-19 lockdown in 2020 was firm evidence of how much the relationships developed through Challenge Group. Hannah knew how much families were struggling, so she reached out to offer pastoral support and did doorstep visits during lockdown.

She would take a photo of herself outside a Challenge Group family's home and circulate it to the group. 'People would get so excited, wondering when I'd get to their house.'

She also knew that one family had a daughter who benefited from connecting regularly with some therapy guinea pigs that lived in another part of North London. Hannah made a special trip to get the guinea pigs and took them to the family's doorstep. The photos the family shared afterwards showed how much this gesture helped to relieve some of the stress that lockdown disruptions caused.

Hannah notes, though, that she wasn't the only one doing what she could to help Challenge Group families. The florist who usually donated flowers to the playgroup began donating them directly to the families during lockdown, even though the group was not running.

'It just showed that Challenge Group is not just a group,' Hannah says. People feel really connected and see a deep importance in their participation.

# ● Behind the Scenes at Challenge Group ●

To keep a group like Challenge Group running smoothly and safely, there are lots of things that need to happen behind the scenes. St James Church now runs the Challenge Group in Muswell Hill and through her role as Head of Community Ministries there, Hannah looks after all the safeguarding. She processes DBS checks on all volunteers and trains them in basic safeguarding awareness. She also conducts risk assessments to ensure the space used by the group is safe.

‘With drop-in groups, you don’t always know who’s coming. You want to make everyone feel welcome and comfortable but you also need to ensure you have the proper safeguarding and good systems in place,’ says Hannah.

Hannah has also liaised with leaders of Wave’s new Associate groups to make sure they’re thinking about safeguarding and establishing best practice from the beginning.

# Getting Started with Safeguarding

Safeguarding is about creating an environment where everyone feels safe and welcomed. It focuses on preventing harm, abuse and neglect (including harassment and bullying) and on being prepared to respond safely and effectively if a problem arises. It applies to everyone attending a group or event, including employees, volunteers, vulnerable children and adults and other participants.

Hannah says that safeguarding is often an issue with families that have members with learning disabilities. 'Parents and carers are often exhausted and need support, but they also need to follow safeguarding channels,' says Hannah. 'It can be hard to know how to handle.'

She tries to see things from their perspective. Many are overwhelmed with worries about the future and the daily challenges of keeping on top of everything. They may be trying to get an Education and Health Care Plan (EHCP) in order to access more support from their child's school; they may have to arrange special transport for their child, source necessities for older children with special needs or look after siblings without learning disabilities. Often, they're working full- or part-time jobs as well.

# Building a Team of Volunteers

Hannah thinks one of the most important considerations when starting a group is recruiting the right volunteers.

‘You need a solid, reliable, compassionate team of good listeners,’ she says. There’s no room for volunteers to bring their baggage to the group. ‘Parents and carers are often in such a vulnerable position, they really need the volunteers to be in it with them. You want volunteers who understand that we’re not doing this for people, we’re in it with each other.

‘It can be hard and scary being with people with additional needs,’ Hannah admits. Behaviour can be unpredictable and some children might bite or scream. So make sure you have enough people helping – and the right people.

‘You need a careful, cautious recruitment process.’ Plan for one or two people to serve refreshments, as well as someone to help set up and/or clear up. Bring in people with musical talent or those who are good chatters.

## Running a Wave Play Group (Challenge Group)

Hannah says there are very few regular expenses involved in running Challenge Group. The Muswell Hill group pays for a massage therapist and snacks, and while Covid restrictions were in place, they also spent extra on materials for packaging individual snacks. Baked goods are donated for free by volunteers. Otherwise, Hannah says it's a good idea to invest in a thermometer, in case anyone falls ill, and the group will need some toys, but these don't have to be expensive.

There's no fee to attend Challenge Group, but if participants do want to contribute, donations to Wave for Change or the Challenge Group fund at St James are welcomed.

To get the word out about Challenge Group/Wave Play sessions, Hannah says the group distributes cards and leaflets, and makes sure that health visitors know about the group. They also post regularly to their Facebook and Instagram accounts, and St James Church posts weekly on its social media pages.

But Hannah says that one of the best ways to get the word out about the group is through the families who participate. 'Parents and carers are big advocates of Challenge Group and have a big impact in promoting the group.'