

On this episode of the podcast, we are joined by John Oldham a member of Yeo Valley Lions. John joins to talk with Samantha Boffin about a very special lions club project that the club set up and run, which is a secure stay and play area, named Kingsmour Playground.

Be uplifted, be inspired. This is Step Forward and Volunteer.

Welcome to the latest episode of the popular Step Forward and Volunteer podcast brought to you by Lions Clubs British Isles.

My name is Samantha Boffin and I'd like to thank you for tuning in.

If you haven't listened before, our aim is simple. We want to celebrate the positive difference volunteering makes to communities across the British Isles and beyond. To do that, we'll be speaking to those who give up their time to help others, inspiring more people to step forward and volunteer.

This month on the podcast, we are joined by John Oldham a member of Yeo Valley Lions.

John joins to tell us all about a very special project the club set up and run which is a secure stay and play area, Kingsmour Playground.

But first, I have a favour to ask. We'd like your help in getting the word out about Step Forward and Volunteer. Tell your family, tell your friends - and if you're a Lions member, why not let other members of your club know about the podcast - and how easy it is to

listen. All you need to do is either go on the website www.lionsclubs.co where you will see a link to the podcast, or you can search for Step Forward and Volunteer on apps like Spotify, Podbean, Apple podcasts and Google podcasts.

You can listen on-demand or subscribe so that you never miss an episode. We publish a new programme each month, and we're really keen to spread the positivity and get as many people listening as we can.

Today we're talking to John Oldham from Yeo Valley lions all about the Kingsmour Playground.

Hello, John, welcome to the podcast. Hello Samantha. So John, could you give the listeners some background as to how this project came about for Yeo Valley lions, and maybe even how long the Kingsmour Playground has been running.

Cut a long story short, about 25 years ago, a member of Yeo Valley Lions Club told his fellow lions about the difficulties he and his family were facing to find suitable playground facilities for his autistic son. He pointed out that the usual public playground facilities just weren't suitable. And his situation was a common one, as he knew from contact with others, for many families. So Yeo Valley Lions Club decided to see what could be done utilizing the skills of various lions and their contacts, and advice from playground equipment manufacturers and so on. Plans were drawn up for a playground, specifically designed for children with special needs. The difficulty, then became to find a suitable site where we could actually

have the playground. Anyway, again, contact through the church revealed that the local farmer had some land that would be suitable. And he was very sympathetic to what the Lions wished to do, because his own family had experiences of difficulties way back, he made the land available to us, and without that generosity, they're would never have been a playground. Converting this land into a playground required all sorts of skills. So again, it was calling into play Lions and their contacts to sort these things out, drainage and this sort of thing. They persevered, and so 24 years ago, the playground opened. And as a result, we now have Kingsmour Playground with Lions providing a service to the local community.

Wow, that's incredible. So it was a real community effort in terms of Lions, so many people and their different skills were involved in this. Oh, yeah.

And in fact, there's always been interest in the local community, because we, we actually see it as one of our main contacts with the local community, and because of that, I think its success. It's not just the initial stuff, but the success over 24 years has been because of that contact.

Wow. That's incredible. Gosh, it's amazing. You know, how much Lions give back to you know, people from the skills and the people that they know already. So John, what is it about this playground specifically that sees families visiting many times over in a year.

So first and foremost, reason is it offers a safe haven for children with special needs and their families. Is designed so that the children can let off steam. So there's a lot of open space there. And they can have social interaction between each other. In a way that's not possible in a traditional playground. The traditional playground equipment, people use it, this is one where there can be a lot of contact, or no contact at all, if they don't want it. So it's easy to do that. And many, many comments describe it as a family facility, because it's not just the playground. And the most used description that I hear when I go down there is that it's non judgmental, and parents and carers stress highly the importance of this, it means that they can relax and the whole family can have fun.

Wow, that's, that's amazing. Where is it in relation to the town or the village that it's near? Is it quite some way away? Or is it right in the heart of it

it's actually in a rural location. But there again, our Lions Club covers a rural location, several rural villages, but we get people going there from greater than the area that we serve.

People have joined, they've moved away, they still come back. But it's in the countryside. So it's not one that's sort of readily reachable by people just popping in. They've got to know it's there. So it's a well, kept secret, but not amongst the fraternity that use it.

So do you have any schools or any other organisations visiting this playground?

Well, yeah, and it's something that certainly since I've been involved in it, which is only for a small part of those 24, 24 years in lions. Generally we've been encouraging groups that come

along. There are several groups certainly, I've been sort of associated with children with special needs. Obviously, the local authority has what used to be a disabled children's team, which has now got an acronym SENCAS. With children with special needs and activities for them. They have events in the school holidays. And one day a week, they come and they have a Stay and Play Day where they can not only use the playground, but actually do other activities with the children as well. So there'll be face painting and things like that. And I think they also used to have a bouncy castle. And also, we've got schools that come along, we had a school that came along with children with special educational needs and their regular visitors. And another school which is going to be part of the school where they actually are involved with children with special needs. And more recently, this last year, we had a group from the Jessie May hospice at home charity, which deals with terminally ill children. And we decided as a Lions Club, we'd actually make contributions towards this as a charity. But we decided that it was possible to work with them and try to arrange a picnic where they could invite families with children who were terminally ill, and have a family picnic. And we did this. And we chose a sunny day where we didn't choose a sunny day, the sunny day, chose us. And they had a great time. And as a result of that, they came back and they did it again. And it was really successful. And those sorts of sessions with those groups lead to the people who come may not know about our playground, they then join as individual members, and come back and repeat the experience. So it's been a source of individual membership as well. But we want to encourage as many people from groups using it, because it does help with social skills for children who come along.

I think one of the things I noticed when I was looking at pictures of it, John is, is how spacious it is there's a lot of space there to enable things exactly like that, to have picnics and have quite large groups there. So it's, it's impressive.

You know, we've deliberately retained that sort of free space, because children just love to run around in there. And if it's just open, they can run around. And in addition to that, we've obviously got other equipment, but But yeah, it is the space.

Yeah, it's amazing. And of course, families come as well. So how many families would you say make use of the playground, in a year, for instance?

Since the playground started, we've over 700 people have joined it over those years. But last year, 42 new families joined the playground, people join for life. I mean, we, don't have annual subscriptions or anything like that people join and they stay. Some people will stay for a year or two, and some where the children grow up and still come to the playground. And we even had a visit two or three years ago, from a family in Australia made contact with us, and their membership number was something like 005 and the girl was 29 or something like this.

So in terms of the operation of the playground, obviously it's an open space and open to the elements. So does it only operate at certain times of the year, how's it run?

Well, we open it between the end Easter or the first of April it's just whichever comes first. So basically, it's Easter and we stay open until the end of October which is basically the end of half term week. So if half term runs into November, we still do the half term week because obviously holidays are a prime time for them. Then we close for the winter because the playgrounds not really suitable to be open then it can get very muddy and its upkeep we need to do some repair jobs out of season, but it's not the best of times to be in an open space. But when it is opened it's open. We don't have an open and closing times people come when they want to come in. They get a combination lock, they have a code for the combination lock, they let themselves in, they scramble a lock when they're in there, the kids can't get out and they don't want to get out. So that ensures that they are safe when they're in there. And we don't police it from that point of view. I do like to know when groups are coming, though, because that can be difficult if two schools turn up on the same day, because that does have a problem with equipment, because we can have as many as 20 children coming from a school. So if we got two of those together at the same time, that would make for problems.

Yes. Now I can imagine,

We have a roto system amongst the lions, club members who visit the playground, towards the end of every day to check that everything's all right. They record things in a book, anything that's needs repairing, I'm told about and we organise the repair of it. And we have regular visits where we go to carry out repairs and things like that.

Wow, that's good. That's actually a lot of input from Lions, then. That's incredible.

Yeah, if you think about the amount of hours that go into it, it's probably going on for four or 500 hours in a year that we spend per person, that's, you know, people hours, that's the regular maintenance every day. And of course, the work in between times where we've got things to repair, and, and so on. So that's the sort of investment from Lions in, in that, everybody plays a part.

Yeah, amazing. And so apart from time, are there any additional running costs for the club?

We do have costs because obviously something like the playground can be quite costly. I reckon, I did a quick look at what the cost could be, and it's around about probably four and a half thousand pounds a year to run it. We've got to cut the grass and we have a toilet facility because that's something that everybody was quite keen that we have. So we hire a toilet facility which is regularly maintained. And of course, we have insurance costs. And we may have to pay out occasionally for other things connected with the playground. But that's probably around about the sort of cost that we would anticipate.

That's amazing. And of course without it being run by lions, I can imagine it just wouldn't even happen. That's it. That's quite incredible.

But, but we love it. We love it. Absolutely.

And certainly the kids, so could you describe to us what there is in the open air playground for children and families.

Right? Oh, we've got some specially designed equipment. So a child could be accompanied on a swing or down a downer slide. We've also got a specialist wheelchair swing where a child in the wheelchair can be accommodated. So they get onto the swing, the person who's caring for them, it's wheelchair will sit opposite them. And it's just a gentle movement makes the swing move. And one of the things that I discovered about that in talking to people was that where a child comes to the playground is swaying where their head is held in a particular position. Their view of life is in that plane. When they go on the swing. The swing means they can see over the hedge and they can see the sky and one girl through her mum told me that she went on the swing and she swung her way to the stars. And I didn't make that connection until I realised what it was like, I tried the swing out it to see what it was like. And they do they can see the stars. We've also got a sandpit, a play house, a fort, a boat, we've got tubular bells that can make enough noise to wake up the neighbours and various pieces of field equipment a small climbing wall and the equipment that they can walk on and balance on, things like that. And we've also got various toys, such as the most popular ones would be bikes because we've got quite a bit of tide area that they can ride around on and tractors. We've got a lot of tractors around the place. We've also got a waterfall and a movements sensitive water feature, which is like a fountain, and that's in a sort of calm section of the garden, and they can go in there, and very often, some children just like to watch the water or listen to the water. We've also got picnic tables, a large sun umbrella, a rain shelter in case it rains. And the toilet facility. And because it's a safe place,

children can play safely on their own, they can use their imagination, and the adults can just relax.

Wow, that's, I mean, incredible. And to make a playground like this so accessible is quite amazing. I remember myself, you were talking about swinging at the beginning. And I remember as a little girl, that the swing was the most exciting thing in the playground, because you're right, you see the world from a different perspective. And so to be able to offer that, to you know, across the board to every child is quite incredible. So John, What sort of feedback do you receive from all these visiting families?

I'm quite keen with families, I love talking to what I call the real people, there's lots of people can give you advice about all sorts of things. But I still believe the real people the people that actually day to day live, live with all the problems of, bringing up children with special needs. I like to think that talking to them, and finding out how we can actually help them in their life is the way to do what we we're doing. And we can check on this by talking to them. But we also ask people to put comments in our visitors book. And we don't expect everybody to use the visitors book every time they visit because some families are coming daily. It's always difficult because if you've got children with you that actually don't want to leave the playground, the last thing you want is to be handling that and trying to write in a book about the wonderful day you've had. So it's good to pick up those comments. But I do like the ones that we pick up by talking to people, and I've got a few comments we get about I would say we get over 100 comments in the visitors book, and that they're things like, "lovely to be back, great time had by all", "looking forward to a great day this season".

“Great days this season.” “Love this part, no judgments when people feel safe and comfortable.” “My daughter loves it.” “This is a really lovely surprise. Such an inclusive, safe place for all of the family.” “Enjoy the quiet sunny afternoon away from everyday chaos. Thank you really appreciate space.” “Great time. We love it here.” “Amazing to be back.” “First visit, what an amazing space so well maintained and lots to see.” “A fabulous day super for the children to be enclosed and say thank you.” “Family picnic day. Lovely time had by all” I think that was from the Jessie May. Well, thank you. It's those sort of comments that I could go on about that. But they're just typical of the comments that people write in the book. And I just find it, I love going down there talking to people about it, and getting their views of, of the playground firsthand. And also seeing it and seeing the way that children react and relate to each other in a way that wouldn't be possible anywhere else.

You must be so, so proud of that, that sort of feedback. I mean, that's amazing. And also, to keep asking people as well, to ask people what they need is such an important piece about this. It's incredible.

Actually we were fortunate. Four years ago, a locally based company adopted us for what they called, ‘Stop, Make a Change Day’. And that is a requirement with their staff that one day per year, that the firm pay, they go and do something for a charity, all the employees come and they will do various things. And they came along and they were a construction company. And they did quite a bit of maintenance work for us revamping, you know, walkways and things like that needed sorting out, painting. In fact, if something didn't move, it got painted, replacing the pergola, providing that the huge sun umbrella we got came out

of that and some picnic tables. And there was a local company but the person who introduced it lived about half a mile away from the playground. And the staff had a raffle. On top of everything else they did. They had a raffle, and they used all the funds that they raised which was getting on for 1000 pounds to buy toys for the playground. And so that, that was a nice feeling, it wasn't just us in the community doing that there were other people interested in doing it, so that it was a good feeling. And some of our members occasionally donate toys when they're no longer required by their own children, bikes and things like that, because as you can imagine, things like that get hammered.

Yes with that many families and schools and children coming in and out, I can imagine a lot of wear and tear.

It is in a way, it becomes a family, because people join together, people that have never met before. For larger groups, they agree to meet up down there, they can share keeping an eye on what their kids are doing and talk about various things. And I think it's a really, truly community service. And it's actually exactly what lions is about. It's actually about serving the community. And the playground is just fantastic for doing that. And I just think it's a privilege that I can manage it.

You know, it's the most wonderful thing. You're right. So not only does it give your children a safe place to play with, that is actually relevant for the way they want to play, but also, you're right, it gives families a place to come and connect with other families, and you know, be able to share all of their lives with them. It's a lovely, lovely thing.

I think the main thing is that it isn't just about children, it is about families. And it is the fact that it's non judgmental, you go there, and what happens down there stays down there. And that everybody in the family can do what they want to do. I just remember that's been brought home to me one Friday afternoon, late in the afternoon, where a mum with a young child he was charging around his playground. And she was reading the book. And she said, it'll be about an hour. And he'll be absolutely exhausted at the end of it. I've read a few chapters of the book, and we'll go home. We'll have a nice quiet evening at home because he was in love tiring himself out. And I thought it's just using the open space. And as much as being able to do that as it is about using you know, special wheelchair or whatever we've got down there.

The simple things that we do that have the biggest, the biggest impact. And because they're what we're doing is interacting with people in their daily lives. This isn't something that we've sort of created. And it's a big one off thing. This is something that's there day after day, rainy days, sunny days. And we just, and we just repair things, you know, things get broken, we mend them. That's a simple bit. But there we go. Lovely talking to you.

How wonderful. Well, thank you so much, John, for sharing all of that. And the Kingsmour Playground just seems like a wonderful place to be. Thank you so much. Thank you.

Volunteers add value to shared spaces. From the special play area we've just heard about to tree planting, litter picking to funding park benches. A shared community benefits from voluntary help in local places.

That is all we have time for on this month's podcast. Don't forget you can also listen to past editions of the Step Forward and Volunteer podcast any time via www.lionsclubs.co or on Spotify, Podbean, Apple podcasts or Google podcasts.

Thanks once again to our special guest John Oldham from Yeo Valley Lions and a big thank you to our listeners as well. Take care and goodbye.