**SPECIAL FRIENDS CLUB**

**ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING**

**THURSDAY 14th NOVEMBER 2024, 7.30PM**

**The Inn on the Green, Horfield**

1. **Welcome**

LS welcomed and thanked everyone for coming, and there were introductions from the board of trustees.

Copies of the agendawere made available to everyone.

1. **Attendees and apologies**
   1. Attendees: Liz Stratton (LS), Leanne Parkes (LP), Maya Vaitilingam (MV), Chantal Byrne, Colin Gimblett (CG), Jane Joyce (JJ), Sophie Axford (SA), Sue Edgerley (Minutes), Pearl Kofi, Jo Cooper (JC), Ella Hocking (EH), Sarah Coombs (SC), Rachael Wakley, Caz Leroy (CL), Carrie Edwardes, Janice Porter, Sarah Rosser (SR), Kevin Rosser, Chantelle Francis, Harshinder Sirah (HS), Nakita Singh (NS), Kelly Golding (KG), Theo Kissoon (TC), Chandrika Siddhapura, Yug Siddhapura, Nayana Nair (NN).
   2. Apologies: Helen Conway, Jennie Large, Mariia Dolbunova, Jahantab Hashmi
2. **Minutes of previous meeting**

The minutes of last year’s AGM were approved and signed off by LS and MV and made available.

1. **Chair’s report**

LS read from the Chairs report attached.

1. **Treasurer’s report**

MV presented the accounting period from April 2023 to March 2024 and the accounts were made available.

At 31 March 2023 assets were £41,811. Over the year there has been a £19K overspend. A working budget remains but we do need to keep reserves to satisfy potential funders that the charity will be able to operate.

SC asked reason why Bristol won’t fund SFC and it is that the club’s activities do not meet the BCC criteria for short breaks.

1. **Election of officers**

LS explained that, according to the Club’s Constitution, four key Officers/Trustees had to stand down from their role. All agreed to stand again for election and stay in their current roles as detailed below. All candidates nominated and seconded and re-elected unanimously.

Chairperson:  Liz Stratton – Jane Joyce nominated, Sarah Rosser seconded

Treasurer:  Maya Vaitilingam – Liz Stratton nominated, Jo Cooper seconded

Secretary:  Chantal Byrne – Liz Stratton nominated, Janice Porter seconded

Vice-Chair:  Colin Gimblett– Liz Stratton nominated, Caz Leroy seconded.

Board of trustees;

Leanne Parkes – Liz Stratton Nominated, Rachael Wakley seconded

Sophie Axford – LS nominated, Sarah Rosser

Jane Joyce – LS nominated, Chantal Byrne seconded

Sue Edgerley – LS nominated, Ella Hocking seconded

Jahantab Hashmi has agreed to become a trustee – LS Nominated, Chantelle Francis seconded

1. **Funding and Costs**

LS explained that members need to be aware of how the cost of living is impacting the charity. Venues are charging more for admission and changing their charging structures, and more families are booking activities to afford days out. There has been a small increase in the South Gloucestershire Council grant, but this increase does not represent the increase in costs. The trustees have chosen not to increase subs for members so as not to increase the financial burden on them. Ongoing activities will reflect a strict adherence to annual budgets pending any additional grants and charitable donations received. A reserve needs to be kept to satisfy potential funders of the sustainability of the charity. The trustees have been able to secure a grant to enable the charity to distribute supermarket vouchers to Bristol families.

Approach to Centerparcs

The issue – the charity receives a grant from South Glos council, currently £18,800 but the condition of the contract stipulates that this must be partly used to subsidise an annual short break to Centerparcs, due to it being fully accessible and inclusive. However, Centerparcs prices have increase dramatically, beyond the scope of the increase in the South Glos grant so after approaching SG council they have agreed that this requirement can be removed and replaced by other short break options each year.

To illustrate difference in costs to the charity – the latest caravan short break cost £5K to subsidise whereas the latest Centerparcs break cost £12K while reaching a similar number of families. This difference illustrates the significant impact that an annual CP break will have on being able to provide other activities through the year.

The trustees recognise that this will be very disappointing to our members so feel the need to agree a compromise to carry forward without any contractual obligation to South Glos council that will jeopardise the award of the grant. The proposal is to offer a shot break every year and aim for it to be at Centerparcs every other year on condition that specific funding has been obtained and earmarked to do so.

Leanne suggested the next Centerparcs break will not be before autumn 2025 and will be more likely to be in 2026, in order to secure funding and the best prices from Centerparcs and give members enough time to pay in instalments.

SR agreed that alternate years for Centerparcs was a good idea and pointed out that other venues were becoming more and more accessible and inclusive.

KG said that she really values going to Centerparcs and advance notice was great for planning and being able to pay in instalments.

CL made the point that CP is very accessible for disabilities but not financially accessible for a lot of people, due to the costs of the break and prices once you get there – this presents a good opportunity to explore other places.

EH – would prefer to continue with annual visits. LS – we would need to limit other activities or commit to much more fundraising where we don’t have capacity hence the need to have the requirement removed from the South Glos contract. There is also a general reluctance to limit activities a family attends as they are a lifeline for many.

HS asked why Bristol City Council doesn’t provide a similar grant to South Glos and it was explained the club does not meet its criteria for short breaks in that the charity is for families to attend together rather than drop children off. HS suggested that BCC should be challenged on this issue.

HS also felt that there are not enough activities for older children and young people. KG felt that more activities for younger children are needed. LP pointed out that there is a fair range of activities for all ages.

HS suggested that Bristol being a wealthy city that we should tap businesses for donations. This would need a dedicated fundraiser to facilitate this as there is limited capacity amongst the volunteer trustees.

NS said that she had read through the finances and volunteered to help look into various grants and funding options and write to relevant organisations which was gratefully accepted by the trustees and this will be followed up after the meeting.

LS reminded the meeting that as volunteers the board of trustees works for free so keeps running costs low. HS strongly wants the board to pursue BCC for funding, however this has been tried repeatedly in the past with no success and as volunteers there is little capacity to devote time to it. JJ responded that the money we need is from a specific part of BCC budget that we don’t meet the criteria for. We would need to provide drop off sessions that would need to be staffed and incur significant running costs which might not be fully covered by any resulting grant.

NN questioned raising subs. LS said that a 25% increase would only raise another £5K a year and it was felt that this would have a limited impact while placing a higher financial burden that some members could not afford.

JC asked about the split of families between South Glos and Bristol and potentially the SG grant subsidising Bristol families. This has come about from the historic origins of the club but the trustees feel that is not helpful to have separate activities as member value the opportunity to meet and socialise with other families from across both areas.

1. **Any questions**

LS opened the floor for questions.

TK asked if it would be an option to take more members on – LS said that this is not possible due to venue capacity and we would end up visiting in segregated groups.

EH offered to help with activities and hosting where needed. LS thanked her and reminded the floor that offers of help are always much appreciated and welcomed suggestions for future venues and activities.

SR said that all the efforts from the Trustees was much appreciated.

KG said that they value the community that SFC provides and the connections they have made which makes life easier in the holidays.

HS would like opportunities to meet up off the back of our regular activities. SA reminded everyone that their lanyards help facilitate this and we can, and have in the past, arranged meet ups within certain activities.

LS closed the meeting and said a summary of what was discussed about CP will be emailed to members in the following week.

Meeting ended 9pm.

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**Special Friends Club**

**Chair’s Report to Annual General Meeting**

The period covered by this report is **1 April 2023 to 31st March 2024.**

We again offered our members a full programme of weekend and school holiday activities during the period. We revisited SFC favourites such as Bristol Family Cycling centre, The Bristol Old Vic and mini-beats performances at St George’s concert hall. We arranged Christmas outings to an outdoor skating rink and the Lights at Longleat. We have had success with sole use bookings of sensory inflatable play sessions in Yate and sole use sessions at Lush Cosmetics at the Mall at Cribbs where all ages have enjoyed the sensory experience of making bath fizzers in a small group.

Our teenage and young adult members have benefited from a programme of regular rock climbing at Burrington Combe with an outdoor activity provider and practised their tennis shots with coaching at Fry tennis club. We have continued our regular bookings at Longwell Green and Easton swimming pools and at Super Sense, the sensory centre at Imperial Park sports club.

Many families enjoyed a subsidised short break to Center Parcs Longleat Forest in March 2024, continuing our change to visiting during the Spring rather than the Winter as we have done historically. We were also able to fund a weekend break at a caravan park in Devon at the end of September, which was also well attended. The prices were good value for a three-night break due to our subsidy. We received feedback that the the ability to park outside the accommodation is more appealing to some members than the car-free approach of Center Parcs. We feel that offering two short breaks is ideal since members can choose to attend based on their family circumstances and preferences.

We distributed supermarket vouchers to our South Gloucestershire families with funding from a grant we applied for via the Local Authority from a pot of money which aimed to alleviate the cost-of-living pressures for families raising a disabled child(ren) by using local grass roots charities as a means of targeting those most in need.

The Club saw a steady increase in applications for membership during the period and after discussion with our main public funder and amongst the Board we have temporarily closed our online application form whilst we work through a small waiting list of families. Membership of the Club is therefore static at the constitutional limit of 180 families. We expect to reopen to applications in the next financial period and have made considerable efforts to communicate the pressure on our membership to members, funders and referring organisations. Our Local Authority grant was increased by 6% to reflect the demand for our provision against rising need in the community. We also took the decision to make a small amendment to the wording in our constitution regarding eligibility for membership of the Club to remove ambiguity and to allow us to be more transparent in the decisions we make around eligibility. This was shared with members at our AGM in Autumn 2023.

The board of Trustees remains at 7 serving Trustees and we continue to explore ways to increase our number to succession plan for Trustees who may look to step down in the coming years due to work and life priorities. We are also considering whether to seek a second freelance administrator now that the Club is bigger and the volume of queries from newer members has increased. It would also mitigate the risk to the Club’s operation of our current arrangement with a sole provider.

Liz Stratton, Chair of Trustees, July 2024