

# It Takes a Village to Raise a Child



**A report into what helps and hinders the social action of Families First.**

By Patrick Heyes and Elena Ewence in collaboration with Families First and Social Action Inquiry Scotland.

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## An Introduction to Families First

Families First is a grassroots organisation based in St. Andrews that provides psychosocial support to children, young people, and families. They are reliant on a community of like-minded volunteers who are crucial to their service in order to provide one-to-one befriending services, youth groups, and parental/carer support. These services help to enable children and young people to overcome challenges in their lives. Often this service involves helping children and young people access education and achieve their best potential, despite the barriers they face in society.

Families First acts as an additional service to those provided by the state, which can be inaccessible to those most vulnerable. Through this, they want to change the way in which young people from Northeast Fife view themselves and help open pathways previously unavailable. By using a holistic and community orientated approach to helping young people, Families First is challenging standard welfare provision for those who most need it.



*Images Sources: Families First.*

Families First provides a comprehensive range of services, including One-to-One Befriending sessions that pair young individuals with dedicated

volunteers. These ‘Befrienders’ are provided with guidance and encouragement to collaborate closely with the young individuals they are matched with. This approach involves offering choices and delving into shared interests. The Young People’s Service creates a supportive environment where children and young individuals can address their concerns, cultivate new friendships, and engage in social activities that enable them to feel at ease while expressing their authentic selves. Accompanied by both staff and volunteer youth workers, these referred children and young individuals receive assistance across various settings such as schools, youth groups, and school holidays.



*Image Source: Families First.*

The Parent and Carer’s Support Group convenes every Thursday during the school term, providing an avenue for members to convene over lunch and engage in meaningful exchanges. This scheduled gathering offers participants a valuable opportunity to temporarily disengage from their domestic responsibilities, while also fostering a space for mutual assistance and camaraderie.

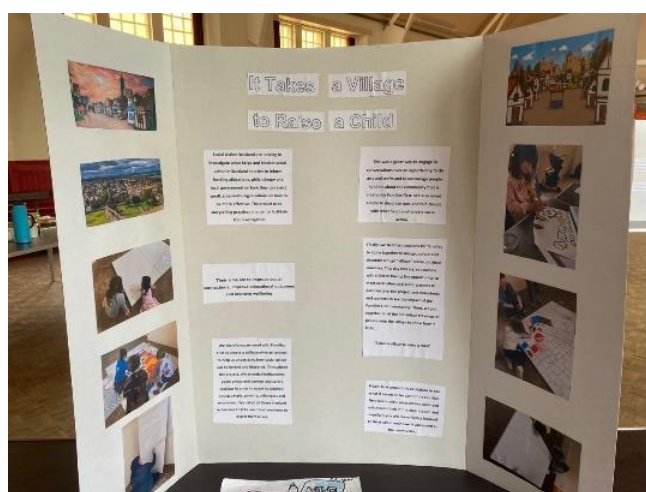
## An Introduction To 'It Takes a Village to Raise a Child'

Social Action Inquiry Scotland is an interdependent inquiry into social action in Scotland. Social Action Inquiry Scotland are partnering with communities across Scotland who, through storytelling, are sharing their stories of what helps and what hinders their social action. As storytellers for Social Action Inquiry Scotland, we partnered with Families First in St. Andrews to investigate what factors affect their work. By using the means of collaborative art, we wanted to share the story they had to tell with the local community, to raise awareness of the work they do, and what matters to them.

Throughout our time spent interviewing both the staff and users of Families First, it quickly became apparent that volunteers were central to the organisation's ability to run and provided the backbone to the services that it offered. This inspired us to create our piece, 'It Takes a Village to Raise a Child'. Our piece was created to emphasize how, in the modern age, despite the isolationism faced by many and the erosion of the community framework seen in many towns, community collaboration still is the most fundamental metric in raising a generation of healthy, happy, kids. The benefit kids get when they are plugged into the community is immeasurable, and the benefit for those who volunteer is also immense, as they get to give back to the community that raised them.

To create this storytelling piece, we first attended a dozen of the befriending sessions run by Families First and got both the kids and the volunteers to create a self-portrait which would be added to our village. The village was made over 2 sessions, involving the families who use the service drawing and painting a village backdrop on 3 large canvases. From here, we stuck on the self-portraits, with the result being a beautiful piece of collaborative art.

With the piece finished, and a set of boards created to tell the story of both Families First and Social Action Inquiry Scotland, we opened our exhibition 'It Takes a Village to Raise a Child' at a local church hall. The event was a success, with the local community turning out to support the young people who had been involved. A stall by Families First was set up to promote volunteering, and even managed to encourage a few to sign up to work with Families First.



## What Helps and Hinders Social Action for Families First?

We asked volunteers, workers, and service users some questions to find out what helps and hinders social action. A selection of some of their responses follows.

### What have been the biggest factors hindering your service?

*“The biggest hindrance has always been funding. So many organisations are looking for an increasing smaller pot of money, that is too often extremely restrictive funding, making it hard for organisations such as Families First to tailor themselves to the criteria.”*

*“Online funding applications that require a lot of reporting can often be difficult to navigate, and require a breakdown on how money is spent, impacting all people involved with the charity.”*

### How does Families First go against the status quo?

*“Families first offers long term support to the community. Unlike many organisations that provide short term fix, Families First aims to be a constant in the community and work with individuals and families for long periods of time, allowing a massive impact to be made.”*

*“Families First is very child focused. Kids have time focusing only on themselves with a safe person. Whereas often in school there can be too little attention for them.”*

### What could help run Families First more effectively?

*“We could have more funding. Some big funding that’ll keep us going for long term. We are very limited for space and find it difficult to pay for new staff.”*

*“Volunteers need a central location in St. Andrews to help fit in with their schedules, so a bigger location in town, perhaps funded by the university, would be amazing.”*

### What impact did Covid have on Families First?

*“As a small organisation, we were able to hit ground running when it came to Covid. We made decisions quickly, responded well to Covid, and thought on our feet to deliver services differently.”*

*“We were able to support in our community as we were key workers, although digital services were inevitably a steep learning curve, and took some getting used to.”*

### If you had unlimited resources, how would you change the services offered by Families First?

*“We wouldn’t change the service, but we would grow the service by having more youth workers, a bigger building, and visiting more places in the community.”*

*“I’d love if we had a purpose-built facility like a community centre, with a room or cafe for parents.”*

### How do you protect the wellbeing of volunteers?

*“We have a robust training program for those starting, we protect them using policy and procedures, and we have entry and exit interviews. Volunteers are told if they have any concerns whatsoever to contact us.”*

### How do you promote volunteering?

*“We take part in both the Freshers Fair and Volunteering Fair, but most of it is by word of mouth. We have strong links with the university. A lot of word of mouth comes from current volunteers.”*

*“We have no difficulty getting volunteers, but we would like to grow the service, so we weren’t so reliant on university holidays and having to work around university time.”*

### How do you identify the impact you make on families?

*“We do assessments throughout the year where we ask how we know we’ve made an impact. We have measuring tools in place and review the service through the year. Once the service is finished, we measure through the interviews with the volunteers.”*

The following are our reflections on the questions asked and some responses from some of the volunteers at Families First.

### What made you volunteer in the community?

Almost all the volunteers at Families First we met with were either students or people who are retired, meaning they have the time to volunteer. Students often described feeling disconnected from the community of St. Andrews and saw volunteering as an opportunity to give something back. Many described wanting to feel a sense of purpose outside of being a student.

Some students described wanting to be involved to gain experience for later life and looking to start a career. One male volunteer expressed how he felt there was a lack of men in social care so thought it was something he wanted to explore.

Many volunteers described the importance of volunteering and giving back to the community and that everyone should try and volunteer if they are able to do so. Some of the responses in relation to this were:

*“Communities should stay close knit.”*

*“It’s all a cycle. If you help the community, it will help you back so you should do little things where you can.”*

### What hinders social action?

*“Relying mainly on students to volunteer is helpful but can be a hindrance as it means there are big gaps in the summer and at Christmas.”*

*“There doesn’t seem to be a huge push for youth groups. Only privately run groups or those just for children. There isn’t such a big push for relaxing and general holistic support.”*

*“Resources are the main factor that hinders social action and having to completely raise their own funds is a challenge. In education, we have seen many initiatives come and go due to a lack of funding. I’ve seen many*

*facilities and projects in disadvantaged areas that always end up closing due to funding.”*

### **What do you like about volunteering?**

All the volunteers described their experience with Families First as enjoyable and having a positive effect on their wellbeing.

*“It makes me feel good and I find it very rewarding.”*

*“It’s nice to gain community ties and knowing that everyone is interested in helping each other.”*

*“Working with young people has made me very conscious of how I present to them. I feel a greater sense of responsibility and I am more conscious with how I act around them and even in my personal life. I want to set a good example.”*

*“There is a beauty in volunteering without being paid to do something and doing it out of your own heart. The world today revolves around money - going to a job in order to pay bills and buy things. When you are not motivated by money, it brings about a different aspect of self-motivation which isn’t material. And that is special.”*

*“I love how Families First is child-led. Educators always try to be child-led but with classes of many children, this brings challenges. Whereas here, I can be flexible and change the plan according to what the child wants to do.”*

We also asked some of the young people who use the service what their thoughts were.

### **What superpowers does Families First give you?**

*“Talent.”*

*“Fearless.”*

*“Super happiness.”*

*“Do things never done before.”*

### **What do you like about Youth Group?**

*“Seeing friends.”*

*“Doing something different.”*

*“Without youth group, I would probably just be sitting alone at home.”*

*“I’ve got to meet other people from outside of school. Youth group is way better than school because its more relaxed and I have more freedom.”*

*“I have the freedom to choose what I do and open up to people. Compared to school, there is no one telling you what to do, fewer people around and it’s nice and calm to be around other people.”*

*“Families First has helped me to find friends and be myself.”*

*“It’s taught me the skill of speaking and talking to people and communication.”*

*“It’s allowed me to make more friends.”*

## **Our Survey Takeaways**

Our survey of the Families First community showed two key takeaways:

- Volunteers keep small organisations like Families First alive.
- Lack of funding and restrictive funding provide the biggest hinderance to effective operations.

These results were not unexpected to us, as storytellers with experience of social action, going into this project. Funding in Scotland has routinely been highlighted as the central issue for social action. For smaller organisations

such as Families First, this issue is amplified as they often lack a designated member of staff to tackle funding applications.

## Creating Our Mural

Social Action Inquiry Scotland were looking to inquire into what helps and hinders social action in Scotland. To inform funders and local government on what barriers and enablers small, grassroots organisations, such as Families First, face, we decided to create a collaborative art project. This project's aim was to help us understand what helps and hinders the social action of Families First. Throughout the project we attended befriending, youth-group, and parents and carers sessions and asked all those involved to use mixed mediums to depict themselves.

This was a great way to engage in conversations over an opportunity to do arts and crafts and to encourage people to think about the community that is created by Families First. We also asked people to decorate suns and rain clouds with what helps and hinders social action.





Finally, we held two sessions for families to come together to design, colour and decorate a huge 'village' scene on three canvases. This day was a great success with children having the opportunity to meet each other and bond, parents to participate in the project and volunteers and workers to see the impact of the Families First community. Finally, we put together all the individual drawings of people onto the village to show how it truly... 'takes a village to raise a child.'



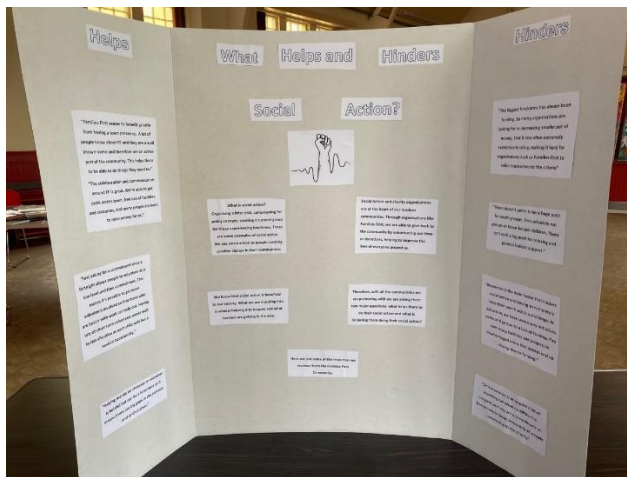
## The Exhibition

Our work with Families First culminated in an exhibition hosted on the 17<sup>th</sup> of June 2023.

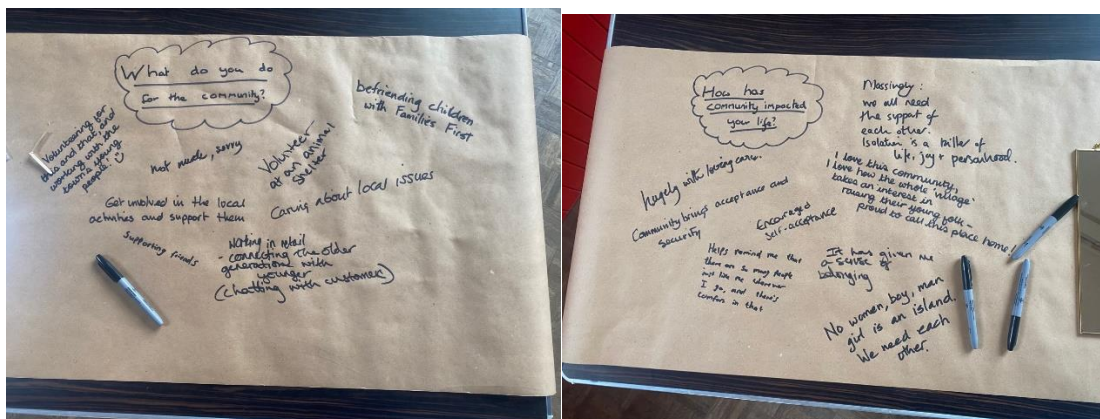
At this exhibition we displayed our collaborative piece of art done with the Families First community, along with some boards displaying the story of our project and the journey we had been on.



The event was a huge success, with not only the Families First community showing up to celebrate the work they had done, but the wider St. Andrews and East Neuk community attending too. This opportunity allowed them to learn about the great social action being done locally.



With a table of refreshments and spectacular art to look at, our guests thoroughly enjoyed the exhibition. We included some space for attendees to reflect on what they do for their community, and what community meant to them.



## Where Can We Go from Here?

For social action to thrive in the future, we must do all we can to increase what helps and tackle what hinders. The two key takeaways from this report are:

- We need to get more people in the community involved with social action.
- Funding routes need to be improved.

The last few decades in Scotland have seen a steady decline of the role of community in the lives of individuals. As traditional industries have declined, many towns have been left behind, and migration to cities has been massive. Recent austerity measures since 2010 have further fueled the death of the community, as community hubs have been closed and overall funding decreased. This is an issue not solvable within the reach of the Social Action Inquiry Scotland, but much can be done to mitigate these factors.

Our work with Families First has shown that outreach to the community, through events such as the one we presented, can be immensely beneficial in raising awareness of important work done in communities.

Funding has always been the biggest hinderance for small organisations. There is a limited pool of money, and an increasing number of groups trying to access the same pool. This is not an issue that can be solved without a large amount of capital, something unlikely in the current economic climate. However, what can be improved is the channels of funding currently present. Family First staff highlighted the restrictive funding applications as a hinderance to their service, with vital time and effort having to be spent navigating complex funding applications to receive funding that can often only

be used for a specific purpose. This leads to inefficiencies with how Families First use their resources, with irregularities occurring such as one month one service being overfunded while another goes underfunded. These issues can be easily solved by introducing more lenient funding applications and increasing the amount of lump sum funding given out by funders. These changes would allow organisations to run smoother without an increase in capital.

We strongly recommend funding bodies begin to introduce these changes.