

## SOUTHERN ABILITY

A COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT APPROACH TO  
SUPPORTING PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES



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SOUTHSIDE PARTNERSHIP DLR  
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## SECTION ONE: INTRODUCTION AND METHODOLOGY

### INTRODUCTION

This report sets out to document the history of Southern Ability, a social support club for People with Disabilities and to describe the application of community development principles in the formation and development of the group. The research also seeks to highlight the impact that Southern Ability as a social group has on the members, parents and other stakeholders including the staff, volunteers and local agencies. The research aims to inform the work of the Southside Partnership DLR and other interested parties and to describe one example of a community development approach in operation.

### OUTLINE OF THE STUDY

The research consists of five Sections:

Section 1 is an introduction to the research, background to the research and organisational background as well as a discussion of the research methodology.

Section 2 provides a profile of the members and a history of Southern Ability as well as a description of activities and how they are organised.

Section 3 discusses the community development process and how it was implemented in this case.

Section 4 discusses the impact of the group on members of the group and their parents and families.

Section 5 provides conclusions.

### METHODOLOGY

The research will use a qualitative method in the form of interactive interviews. Qualitative research allows the researcher to gather in-depth data as “non-numeric data in the form of words” (Schwandt, p. 130). A qualitative research method will be used by the researcher as it will be the most appropriate technique for gathering data for the research topic. The main feature of qualitative interviewing has been described as:

*“The interactional exchange of dialogue, the relatively informal style, a thematic, topic centered, biographical or narrative approach operating from the perspective that knowledge is situated and contextual.” (Mason, p. 62)*

Qualitative research puts a lot of emphasis on the participants’ experiences, feelings and thoughts; this is where the primary source of information lies. This approach relates to:

*“People and their perceptions, meanings and understandings as the primary data sources.”  
(Mason, p. 56)*

It was considered that one-to-one interviews were the most appropriate way to achieve the aims and objective of this research as it would allow the researchers to take account of the wide ranging differences in the type and severity of impairment of the participants. Qualitative one-to-one interviews were also held with parents of members of Southern Ability, the stakeholders, the volunteer and the staff of Southside Partnership and Holly House that facilitated the group. Interviews were conducted at the club with the group and by phone with parents and carers. Interviews with stakeholders and staff took place in their offices. The interviews lasted 30 to 40 minutes per participant and were transcribed for analysis. In some instances, where a face to face interview was not possible, interviewees completed a written, open ended questionnaire.

## ORGANISATIONAL BACKGROUND

### SOUTHSIDE PARTNERSHIP DLR

Southside Partnership DLR is the largest urban partnership in Ireland targeting its work in the most disadvantaged communities and with the most marginalised people living in the county of Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown. Southside Partnership DLR is committed to the equality and inclusion of social groups such as Travellers, people with disabilities, ethnic minorities, lone parents, disadvantaged women, the unemployed, ex-offenders, early school leavers, older people, the lesbian, gay, bi-sexual and trans-gender community and young people at-risk. The Partnerships also supports local organisations, schools, community groups and statutory agencies to work together to effect positive changes in the quality of life of disadvantaged communities.

Southside Partnership DLR is grounded in and operates according to established community development principles (Community Workers Co-Op, 2010):

- **Collectivity:** Taking collective action and working collaboratively to achieve goals.
- **Empowerment:** Addressing the unequal distribution of power and supporting individuals and groups to take an active role in the decisions that affect their lives.
- **Social Justice:** Promoting a fair distribution of resources and working towards concrete gains in the quality of life for people in disadvantaged communities.
- **Equality:** Recognising the value of all members of society and challenging prejudice and discrimination.
- **Participation:** Ensuring that people participate in decision-making and structures that affect their lives.
- **Integrity:** Acting with integrity and with due regard to the values and principles of community development.
- **Competence:** Striving to improve our professional knowledge and skills and apply them in practice.

Southside Partnership DLR is currently implementing a new Strategic Plan (2011 – 2013). This plan follows a formal logic model and is designed to fulfil the four national goals of the LCDP:

1. Promote awareness, knowledge and uptake of a wide range of statutory, voluntary and community services
2. Increase access to formal and informal educational, recreational and cultural activities and resources
3. Increase people's work readiness and employment prospects.
4. Promote active engagement with policy, practice and decision-making on matters affecting local communities.

In addition to the LCDP, the Partnership supports and engages with the following national programmes and contributes to the implementation of the national programmes at a local level.

### **RAPID Action Plan**

Southside Partnership DLR has been an active strategic partner in the implementation of the RAPID Action Plan in the Loughlinstown and Shanganagh area. The inclusion of people with disabilities was identified as a formal goal in the RAPID Community Participation Strategy which is led by Southside Partnership. The RAPID programme has supported Southern Ability through the allocation of funds under the Dormant Accounts Programme.

### **National Disability Strategy**

The National Disability Strategy, (NDS), as set out in "Towards 2016" and the "Agreed Programme for Government", embodies the commitment of Government, and the Irish people to promote the inclusion of People with Disabilities. *"The parties to this agreement shared vision where people with disabilities have to the greatest extent possible, the opportunity to live a full life with their families and as part of their local community, free from discrimination"*, (Towards 2016, 2006, p. 66). The Partnership seeks to ensure the implementation of the NDS at a local level and supports a number of initiatives to support People with Disabilities.

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## **HOLLY HOUSE COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT PROJECT**

Holly House has been in operation since 2004 and was funded initially through the Community Development Programme at the Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs. Holly House operates out of a local authority unit in Loughlinstown, Co. Dublin. The programme is led by a committee of local volunteers and is managed by a Project Coordinator with the support of a number of part-time staff. The project provides a range of services including Adult Education, Youth Clubs and Afterschool Programmes and acts as a key resource centre and infrastructure for local community development in the area. Holly House was initially hosted by Southside Partnership DLR. In January 2011, Holly House was fully integrated with Southside Partnership DLR under the new Local Community Development Programme (LCDP)

## SECTION TWO: PROFILE OF SOUTHERN ABILITY

### MEMBERSHIP

Southern Ability is a social group for people with disabilities based in Loughlinstown which was formed in 2008. Loughlinstown is a disadvantaged local authority estate and a RAPID designated area. The members range in ages from 18 – 30 years and include both men and women. The list of participants has been fairly stable over the three years with most of the members participating from the start. The group provides a space for young adults to meet and socialise and to enjoy activities such as art, drama, healthy eating courses, drum workshop and outings. The members have various disabilities including physical and intellectual and a majority of members are female. The members are all living in the RAPID area and most of them are working or attend day services such as Enable Ireland. Participants become involved primarily for social reasons. A number of members said that they had friends in the wider community but that the group was important because it was exclusively a group for people with disabilities and provided an opportunity for them to be with “people like me”:

*“Because I want to meet up with friends that are like me.” (Group member)*

*“Because most of my friends have moved on, I want new friends and this club is for people like me. It is fun to be with people like me.” (Group member)*

*“To meet friends and do things together, things like having fun with people like me.” (Group member)*

The group has a regular meeting every other Thursday in Loughlinstown Community Rooms (a local community facility operated by Dún Laoghaire Rathdown County Council) between 7:00 pm – 9:00 pm. The group organises a more elaborate event such as a disco or a trip to a restaurant or the theatre once a quarter.

The group is supported by the Southside Partnership Development Worker supporting People with Disabilities; the Holly House Development Worker, and the volunteer Group Leader. Additional volunteers provide practical help at the sessions and there has been significant input from the local community Gardaí. Some of the members require additional personal support due to the nature of their disabilities and in these situations their parents also help out. Funding for the group is provided by Southside Partnership DLR, Dormant Accounts through the RAPID programme as well as funds raised by the members themselves. Funding is used primarily for transport costs.

### GROUP FORMATION AND DEVELOPMENT

Southern Ability was founded by a young woman with a disability who lives in the Ballybrack area. Jamie had personal experience of being marginalised due to her disability and was looking for

opportunities to engage in the local community and to find new friends. She made contact with the coordinator of Holly House Community Development Project and Southside Partnership.

The Development Worker with Southside Partnership met with the Group Leader and discussed options and ideas to reach out establish a group and reach out to local people and to have a say in how the group was run:

*“I always wanted somewhere local where I can have a say. Somebody overheard me saying this and introduced me to the Co-ordinator of Holly House CDP who referred me to the Community Development Worker in Southside Partnership” (Group leader)*

Together they designed posters and a logo and the Leader named the group Southern Ability. At the first group meeting only two people turned up. The SSP Development Worker and the Group Leader visited some local day services and handed out fliers resulting in eight people attending the next meeting. Initially, the group started meeting every three weeks; third Thursday from 7pm – 9pm. With additional support of the Holly House Development Worker, the group started meeting every two weeks. As the group developed, further supports were needed. Southside Partnership worked with the Dún Laoghaire Rathdown Volunteer Centre resulting in two volunteers being recruited to help out. The facilitators also contacted Shankill Gardaí station who organised Community Gardaí to support the club with activities and on outings.

## PROGRAMME AND ACTIVITIES

The group has a very broad range of activities that take into account the particular interests and abilities of the various members. A quarterly plan is developed by the Group Leader and the Development Workers based on conversation and consultation with the members and specific events are scheduled and appropriate plans developed. The emphasis on all the activities is to have fun and to provide a safe space where everyone can participate:

*“We make our activities social; we do not do lessons or learning courses, though I personally did a Community Development course. The group learn at their own pace, the activities make them feel fulfilled and enhance their self-confidence. Because there are different disabilities in the group, we are careful of the activities that we do so as not to leave anyone out. We try as much as possible to work around the funds available in organising activities. Most weeks we are in Loughlinstown for our in-house activities. Last Christmas, we went out, recently we had a disco, we have fun all the time and this makes us happy and we can be ourselves in our own space.” (Group leader)*

The Development Workers and the Group Leader work together on the details of each event based on what the group are interested in:

*“We also encourage the group to have their opinions about the activities, then it is up to me and the Development Workers to organise the activities, transport and accessible venues.” (Group leader)*

The following are examples of the type of activities that the group has participated in in recent times.

- Visit to Southside Partnership Youth Café space with use of the computer bank and Wii games.
- Meal in a local restaurant.
- Visit to the Holly House Digital Media Centre; the group had some sessions at the centre to develop a photo album at the centre to document their time together.
- Visit to Shankill Garda station, tour of the station and training in riot control techniques!
- Pool and board games at Loughlinstown Community Rooms
- Launch of the Southern Ability Photo Album and exhibit of photos at the DLRCC Social Inclusion Week
- DLRCC Community Awards Event. Southern Ability was highly recommended in the Youth section and the Group Leader received an award. The whole group attended the event and joined in the celebration.
- Disco organised in partnership with Southern Ability and Enable Ireland. Over 50 Young People attended the disco and it provided an opportunity for the group to meet new people and socialise. The group plan to hold three discos a year.
- Movie night at local cinema.
- 21<sup>st</sup> Birthday celebration for member. This was a significant event in that while staff provided some support in arranging transportation, the group themselves and their families organised the trip.
- Drama and drum workshops.
- Visit to the Theatre
- “Healthy Food Made Easy” event in Southside Partnership.

In general Southside Partnership facilitates opportunities for Southern Abilities to engage with other groups including World Refugee Day, Social Inclusion Week, and the annual International Day for People with Disabilities in Ireland in December.

## EVENT ORGANISATION

Organising events with Southern Ability can entail a significant amount of facilitation and arrangement to ensure a positive experience for all concerned. A key challenge for any event is accessible transportation. Southside Partnership DLR was instrumental in developing Accessible Community Transport (ACTS). In consultation with the group, the Group Leader and the SSP Development Worker agree a date and time for each event and the Development Worker contacts ACTS to book the transport. The Group Leader contacts each individual member to agree time and place for pick up and drop home and the Development Worker checks in with parents. Meeting places for the pick-up are always in local accessible areas for members such as the Loughlinstown Community Rooms or Tesco, Ballybrack. The Group Leader will ensure she has the first aid kit and attendance records for each club meeting.

The two Development Workers contact volunteers and make sure there are one staff member and two volunteers attending each activity. Some club members require one-one support (due to poor balance or because they are wheelchair users). The role of the volunteer is to provide support to members but also to act as a buddy, ensuring members are safe but also enjoying the night.

After the event, members are transported safely back on the bus and each member is dropped off to their home. A staff member will stay on the bus until everyone is home safe. Safety and fun are the responsibility for staff and volunteers and are at the forefront of the support given to club members. Each trip is planned and organised so that each member has an opportunity to engage and participate equally. Transport, venues and activities are organised to suit the needs of each member and the volunteers and Community Gardaí play an invaluable role in the running of the club.

An example of such an event was a recent trip “behind the scenes” at Shankill Garda Station. This trip was chosen as the Community Guards from Shankill Station support the group and they attend many of the club activities. The Gardaí invited the club to visit the station and to find out what the Gardaí do on a day-to-day basis. On arrival at the station, each member was transported off the bus safely. The Gardaí spent over an hour showing the club members the various pieces of equipment, cameras and the cells. Afterwards each member had a chance to try the riot gear and the Garda van. The event had a very light-hearted feel with the members and Gardaí joking and enjoying their time together. The Gardaí have made a strong connection with members and everyone was delighted to have their photos taken.

## ROLE OF THE DEVELOPMENT WORKERS & VOLUNTEERS

The Development Workers at Southside Partnership and Holly House provide a vital role in supporting Southern Ability. The Development Workers must negotiate a sensitive space – providing an appropriate level of support while facilitating and encouraging the members to take ownership of the group themselves. Over time this relationship has developed with the staff and volunteers working together well:

*“We are knitted in together, formal but in a fun way. We do fun things and have fun as well. The members have a bonding relationship with each other and with the facilitators as well.”*  
(Group leader)

The Development Workers provide a number of key supports including logistical support such as booking rooms and arranging transport as well as providing connections and referrals to other structures and organisations. Securing funding for transport and events as well as ensuring safety at events was identified as crucial. The Development Worker with Southside Partnership described her role as follows:

*“Applying for and managing funding as well as organising activities for the group such as organising transport, liaising and supporting volunteers and linking with the Community Gardaí and parents when necessary. Overseeing the group to ensure their safety and well-”*

*being as well as having fun is also very important.” (Community Development Worker, Southside Partnership)*

Listening to the members themselves and letting them set the agenda is also a critical component of the work. The Development Workers and the Group leader meet on a quarterly basis to plan activities for the coming months, based on what the members have felt about previous activities and what they said they wanted to do in the future. Over time, the staff have built strong relations with the members allowing for real exchange and engagement between the staff and members:

*“They are very friendly. I have learned a lot from them, you see the person and not their disability. They are very talented, a resource on their own.” (Community Development Worker, Holly House).*

Liaising with the parents of the members is an important role for the Development Workers and again requires tact and sensitivity.

*“[We have] good contact with parents, we keep them up-dated and involved with outings and trips through phone calls and text. Application forms are filled by each parent, they have my telephone number and I have theirs. There is a trust built up that members are safe, I organise transport and keep them informed if we are running late on an outing. Parents sometimes get involved with some of the activities of the group, though the members prefer to be by themselves because the group is a chance to be with friends and peers.” (Community Development Worker, Southside Partnership).*

A volunteer who works with the group has seen the benefits of the group and has been so impressed she did fundraising on her own to support the group:

*“I want to see the group up and running because it does so much for the members of the club. I like the group so much that I had to participate in the women marathon to raise fund to support the club.” (Volunteer)*

## POLICY AND PROCEDURES

As with any service provided by Southside Partnership, the staff ensure compliance with a range of policies and procedures that ensure the safety and well-being of participants, staff and volunteers. Staff reviewed existing policies with the group leader, participants and volunteers and discussed the implications of these policies and how they would be applied to the group. As the club has expanded and developed, it has been important to review these policies in order to promote the safety of all those involved. These policies include:

- Volunteer recruitment and management
- Health and Safety, including responding to and reporting accidents
- Policies related to the protection of Vulnerable Adults
- Codes of behaviour for Staff and Volunteers including Anti-Bullying Policies

## ENGAGEMENT WITH LOCAL STRUCTURES

As Southern Ability has grown and developed, the group has started to engage with other groups and structures in the area. This has been a powerful experience for both the group members and the larger community, allowing for a real exchange on disability issues in the area. This engagement with structures is described below.

### ENABLE IRELAND

Enable Ireland provides free services to children and adults with disabilities and their families from 40 locations in 14 counties. Covering childhood to adulthood, expert teams work with the individual and their family on a plan for each life stage.

Enable Ireland Dún Laoghaire has supported the club since it began, encouraging members to join, keeping linked in with events, pooling resources and providing space. This has proved to be an invaluable working partnership that will continue into the future.

*“Enable Ireland Dún Laoghaire is delighted to have the opportunity to work with Southside Partnership in a variety of community and social events and activities. In particular, we have seen the benefits of being involved with DIG (Disability Interest Group) and also some of our Service Users have really enjoyed their involvement in the Southern Ability Social Club. We look forward to building on this productive relationship in the future” (Coordinator, Enable Ireland Dún Laoghaire Adult Service)*

### RAPID

The Revitalising Areas by Planning, Investment and Development (RAPID) programme is aimed at improving the quality of life and the opportunity available to residents of the most disadvantaged communities in Irish cities and towns. It aims, in a focused and practical way, to reduce the deprivations faced by residents of disadvantaged communities. It attempts to do this through targeting significant state resources at the needs of disadvantaged areas. Southern Ability draws its members from the Loughlinstown and Shankill neighbourhoods which are included in the Dún Laoghaire Rathdown RAPID area. Supporting People with Disabilities was identified as a key task in the RAPID community participation strategy and the RAPID programme is fully supportive of the group:

*“I think this project is fantastic; it is a good example of a local collaborative integrated piece of work between Southside Partnership and Holly House CDP in supporting a very important issue. “ (RAPID Coordinator)*

The RAPID programme provided very important financial support to cover the cost of accessible transport and other essentials:

*“The RAPID programme had an allocation of funding from Dormant Accounts and we ring-fenced €5,000 towards the development of the Southern Ability project. I am fully aware of*

*the financial needs of this project and watch out for any opportunities to support the further development of this project.” (RAPID Coordinator)*

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## AN GARDA SÍOCHÁNA

Southern Ability has a strong relationship with the local Community Gardaí. This has developed over time and while relatively informal, it provides an interesting and highly valued addition to the club. The Development Worker described their role as follows:

*“We encourage the Gardaí to come down as much as they can, they come as helpers, they did a session with the club on the role of the Community Gardaí, and it was very effective. The group members have been to the local Gardaí station to see what they do; they loved it and are looking forward to going again.” (Community Development Worker Southside Partnership)*

Participation by the Gardaí represents a significant commitment by a state agency to a small local group but there were a number of benefits which go beyond the immediate support to Southern Ability. According to the Garda, the role facilitates people linking up with the official Garda structure when necessary. Participating in Southern Ability was described as benefiting An Garda Síochána and is supported at an official level:

*“I actually represent my organisation in the group, because supporting people in the community is a major part of our duty and responsibility. It fits in well. One of the goals in our national strategy is to be more accessible to all, particularly diversity groups.” (Community Garda)*

*Participating in the group has also had a personal impact on the Garda as well:*

*“I have a better awareness of the needs and support the entire community needs to give them. Personally, anywhere I am now I consider the needs of this group particularly in terms of accessibility. Also I now see that they have bundles of talent and they are fun to be with.” (Community Garda)*

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## DLR COMMUNITY 5K

As part of Social Inclusion week the DLR Sports Partnership hosts a local 5k walk. Each year people from all over the County take part in this community event and sometimes use it as an opportunity to raise funds for charity. Several members of the club and their families have taken part in this event and have raised money for the club. Members and their families enjoy taking part and feel that they “are giving something back to the club”.

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## DLR SOCIAL INCLUSION WEEK

The aim of the Social Inclusion week is about ensuring full and equal participation for everyone and is an opportunity to hold a series of positive actions that support people to achieve equality,

participation and recognition. The week aims to support people to be able to contribute to social and cultural life and to be aware of, and challenge all types of discrimination.

Southern Ability has taken part in Social Inclusion week since 2009 and their projects include the following:

- Art mural: each member contributed to painting a mural with the Southern ability motto 'Life is for Living' and this was displayed at a Southside Partnership and DLR county council event 'A Celebration of the Arts' in October 2009.
- Photograph Album: each member participated in a Digital Media Course (facilitated by the Holly House Community Digital Media Centre) and created and published a series of photos of the club meetings. This album was launched to parents, families and friends in October 2010.
- DVD: The club produced a DVD that highlights each member's experience of the club and what it means to them. This was launched in the Rehab Care Resource Centre Film Festival, October 2011.

Taking part in these events gives the members an opportunity to showcase their individual and group work and builds their confidence when engaging with other groups/events around the County.

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#### DLR COMMUNITY AWARDS

Dún Laoghaire Rathdown County Council host an annual award ceremony open to all community groups. The Awards programme is the Council's way of honouring the enormous variety and wealth of projects being run by community volunteers across Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown. In 2010 Southern Ability won an award for their photo album and the group leader was presented with a trophy for her actions as a volunteer. The club will enter the award programme in 2011 and onwards.

#### FUTURE DEVELOPMENT

Members and their parents all recognised the positive experience that the club has been for themselves and their families and all wanted to see the group continue and even expand to a weekly event or include occasional overnight trips:

*"Yes, we are even looking forward to an outing like a weekend to be organised for them as well as a holiday – I will support anything to make this possible." (Parent)*

*"Definitely, in fact if it can be every week I would love it. Meeting and chatting with her peers is very important and she looks forward to it all the time." (Parent)*

The Group Leader sees the club continuing and expanding into other areas but the core activity of a socialising was still the primary objective for the group:

*“The fun and enjoyment as we go along is rather important to me. We do not really expect anything but just have fun. Presently we have ideas on a presentation for Social Inclusion week in October. Since we have started the club we have always participated in the Social Inclusion Week. This is the third year since the group started. The first year we had art – painting presentation, the second year we had a book which is the collection of our activities in the second year and this third year, we are hoping to present a documentary on the member’s opinions.” (Group leader)*

The Partnership sees the club as a vital project with a significant impact on the quality of life of people who are living with major challenges. Southside Partnership will continue to support the club and plans to expand the model to other parts of the county, despite limited funding opportunities in the current environment.

*“Expanding and keeping the club running consistently, more open days, more members to join and more organisations to support the club are the future plans, but more importantly is to have Southern Ability in the Western Part of the County. As for the funding issue, yes, it is a challenge but not a big issue. We have a lot of fund-raising events.” (Community Development Worker, Southside Partnership)*

## SECTION THREE: THE COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT PROCESS

The Southern Ability Club did not happen by accident – it was the result of a directed process, led by local voluntary initiative and supported by a collaborative, local development infrastructure. At each stage of the process, this partnership between local initiative and skilled support ensured the successful outcome.

### RECRUITMENT AND GROUP FORMATION

The initial promotion of the club and the recruitment of new members occurred primarily through personal, face-to-face contact. A number of the group did already know each other from attending school together but most did not know each other. Personal visits by the Group Leader and the Development Worker to Enable Ireland and other support organisations were essential in making contact and building trust. The issues faced by the members also meant that the contact also had to be made with the parents and the process discussed with them to alleviate their fears and ensure a clear communication process. A critical component of the recruitment process was ensuring that personal details were recorded and explaining the ground-rules and procedures to be used in the club. Many of the group were not involved in a social club of this type (and in general did not have many social outlets) so there was a great deal of interest in joining the group while at the same time significant fears and worries about what was involved. The leadership and support of the group leader and the staff was critical in building trust and helping the group settle in together.

### GROUP DEVELOPMENT

Each member of the club brings their own individual personality, gifts and needs to the group and the development workers are both sensitive and tuned in to each individual need while ensuring the needs of the group are also being met. Activities, outings and events are planned with these needs in mind, and this promotes a safe space in which the club members can venture outside their comfort zone and participate in new experiences. The staff and volunteers work closely with each individual and are always aware of the dynamics within the group. As with any group of people, what happens outside the group has an impact on the group and the members and the workers need to be sensitive to this and step in as appropriate to ensure a warm, supportive environment.

### LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

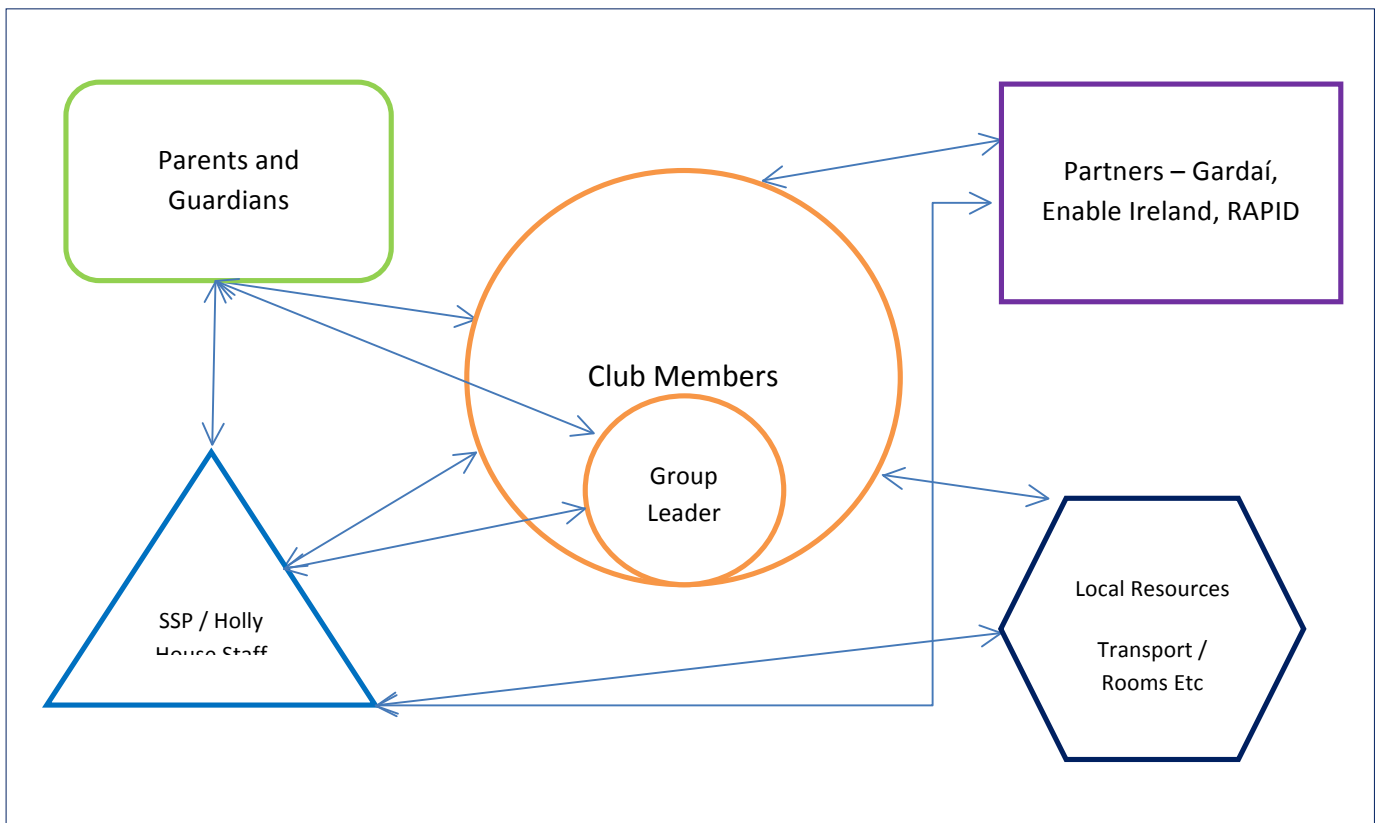
The main focus of the club is social activities, however staff encourage and promote leadership development in several members. The Group Leader has completed a community development course, several personal development workshops, Digital Media workshops and many local and

county events. As well as playing a lead role in the club, the Group Leader also volunteers with young people in her local community.

Other club members are showing initiative and are interested in taking up leadership roles within the club. Again the community development workers encourage and support personal development with each member with a view to encouraging individuals to take up a leadership role in their community and to promote active citizenship.

## COMMUNICATION

A core aspect to the process is the communication between the various members, parents, staff and collaborative partners. Managing this set of complex relationships requires tact, patience and a practical attention to detail. Throughout this process, the members are central to the process. The diagram below identifies the various sets of relationships that are managed in facilitating the Southern Ability Club.



- **Members:** The club members are in contact with each other on a regular basis and this contact has increased over time as people meet up outside of the club hours. The Group Leader takes up an important role of staying in touch with the members, encouraging participation and responding to problems as they arise. On a practical level, she contacts each member two days before the club meets to remind of times and venues. The Group Leader also maintains a Facebook page and members use this as a forum to keep in touch.

- **Group Leader / Development Worker:** The Southside Partnership Development Worker meets with the Group Leader on a monthly basis to support her in her role as Leader as well as to work out the practical details of events and meetings. This is an important time to provide direct one-to-one support to the Leader and to encourage engagement with the wider community. This includes possible training options and working through issues that may cause barriers to participation.
- **Quarterly planning sessions:** The Development workers and the Group Leader meet quarterly to plan club meetings and activities. Each activity is planned taking into account the diverse needs of members, budgets and accessibility.
- **Communication with parents:** Each parent is notified through letters, calls and texts when an outing takes place. Parents can contact the Community Development workers at all times. Maintaining close contact with the parents ensures that the sessions run smoothly as the staff and volunteers are aware of the individual needs of each participant and potential problems are resolved before they arise.
- **Communication with the wider community:** The group works hard to represent itself in wider community and to ensure that the positive contributions of members are recorded. Articles about club activities are placed in the local newsletters, and the group has produced an accessible “comic book” to document the work of the group. The access to the Community Digital Media Centre has facilitated the group in producing DVDs to document and promote the club which are more accessible than written reports.

## PLANNING AND EVALUATION

While the activities of the club are delivered in an informal, fun environment, there is considerable planning involved in making each event happen and the staff and volunteers ensure significant time is built in to ensure appropriate review and evaluation of the process takes place. Events are planned on a quarterly basis and the members themselves brainstorm ideas for activities and outings. These ideas are honed in a quarterly planning session with the volunteer Group Leader and the two development workers who draft a schedule of activities which is then presented back to the group for comments or changes.

The staff check in with the members and the parents after each event to follow up on any problems and to hear how the members felt about the event. The Partnership Development Worker and the Group Leader meet on a monthly basis to assess how the process is working, to identify any problems and to ensure that the learning is applied to future events. The Partnership and Holly House have also established an annual review workshop with senior staff to reflect on the process and inform the future development of the project.

This report constitutes the first formal attempt to hear from the members, parents and the stakeholders on their thoughts and experience of the groups as well as to record the history of the process and to reflect on the process to date.

## SECTION FOUR: IMPACT OF THE WORK

Participating in the Southern Ability group has had a significant impact on the members. Many of the members had very limited social interaction prior to engaging in the group. For some of the members, the Thursday night event is the only social event they attend. Since joining the group, the members have reported that they have grown in confidence and are now going out more on their own. Members also reported that they are more likely to participate in social events in the wider community and they have broadened their social circle. Parents and family members have also reported seeing a change in their children and a positive knock on effect on the family as a whole. These impacts are detailed below:

### INCREASED SELF-CONFIDENCE AND INDEPENDENCE

The members interviewed talked of their increased self-confidence and greater independence since becoming part of the group:

*“My behaviour is good now; I used to be very hyper. I am happy with myself now because I have confidence with myself now, I go out often now by myself” (Group member)*

*“The group means more outings for me and I now believe in myself” (Group member)*

Many of the members talk about being more independent and trying activities that most people take for granted such as using a bus, going the local shop on their own or travelling into the city centre.

### LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

As the founder of the group, Jamie has developed as a local leader and now volunteers in Holly House, helping out at the community disco and as a youth leader in the Community Digital Media Centre. The group leader is now well known in the community, and will continue to grow into the new leadership role.

*“Empowerment, self-confidence is built up, I strongly believe that I have a voice now, boldness to do things that others do now, help others [to build their] confidence to go out and speak by themselves and for themselves.” (Group Leader)*

### IMPROVED SOCIAL CONNECTIONS

Participation in the group has helped members to build a larger network of friends both within the group itself but also in the community beyond the group as they become more independent and confident:

*“The group means coming to a new platform of new relationships.” (Group member)*

*“The group makes me more mature, independent and I communicate more with others”.  
(Group member)*

*“The group makes me get out a lot; it has increased my self-esteem and my relationship in the community.” (Group member)*

## POSITIVE IMPACT ON FAMILY MEMBERS

Family members have also recognised the significant impact for the participants as well as the positive impacts on the whole family. A number of parents were interviewed and talked of the changes they have seen since their son or daughter became involved in the group:

*“The group means so much to me and my family. The group is a bunch of terrific people. Because of the joy, relief and fun that she has in the group, I can do everything within my ability to support the group. In fact I am talking to a friend of mine to see if he could have some hours of training for the group, because we know funding is an issue.” (Parent)*

*“The group has brought so much positive differences to my daughter, she is happier than before: she can go out by herself and she has personal confidence. To the family it is a big relief to see her happy because of the fun she gets from the group. We always look forward to the Thursday evening because she is always happy about it.” (Parent)*

*“My daughter’s social life has really improved and this has a good and positive effect. This runs over to the family members. The group means a social outlet for her and her peers, somewhere to go. The most important thing is that she feels independent because we as parents are not involved in the group.” (Parent)*

While the primary purpose of the project was to provide a social outlet for the participants, the club also provides a short, informal respite for parents who are providing round-the-clock care for their children with significant disabilities:

*“The group gives me a break as well as giving my daughter a break from home as well.”  
(Parent)*

Even with significant support needs, the participants like any young adult are always pushing for more independence as reflected in this comment by one of the parents:

*“She does not depend on me so much again, she is independent. Though, sometimes I come along to the club, but she does not like me being with her in the club.” (Parent)*

## SECTION FIVE: CONCLUSIONS

The Southern Ability Club has been acknowledged by the participants and their families as having a very positive impact on their lives as well as providing an opportunity to highlight issues of access and inclusion in the local community. The presence of the club has allowed for a real exchange within the community on issues of access and inclusion. The success of the Club comes from the community development approach used in building and maintaining the club and the partnership between local people, volunteers and staff in community based organisations working together to promote inclusion and participation by all. These themes are discussed below.

### ***1. POSITIVE CHANGE IN QUALITY OF LIFE OF PARTICIPANTS***

Participation in the Southern Ability Group has had a hugely positive effect on the members of the group. The members themselves report that they are more confident and have more social engagement with the other participants and with the larger community. The family members interviewed spoke of the positive impact the group has had on the members and how this has had a noticeable effect on the other members of the family.

### ***2. INCREASED INCLUSION OF PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES.***

The Southern Ability group has facilitated the greater engagement of people with disabilities in a number of local events and projects. The presence of the group has raised issues of disability and access and ensured that people with disabilities were actively participating in a number of large community events. As a result members are more open to engaging in events without the support of the group leaders. In addition, some members are meeting up socially at the weekends. Local community residents and community structures are now more inclusive of people with disabilities and issues of access and participation are being taken up by the wider community.

### ***3. COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT APPROACH***

From the start, the group has operated within a community development approach. The initial idea came from a local volunteer and the vision, ethos and programme has been developed by and with the members of the group. It is clear that there is a number of contributing factors that ensure the club runs effectively. The role of the community development workers is key to this process, ensuring each member is encouraged to engage as an individual and as part of the group in a safe environment. In addition, the practical resources available through the local development infrastructure have provided the necessary supports for the project. These issues are summarised below:

- 3.1. **Local Focus:** From the start, the project focused on meeting the needs of a small number of residents. This kept the project manageable and allowed for the development of strong relationships within the club. Resources were also sourced locally to ensure the long term viability of the project and to embed the project in the local infrastructure. Meetings were held in local resource centres to facilitate access and transport is sourced from a locally based Accessible Community Transport Southside (ACTS). Funding sources include the local RAPID programme, Southside Partnership and local fundraising. Volunteers live in Loughlinstown or surrounding area.
- 3.2. **Developing Local Leaders:** The community development approach ensured that local volunteers took up a strong leadership role in the group. Leaders were recruited, supported and encouraged to take up a leadership role.
- 3.3. **Skills & Competencies of the Workers:** The community development workers play a key role in sustaining the club. Both adhere to community development principles and have a particular set of competencies and skills that ensure a structured, well balanced and fun process for all involved. Skills and competencies include
- Effective communication: clear and concise communication with members, leaders, workers, volunteers and family members.
  - Facilitation: ensuring the needs of the individual and the group are being met
  - Focus on development and personal growth: Develop and build good relations with members, parents, volunteers and funders and encourage capacity building and personal development.
  - Mediation and Conflict Resolution: Ability to defuse conflict within the group
  - Personal Awareness and Emotional Intelligence: It is crucial that the development workers have the confidence to deal with situations and ensure that they treat members with respect and dignity while maintaining professional boundaries.
  - Open minded: Open to new experiences and willingness to learn
- 3.4. **Practical Supports:** The Local and Community Development Programme as well as the Dormant Accounts Grant through the RAPID programme have provided the essential funding, staff resources and infrastructure that were necessary to allow this project to happen. By operating on the ground in the community, the Partnership and Holly House were in a position to respond quickly to the local initiative and ensure the project was a success. The collaboration was helped by the recent integration of the Partnership and Holly House Community Development Project.
- 3.5. **Collaborative Partners:** It is apparent that working in partnership with organisations, groups and state agencies has had a positive impact on the club. Pooling resources, funding opportunities, sharing accessible space, transport and linking in with events have proven invaluable to the effective running of the club. The success of the club has been dependent on the active collaboration, good will and support of a variety of groups and institutions including Enable Ireland, the Community Digital Media Centre and DigiPaul, the RAPID programme, An Garda Síochána, the Loughlinstown Community Rooms, Dún Laoghaire Rathdown County Council, Social Inclusion Office as well as the very significant contribution of local volunteers.

#### **4. FUTURE DEVELOPMENTS:**

Southside Partnership, Holly House and partners will continue to support and facilitate the club. As the club and its supports are placed in the heart of the community it is envisaged that the club will continue and become fully embedded in the life of the community. Southside Partnership is open to supporting the development of other clubs in the West of the county and Dún Laoghaire. Conversations are taking place as this report goes to print.

## APPENDIX – INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

### Questions for the Founder of Southern Ability

- Why and how did you come about the idea of the group?
- What role do you play in the group?
- What are your experiences of working with the group, the staff of Southside Partnership and the volunteers?
- Has the group met your expectation?
- What is your personal impact for getting involved?

### Questions for members of Southern Ability Club

- How long have you been involved in the group?
- How did you hear about the group?
- Why did you get involved in the group?
- Is the group important to you?
- If yes, how?
- What do you enjoy most in the group?
- What do you not enjoy in the group?
- What does the group mean to you?
- What would you say is the best thing that the group has done in your life?
- Would you want the group to continue?

### Questions for parents and guardian of members of the group.

- What does Southern Ability mean to you?
- How did you hear about the group?
- Has the group made any difference in your child's life and to your family's life?
- Would you like the group to continue?

### Questions for Volunteers.

- How did you hear about the group?
- Why do you volunteer with the group?
- What are your roles in the group?
- What does it mean to you supporting the group?
- Have you seen the group developed since you join the group?
- Do you have any aspirations for the group?
- If yes, what are your aspirations?

### Questions for Volunteers / Gardaí

- How did you hear about the group?
- Why do you volunteer with the group?
- What are your roles in the group?

- What does it mean to you supporting the group?
- Have you seen the group developed since you join the group?
- Do you have any aspirations for the group?
- If yes, what are your aspirations?
- Is your organisation aware of your support for the group?(for the Com. Gardaí)
- Has anything change in your view with People with Disability.
- Does this work feed into your national strategy?

#### Questions for Facilitators / Development Workers

- How did you get involved?
- What is involved in supporting the group?
- What have you learnt about people with disabilities?
- What would you see as needs for People with Disabilities?
- What is the relationship between you and the group?
- What is the relationship between you and the parents of the members of the group?
- What is the relationship between you and the volunteers, stakeholders and the funders?
- Would you have any challenges facilitating the group?
- What are your immediate plans for the group?
- What are the future plans?
- Is funding an issue?

#### Questions for Funder (Rapid Coordinator)

- What is your understanding of Southern Ability?
- How did you get involved with Southern Ability?
- Why did you get involved with the group?
- What are your objectives of funding the group?
- What are your future plans for the group?

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