

Wavemaker Spotlight: Ben Suddell Former Wave Cafe Director

Ben Suddell was working as a teacher when he first started going to Wave Club in 2013, and it wasn't long until he realised how one-directional the education field's approach was to people with learning disabilities. Ben initially saw Wave Club as a chance to help make a difference in the lives of young people with learning disabilities, but he soon found that he was also benefiting from the positive experience of mixing with others who were different from him. Participating in Wave Club was anything but one-directional.

'It was an environment in which there was no judgement,' Ben explains. 'People were mixing and valuing each other and you felt valued as well.'

Wave Club ultimately spun off to become Wave Cafe, a registered charity. By then, Ben was hooked. He started volunteering at pop-up events in his free time and was eventually offered the chance to serve on Wave Cafe's Board of Trustees. As a trustee, Ben helped to develop the concept for the cafe and the strategy for turning it into something real. It had to clearly be a Wave endeavour, but with an element of commercial viability. When the Cafe's first director left the organisation, Ben took the decision to leave teaching and step into the director's shoes. He led the Cafe for three years before leaving in the summer of 2021 to qualify as a clinical child psychologist.

Getting People Involved

When Ben's involvement with Wave Club began, it was through an invitation from Wave co-founder Bernice Hardie. The group was focused on providing mixing opportunities for young people with learning disabilities and was made up of about ten people, many of whom knew each other outside of Wave. When Ben later joined Wave Cafe, one challenge he faced was how to reach new people from the wider community.

The cafe was not going to be an event-focused space, but the team started out by hosting a range of music, art and evening events. This helped to bring people from the community together and develop interest in the cafe.

In order to be a genuinely inclusive, mixed-ability space, Wave Cafe needed to attract people without learning disabilities to their events. The Cafe team reached out to their wider social networks, put up flyers in local pubs and other spaces, used social media and made sure they had clear signage outside their venue.

Some people without learning disabilities wanted to volunteer at the cafe, but Ben said it was important to shift this well-intentioned mainstream desire to help those with learning disabilities. Instead of taking on volunteers, he invited people to simply come and participate in whatever was happening at the cafe. He wanted the experience to be a bi-directional exchange where people with and without learning disabilities were active participants - and he wanted people to relax and enjoy being at the cafe. Plus, he points out, 'Being part of the community is helping everyone.'

One of Ben's key pieces of advice for attracting people without learning disabilities is to offer high-quality events that people want to do.

Creative activities, such as art, are always popular, but the offering has to be enticing. You can't expect people to flock to a primary school-type papier mache class, he warns. He says free or inexpensive activities, such as morning yoga classes, drop-in art sessions throughout the day and evening supper clubs, have been very successful.

For a venture like Wave Cafe, one of the best ways to get people through the door is by appealing to their appetites. 'Wave Cafe serves good-quality food at good value,' he explains.

From homemade cakes and hot drinks for a mid-morning or afternoon pick-me-up to a £5 vegetarian buffet lunch, the cafe attracts a regular base of customers who come for a delicious and affordable meal or snack each week.

Ben admits that it was tricky getting people without learning disabilities involved because many of them are unsure of how to behave around people they see as different.



Creating something that looks mainstream also helps to attract people without learning disabilities. Ben admits that this might be seen as controversial. By not highlighting the inclusion aspect of Wave Cafe, some people could worry that the organisation's core purpose will be forgotten. However, he doesn't think this is the case. In fact, Ben believes that it isn't only people without learning disabilities who feel uncomfortable about mixing. He thinks the attitudes of those with learning disabilities also need to be challenged and given space to evolve. Mixing with new people shows them that they can be pushed out of their comfort zone ... and do fine.



'You have to understand that people have reservations and that there's an element of discomfort and awkwardness.' To help ease such feelings, Ben advises facilitators to try to introduce people at events and to keep an eye on the group dynamics to make sure the mixing is happening. He says that when you put two people together, one with and one without learning disabilities, both individuals have to struggle to get somewhere, but the destination is worth the initial uneasiness.

Running the Cafe

Wave Cafe reopened in summer 2021, after government Covid-19 restrictions were lifted. It's now open every Thursday at Muswell Hill's United Reformed Church. While some volunteers do help out occasionally, their availability often fluctuates, so Ben makes sure to have the kitchen and front of house staffed by the Wave Cafe team. Ben is onsite all day, supported by two part-time staff to work the morning and afternoon shifts and one person in the kitchen. The cafe also offers work experience opportunities to young people with learning disabilities through the Harrington scheme.

Food is often donated by people in the community or by local restaurants. Some activities may have a small fee applied, while others are free or ask for a donation.

Most of the cafe's operating expenses are covered through grants and donations, but it does generate some revenue from its weekly opening day. Plans to increase the number of operational cafe days would bring in further revenue and position the organisation for further grant funding.

Changing Attitudes & Behaviour

From its early days, inspired by Wave for Change and Wave Club, Wave Cafe has worked to make the 'with not for' ethos a way of life for those with and without learning disabilities.

For Ben, one of the best things is being at the cafe and seeing people really mixing in a relaxed atmosphere where there's less societal pressure around what to say or do.

'One of the funny things about Wave Cafe,' says Ben, 'is that it's so simple. All we do is bring people together. You feel like you're not doing much but it's very different from other groups. The more I share it with people and see their reactions, I do think we're doing something radical.'

