

Shelley Renwick

Shelley Renwick managed a hotel bar before she had children and gave up her job. To re-direct her energy when her children started school, she became a parent governor and a volunteer for the Coventry New Deal for Communities (NDC) team. Eventually, she became the NDC Education and Employment Co-ordinator.

You're an example to school and community organisations looking for ways to involve parents. What were the key elements that brought you to where you are now?

I'm a single parent and my daughter was in the local primary school. I helped out there and the school encouraged me to become a governor. When the NDC started, I attended its education meetings to bring a community perspective. My son was about to start nursery and it was driving me insane not working, but I also wanted flexible hours for my children. The NDC offered free childcare to full-time volunteers as part of a get-back-to-work scheme. So I took that opportunity. They also provide childcare and transport for local resident volunteers to attend meetings, enabling people to get experience to start a career. From there, I could apply for a paid position when one appeared, and I rose through the ranks to my current position.

When you started volunteering, did you ever think you'd find a paid position with the organisation?

Not in the slightest. My careers advisors at school went through the classic professions – teaching, science, medicine. Jobs in regeneration, the public sector, not-for-profit and so on weren't mentioned.

Volunteering was something that came naturally to me though, because the primary and secondary schools I went to had a strong community ethos. We were encouraged to take part in community and volunteer work, as well as mentoring and supporting others. It gave us an awareness of the value of community democracy and that has stayed with me.

What difference do you think the extended schools agenda makes to the NDC's work?

It's key. It was killing us for an awful long time that school buildings closed down at 3.30 or 4pm. Parents weren't allowed in, the community wasn't allowed in and we struggled to find places where community

groups could meet, after-school clubs or training could take place, and so on. These buildings were locked up behind gates.

Some forward thinking schools had started to open to the community but not enough to sustain what we wanted to do. When extended services became government policy, you could hear the cheers from our building. It was like: 'Yay finally!' The government had caught up with what schools and communities had been saying for a long time.

How does your work fit with extended services?

I work as part of the core NDC team and we link to the local authority's Children's Services team. I facilitate a strategic group that meets four times annually, made up of representatives from different parts of Children's Services, local headteachers, Connexions and so on.

We look at the wider picture to see where gaps are, not just our own programmes. Then the different organisations on the strategic group look at how they can fill these gaps; so the NDC develops services around their services, pump-priming rather than paying for everything, which we can't do anyway.

Do you attend extended services meetings too?

Yes. We're part of their strategy. We're only funded until 2011 so we need them to do our work when we're gone. Saying extended services is good for us is an understatement. It's the only way forward. Without extended services we'd struggle with sustainability. We don't want everything we've done to disappear.

Can you give examples of projects that have been funded through the NDC that are now part of extended services in the area?

We've been partners in building two new school buildings with community facilities attached. One has won the RICS West Midlands Award for community benefit. The DCSF and the council paid for the school and we paid for the community facilities. There's an early years nursery, plus conference and training facilities for community groups and providers, community rooms and a children's centre. We contributed revenue funding for the first year and a half but now it pays for itself. They charge away! We even pay for our meetings there! Which is fine. They've got to be sustainable.

I was there the other night. There was a cheerleading group in the hall, an after-school club in the community room downstairs. People were picking up their kids from the early years centre, which was open until 7 that day. There was an NDC partnership board meeting in one room and a big city-wide training course in another – and I wondered, where did all these people go before the school was open to them until 9pm?

In April 2000, the Coventry NDC areas of Wood End, Henley Green, Manor Farm and Deedmore were awarded £54 million. Local residents, NDC officers, communities and agencies have worked together to decide how to use this money to regenerate the area.

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