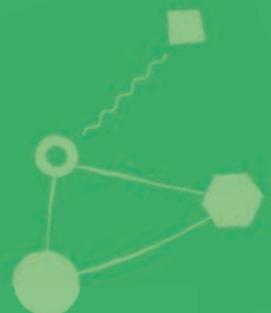




# OUR JOURNEYS: A COLLECTION OF COMMUNITY ORGANISER STORIES

July 2021

Community  
Organisers



**LISTEN**

**POWER**

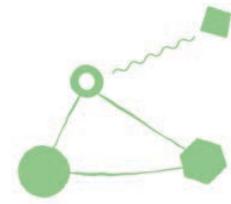
**ACTION**

We believe in the power of listening.

We believe in the collective power of people.

We believe that the actions of people are powerful and can change things for good.





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# Background information



## What is community organising?

When communities work together, the possibilities for positive change are endless. Community organising is the work of bringing people together to take action around their common concerns and overcome social injustice.

## What do community organisers do?



Community organisers reach out and listen, connect and motivate people to build their collective power. When people are organised, communities get heard and power begins to shift creating real change for good.

## Who we are

Community Organisers Limited is the national, non-profit membership body and training organisation for people interested and involved in community organising in England.

We are a national body that is locally rooted and led by our members. Our members are taking action and inspiring thousands of people to get involved in community organising and join the growing movement of people up and down the country who are listening, building power and taking action to improve their neighbourhoods for good.

We are also the home for the National Academy of Community Organising which is a collective of locally rooted organisations (Social Action Hubs) committed to training and supporting people to develop their understanding and practice of neighbourhood community organising.

**Community  
Organisers**



**National Academy**  
of  
Community Organising



*I had been working with communities for a long time before I became a community organiser so had to unlearn some things. Being able to put our learning into practice “on the job” at our host organisation meant the training transitioned in to practice relatively smoothly. Since the programme I have stayed with Community Roots and have been a working director there since 2012. We are a community organising, grass roots engagement community interest company, which was founded by another two Community Organisers as a vehicle to continue into their second year of the programme. The skills that I have learnt and am still learning have been practiced endlessly especially the listening campaigns or community conversations as we call them. I think the Community Organisers Programme has been phenomenal in enabling many people to be listened to and given a voice, when maybe they had never been asked for their views before. This has led to many community-led interventions, projects and campaigns.*

**Penny Liddicot, Senior Community Organiser,  
Community Roots CIC, Gloucestershire**



## Context

Back in 2011, community organising was supported by the Office for Civil Society within the Cabinet Office as part of the Community Organisers Programme (COP, 2011-2015) which funded the employment and training of 500 community organisers.

The COP provided one-year, full-time, paid training placements. Trainees were largely recruited from and trained in the communities they worked in.

The programme demonstrated the considerable impact that community organising has on both a personal level (through the development of people's confidence and skills) and at a community level (bringing people together to take collective action on the issues that are directly affecting them).

The COP evaluation by Ipsos-Mori and NEF highlighted that there was a notable increase across all participants in the following skills: working with people from different backgrounds, problem solving, relationship-building, engagement with decision-makers, digital organising skills, listening to local people, motivating people, and securing change.

Alongside this, the programme also had significant wider community benefit, as evidenced by the 2014 Community Life Survey which showed that where community organisers were active people were more likely to pull together to improve their area and had a stronger sense of belonging to that neighbourhood.

## The Research

We sent out a short questionnaire across our network asking those who took part in the original programme "Where are you now?"

Through a variety of questions, we have gathered short snippets outlining why the programme was important to those who took part and where it has led them in their professional journey.

We also carried out 6 in depth video interviews, and these are set out below in more detailed case studies showing how the COP has impacted on people's lives, on both a personal and professional level.

## What next?

Over the last 3.5 years we have been exploring how to further sustain and develop the next generation of community organisers. Our belief is that the Government needs to invest now, in the development of a National Community Organising Apprenticeship.

The current context post-COVID has created the conditions for a 'perfect storm':

1. Economic insecurity and rising unemployment for those on low incomes
2. Rising numbers of individuals suffering from poor mental health caused by increased living pressures
3. Increased demand and reduced resources and capacity in local organisations and services

To weather this storm, there needs to be an investment in people and organisations in the most affected communities, that strengthens their leadership and problem-solving capacity and catalyses community action. As Danny Kruger, MP, writes in his report for the Prime Minister, we need "horizontal networks, connected at nodes in the community which help people stitch together the combination of services and opportunities they need". Community organisers and Social Action Hubs do exactly this, helping communities identify collective goals and work together to achieve them.

Therefore, we propose an investment in the training of community organisers through a waged two-year apprenticeship.





*I learnt new skills, such as listening, facilitation and how to connect with others, all of which built my confidence in working with strangers. The Community Organising Programme and other roles I have done where I have had to use my listening skills have helped me to develop to where I am now.*

**Fiona Bond, Suicide Prevention Advisor**



*The COP gave me a massive confidence boost to go out and get a job. The training literally turned my life around. From making new friends and gaining confidence. I've found my voice; I've been able to stand up for myself. The change is massive.*

**Emma-Jane Millett, Lab Technician for a Senior School**



# Steve Smith

Neighbourhood Coordinator, Nottinghamshire County Council

**I was working as a manager at the Greenway community centre and had recently set up First Universal Enterprises Ltd(which is an Alternative Education Provision for 14 -16-year-olds) when I heard about the Community Organiser Programme. At this time, I was putting in a huge number of unpaid hours weekly, so the fact the Community Organising Programme offered a good wage and training in the type of work I was already doing was ideal.**



The ‘heart, head, hands’ approach to listening has been one of the most effective tools that I learnt about and have used consistently over the years to ‘ignite resident’s impulse to act’, helping me to support people to set up over one hundred community projects and initiatives. Through community organising my understanding of ‘strength in numbers’ has deepened. I have embraced the definition “bringing people together to take action around things they care about most. When communities work together, the possibilities for positive change are endless.” As a person of Jamaican descent this particularly resonated with me. Growing up in the UK in the 70’s and 80’s black people literally had to stick together to benefit from safety in numbers. The ‘united we stand, divided we fall’ mantra echoed across the black community so becoming a community organiser felt like a natural progression for me.

The process of how to effectively listen and build a conversation was an incredible learning point for me and very different to how I had engaged in the past. We had to build a relationship and create a space where people felt safe, confident to confide and ultimately to encourage a belief in themselves.

My first resident house meeting in 2012 enabled me to put this learning in to practice and within my first year I had set up 13 groups with 44 Volunteer Community Organisers (VCO’s).

Many of the people I listened to have their own immediate problems to deal with. But by inspiring this sense of belief they not only tackled their own problems but also believed in their abilities to make a real difference in their community.

After the Community Organising Programme, I completed the Community Organising ‘Go Deeper’ training and led the local CO Volunteer Training Programme (VTP) training up volunteers across Nottingham in community organising. This acted as a catalyst for me to complete an Adult Education and Training qualification, which improved my skills as a Community Organising Trainer and enabled me to develop and deliver several non-community organising courses too.

I also obtained funding from the Community Organiser Mobilisation Fund which was all about raising awareness of the community rights agenda. I was also involved with the Community Organiser Expansion Programme, which ran until March 2020, where I was the Director and Lead Trainer for Sneinton Alchemy CIC which is a Social Action Hub that has supported the training of over 400 people across Nottinghamshire.

My involvement in Community Organisers and work in the community led to me getting elected on to the Community Organiser’s Board as a

Director and recruited at Nottinghamshire County Council as a Neighbourhood Coordinator.

I work in the Communities Team on the Community Friendly Nottinghamshire (CFN) project. The CO approach is now an integral part of the Communities strategy which 'sets out how the Communities team will support the Council's ambition to put local people at the heart of everything it does'. Using the CO approach, CFN supports residents to start new community action groups on a weekly basis. We continue to train residents, public sector, and voluntary sector staff, so as the communities we work in become more resilient, the approach is being embedded across the whole sector, so it is better equipped to 'help people to help themselves'.

Throughout the pandemic we have set up different groups so that people are not left isolated and have built connections across the community with a network of over 520 people. My team quickly adapted the training and developed 2 short online workshops called "Community Organising Essentials" and "Turning Ideas into Action" with 140 people attending 7 different workshops. Additionally, we have hosted several online network events and have strengthened relationships among the attendees who are now poised to respond

collaboratively to emerging challenges.

The Community Organising programme has supported my development as a practitioner, trainer, and a person, and has helped me professionally to get to where I am today. It has given me confidence and a belief in myself, that I too can make a difference to those around me. That's why I am considering running as a councillor in Nottingham and serve the people I have built connections with during my time organising.





*I loved everything about the Community Organisers' Programme. The trainers were great, and the content was good. Learning how to listen to my community was the most important thing. We have created a social supermarket because of our listenings and now we are turning into a charity and opening a Community Hub.*

**Eileen Jordan, Director CIC, Stafford**



*The COP has definitely led to the sort of work I am doing now. We have listened to over 500 people which has helped us to develop and implement an investment plan. The opportunity to learn the skills of active listening and reflective practice as well as gaining an understanding of power – the types, the dynamics – and the skills to analyse power within a setting have been key. Listening is key to discovering the root issues; and to enabling the root solutions.*



**Photo by Kevin Redpath**

**Jon Cousins, Community Project Lead, Somerset**



# Alice Toomer-McAlpine

Community Journalism, Manchester



**I applied to the Community Organiser Programme in Manchester in 2014 after I had just finished university. It was my first “proper job” and introduced me to the third sector as well as the principles and practices of community organising. The combination of learning and practice alongside the opportunity to reflect helped me to make sense of and embed my learning, and the fact that the position was funded made it possible for me to take part. Both elements of learning and practice gave me the confidence to try things out in the community and gave me a deeper understanding of power which helped in managing the power dynamics that exist within communities.**

I carried out my progression year working as a Community Production Assistant for the Reporters’ Academy; a youth and media production company and an organisation that I had volunteered for when I was younger. Its focus is to train young people in media skills whilst building their confidence by taking them out to real life reporting jobs for a range of clients including the NHS and sporting organisations, even attending the Olympics in Rio.

My community organising practice underpinned all of the work I was doing, and I even set up a project called “Rights, Camera, Action” where I gave a group of young people an introduction to community organising alongside media and reporting skills. We were also commissioned by the National Union of Journalists to create a video as an add on to a guide they had recently adopted for journalists reporting on stories of poverty.

I continued doing freelance work for The Reporters’ Academy alongside other community work, including for local wellbeing organisation Healthy Me, Healthy Communities Healthy Me

I listened to people in community spaces and health centres which helped shape health

provision to better reflect the needs of the community. One of my favourite projects I worked on with them was called “People Powered Maps”, a co-produced resource that mapped out the various healthy and friendly places that people could access, and we gave this to GPs to give out to their clients under their social prescribing obligation.

However, it was the crossover between the skill of listening that I learnt on the programme, and the importance of listening in journalism, that married so well for me and contributed to my interest in media production.

In community journalism you are speaking to people who do not have media experience, so you have to build that relationship of trust, step away from your biases and encourage people to open up. All of which my training on the programme had taught me.

This listening practice helped me when I came to set up The Meteor; a local media cooperative which supports people and groups within the community that do not usually get chance to tell their story. We even set up an organising group within The Meteor and I developed a storytelling course that I delivered for Community Organisers. I have also been involved in delivering a variety of other training for

Community Organisers, which has helped me deepen my own learning and understanding.

Overall, the programme has been the catalyst that has propelled the rest of my career, giving me a variety of skills that I can incorporate, in a flexible way, to all the work I have been involved in. It has given me a range of skills from project management to listening and relationship building that I could not only apply to these roles but also share with my colleagues through delivering training to them.

My ability to listen and my experience of working in community journalism has furthered my passion to support those in the community to tell their own stories and equip them with the skills to do so through one-to-one support. I am currently exploring a new business venture so that everyone in the community has their voice heard and their story told.





*I loved that the COP brought together likeminded people and gave us the skills of helping people to find their own voice. Nurturing them to find their own path; mentoring them until they are confident enough to take the next step in their vision. It led to the work I am doing now. We are a social development organisation, working in conjunction with communities and nurturing social action projects, which have come from community need. We have commissioned three separate Introduction to Community Organising Courses due to the value we place on the training. We have used the practice alongside other approaches to build our services and community organising has been the golden thread we use to validate the work we do.*

**Ross Podyma, Director of Social Change Sporting Communities**



*Completing the Community Organiser Programme gave me the experience I needed to pursue a career in community development. The ethos and principles are a great basis for community development and supporting communities to do things for themselves. The process works! It is that simple.*



**Selina Waltho, Community Development Officer**



# Graham Weston

Community Action Manager,  
High Trees Community Development Trust



**I took part in the Community Organiser Programme between 2013-2015 and worked as a Trainee Community Organiser at High Trees Community Development Trust alongside 3 other trainees. The Programme not only introduced me to community organising, giving me a foundation and knowledge to build on, but it also left me with deeper questions to ask myself and those around me; how can we begin to understand and shift power? How can we encourage collective action?**

In our first year we were tasked with door knocking: listening to 500 people each, supporting people to take action. During the first year we brought together a number of groups and supported a number of actions, from street parties to book fairs to raise funds for campaign materials to fight a major estate regeneration. During the first year we learnt the true art of listening, to listen to understand and not reply, build relationships in a variety of contexts (one-to-ones, smaller house meetings and slightly larger groups) and identify people's interests and motivations.

The shared journey that we went on in this first year was a very special moment in time. The ability to reflect together with people from across the country, working in a variety of communities, was an invaluable learning experience. It was particularly useful when exploring organising and power: organising being the most effective way of shifting power between those who have it and those who do not. Being able to explore power, in both a theoretical and practical way, has given me the ability and confidence to understand, articulate, teach and support groups to organise around power imbalances within the community. Together we are powerful, the aim is always total participation. This means when I'm listening in the community, I'm conscious that it is not just the "usual suspects" that are heard, but that everyone

in the community has their voice heard.

The success of my first year meant I obtained a further grant to progress in to a second year and stay on as a community organiser at High Trees. I also became part of the Inspiration Network, which was a group of qualified community organisers who were selected to support and mentor other community organisers in the programme. This gave me the opportunity to sit on a recruitment panel to recruit trainee community organisers. I loved that the programme not only gave me the chance to put myself in a challenging situation giving me the confidence to grow, but also opened up channels for power to be shared between those taking part in the programme and the programme managers. This meant we had an equal voice, and that action and learning was reflected back into the programme helping to not only inform this programme, but also subsequent programmes such as the Community Organiser Expansion Programme.

At the end of the programme, I progressed to work as a Neighbourhood Community Organiser at High Trees before becoming their Service Coordinator and now I am their Community Action Manager managing a small team working across Tulse Hill. I also lead all of their community organising training.

My learning alongside 1000s of hours of practice has not only seen me grow, but High Trees grow too. High Trees commitment to Community Organising, the support of community organisers and my commitment to organising has led to the creation of the Community Action team, a department that had not previously existed within the organisation. High Trees commitment to community organising ensures that we are reflective, and that community organising is embedded into everything we do ensuring we do not become just another service led organisation doing for communities what they can do for themselves.

Listening, power and organising were the seeds that the programme planted at the start of my journey, but there is no end, I have lots more growing to do. Community organising is still relatively new in this country and the role Community Organisers play in supporting practitioners in this field of work who have the same shared values is invaluable. Through their resources, that we have collectively poured our experience into creating, we are able to communicate community organising more effectively and their one-day trainings enables us to train other people in this work. With communities there are no short cuts, no one size fits all, you go at their pace, and you make sure as a

community organiser, that you are aware of your power and find a way to shift that back into the hands of the community. This is what community organising has taught me. And this is why I am still here, after 8 years, learning every day.





*The initial listening training and the CO camps to network and learn from each other have been the most useful parts of the programme. It has led to the type of work I am doing now, both as a community organiser and working for Treverbyn Community Trust as their Volunteer Coordinator. The approach we were taught is such a different way of engaging, with door knocking taking courage. But if you are genuinely interested in what the residents of your community really think then you can overcome those fears and create incredible dialogue, which lead to positive action*

**Linda Chapman, Community Organiser**

**Kinsman and Treningle Tenants and Residents' Association**



*I really feel that the COP developed me as a person, not just in new skills, but also in confidence. It helped me understand that I can bring about change on the issues that matter to me and set me on a different path. The training was excellent, particularly on how to listen, empower and lead people to action, but all parts of the programme were useful including the peer support and meet-ups. I'm still community organising. I really believe in this as a method and movement to bring about social change.*



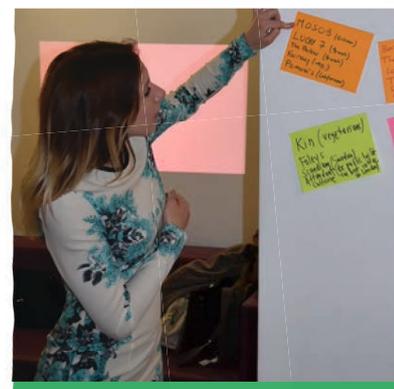
**Natalie Ratner, Senior Community Organiser**

**Halifax Opportunities Trust**

# Laura Ward

Community Specialist, Tableau

**I trained and qualified as a Community Organiser at Starting Point Community Learning Partnership. I hadn't been to university when I undertook the trainee Community Organiser role, as I was unsure what I wanted to do and after working for the CSA (part of the Department of Work and Pensions) as a case officer for 4 years I was thinking about going to university to study.**



However, in 2012, I took a secondment from the CSA to work for LOCOG, the London Organising Committee for the Olympic and Paralympic Games, and this is where I learnt how important volunteers are to an organisation. I also learnt that working with communities was a lot of fun! Finding the trainee Community Organiser opportunity was just what I was looking for and I was thrilled to learn from our incredible tutor, Juliette, that I'd also have the opportunity to complete a PG Cert too.

I love working with local communities and learnt so much during my time on the Community Organiser's Programme. Embracing the principal of working with communities and encouraging them to take ownership of their own projects is a skill that has been fundamental in each of my roles. As has learning how to listen and facilitate meetings using the Art of Hosting methods: it is a skill I still use today.

After 4 years, I decided to take up the opportunity of a Community Organiser role at Airbnb - I was interested to find out how organising could work at a tech/travel company. I loved the concept of Airbnb and was excited to see how organising would fit within the business. Whilst working at Airbnb, I was part of the Public Policy team and worked with hosts to fight for fair home sharing regulation in the UK.

After 4 years at Airbnb, I was made redundant and started my role at Tableau as a Community Specialist. I'm part of the Marketing team and I

focus on integrating community into every area of the business. We want our community to shape the business! Despite working in the private sector for the past 5 years, a lot of my work involves working with local communities to bring changes for the common good. Hearing about initiatives from other community organisers has given me inspiration for projects. It's so important in my current role that I listen to members of the community to understand their pain points, their struggles and the things that they love about the product. This helps us develop our programs and influence the product itself.

Since training as a community organiser, I've remained a community organiser! I've done this in the private and voluntary sector. Without the community organising training and my post graduate certificate, I wouldn't be where I am today - I wouldn't have the qualifications, skills or experiences to even apply for these jobs.

Everything I learnt in my community organiser training, and my PG Cert, has helped inform my practice. Since then, I've had incredible opportunities working for American tech companies; I've been able to travel, meet communities across the globe and further my journey as an organiser!

The training is where I developed my ideas, methods and best practice and I wouldn't have taken this career path if it wasn't for my contract as a trainee Community Organiser in 2012.



LAUREN

JANE

LANG





*I found the cohort network, wider network, training, and ongoing support the most useful parts of the programme. The whole community organising approach taught me new skills that have been beneficial in my current role such as, listening to understand, not respond and action learning set facilitation. It directly led to the sort of work I am doing now facilitating relationships within the Gillett Square community and with external agencies and stakeholders. It doesn't always translate easily into practice. Community work is always two steps forward, one step back, and the odd swerve sideways, isn't it?*

**Anja Beinroth, Community Organiser**

**Gillett Square, Hackney, London**



*I am the Manager of thebigleague CIC in Hartlepool. It was set up with the support of the Community Organisers Programme in 2014 to support communities around health and poverty. The concept of listening to and empowering people to achieve their goals is at the forefront of everything we do. We have grown over the years with over 20 members of staff, running many projects across the town and receiving many awards for our work. This all started because of the COP.*



**Ian Cawley, Manager**

**The Big League, Hartlepool**

# Valentina Demori

Head of Community, B Corps, Madrid, Spain



**I completed the Community Organiser Programme in 2014 just after I had finished my master's degree. My main motivator for taking part in the programme was to help communities to find their own solutions to problems before those problems became too entrenched. This is a move away from the traditional social, community style work that I had witnessed where agencies were parachuted in to fix the problems. The combination of learning and "on the job" practice whilst being paid were also crucial to me being able to undertake this training.**

The extra curricula modules that were also on offer gave me the chance to go deeper in my learning and I undertook a module on "conflict and relationship management" and although not solely community organising focused – it helped me to understand many of the power dynamics that I was starting to face in the community I was working within.

But it was the listening element of the training that I found most crucial and gave me the lifelong skill of how to actively and affectively listen to people in a way that builds trust and encourages dialogue and openness.

This is what gave me the confidence to be able to talk to over 500 people on their doorsteps about the things they loved the most about their area and that confidence has stayed with me throughout all of my career pathways.

Following the completion of the CO Programme, I went on to work for a Student Union and put the skills I learnt in to practice when the community wanted to transform a local unused pub into a space for the community with a community centre and community café. Whilst this project was not successful it made me realise that in community organising you have to accept failures and learn from them. This work also progressed to me

training people in community organising for charities such as Scope as well as Student Unions in London, Brighton and Sussex.

Alongside this I joined the "soup movement" a project which invites local people for food and showcases local community projects. The money raised from the food is then used to fund a project led by the community and voted on during the evening.

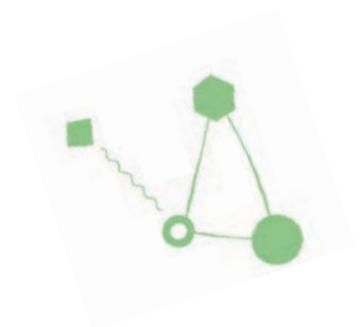
I did the same thing in Madrid for an organisation called Impact Hub, where I worked as a community organiser supporting the building of entrepreneurial communities.

Impact hub became part of the B Corps network, where we were certified as a business that met their highest standards with their criteria focusing upon environmental and social performance as well as public transparency and legal accountability to balance profit and purpose.

This led to me working for B Lab Spain, becoming their first community organiser. This is a great achievement given that they are an international organisation building a movement to make businesses a force for good and answerable to their communities.

I am now Head of Community enabling me to put community organising at the heart of everything we do and our social media presence gains so much attention that many people within the community want to be part of it due to a shared purpose.

Above all, my time spent on the programme, has taught me that all human interaction should be positive, empowering and encourage action. It verbalised many of the things that happen every day but that you would not think to question, challenge or reflect on and therefore a key aim for me is to bring a community organising mindset to Spain from a “what are they going to do for you” perspective to what are YOU going to do – and that desire and passion to take action comes directly from my time with Community Organisers.





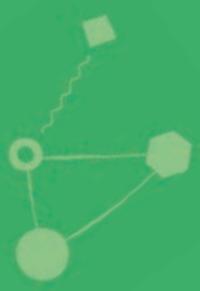
*The programme led to the work I am doing now. I work to embed community organising in communities as it is a tried, tested, and successful method to engage and empower communities. The skills I learnt on the programme around listening, understanding people, and managing conflict help me in my role each day. Although, it took 3 years for the training to really translate into practice.*

**Alexandra Neale, Senior Community Engagement Officer  
Wiltshire Community Foundation**



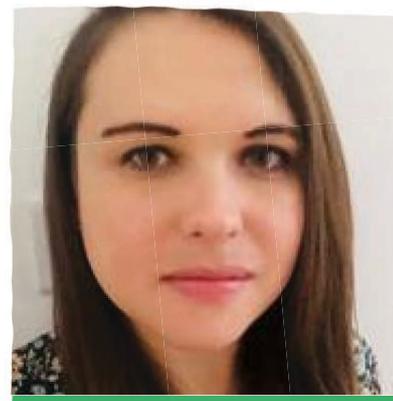
*I am a CEO managing a team delivering a range of services including community development. We have a community development officer and 4 part time community organisers working out in the community undertaking outreach and finding out what people like about their community and what they would like to change. The community organising tool was the most useful part of the programme and has been the cornerstone of our work.*

**Irene Winter, CEO, Hornsey Lane Estate**



# Gemma Cobby

Community Organiser, National Education Union,  
Councillor Doncaster



**I finished university just before starting the Community Organiser role. I was in Lincoln at the time doing my Masters and was also working as a part time Labour Party Organiser.**

I didn't actually apply for the role I ended up doing. I applied for a role in Lincoln but was recommended a role in Doncaster. There were some challenges to this as I wasn't from the area but it really helped in shaping my understanding of the role and the importance of listening.

It was the importance of listening and listening as a skill which was the biggest thing that I learned in my trainee year. It was through listening I began to understand the importance of empathy in building relationships and how you can begin to understand what it was that others needed in order to upskill or develop themselves.

Working with a local team and also being part of a national network meant that I could also hear about what was going on in other communities and learn from others. A key lesson we all learned was that a year just wasn't enough.

Having said that, some of the people I met, for example a group of women who started a support network for themselves is still running.

After my trainee year I went to work for the Coalfields Regeneration Trust, a funder dedicated to working in former mining towns and industrial areas. It gave me the opportunity to build on the skills that I gained during my trainee year as the role was about outreach and empowerment.

In Goldthorpe, the community that I was working in whilst at the Trust, they were so used to people coming in and doing to them. But the skills I learned, built on and developed during my trainee year helped me to tackle some of the mistrust that I was met with at first. I went to coffee mornings and people were a bit like 'who are you'. Over time the relationships developed.

I also managed to use the skills I gained to get a group of businesses working together. The listening and relationship building skills meant that I could tackle some of the conflicts that existed between them and get them working together.

After working at Coalfields Regeneration Trust I decided to work for the National Education Union (NEU) as an organiser and it is where I am still working now. The reason I got the job was directly because of my community organising background.

Coincidentally, I have found myself back where I started by becoming a local Councillor in the area where I started community organising in my trainee year!



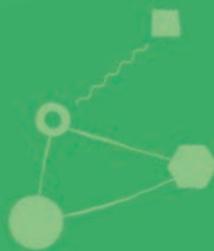
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