

Nechells POD is 10 Years Old!

It is hard to believe that Nechells POD is ten years old, it is difficult to imagine a time when Nechells POD was not here. When in 2008 Noran was interviewed for the post of EAZ Director and as part of the process had to work with other candidates in a role play about being stranded in out of space in a rocket who would have thought her appointment would mean developing a derelict nursery in the heart of Nechells into a vibrant, community hub... almost the same as stopping a space rocket from crashing!!



The head teachers in Nechells wanted to develop a resource base that would not only support pupils and staff but also offer help to families and the community. This wasn't going to be an easy task, the building, Thames Tower Nursery, needed extensive work to make it a safe and welcoming place. So where to start? First of all think of a name – as the building was going to house the Education Action Zone, Extended Cluster Co-ordinator, Parent Support Advisor and a Sports Co-ordinator it was felt that like dolphins, who all work together to support their dolphin groups, we would be doing the same in Nechells, supporting our community. Dolphins work together in a POD, dolphins are friendly, playful and sociable all characteristics of a supportive community team! Most important though is that POD also stands for Place Of Dreams and that is what we hoped to achieve when we started developing Nechells POD.

In the first six months the most important thing we did was to appoint Zenia to manage the finances and oversee the building development. When we first moved into Nechells POD there was only one area where Zenia could access her laptop, in a storage cupboard that became the community kitchen! We set up a partnership with the Looked After Children Education Service (LACES) and with their financial support started renovating the building making it disability accessible and less like a prison, removing the bars from the windows, making it more like a place that the community would want to visit. Throughout all of the alterations and building works we had the tremendous support of Margaret Sullivan, Birmingham City Council Asset Manager, without whose assistance we could not have moved forward.



Sue Ayres (Head of LACES), Zenia and myself, spent a weekend once the builders had left, cleaning and moving round furniture to make Nechells POD a place where activities could take place. We were very lucky to have two minibuses which meant that when offices were closing down we would get phone calls regarding picking up furniture and we would whiz round and drag everything into the minibuses. The whole of Nechells POD was completely furnished through donated furniture, apart from one bookcase. KPMG employees came along and decorated internally and completed external groundworks so that Nechells POD was looking good! We found a knife, a gun and a set of false teeth in the bushes which our local fire arms specialists came and retrieved, they only wanted the gun but were happy to dispose of the other items! Once the building was ready to house staff Zenia and I opened the doors to the LACES team, who had their own office, and Chris, Tori and Emma who were part of Nechells POD team. Nechells POD started to become a hub of activity offering afterschool activities for children, family activities, learning opportunities, intergenerational events and sessions for the elderly. We were very pleased that we were able to make partnerships with other organisations who use the facilities at Nechells POD to run a wide range of activities. Currently we have over 70 partner organisations who work with us throughout the year. As Nechells POD started to offer more activities we were able to fund an extension so we could have more flexibility in our accommodation. Sadly as some things were expanding others were reducing and in 2011 funding for EAZ's ceased, followed by the end of Extended Services. This meant us having to rethink how we would move forward and change our staffing. In 2012 we became a Community Interest Company and in 2015 a Charity so that we could apply for funding to keep Nechells POD running amazing activities for the community.

Whilst some staff members sadly left we welcomed new faces – the stunning Shantel, terrific Tina, super Sheena and lots of wonderful volunteers. We were also lucky enough to have three great apprentices – Cameron, Harry and Beth. The wonderful SENDIASS have replaced LACES. Even though funding is more limited we have been able to provide more activities and support the local community. We received a major injection of funding from Reaching Communities (Big Lottery) and smaller pots of funding from Near Neighbours, Lloyds Community Foundation, Garfield Weston, Awards for All, Aging Better, Active Citizens, Clothworkers Foundation, Proceeds of Crime, This Girl Can. This has enabled us to continue to run and expand what is available for Nechells residents. One of our strengths is that what we provide is as a direct result of requests from the community, whatever it is we try and source it, if it will have a positive impact on the lives of local people.



We are proud of our achievements. Some of our participants started with us on basic literacy courses and achieved GCSE English and GCSE maths. We have done tremendous work in inspiring our young people to get involved in environmental, community safety and intergenerational projects. By offering well-being and counselling support we have helped people to overcome their issues, feel more confident and happier. Our job club has supported many people into work, training and employment. Our elders have even had their own book published!! We have organised residential for children, families and elders, day trips have been particularly successful visiting seaside resorts, theatres, parks, garden centers. Our weekly Place of Welcome is very well attended and ensures that our diverse community has a time to come together each week to enjoy one another's company. We have lots of opportunities for learning through our partnership with Joseph Chamberlain College and WEA, plus ESOL provided by our volunteers, ICT through Pemebertronics, sports activities with Park Lives, craft activities with Birmingham Play Care Network and sewing with Sew Crafty. Toddlers can learn English alongside their parents provided by Birmingham Churches Together and through our partnership with Birmingham City Council library we offer weekly Tots Time. In fact the library is now established in our entrance corridor whilst we work with BCC to have a new library facility and community café in a Nechells POD extension. Our community has been involved in some exciting projects such as the Big Hoot, Reading Benches and the Big Sleuth that promoted Nechells POD across the city and has given us a legacy as a reminder of our community's creativity.



All of this would not have been possible without the support of our volunteers. We are very lucky to have some amazing community volunteers who make sure all our activities and sessions run smoothly. We also have some brilliant trustees who give of their time freely to make sure our charity is run well and that we are managed correctly. There are so many positives about Nechells POD but the biggest positive is the people who come along to the activities, the brilliant staff, our spectacular partners and our wonderful volunteers. The feedback from participants is very positive, telling us about how their lives have been changed for the better since coming to Nechells POD.

So on our tenth Birthday I would like to say a big thank you to all the staff at Nechells POD but particular to Zenia who has walked every step of the journey with me, a big thankyou to volunteers and trustees, to our partners and the Nechells Community and special thanks to Sean and Graham who have been very understanding regarding our obsession with making Nechells POD a Place of Dreams. Ten years have flown by from Zenia and I wondering exactly what we had let ourselves in for, to now being so proud to run such a wonderful community project .

Noran

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