

'Don't do what you've always done ... if you always do what you've always done, then you'll always get what you've always got...'

An NRC mentor known to many schools, Karen Gardiner has run Birmingham Ishango Science Club since 2000. But cuts are forcing this respected complementary school to work differently. Karen explains to *Bulletin's* Adam Zulawski.

Karen: Ishango Science Club was a 'limited company by guarantee' with a board and staff. When we lost our funding we went through the motions, as you do, and now I'm setting up a business that does the same thing but in a different format.

Ishango now runs on four nights each week instead of Saturdays. Before, it only offered maths, science and literacy; now it's maths, science, engineering, technology, 11-plus coaching and post-16 A-level. We're also working with parents, educating them about the school system.

afford the apportionment figure: nearly £30,000 per quarter plus £3,700 in rent on top!

At the end of the original Ishango, parents did start paying to try and save the provision, but it wasn't enough. We still have some parents who are willing to pay for provision so we'll work with them; hopefully, it'll build up and we'll have a private tuition facility. We want to do things properly. We're also looking at marketing and working in partnership with other organisations.

We found a place in Hockley Hill which was quite good, but it didn't work out unfortunately. We're still looking around Birmingham for the right location for the new home of Ishango.

Adam: *What's the legal status of the new Ishango?*

Karen: It's a private limited company with social aims. We need to have an advisory or steering group that is

Schools often don't realise how much groundwork we do teaching the core subjects of maths, science and literacy. This enhances pupils' GCSEs and leads to higher grades than expected. We're able to look at the grey areas, where children aren't achieving and fine tune things because we have smaller groups, more one-to-one contact.



Adam: *Why did you decide to take this new direction?*

Karen: We'd already identified gaps with science, especially with African-Caribbean children. But after looking at research, we found that the majority of young people don't go for science at all, and they don't go for jobs in it.

We've also had parents tell us they don't know how the system works, or that they have problems with their children at home. I used to deliver pastoral care on a voluntary basis, but now we're putting that into the new Ishango package too.

We're still non-profit, but we have to sustain it in a new way to keep our children educated. We're looking at costs and want to keep them quite low, but we do have to pay for the facility and resources. We were based in a children's centre in Attwood Green but we couldn't

responsible for what happens within the organisation. We're just going through the formalities with Companies House; we've registered and just need to incorporate now.

I'm doing all the groundwork with staff from the original Ishango. They're not just staff who come in and work; they're now stakeholders. This is better because each has a say and everybody is valuable. They've put everything into it. They're also called 'practitioners' now, rather than 'staff'. They're science practitioners, English practitioners, maths practitioners.

We'll have an advisory group of about seven people, and a tier of 'ambassadors'. I'd like a younger board because they're more innovative and know what's going on out there. The older ones will be the ambassadors. We'll look at their skill sets to see what they can offer the

organisation. In the olden days (three months ago!), board members were less active. We want people to be actually doing things now.

The ambassadors – business people and entrepreneurs – are role models and, in some cases, they'll sponsor a child for a year. We'll give them a package which tells them what the child is doing, how they're progressing and we'll invite them in for celebration days. The more people we can involve, the more organisations that work with us, the better it will be.

Adam: What's the mood around all these changes?

Karen: It's amazing. The dynamics of the group are really good. We meet every Wednesday, fall into our groups and just get on with it. Three people work on the brochure, three on research and three on the business plan. We respect each other because we know we all have something to contribute. It's good advice for everybody, anywhere: always remember that somebody knows something you don't. You can't always know everything. Ask questions. Everybody's got their own little pot of knowledge they can share.

Yesterday we had a meeting about publicity and I spoke about having business cards. Everyone stopped talking; they just seemed to be thinking: 'What do we need business cards for?'

I said 'You're a stakeholder in the business, so why shouldn't you have a business card?' They hadn't thought like that before. This is the difference between just coming to work and being a stakeholder. They'll have business cards with the Ishango logo and it'll say on there that they are practitioners.

Adam: How do you feel about the future?

Karen: It's hard to improve provision in this climate and I think there will be a number of challenges. I'll just take each one as it comes and deal with it. I'm really passionate about Ishango, so that alone will give me the energy to go on. And the NRC is still there for us. If I've been stuck, I ask Claire Arthur. She and I looked at the different ways of setting up a business – limited company by guarantee, a social enterprise, community interest company, and so on. She advised me, as a quality assurance manager, on how to go about it. I class myself as a senior mentor, but I don't know everything. It's coming to terms with what you do know, what you don't know and what you need to know.

Martin Luther King said that if you forget about the things that are important to you, that's the day you stop living. The same applies to Ishango: if you believe that the work you're doing is important then find another route you can take it down. Talk to people who you're working with. Have good relationships with the parents and carers of the children that you want to work with. Do fundraisers. There's always something new you can try, something you can change to make things better. Evaluate yourselves. Look at what's good and what isn't. Look at where you're wasting your time, where it can be better served. We've had to do all these things. And I've decided: I'm not doing it alone.

We just have to suck it and see. I'm a great believer in the saying 'if you always do what you've always done, then you'll always get what you've always got'. If you don't change anything, you'll stay in a rut.

www.ishango.org.uk

One mentor's experience



Rita Pretty has been working as an NRC mentor for six months. She tells us about her impressions over this time.

In taking on the role of Supplementary School Mentor for Lewisham, one of the most interesting areas

I have observed has been the importance given to communication. Visiting supplementary schools, you can see the amount of talking that goes on – by the teachers, the volunteers, the parents/carers and the children.

Children talking

My experience of working in early years settings means I know the amount of funding and work that has been put into the development of language and communication by local and central government.

The nursery where I last worked was in a Lewisham pilot scheme called Every Child a Talker, which encouraged language and communication for the under 5s at home and in nursery settings.

Children and adults talking

At Dr Fazil Kucuk Turkish School, if you go into the dining room area, sitting at the tables are the young and old, children, men and women, all talking to each other.

Before the morning assembly, all the children sit talking to each other, between their age groups too. Adults talk to children, children talk to adults; adults talk to each other, children talk to each other. It's a real pleasure to see!

At the end-of-term celebrations at Tidemill Arabic and Cultural Club, all age groups talk to each other. And at the Downham Tamil Association, teachers and children really communicate with each other in every classroom.

Two-way communication

While the talking is going on, no one needs to be misbehaving, no one needs to be destroying anything, and no one needs to be shouting at anyone. Talking crosses generations from old to young, children to parents, and parents to infants.

Communication is a key word. If a child has to be told by an adult 'Sit and listen!', then it means real communication has also stopped.

But two-way communication, one to one, by committed people who believe in what they are providing for the children enables the child to believe in themselves.

They will have trust in the teachers and adults working with them and this always leads to great results.