Changing lives: from community campaigner to



Mo outside the new HLF-supported visitor centre at St Anns Allotments in Nottingham Ashley Franklin

Mo Cooper never imagined she had the right experience to make decisions about how HLF distributes money raised by the National Lottery. But after two years on our East Midlands committee, she's discovered just how much she has to bring to the role.

Originally from Liverpool, Mo worked in social housing for two decades before moving into community development work, taking on a range of roles including working in the domestic violence sector.

At 50, she decided to take a year out and go back into formal education for the first time since leaving school to study a Master's degree in Urban History at the University of Leicester.

Not for the first time in her life, Mo then decided to change direction entirely and applied for a job working at St Anns Allotments in Nottingham. The Grade II* listed site had just secured a £2.7milion HLF grant to build a new visitor centre and repair and conserve buildings and plots that had fallen into disrepair.

Mo was brought in as a heritage officer to coordinate a project to record and share the 700 years of history of the site.

She worked at St Anns for eight years and it was here that she saw first-hand the difference National Lottery funding could make. "The gardens had experienced years of neglect and vandalism" she says. "It was like the wild west. I would

never be there in the dark or go to certain areas of the site. Now it feels perfectly safe and almost all the plots are full for the first time in a generation."

She is now helping the Nottinghamshire Deaf Society run a heritage project celebrating Deaf heritage and culture.

Whilst she was working on the allotment project Mo saw an HLF advert looking for new committee members. Our committees make decisions on regional funding applications up to £2m and also help teams in assessing projects by attending regular site visits.

“To be honest I applied as a bit of a joke”, Mo says. “I thought ‘they are not going to want me; I’m not a proper historian.’” But Mo was interviewed and was offered the role.

[quote]“It’s really nice to have that opportunity to see the results of the funding and to have your passions and knowledge expanded by speaking to all the participants."[/quote]

At first I felt very out of my depth, but after the first meeting and set of visits, I realised that I had a lot to give beyond ‘oh I know a bit about history.’ Because of my experience working on equalities issues, I make sure we spend a lot of time looking at what the community benefit of a project will be and whether or not it is just words. My fellow members may feel that I bang on a bit, but I think having someone who does that has been quite important for the committee.”

For Mo, one of the best things about being a committee member is getting to see the best heritage the East Midlands has to offer. “I manage to get out to quite a few events” she says. “It’s really nice to have that opportunity to see the results of the funding and to have your passions and knowledge expanded by speaking to all the participants. I wish I could visit them all.”

Things came full circle for the former housing officer late last year when she visited a project at Bolsover Model village in Derbyshire, which has fast become her most memorable visit yet. Tenants are seeking to restore hundreds of listed homes at the site – updating historic buildings for the 21st century. “It’s such a complicated project, but they were doing it in exactly the right way. I just thought that’s a fantastic scheme that’s really being driven forward by the community.”

“I could connect with the people there because I’m from the same background. For me being a role model is very important. The children in St Anns don’t aspire to much in the way of careers and wouldn’t dream of going to university. But when I used to give talks there, I could stand up and say you can because I did. Where I was brought up was just as bad, probably much worse actually. The fact that I can achieve and run a heritage project means they can.”

Mo will finish her first term as a committee member in 2017 and is also looking at applying for a PHD studying working class housing. Whatever she does next, she says that keeping busy is in her genes. “You’ve got to have a challenge. It would be very easy to do the same thing again and again but I’m inspired by all these people I meet who are doing something different and that really challenges me to keep trying new things.”

Become a committee member

We are currently looking for new committee members in London, Northern Ireland and Scotland and committee chairs in the North East and Yorkshire and Humber. Find out more about the roles by watching our film and reading our interviews with committee members on our committee recruitment page.

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