

Reflections on community action by Mike Locke

I first got involved in the campaign for what became Maxilla Nursery Centre in late 1972 or early 1973. I can't remember exactly when; my earliest notes found for this history project are for a meeting in April 1973, but I think that wasn't quite the beginning for me. My friend Judy Wilcox, who was Community Worker for the People's Association, asked me to write a press release for a meeting to kick off a campaign for under-5s services. So, I went to the meeting ... and the next one and the next ... and someone asked me to write up the minutes, and I then did the minutes for many, many meetings. As the campaign gathered strength and support from local authorities and community bodies, I was part of the group working on the plans for the nursery centre; for instance, I can see from the archives I was part of discussions with the Inner London Education Authority (ILEA) and the Charity Commission. In April 1977 when the management committee for Maxilla was established, I became its chair.

I got involved because, first of all, Judy asked, and it was about the community where I lived. I'd moved into North Kensington two years before with not much knowledge of the place; it was simply where I found a flat. As I learnt more about the community and about what parents and children needed, I knew the campaign was right in our demands and in the centre we planned, as the life of Maxilla proved.

I got involved because I felt useful and had skills to apply as a writer and researcher. My research at what was then North East London Polytechnic (now University of East London) was in education policy and management and included a focus on governing bodies. I can see, having found my notes, I spent a huge pile of paper trying to work out a committee structure. The problem was we wanted the Maxilla management committee to oversee the whole centre and be autonomous, but (a) we had to include the governing body required by ILEA for the nursery school, and (b) we had to make it so Westway Nursery Association as the charity that raised the funding kept its legal responsibility. My notes show we agreed a management committee of 28 so as to include representatives of parents, staff, Westway Nursery Association, ILEA, RBKC and others, but one of the drafts had 34 members. I was into "participatory democracy"!

What I didn't realise at first was how we were building on community action in North Kensington/ Notting Hill during the previous decade or two. People in this community had created the first Law Centre, the first Adventure Playground, Notting Hill Social Council (one of the first councils for voluntary service), Notting Hill Carnival, and the People's Association (where our nursery campaign began). See Jan O'Malley's *The Politics of Community Action* (Spokesman Books, 1977) and the history pages on the Colville Community Forum website www.colvillecom.com. So, there was an infrastructure of community organisations and a network of community leaders with experience, skills and commitment in the struggles for public services and community provision.

This "social capital" (as it would get defined in the 1990s) provided confidence and skills in ways of working cooperatively to achieve community demands. Some people joining our campaign came with experience from this community action, and even when they were not directly involved in our group we looked to them as allies; we drew on their network of political support through the local community and into dealings with the borough council. When the crises came in the 1990s and 2000s, Maxilla was able to call on community leaders who had been there at the beginning to help defend it and eventually to end our involvement as a voluntary organisation.

Our campaign began as a group of community leaders and professionals in under-5s services, together with a mix of members of the local community. It evolved into a structure of the board of trustees for Westway Nursery Association and the management committee of Maxilla Nursery Centre. Year-by-year there was a turnover of people as parents, staff, friends and allies joined the board or the management committee, and some of us moved on to other things and other places. I was involved until the later 1980s, changing my role from the management committee to chairing the Association's board of trustees from 1981 and, later for two years, volunteering as Treasurer. By then I had moved from North Kensington and, looking back; and I was probably burnt out.

Community action in North Kensington was set in the peculiar political environment of the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea governed throughout by the Conservative Party. The history was that the Borough, on one hand, stood against providing public services needed by the local community, but, on the other hand, was prepared to accept, even encourage, community initiatives to tackle those needs. Whilst this represented a sort of paternalism, it was a situation in which community groups were able to demonstrate the force and value of services controlled by the community.

The campaign to establish Maxilla succeeded in that political context. We developed out of the People's Association and its Powis Playgroups, where Judy was a community worker. The People's Association campaigned on housing conditions, combating the "Rachmanism" of slum landlords and the effects of poverty and oppression, and opening up play spaces and playgroups. It had developed out of the Summer Project of 1967; and behind the Summer Project lay its founders' experience in the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament.

Thus, the origins of Maxilla lay in revolutionary community politics, but the struggle to establish and sustain the nursery centre worked in pragmatic ways, relating as much – indeed, more on a week-to-week basis - to council

officers and the ruling party in the borough council as to our radical friends. After Maxilla was established, we looked to see how we could help improve under-5s services in other parts of the Borough. This led us as Westway Nursery Association into working with the borough and community organisations to create under-5s centres in Earls Court , Grenfell and Swinbrook and initiating an Under-5s Strategy Group.

A central body throughout Maxilla's history was the North Kensington Amenity Trust – now Westway Trust. The building of the elevated M40 Westway through North Kensington during the late 1960s had torn through the community. As the overhead motorway was planned and built, community leaders created the Motorway Development Trust to develop plans for getting something positive for the community. A compromise was reached by forming the Amenity Trust dedicated to developing the land under the motorway for community use but with the economic imperative to fund itself through rents, grants and other income.

In 1973 – that meeting I noted at the top of this piece – the Amenity Trust was considering the need for under-5s services in the community and what role it could play. It helped produce an unsuccessful proposal for a centre. It raised funding from the Leverhulme Trust for the research and development job, to which Judy moved from the People's Association so as to plan the nursery centre. Looking back, I think we saw the Amenity Trust useful then as a catalyst but we had to wrest the project away from the Trust so the nursery centre would be run by the community. The Amenity Trust made the site for Maxilla available on its land. But thereafter we and the Amenity Trust were engaged in a decade of wrangling about the lease as the Amenity Trust attempted to charge a commercial-level rent to assist in its income-generation whilst we paid a percentage of that as a charity-level rent. Eventually, we succeeded in establishing a charity-level rent and signed the lease, but when Westway Nursery Association had to withdraw in 2006 that left the borough with the lease paying the higher level of rent.

A lot of the struggle was technical like that: rent levels, charity law, committee structures, staff contracts and job specs, finance. Now picking through the piles of minutes which I'd stashed in my loft nearly 30 years ago, I find the minutes of ILEA Schools Subcommittee when it agreed with us in 1980 (not, as we'd remembered from 1978) that the nursery school and its staff should run a full year and full day (not conventional school terms and days). I find notes prepared for staff discussions in autumn 1981 to help work out our policies and procedures as a community nursery. And the minutes in October 1975 which had results of the tests showing low levels of lead pollution on the site, until when we might not have been able to start building because of the threat of lead pollution.

Community control required a group of people in staff and committee roles to learn a lot quickly on the run. We took strength from the commitment, skills and experience in the community, and from the research and practical knowledge which underpinned our approach for comprehensive under-5s provision. The success of Maxilla in terms of community action and control was based on technical, professional and political knowledge and in applying that in dealing with local authorities and other local organisations, including the Amenity Trust. The ways to get things done were nearly always complicated, often like walking a tight rope juggling priorities, but always we were convinced what Maxilla was doing was right.

So, when the Borough refused to see that in the 2000s, and in 2006 Westway Nursery Association had to back out and close down, it was traumatic. Yet in 2015 when Judy and I went back to see Maxilla Children's Centre before it was closed, the amazing thing was finding the ethos living on: it was still Maxilla; and the practical struggle continued in saving the garden for children's play, care and education.

