

## Ioana Cerasella Chis, Policy Intern in the Corporate Resources department at Birmingham City Council (2013)

BA (JH) Political Science and Sociology

This summer I have been a Policy Intern in the Corporate Resources department at Birmingham City Council (BCC). As a Political Science and Sociology student, I have been interested in working in a Local Government institution. That was because I wanted to find out more about the possibilities and limitations of the public sector in collaborating with, and supporting community organisations. Given my current interests and knowledge generated from my two years of study at Birmingham I found that the internship met my expectations and provided valuable insights.



Throughout the four weeks, I and other four University of Birmingham students worked together to implement a project 'mapping the Third Sector in Birmingham'. This exercise was conducted in response to BCC's scrutiny department's report on 'Health of the Third Sector'.

Our task was to create a strategy for gathering information about the voluntary sector's 'under-the-radar' groups; these are defined as small community groups which are not included in public databases. Examples of these include book clubs, faith-based groups, youth services etc.

Early in the first week we found out that the purpose of this project was to:

- to inform decision-making in the Council
- for a comprehensive and user-friendly database to be made available to (potential) volunteers, users of services (i.e. people who need support) or campaigners
- to build relationships and partnerships between third sector providers and local communities, with BCC.

In the first week we were presented briefings and attended meetings with various representatives of non-governmental organisations (BVSC), a university lecturer who has micro-mapped areas in Birmingham before (Prof. Angus McCabe), City Council employees, and local councillors. By listening to their experiences and advice, we gathered information and tips on what a useful database should look like, how to approach community organisations, how strategically to find small groups, and the importance of community activism. We then proceeded onto analysing a number of public databases, comparing them to discover their strengths and weaknesses, in order to produce a recommendation paper for the Council. Subsequently, we presented the criteria which we considered crucial when designing a database of under-the-radar groups.

The next stage of our internship entailed contacting other relevant small groups' representatives and public sector employees, to better understand the dynamics of four areas in Birmingham which we decided to micro-map: Castle Vale, Lozells, Kings Norton, and Selly Oak. Attending a community event in Kings Norton proved to be of great importance, as we had the chance to listen to the opinions of local residents and organisations about their interests and local concerns. To ensure that our experiences would be passed to other Council departments and to the next team of eight student interns, we designed databases, wrote a manual for micro-mapping, and other reports. This exercise helped us reconsider the successes and mistakes throughout the month spent at the Council. I appreciated the fact that whenever we were unsure about anything, there was always someone around to give us the support we needed.

I regard this internship as invaluable for giving me important insights about how decisions are being made locally and city-wide, how local institutions operate and the great social value which organised groups add to society. I particularly enjoyed seeing the high level of trust and freedom shown to us by our supervisor, Jason. Together, every week, we discussed the progress of our team's work and agreed upon the next steps of the project. Throughout the internship, I felt that our work was of great value for the Council and that we were contributing to the development of a project which will hopefully make life in Birmingham better.

Working with other student interns in a team was a real pleasure and I hope to meet them again soon! Shortly after the first day, we took on various responsibilities. As this experience was new to all of us, we tried to diversify our roles as much as possible, to get the most out of the work in the office and in the community. The micro-mapping exercise will be continued by a new team of enthused interns whom we briefed for two days.

Now that I have more in-depth knowledge about small community groups which exist in Birmingham, I am planning on learning British Sign Language soon, which will give me the opportunity of volunteering for an NGO that collaborates and supports deaf and deafblind communities.

Before starting my internship, Careers Network gave me valuable support for which I am grateful, as it enabled me to undertake this internship. They provided me with advice about how I should prepare myself for this experience, and their bursary award allowed me to make the most of my time at BCC.