

YOUNG ISLINGTON

Gearing up for a career in motor mechanics

Sparkplug is a council-run project that works with vulnerable young people who are at risk of truancy, anti-social behaviour and crime.

The scheme focuses on mechanics and engages young people with motorbike riding, youth clubs, outreach work and accredited courses – then seeks to get them into more formal training and onto employment.

It started in 2002 when Project Manager, Martin Willis, was working at Bingfield Park adventure playground, near Caledonian Road. At that time there were a lot of scooters being stolen from the area and it needed a radical solution.

Martin secured funding for five motorbikes and enough safety riding equipment for 15 young people and with it, he formed Sparkplug. The project was immediately

successful, and scooter crime dropped dramatically.

The project soon grew to offer accredited courses, funded by the council. Over 100 young people have gained their accreditations and certificates over the last six years.

One such person is 17-year-old Chelsea Free, who became the project's first female mechanic when she was 16. Now a Sparkplug team member, Chelsea says the scheme has changed her life.

"I used to hate school so didn't bother going, and was hanging around with a dodgy crowd," she says. "But I actually liked learning at

Sparkplug – it was a totally different environment."

Chelsea had always been into motorbikes, but at Sparkplug she discovered a passion for mechanics, too. "I really enjoyed it – we could ride the bikes loads and they taught us how they worked at the same time," she says. "I loved it so much I volunteered there for about a year afterwards – and now I'm working with six to 12-year-old kids. My life is so different to how it could have been."

Cllr Paula Belford, Executive Member for Children and Young People, said: "Sparkplug helps young people develop new skills and a route to a career as a mechanic, as well as improving their self esteem and confidence. It has proven very successful so the council has increased funding for the project this year."



➔ To find out more, call Martin Willis on 020 7619 9229 or 07931 441 058, or visit www.thesparkplug.org

Sparkplug's first female mechanic, Chelsea Free, says the scheme has turned her life around