

Bedford Borough Council

Team BEDS&LUTON are one of 43 Active Partnerships across England. Our vision is to have a Healthier and Happier Bedfordshire. We bring together a range of groups across Luton, Bedford and Central Bedfordshire, including community organisations, national governing bodies, coaches, clubs and volunteers. Supporting, developing and promoting physical activity in the local area so everyone can have the opportunity to achieve a healthier, happier and more active life.

Our mission is to work in partnership to support, develop and promote safe, high quality and inclusive opportunities for people to participate in sport and physical activity for life.

In the context of this application, Bedford Borough Council are one of our key stakeholders to deliver a healthy and active lifestyle to the residents of Bedford Borough and we saw first-hand the amazing work Robert has to engage all residents during the pandemic to remain active. We work with many other local organisations and local authorities across Bedfordshire, but the work Rob within the Bedford Borough Council Sport Development Team has been above and beyond the expected levels seen across the country.

Going above and beyond

Robert has been instrumental throughout the ongoing pandemic to ensure that the community across Bedford have been able to access online free movement and physical activity sessions via ZOOM. This has been provided by the local council and Robert is a key part of the Sports Development Unit.

<https://bedfordsportlive.crd.co/>

Whilst the younger population embraced the online world, the older generation struggled with it more and found going online quite hard. It was a big learning curve for large parts of the community as many of the activity sessions were designed for the 50- 80 age group who had never used a video conference software before. We interviewed many of the participants and all said that Rob went above and beyond his normal role at the council. The sessions have become a lifeline for them during the ongoing lockdowns and helped them established a routine and a virtual connection to the local community. All sessions were free and the variety and depth of sessions was far more innovative than many other council ran sessions in the area. Rob made himself available to help individuals with their computer issues and helped several couples find the right way to get online easily and without the need to buy any new equipment (for example using their mobile phone to do the classes if their computer did not have a video camera).

You can see a video of the impact it had on one couple here:

<https://www.teambedsandluton.co.uk/mary-and-vaughan-phillips>

“The online exercise classes concept was completely new to us and one which we probably wouldn’t have gone looking for before the Pandemic but now we really understand the benefits and would gladly recommend to anyone how good there are. The technology side of it is a little daunting at first but you quickly overcome that. You also get lots of support from Robert at the council if you need it.”

After a session they have a coffee and catch up which really helped the community stay together and talk. With many of the participants being on their own this really helped motivate and improve mental health during a very lonely time.

Making an impact during the pandemic

The ongoing Covid-19 pandemic has been challenging for everyone, with a lot more time spent at home and the closure of a majority of services and business, it has been really difficult for the community to become and remain physically active as well as socialise with friends and family. Robert worked tirelessly in his role at Bedford Borough Council to ensure sport and physical activity sessions were available online throughout the ongoing pandemic and national lockdowns. Robert adapted his areas of work which focussed predominantly on mental wellbeing with a link to CAMHs and activity for older adults linking in with numerous care homes. Robert reacted swiftly to the initial lockdown in March 2020 providing online sport and physical activity sessions online via a secure platform, delivered by a qualified coach

with the opportunity to socialise at the end of the session to make new friends and ensure the community felt connected.

A key area of Rob's work which he feels strongly about supporting surrounds mental wellbeing. Prior to the pandemic he worked with CAMHS (Children and Adolescents Mental Health Service) to provide unique sport and physical activity sessions with a CAMHS support worker on hand to support the young people or provide guidance to any parents or carers who had questions or needed support. The session typically had around 8-10 young people attending each week with the activities including badminton, table tennis and yoga, unfortunately due to the pandemic and closure of leisure facilities the session disappeared overnight. Although, Rob adapted the sessions and service to run online, with different activities, adopting a multi-sport fitness session as well as continuing the yoga online with support from CAMHS participation officer. The virtual session has continued to grow in number with accessibility no longer an issue and young people looking for ways to become and remain active whilst wanting to make new friends and socialise, below are some quotes from participants and parents who have been involved in the programme:

Participant- "Despite the pandemic, I think using sport to help people with conditions like mine is positive- it gives me motivation to carry on and I need a place where I can meet other people like me and talk. Exercise helps take my mind off things."

Parent- “The Young Minds Yoga is a weekly exercise session which gives young people the chance to relax and discuss problems with professionals if they want to. Their parents and carers can also stay and chat to the Children and Adolescents Mental Health staff (CAMHS) or each other which provides peer to peer support which I think is great for us.”

Rob continued his partnership with care homes and understands the importance of movement and impact of loneliness on this age group, providing an EngAGE together programme as part of his role at Bedford Borough Council’s Sport Development Team. The EngAGE programme offers physical and social activities with the intention of improving mental and physical wellbeing. All the sessions are chair based and specifically designed for older adults and isolated older people, to date Rob has facilitated 33 weeks of the EngAGE programme with 88 live sessions offering a range of activities including; chair dance, chair yoga and chair cycling reaching over 307 participants. The feedback from participants and partners has been really positive and complimentary of the work Rob has done and how he has gone above and beyond his role, taking the time out to ensure individuals have the opportunity to be active in a fun and comforting environment despite this being their homes and ensuring individuals, specifically the elderly are able to access the online sessions, supporting them with technical queries and even arranging weekly 30 minute catch up meetings with residents who said they felt lonely.

Innovative ways of working

With the face-to-face opportunities for residents to get active stopped overnight, Robert innovatively moved the sessions he could online to give the current services users access to still staying physically active via the newly created <https://bedfordsportlive.crd.co/> website. Then at speed the sessions multiplied to target a wide range of residents to stay active. For example, the Keyboard Warriors session was to target those working from home who have been sitting at the desk all morning to get up and move to reduce the effects of a sedentary lifestyle.

“I miss not being able to attend sessions face to face and whilst I would prefer this method, I like having the online sessions, it gives me something to look forward to and gives me a routine and structure to my week with my school being closed.” -Yoga Participant

To date since March 2020, Rob has facilitated and organised 872 hours in total of online activity sessions with the total of 17,321 attendees across all the session which is an incredible amount. The statistics below demonstrate the incredible growth and sustainability of the sessions.

“As an instructor, it’s been challenging to not be able to deliver but I am grateful to be a part of this project and see the regular participants logging in. The participants help me have structure and feel like my virtual family.” – Coach

With recent concerns by local residents returning to face-to-face activities even though restrictions have eased due to the new variant within the borough

the online sessions have still continued to support every staying active. Not only were the sessions about keeping moving but also gave opportunities for people to have conversations with other participants with a chat after each session.