

## TWO WHEELS GOOD

### Get Fit For Free, Luton



Source: Sue Rowe

*Gym membership, the latest trainers, and an iPod – the costs of getting fit can start to outweigh the benefits. But do you need all this gear? Sue Rowe reckons that you can get fit for free, and she set up a project to show people how. Here she explains how she did it.*

#### **What is your project?**

It's called 'Get Fit For Free!'. I started work on it in July 2005 with three years of funding from Sport England and the Big Lottery Fund.

My brief was very open – to devise an innovative project to encourage people living in deprived areas of Luton to become more active. These areas have multiple social, health and economic problems, and it can be difficult for people to find the motivation to get fit.

#### **How did you get started?**

The project began in Marsh Farm, a housing estate to the north of Luton. I managed to negotiate the use of an office in the local community centre which proved an invaluable way to get to know people.

I wanted to start a walking group and a cycling group, each meeting weekly. But rather than go for printing lots of leaflets and posters, which often get ignored, I erected a gazebo on the local green space and brewed up tea on a camping stove to try and attract people and get them chatting. This was a far better way of advertising the groups.

#### **Who else did you involve?**

For the cycling club I had invaluable help from a local Sustrans (the UK sustainable transport charity) volunteer – he brought along a workshop stand and tools and fixed minor problems on people's bikes. For the walking club I had help from another community worker – he had far more experience than me and I learned a lot watching him. I think it helped having both a man and a woman there at the beginning. We managed to attract one woman to the walking club who then got all her friends to come – champions like that are a godsend to a club looking for members.

#### **What do the clubs do?**

The walking group uses a good off-road network of paths in Marsh Farm. There is lots of communication between people in this group – I have found that quite often people confide in me while we are walking along. Mostly it is older women who are attracted to the walking group, many with health problems, and some with older relatives to care for.

The cycling club started by using the same paths but over the first winter the numbers started dropping off until, in the end, I decided not to continue with the group.

### **So that was it for getting people to cycle?**

No, there is more to the story. At the gazebo I would sometimes meet people from the estate who said they would love to ride a bike but hadn't since they were a kid and, anyway, they couldn't afford one. I decided to try and encourage them to 'have a go' by lending them a bike.

From such small beginnings has grown probably the most successful part of the project. I have developed a loan scheme using old bikes that are repaired by a local mechanic which we literally 'recycle'. The bikes are often donated to us by people who no longer use them. The police also donate bikes they cannot sell at auction, and we often find good ones at local tips.

So far at Marsh Farm the project has loaned 80 bikes to individuals. I often get good feedback about how they are being used. People say things to me like, "I can go and see my dad really easily now", "It makes me feel 10 years younger!", or "I go everywhere on my bike – I love it!"



Source: Sue Rowe

### **The bike loan scheme has been an unexpected outcome of your project – how have you incorporated that change?**

The long-term bike loan is a better way to get people active than the fixed group. It gives people more flexibility so they can cycle when they want, and with whom they want. It also makes better use of my own resources.

### **What else are you doing?**

In the past few months I have extended the bike loan idea to other areas of Luton: Dallow, High Town and Bury Park. Bike ownership is fairly low in these areas too, even among children. Instead of donating single bikes to individuals I am concentrating on loaning several bikes at a time to community centres, schools, and youth centres.

I am also working closely with Luton Borough Council's cycle training team who hold cycle training sessions at the community centres and schools where I have organised a bike loan scheme. People who take part in the training session, and who can provide their own helmet and bike lock, are then eligible for their own loan bike. The idea is that this shows that a person who wants a bike is committed. Nineteen young people turned up for the first session of this new scheme and they were all very keen to do the training and get their own bike. One barrier I am already finding is that some people are struggling to find the funds for a helmet and lock.



Source: Sue Rowe

At Beech Hill primary school in Dallow I donated 27 bikes so the whole of their Year 6 (53 children) were able to take part in cycle training. Out of these 53 children, only 5 owned their own bike, and 22 had not been able to ride a bike before training.

The project has also donated bikes to health workers to encourage them to cycle around on their home visits instead of using a car, and we've just started a scheme with Luton and Dunstable Hospital employees so they can cycle to work – it's better for their health, and it relieves pressure on the hospital car park!

#### Facts

- "The annual costs of physical inactivity in England are estimated at £8.2 billion - including the rising costs of treating chronic diseases such as coronary heart disease and diabetes. This does not include the contribution of inactivity to obesity - an estimated further £2.5 billion cost to the economy each year" (Source: *Department of Health, 2004, At least five a week. Evidence on the impact of physical activity and its relationship to health. A report from the Chief Medical Officer (page iii)*)
- "The recommendation for adults of at least 30 minutes of activity a day is for general health. However, it is likely that, for many people, 45-60 minutes of moderate intensity physical activity a day will be needed to prevent obesity." (Source: *Department of Health, 2004, At least five a week. Evidence on the impact of physical activity and its relationship to health. A report from the Chief Medical Officer. 2004.*)

## Further Resources

### Why cycle?

- “Cycling is **fun** and offers **complete freedom** without the pollution, health and social costs of motor transport. Cycling is **environmentally-friendly** and **sociable**. Cycling offers **independence, lower travel costs, health and fitness**. Last but not least, cycling also **saves time** and is **reliable**.” Visit [www.sustrans.org.uk](http://www.sustrans.org.uk).

### Get cycling!

- For help setting up cycle groups: [www.cyclenetwork.org.uk](http://www.cyclenetwork.org.uk)
- For help with cycle training or finding funds to become a cycle instructor, visit:  
Adults: [www.cyclingengland.co.uk/training.php](http://www.cyclingengland.co.uk/training.php)  
Children: [www.Bikeability.org.uk](http://www.Bikeability.org.uk)  
All ages: [www.lifecycleuk.org.uk](http://www.lifecycleuk.org.uk)
- For safe cycle routes near you, visit [www.sustrans.org.uk](http://www.sustrans.org.uk). The National Cycle Network is now 10,000 miles long and 75% of all people in the UK live within 2 miles of its routes.
- If you want to save energy and get financial assistance as an employee or employer by cycling to work (or other forms of energy efficient transport) find out more from the Energy Saving Trust (EST) at [www.est.org.uk](http://www.est.org.uk) or phone their transport help line on 0845 602 1425.

### More information...

- Info sheets, including “The right bike for you”, “Cycling with children”, “Bike Security”, “Cycling clothes”, and many more available for free at: [www.sustrans.org.uk](http://www.sustrans.org.uk) (click ‘info and resources’, then ‘publications’ then ‘info sheets’).
- Bike buddies: [www.bikebudi.com](http://www.bikebudi.com)
- School travel plans: [www.teachernet.gov.uk](http://www.teachernet.gov.uk) or [www.saferoutestoschools.org.uk](http://www.saferoutestoschools.org.uk)
- Local cycle maps: [www.cyclemaps.org.uk](http://www.cyclemaps.org.uk)
- Online maps of National Cycle Network: [www.sustrans.org](http://www.sustrans.org)
- Hard copy maps and guides of NCN: [www.sustransshop.co.uk](http://www.sustransshop.co.uk)
- General: [www.bikeforall.net](http://www.bikeforall.net)