

Comment & interviews

CYCLE SHORTS

THIS MONTH BEYOND THE GREEN BELT, BATTLING THE A63 BIKE BAN, AND THE BIG BIKE REVIVAL'S RETURN



Lesley with Wildside CCC, working with Help for Heroes

Local Heroes

LESLEY EASTER

One of 15 Cycling Development Officers nationwide, Lesley is changing lives in the West Midlands, as **Dan Joyce** discovered

AMONG THE 11 winners of this January's Thrive Mental Health Commission Awards in the West Midlands, there was one regional prizewinner: Cycling UK's Lesley Easter. Her award was for 'developing and delivering a series of community cycle clubs across the Black Country, bringing people together to increase physical activity, promote wellbeing and good mental health'. It's the kind of work that Cycling Development Officers do on a day-to-day basis. What's remarkable in Lesley's case is that she'd been in her role less than a year.

'I joined Cycling UK on 2 May 2017,' she said, 'and the Big Bike Revival started four days later. My area covers six boroughs – Dudley, Wolverhampton, Sandwell, Walsall,

Solihull, and Coventry – and we managed to organise BBR events in five. From these events came the leads to create a network of ten Community Cycle Clubs, some from scratch, some by affiliating existing clubs.'

Lesley's diverse clubs range from Let Us Play, which provides indoor cycling activities for disabled children, through to Birmingham Business Park Community Cycle Club, which is for cycle-friendly employers and their employees, and Walsall Arboretum, which encourages people to return to cycling or to take it up for the first time.

'Walsall Arboretum had 11 participants on day one,' Lesley said, 'and it has grown from there. We've seen a lot of retired senior citizens taking to two wheels, having not been

on a bike since they were children. Our oldest member is 85! Their confidence and ability have improved immensely. We have carers taking time out for themselves, and participants with health conditions who are pleased to take part in a low-impact activity. The social side is the icing on the cake.'

It hasn't all been plain sailing. Two months after it began, Walsall Arboretum had a break in and its bikes were stolen. The response to this demonstrated how well embedded the new club had become in its local community.

'They love our "oldies",' said Lesley, 'and very kindly donated bikes galore. We are now able to offer cycling to a larger number of people than we were before. We had 24 participants on a Tuesday in January. What's it going to be like on a warm summer's day!?'

I asked Lesley how she went about setting up a Community Cycle Club. 'Find bikes,' she said. 'Any group with bikes has the potential of becoming a Community Cycle Club. Then find an enthusiast. If you can find even one volunteer, you have the makings of a club. If you haven't got bikes but you have a volunteer and a location, you need to find funding for bikes. You also need somewhere safe to keep the bikes. Bike storage is the hardest challenge of all.'

The logistics don't end there. 'You need to research groups in the area that could make good use of the bikes,' said Lesley, 'then set up meetings and create marketing material to promote the new club. You need to deliver training, such as teaching people to ride. And you need to recruit more volunteers, and find more funding for training them, so that the club is sustainable.'

Cycling isn't just Lesley's day job; she cycles for transport and pleasure too. 'My favourite was a trip to the Outer Hebrides with my husband, who had just bought his first bike since the age of 17: a Claud Butler tourer that was £50 from a recycling centre. I didn't tell him about the five-hour ferry crossing as he hates boats, but we had a fantastic time following the lanes along beautiful coastlines.'

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