

Community Cycle Club

ELLIOT'S PLACE

Ahead of World Mental Health Day on 10 October, **Tia Jaakola** spoke to a Cycling UK Community Cycle Club that helps people overcome mental health challenges through cycling

Elliott's Place is a Blackpool-based project run by the Empowerment charity. It supports young men struggling with mental health, substance misuse, learning disabilities or experiences of homelessness. Their model is intentionally flexible, and based on activities that are centred on sharing experiences. The founders wanted to stay away from a formal, static service, and instead provide a safe space for people to open up and find mutual support, confidence and hope.

Asked about the project, chief executive Mike Crowther explains that young men are "more able to talk and share when they're actually doing something practical or fun and social". It's also about confidence. Mike says that young men with mental health struggles often find socialising a challenge and need encouragement.

Through Cycling UK funding, Elliot's Place has now embedded cycling into its diverse range of social activities. "It's helped buy bikes and other equipment, as well as getting staff trained in maintenance and as ride leaders," Mike says.

Activities facilitator Michael Shepherd adds: "The ride leader course was absolutely fantastic, teaching you how to navigate a group across junctions and things like that. It really built up my confidence in leading people on a cycle ride."

Often, when young men meet with people from Elliot's Place for the first time, they expect to be sat down for a formal assessment, but instead staff suggest going out on their bikes. Mike and Michael believe that visiting the seafront is a great way to improve wellbeing, with "mile after mile of fantastic cycling", but despite the promenade's fame, many people in Blackpool never visit due to lack of access.

If someone has trouble opening up about their struggles, they can

Activities coordinator Michael Shepherd (left) and chief exec Mike Crowther



Above: Supporter Paul Downie of Lancashire Tea, Linzi Cason and Luke Johnson from the Empowerment charity and Cycling UK's Laura Howarth with the project's new bikes

Below: Laura Howarth hands over the donation that was used to buy the bikes and other cycling equipment



go for ad-hoc, one-on-one rides to blow off the cobwebs. It usually doesn't take long to break the ice. "It's just something about that bike ride, the fresh air, the exercise" – as well as getting to the lovely surroundings of the beach – that helps, Michael explains. Cycling, he says, "develops that personal bond, so it's done wonders for building trust between myself and other people that use Elliot's Place".

For many, cycling has also become a tool for accessing other opportunities. With their renewed confidence, the men use the bikes to travel to volunteer opportunities, job interviews and social activities. Mike describes it as "amazing", because the people invariably don't have a car and often struggle to afford public transport.

Both Mike and Michael are personally passionate about cycling, and are also encouraging it as a way of life. It does wonders for health, wellbeing and accessibility, but they also highlight the people they work with are "the people least likely to have a bike or a positive experience of cycling". It's something we can all do, so socio-economic background shouldn't be a barrier.

"It's giving people a fresh experience," Mike explains. "I do think we're actually changing lifestyles for good through this project." ●

Community Cycle Clubs

Community Cycle Clubs sit at the heart of Cycling UK's work to encourage more people to cycle. They are groups of people who come together to cycle – for whatever purpose they choose. Community Cycle Clubs connect individuals to their communities and help more people lead happier and more active lives, while reducing isolation, improving health and developing skills – or just purely and simply having fun. If you want to support more people to cycle, please donate today.

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