



AFC WIMBLEDON
FOUNDATION

Club Together

ACTIVE WOMBLE PHIPPS BRIDGE REPORT



How a football club transformed the summer on a Merton estate



Can a football club make a difference? Can it go beyond the roar of a crowd on a Saturday afternoon and connect with families – especially children – who are living in some of the most-deprived conditions in the country?

Can it bring smiles to young faces, hope and help to beleaguered parents and a sense of “you matter to us” to a community feeling forgotten and lost?

In just four weeks last summer, we provided the answer to those questions by launching a pilot scheme that proved so successful it’s rapidly become a blueprint for future projects. In fact, local councillors were so impressed they’ve now invited our Foundation to sit on one of their key steering committees.

So, what happened? From August 5 to August 30 we moved on to the Phipps Bridge Estate in the London borough of Merton. Why Phipps Bridge? “There’s no denying it’s an estate with more than its fair share of problems,” explained Foundation chairman, Erik Samuelson. “We primarily wanted to connect with children there between the ages of seven and 12, and give them new opportunities and experiences. We wanted to show there are meaningful alternatives to the sort of gangs which, back in 2013, were sentenced for dealing Class-A drugs in the children’s playground.”

For many Phipps Bridge families, school holidays were just another ordeal. Officially, the estate is one of the UK’s most-deprived areas with 245 children living in out-of-work households. Parents couldn’t afford the luxury of sending their kids to summer camps; even on the sunniest and brightest days the play areas stayed quiet and empty with no organised activities. There was no reason to assume the summer of 2019 would be any different. So we decided to do something about that.



4,330
residents on estate

1,055
kids aged between 0 and 15

495
kids in single-parent households

3%
households have no central heating

26%
children living in poverty

41%
kids in Year Six clinically obese

37%
lone parent households

10%
unemployment

620
with limiting long-term illnesses

Source: Community Insight Profile, Phipps Bridge and Cherry Trees Estates, Mitcham

We didn't want any child excluded because their parents couldn't afford it

The Phipps Bridge initiative started to take shape about 18 months ago when Foundation director Philip Rudling met trustees to discuss how they could make a real difference in the local community.

"We wanted to do something that would leave a mark," recalled Philip. "We were also determined to deliver a flagship project, one we could use as a model to take into other local areas. Two of our trustees, Karen Peck and Margaret McDonagh, passionately believed that Phipps Bridge would be an ideal location for what we wanted to do and achieve. Their insights and drive were invaluable."

Further consultations were held with local councillors, charities, care groups and politicians, who all agreed that Phipps Bridge fitted the bill.



That was relatively easy; the far harder question was: 'What could we possibly bring to the estate that would have a significant impact; how could we reach out to families struggling to make ends meet? What could we possibly offer to inspire children, some with Special Educational Needs.

"We wanted to give them opportunities they'd probably never experienced before," explained Erik. "We wanted to fire their imaginations and get them excited about all sorts of new activities and events.

"Above all else, whatever we offered, we were adamant it had to be for free. We didn't want any child to be excluded simply because their parents couldn't afford it."

The first task was to start a fund-raising drive. Local businesses generously chipped in and an arts-based charity, the Taylor Family

“Fantastic. Kids never wanted to leave at end of the day”

“My daughter now absolutely loves AFC Wimbledon. The snacks and trips out were great! Everyone worked hard with the children and you could see the results instantly.”

Foundation, contributed £5,000. Then came AFC Wimbledon's own fans, who once again rose to the occasion, digging deep into their pockets to help the Foundation raise an incredible £20,000.

"It was a tremendous effort and so typical of our supporters," said Philip. "Suddenly we had the financing to bring something new and exciting to the estate."



It wasn't just about playing football

Kasha Petit, the Foundation's Female Development and Inclusion Officer, was put in charge of the project and set about devising a unique programme that would ignite the imaginations of children on the estate – and, just as importantly, their parents.

"It couldn't just be another summer soccer school," she explained. "We wanted to appeal to every child between the ages of seven and 12 – girls and boys. It didn't matter if they didn't like football.

"We suspected trips and outings would be popular, but we wanted them to have a purpose. We wanted them to widen horizons. This wasn't about a day out at Chessington world of adventures. We also wanted to offer other opportunities – like dance, drama and music classes plus a range of other sports.

"We decided to provide all the children with a hot, healthy meal every day. Children's eating habits are often a big problem in deprived areas; in Phipps Bridge alone, 41 per cent of Year Six

primary school children are classified as clinically obese. That's a shocking figure but the reality is it's often quicker and cheaper to eat unhealthy food. We really wanted to address that."

The first task, though, was to gauge how much interest there would be, so the Foundation contacted local school head teachers and asked them to recommend the names of children who might benefit most.

"We couldn't believe the response after that," said Philip. "Word spread and people were coming to us. In the end, 120 children enrolled but that was all we could cope with. There were at least 30 more on a waiting list. That's when we knew we were on to something."



The summer scheme has been a simply wonderful opportunity for dozens of the children living in the most challenging circumstances in Mitcham and Morden.

This free scheme has given these children the opportunity to enjoy a summer of sports, arts, music and, I hear, even a trip to the National Theatre to see Peter Pan!

Local MP and Dons fan Siobhain McDonagh



Our trip to the theatre really stole the show

Between them, Kasha and Philip came up with a programme of activities which turned the summer of 2019 into an unforgettable experience for everyone on the estate.

Acclaimed arts teacher Fabienne Bonnaire ran dance and drama classes and by the end of each week the kids were staging their own little productions. "It was a bit like the X Factor," said Kasha. "There were a couple of really good dancers and you could see the children's confidence growing every day as they put on their own shows."

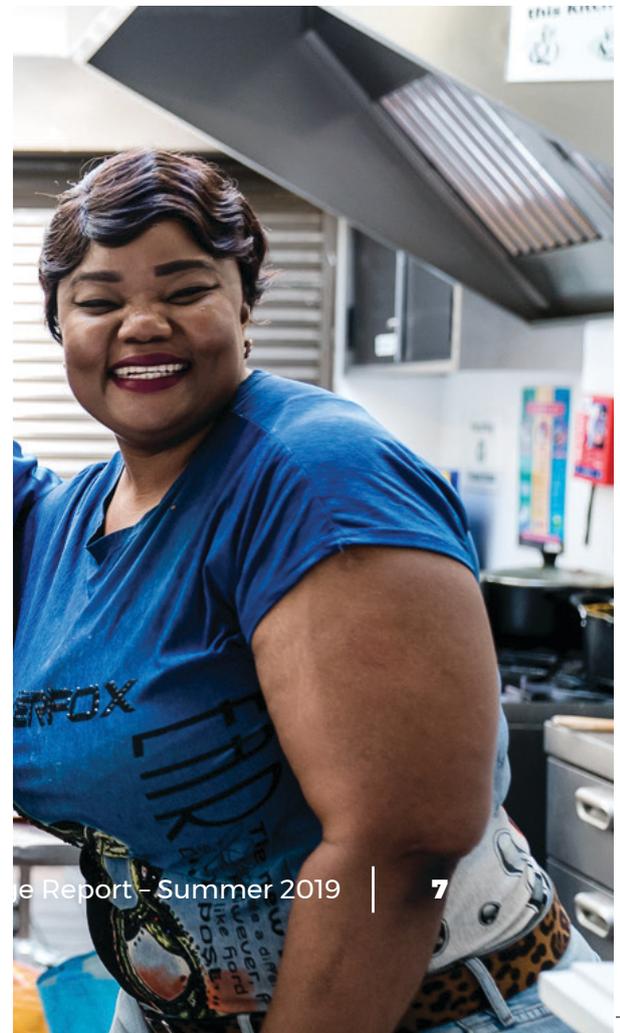
Opera singer Christopher Killerby from the Colliers Wood Chorus popped by to demonstrate some serious singing techniques - as well as helping the children with a Rap song - while media expert Nathan Bisnouth showed them how to make their own podcasts.

"As each day passed, we could see more and more of the children coming out of their shells, especially once they saw what their mates were doing," added Kasha.

Meanwhile - in the kitchen - Mirelle Yando-Gelezi and her sister Natalie cooked up a daily lunch menu of tasty treats which included favourites like jacket potatoes with beans and cheese, chicken curries, pizzas, fish and chips (on Fridays, of course) plus baguettes crammed with delicious fillings. There were also fruit snacks and juices during the day. Most of the shopping was done at local supermarkets by Philip and Kasha although some nearby food banks also weighed in with helpful donations. Waitrose paid for sports equipment and supplied 20 volunteer staff to help out.

Then came the outings! The highlights included a visit to neighbouring Morden Hall Park, which many of the children had never been to even though it's almost on their doorstep, and a privileged trip to the All-England Club, where they visited the tennis museum and got to see Centre Court.

A group of 35 kids and parents became overnight AFC Wimbledon fans when they went to see the home game against Accrington Stanley (a battling 1-1 draw). For many it was their first time at a match - although it was a trip to the theatre which really stole the show.



"Most of the children had never been to the theatre before, so we hired a coach and took 50 of them – plus around 15 parent volunteers – to see Peter Pan," said Kasha. "They absolutely loved it – including the mums and dads."

Special care was also taken to involve children who needed to find their own way of getting involved. If some were nervous about joining in a big-group event, then they could try quieter activities – like table tennis, board games or simply enjoying the swings outside until they felt confident enough to try the grander stuff.

"Of course, there were a lot who just wanted to play football, which was absolutely fine. At first, we wanted to rotate the activities so everyone had a go at everything, but we quickly learned that the kids needed their own preferences and choices. So that's what we gave them," said Kasha.

"We had a big team of staff there, usually eight per day, which is a far bigger pupil/teacher ratio than most schools. Some of the kids had their own special needs so we were able to give them the one-to-one attention they required."

Little stars

Every child who attended the course received a certificate at the end to show they'd graduated. But there was also a popular rewards scheme during each of the weeks, with stars handed out to kids who excelled in all sorts of different ways

"We would have a theme each week and I think that made a big impact," said Kasha. "For example, during week one, stars were handed out to anyone who had helped a child who was maybe feeling lonely or not getting involved. Other children would see that and then want to do something good to earn a star for themselves."

“

The children at Benedict Primary School have embraced the opportunity for an active four weeks during the summer holidays. The opportunity to learn with others, develop their skills and stay active and outdoors is invaluable for our children.

It has been a vital support for parents and carers, who often find the six-week holiday a real challenge.

Christine Smith, Head of Benedict School

1400
meals prepared and cooked

1200
cartons of fruit juice

1500
pieces of fruit

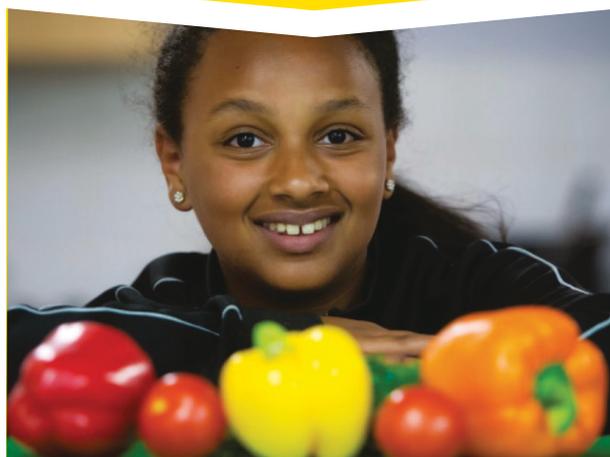
2500
potatoes peeled

3000
hours of activities

30
kids on waiting list

6
trips and outings

0
kids dropping out



“It’s lovely to see someone finally taking an interest in us. That’s unusual here.”

Philip knew the Foundation was hitting home when he got talking one day to an elderly woman who lived on the estate. “I’ll never forget her words,” he recalled. “She’d lived there for many years and knew how desolate it could be during the summer months. I remember her saying to me: ‘It’s really lovely to see someone finally taking an interest. We never see that normally’. That made a big impact on me.”

For Kasha, it was seeing children develop and come out of their shells as they became more and more engrossed in the scheme.

“In the end, the kids were staying on long after 4pm,” she said. “In the first couple of days, we’d see children slowly make connections then – by day three – they looked like they’d known each other for ever, even though they’d actually never met until we came along.

“The trips were also a big hit, and the rapport our staff developed with the kids was something special. Some of the children had been having problems in mainstream education and their parents were concerned they might not settle and fit in. But they all did and nobody dropped out.

“In fact, the parents’ reactions were a lasting memory. They could see their children developing in all sorts of ways they’d never expected or experienced before. Just little things, like making new friends, joining in with a group, or simply laughing and having fun.

Finally, the Foundation wanted a concrete verdict on the project from the people who mattered the most - the children who had taken part and their mums and dads. Everyone was asked to fill in a questionnaire and Kasha explained: “The kids were asked to select happy, middle or unhappy faces and we got an overwhelmingly positive response from them.

“It was basic stuff – for example, they liked the lunches so that told us we were giving them the right food; they liked the activities and they liked meeting new friends.

“The parents were different, of course. They liked the fact their children were being well looked after in a safe environment and given opportunities to experience new activities. They liked we had lots of staff on site, they liked the fact we were there all day – and they especially liked we were providing a nutritious hot meal for their children.”

“**Parents could see their children developing in all sorts of ways they’d never expected or experienced before”**



There's definitely a little bit of magic dust that only football can bring

There's little doubt, AFC Wimbledon has gained some supporters! Many of the kids didn't know the club existed but after seeing a match for themselves – and getting to meet first-team players like Tyrell Thomas, Rod McDonald and Jack Rudoni, who all visited the project to answer questions and enjoy a kickabout – they've become big fans. Even Haydon the Womble went along – only to have his nose tugged off by one of the kids!

“Both the children and their parents react differently now whenever they see the badge,” said Philip. “We do a lot of work with local schools and when one of our coaches walks in, there is a recognition and awareness that wasn't there before.

“The fact we were a football club doing this undoubtedly gave us an advantage. Seeing our coaches turn up at the estate, proudly wearing club tracksuits, looking professional and sharing their knowledge and skills, it all helped break down barriers.

“There's definitely a little bit of magic dust that only football can bring but, on its own, that's not enough. Once you're through the door, you then need quality staff and some inspiring activities to get meaningful results.”

There is no doubt, the Phipps Bridge project achieved its goal and – because of its unparalleled success – helped us establish a vision for the future.

Foundation chairman Erik Samuelson said: “We chose the Phipps Bridge Estate because we felt we could make a difference for disadvantaged local children by providing them with stimulating and healthy activities.

“As always, our fans were brilliant and their donations, together with generous sponsorship from local businesses, meant we were able to make participation, including a hot meal every lunchtime, completely free. It was an overwhelming success so now our challenge is to expand the project into next summer.”



The Foundation is determined not to disappear from the estate and continues to send coaches there on Mondays and Thursdays, while Fabienne continued to run her dance classes.

Erik added: "Merton council were extremely supportive and gave us free access to their youth centre and outdoor facilities on the estate, which gave us vital indoor and outdoor bases for our activities. They were really pleased with the scheme and have subsequently asked us to join one of their steering committees to help them tackle other problem areas within the borough.

"It's extremely important to us that we can continue what we've started. We're here for the long haul - we don't want to pick these children up, and then simply put them down again.

"We also want to reach older age groups at Phipps Bridge - the 12 to 16 year olds - the ones who are probably more susceptible to gang culture and anti-social problems. Maybe we could offer them the chance to earn a basic sports leadership qualification.

"I'm really proud that, through our Foundation, AFC Wimbledon has given something back to its own community like this. It shows the unique

"My son's ADHD is very active, but he had loads of fun and was calm when he came home"

power of sport and its ability to connect with local people in particular. If we can increase our funding, we'd like to extend the project on to the Hazelhurst Estate, which is another area of high need on our own doorstep. In fact, it's right next to Plough Lane, where our new home is currently being built.

"We are determined to make a difference. In many ways, it's what AFC Wimbledon has always been about: a unique, supporters'-run club with strong community values and a profound desire to champion local people. I think the Phipps Bridge project has underlined the power and reach of football and what a club can do to help tackle adversity."





AFC WIMBLEDON FOUNDATION

Club Together

120

kids took part

6

external staff contributed

8

professional coaches

23

special educational needs kids

20+

volunteers helped out

44%

of kids taking part were girls



With special thanks to our project partners:

AFC Wimbledon & fans
Clarion Futures
Merton Council

Merton Youth Service
Random House
Taylor Family Foundation
The National Theatre

Wimbledon Foodbank
Wimbledon Foundation
Wimbledon Waitrose