

CASE STUDY —

Lee Valley Regional Park Authority Paddlesport Course – Together Fund

Lee Valley Regional Park Authority (LVRPA) is responsible for the 26 mile long, 10,000 acre park with various green spaces, sports venues and wildlife havens. The Sport and Active Recreation Team (S&AR) at LVRPA strives to create sustainable opportunities for people to use the whole park to get and stay active in traditional and untraditional settings.

To achieve Lee Valley Regional Park Authority’s vision to continue to be a world class leisure destination the S&AR team has the following mission: “A park that delivers a range of high quality sport and recreation opportunities to increase participation and enrich the lives of our communities.” LVRPA have delivered targeted programmes to a wide range of audiences, including mental health and older people tennis programmes, cycling projects with a specific focus on diversifying the cycling community, and programmes engaging marginalised communities.

The course started with a six week ‘introduction to canoe/kayak progression’ course. This is designed to cater for all experience levels, physical mobility and fitness levels and will specifically aim to reduce any anxieties any group members may have had towards paddling/open water. The six weeks were available to complete beginners, providing a progressive pathway through to the point where participants are happy getting all their equipment set up, safely getting into their kayak and enjoying an activity session around the flat-water environment, or heading out onto the canal for a short trip.

Our aim with this programme was to give the participants the basic skills to be self-sufficient in sheltered environments, enjoying group canoe/kayaking sessions. In addition, the pathway to progress further and feel part of a wider community group is available through the local kayak club based at the centre. The sessions were all delivered by a minimum of UKCC level two British Canoeing instructors, who all have experience coaching individuals with different needs and ability levels.

This project is funded by the Active Local Together Fund pot from Sport England to bring communities together and to create more opportunities for groups to be active after Covid-19. The project, hosted at the Lee Valley White Water Centre, began in May 2023 and ran until September 2023. The project looked to cost £5,040. £1,600 from the Together Fund supported these associated costs, with the remaining £2,230 covered by LVRPA.

There were 3 key partners involved in this project:

- Herts Sport & Physical Activity Partnership
- Lee Valley Regional Park Authority
- Sport England – Together Fund



“I love the way the project has brought so many great people from the local community together that have come from so many different backgrounds. So many had never tried kayaking before and watching how the groups have helped each other and learned together to overcome challenges has been a major theme of the whole project.” Paskell Blackwell Sport and Recreation Officer at Lee Valley Regional Park Authority

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Over 35 people took part in courses, with many participating for the full six weeks or longer. Many who took part are suffering from long term medical conditions and didn't think they would ever be able to enjoy kayaking to the level they achieved and have found a much more active and outgoing lifestyle very possible.

Paul Sherradon, a retired engineer, embarked on an invigorating new endeavour at 76, thanks to his participation in a "50+ Learn to Kayak" course. Paul's career as an engineer had been primarily office based and his sporting activities had dwindled over the years. Kayaking was foreign to him, having never tried the sport before. Paul's decision to venture into kayaking was sparked by an advertisement shared by his wife, highlighting the opportunity provided by the six week kayaking course.

The six week course, aimed at individuals over 50 who are less active or living with long term medical conditions, eliminated previous obstacles, such as financial constraints, thanks to its affordable fee, made possible through the funding support. The kayaking programme had a profoundly positive impact on Paul. It rekindled his sense of adventure, dispelling that age should limit new experiences. The camaraderie of the group and the friendly atmosphere fostered by the instructors made him feel socially engaged and confident about trying new things.

He said: "This course gave me a positive feeling that I can do more. As I have got older, I feel I have shrunk away from things, but this has made me feel so much better about new things. It is very friendly and very sociable".

Paul's enthusiasm for kayaking has opened the door to further adventures. He expressed a desire to continue kayaking and even explore white water rafting. His eagerness to embrace new challenges is a testament to the programme's success in instilling a sense of empowerment and curiosity amongst the 50 plus age group.

Kayaking is a low impact activity improving participants' aerobic fitness, strength and flexibility. Specific health benefits include: improved cardiovascular fitness, increased muscle strength, particularly in the back, arms, shoulders and chest, from moving the paddle, increased torso and leg strength, as the strength to power a canoe or kayak comes mainly from rotating the torso and applying pressure with your legs and a reduced risk of wear-and-tear on joints and tissues, since paddling is a low impact activity.

Annie Thomas, a 71 year old retired PE teacher, embarked on a transformative journey when she decided to participate in a 50+ kayaking program at Lee Valley White Water Centre. Annie's participation in the kayaking programme had a profoundly positive impact on her life. Notably, it boosted her confidence, particularly in aquatic environments where she previously felt uncomfortable. She was not alone in her journey; Annie observed how her fellow group members grew in confidence and developed strong social bonds. Through the programme, Annie found new friends and a sense of belonging within the group, something she had not experienced in a new setting for quite some time.

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Annie now feels empowered to take on new challenges and is eager to help others discover the joy of learning and having fun. Her journey is far from over as she expressed a keen interest in kayaking and plans to start a 50+ tennis course in the coming weeks. Her enthusiasm is a testament to the positive impact of the kayaking programme, which has not only given her newfound confidence but also sparked her curiosity about other activities.

The course adapted a little as it went along with the last group wanting to take their individual flat water assessments at the Centre. After passing this, the five successful candidates can return to the Centre during open hours and hire equipment to paddle the lake unguided or coached as they have reached the safe standard. This is something we will look to add on to the last week in all of our courses from now on and along with the possibility of joining the local Lee Valley Paddlesports club.

After this initial course, the group can progress in several ways to suit their abilities and desires. They can advance onto gently moving water, progressing to the point they are skilled in navigating the white water (if they desire). Alternatively, they can continue to work on their flat-water skill and continue social sessions that are progressive, but more social outcome focused. They can join the local Lee Valley Paddlesport Club, now providing open sessions for kayakers or further courses to develop their skills.

This course has had a real positive impact on me. It has improved my confidence, especially in the water, which I was always uncomfortable in before this course. It has also been great to see the group I started with grow in confidence and socialise with each other so well.

I have found new friends in this group and feel a part of a team which is something I have not experience in a new situation for such a long time. It makes me feel I can do so much more and that I can help others do things and have fun”

– Annie Thomas, a 71 year old retired PE teacher.

