

Active Reach Phase 2: the stories

Active Reach Phase 2

Active Reach aims to support residents in areas of high deprivation in Oxfordshire to keep physically active during Covid-19 and overcome some of the inequalities surrounding physical activity. The project targets low socio-economic groups, people with long-term health conditions and disabilities, and Black, Asian Minority Ethnic groups. It is funded by the Sports England Tackling Inequalities Fund and is led by Active Oxfordshire in collaboration with local partners. Phase 2 of Active Reach began in October 2020 with a focus on the Banbury and Grimsbury area. It involved a range of local charities and organisations including Banbury Mosque, St Leonard's Church, The Lighthouse, Aspire, Age UK Oxfordshire, Oxfordshire Mind and Cherwell District Council.

Storytelling Evaluation

To evaluate the impact of phase 2 of Active Reach, we've used the storytelling evaluation methodology - an evaluation approach used by the Old Fire Station, which is based on the Most Significant Change technique. The process involves collecting stories from participants about their experience of a project, and then analysing these stories in a participatory way to draw out the themes and learning.

The stories shared here were collected from 6 people involved in different ways in phase 2 of Active Reach – staff, community partners and activity participants.

OFS story collectors had conversations with these individuals (the storytellers) about their experience and what it meant to them. These conversations were recorded and transcribed, and then edited down into shorter stories which aim to faithfully reflect the storyteller's insights into impact and significance, whilst keeping their 'voice' in the story – telling it in their own words.

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You're Never on your Own

I'm a member of the Lighthouse Church. Over lockdown I was involved with the sports activities as a participant. It's something a member of the Church brought to everyone. They set challenges every month, targets for walking certain distances. It was voluntary, but it's something I thought was a good idea. I felt like, 'Okay, I need to be a bit fitter, and with the Covid, if you're vulnerable, you won't fare well with it.' That made me try and get myself a bit fitter. So I got involved.

Personally, I liked it because of the nature of my work. I'm a nurse. It's work to home, work to home. Given the nature of our work, you are on your feet a lot. And it looks like you're exercising, but you aren't really. By the time you come home you're tired, you just want to put up your feet. The last thing you want to do is more exercise. This was an opportunity to do that extra thing and look forward to it.

The experience was good. The way it was set up, as a challenge, made it motivating. Given Covid, and everyone putting on so much weight, it was really the time. And the streets were empty, you almost had the outdoors to yourself, so you could go about without feeling like you were putting other people at risk, or yourself. It was definitely beneficial, during lockdown, the walking challenge. Very timely. Something to get us out, given that there wasn't a lot going on.

Previously, I've not been a very physically active person. I don't like exercise and things like that. But I gave it a go. And I liked it, actually it was the only way, I felt, to get me out. I need that extra push. It was having that support and knowing that other people are doing it. And having a target. So it did change my mind and convince me that actually, this is something I need to do.

I feel like I need to continue doing it because it was definitely helpful health-wise, you feel better in yourself. It puts you in a better mood, and it's a distraction. We met up with each other separately too, you cross paths with people. So it's good for your psychology, for your mental health. And definitely good for your physical health too. I found I even slept better. You have these very deep, nice sleeps.

If you are a nurse, you do need something like that, you do need to recoup, doing the exercise. I guess it's one of those things you know you need to do, but you never get around to doing it, even though you know the benefits of exercise. But for some of us it's harder than others. It's one of those things I just put off. I will do it. I will. But then something actually comes along and makes you do it, so that was a good thing.

I think it was also knowing you're doing it with other people. That was the motivation that helped push things along. And I think what made it especially good was the lady who was running it, she's called Emma. She's a really good motivator. She created this group, where people chatted and kept in touch. It was more fun than exercise. She made it really interesting, so even on the days you couldn't walk for whatever reason, you felt like you've missed out on something. It was a good experience that I wish had carried on a bit longer. I missed it when it stopped. Now they brought in the gym. I don't know, they figured people are tired of this and they need something different.

I've been part of the Church congregation for nearly five years. I first arrived in England around 2014, I was in Salisbury then Reading. I was married to someone who was in the army, so we did move around a lot. Then I moved to Banbury at the end of 2016, and when I first moved I met a lady who introduced me to the Church. She was of African nature, lovely, you know, one of those people who picks up on the fact that you're new and you need to be shown around. Yes, she did orient me and she was honestly God-sent. So she invited me to the Church and eventually I made my way there.

It's a small church, a small community – everyone knows everyone. But also the Church has different departments. And I'm involved in some of those things as well. So we do things together, mostly voluntary. Who can help with this? Who can organise that? Things like that. It is a good support network. It's majority Africans, and of course that gives you a lot in common, but there's people from other ethnicities, so it's a good blend. People get along very well.

My life started to make sense, I think, to settle down properly when I moved to Banbury. I am honestly in a good place, compared to when I first arrived. Things have progressed well and I've settled in. The Church has a lot of good people. I do have two girls, so they've helped me a lot with them, I've had a lot of support. And these are people not even from my home country. But you know how Africans are – they do help a lot! So there is this sense of belonging. I like that the Church comes up with a lot of programmes to keep people in each other's lives. So you're never lonely. You're never on your own.

A Job worth Doing

It was normal life. It was what we knew. And it was, you know, ticking along. We were making progress. And eh, yeah, then lockdown hit.

I lead the Active Reach programme across Oxfordshire. 'Fighting inactivity, tackling inequality' is our tagline. It's funded by the Tackling Inequalities Fund from Sport England. The way it works is slightly complicated actually, thinking about it. They release the funding, and that comes to us to distribute to local partners. And what they asked us to do is to really reach culturally diverse communities, low economic areas, people with disabilities and long-term health conditions, those that have been really affected more than the general public by Covid.

I enjoy the office environment, and that bouncing off colleagues, and then suddenly you're at home, on your own, in essence. I found the motivation quite hard. And then the devices, you know, we only had our work laptops. So I'm trying to marry up children's lessons, work, my meetings with project meetings. And there were times when it was Zoom meetings or Teams meetings from nine in the morning to five in the afternoon. I think from the start, I knew it was going to be messy.

We found the people we're trying to work with faced a lot of barriers accessing anything, accessing basic daily needs, let alone being more active. And it was quite interesting because, more so than ever before, the general public realised firstly how important being active was, but also how much they enjoyed it, and how maybe some people had lost that and didn't really make the time for it.

I particularly wanted to reach those organisations that don't actually do any physical activity at the moment, but have a really good reach, whether it's a faith organisation or a social organisation. If we keep going out to physical activity organisations, we're gonna reach the same people, and we're not going to reach those who actually aren't active and don't engage for a variety of reasons. So, for me, the difference was that this was a variety of organisations – local organisations and non-traditional sporting organisations.

We wouldn't have been able to do it in such a short timescale, you know, in a pandemic, virtually, without the support of the District Council, and from the willingness of those organisations to step up and actually work in a really difficult time for everyone. Their enthusiasm to support their communities just, just blew us away really. We're very lucky, because ultimately, we access the funding, coordinate and submit all the funding bids, but really, working with partners to target those who need it most in the right areas – that's such a privilege. It was wonderful to be able to do that in that timescale.

Everything completely changed with the pandemic, it was just very eye opening and freeing to be able to explore a different way of doing things. Being able to make new relationships, in this case, but they're all virtual, which was very strange. I have a hearing impairment and I struggle a little bit on screens, but I got used to it, and I've had to adapt to it. You have group meetings and lots of other projects on the go. It's been quite a strain and a stress. But this has been kind of the light of my lockdown, I suppose. In fact, I'm seeing volunteers, organisations, working in the most difficult situations you could imagine, really putting in their time and effort and enthusiasm. I'm seeing smiling faces coming back. And that, that has made me able to deal with lockdown, with the kids at home, home schooling. That's kept me going and kept my enthusiasm and motivation because I'm seeing it – I'm seeing a difference being made to people's lives and I think that's such a wonderful thing and real source of pride for me. And to be in such difficult circumstances, and see light and

positive things happening, but as a result of your work is, is, just, yeah, I suppose it's building confidence, building motivation, where perhaps it was not there because of circumstances.

I was very scared of failure and getting things wrong. I don't want to get things wrong. I don't think many people do. But actually, to learn and to get things right, sometimes you have to fail. I personally have learned that from this project. A lot of the time you have to report how successful everything was and how it went swimmingly, 'wasn't it great'. And actually, ironically, there has been so many positive outcomes from this project but along with that in the background, and with partners, we're experiencing failures and challenges on a daily basis. You start to fear it less when, actually, you can see positives coming out of addressing that and realise that by recording and sharing those difficult situations we can help our learning and understanding for the future, so that definitely has been a learning experience for me. I think that's what I'll take into future projects, I'll be a bit braver and a bit more challenging, and not be scared to fail.

We're on this planet for who knows how long, and I think if you can experience some happiness throughout that, and if physical activity and what I do and the support we give can help and support people with that, then I think it's a job worth doing.

I Love People

I love people. I've always been drawn to the jobs that allow me to help others and during the COVID 19 lockdown, I was determined to support the community.

I came to Banbury in 1999 with my husband's job. I worked for about 14 years for a local primary school, I was a teaching assistant there. I later changed my job as I found that the children were growing up, and I needed to do something good in my spare time. One day, I was flicking through a Tesco magazine and they were talking about landfill, food waste and what happens to it. Intrigued, I contacted them to see how I could go about collecting food, and I also contacted Banbury Mosque to suggest a possible collaboration. Though I'm a practicing Muslim, I had very little involvement with Banbury Mosque at the time. After about four or five months, we started holding meetings together with Sanctuary and Cherwell Council discussing our goals, and the first community fridge evolved from there.

Very soon, it was noticed that I was working a lot with Banbury Mosque. As they didn't have anyone representing them in the outer community or with partners, I stepped up to the task. One of my first contacts was Tom Gubbins, from Active Oxfordshire, who works on sports and recreational programmes. Tom wanted me to speak to the community and was interested in doing a class for children in the local community. Banbury Mosque had never done anything like this before, so we were nervous, and a lot of work had to be done from both sides to get partners to work together.

Whilst working on these projects, COVID 19 sent us into a lockdown. The Food Bank was closed, but our food collections were still running, and we had to do something with it. Banbury Mosque had no email and had no telephone number, so on the first night of the nationwide lockdown, I quickly organised this. It was almost like starting from the beginning. Lots of local partners wanted to support us in any way they could, particularly as COVID had greatly impacted the BAME communities, and there was much need in our local Grimsbury area. Our food bank was going from strength to strength. We were delivering food parcels to whoever needed one, and for many, we were the first point of contact that they'd had since the beginning of the lockdown.

When restrictions finally lifted, we expected this to be the end of our community support. But very quickly, we noticed the impact we had had on the community. Mental health was increasing, reliance on technology and IT meant that the gap between young and old was widening. We then evolved from providing food to the community, to educating the community - educating adults, educating children, running mental health courses, offering Zoom workshops, and also worked alongside local schools. We also opened the hygiene bank and a clothes bank alongside the community fridge.

COVID during the Christmas period was the most difficult. My spirits were low at that time due to a personal bereavement. However, we continued to offer classes, including Mental Health and First Aid Training for ladies in the community via Zoom.

There was also a Personal Trainer (PT) course arranged by Tom as part of Active Reach. I did the PT course myself during the winter lockdown to make use of the time. It was a fantastic six-week course and when the lockdown lifted again, I was able to attend the college to pass the practical exam and become a qualified PT instructor. That was something good that had come out of the lockdown - where you've gone from not knowing anything to becoming a PT. Never in a million years did I think I'd do that!

And never in a million years did I think we'd have a gym so close to the Mosque! The chairman of the Mosque and his brother bought it. Now our classes can be held at the gym without having to worry about speaking to the instructor or the manager, and we can hire the gym out anytime we want. I work there 10 hours a week too to support it as a newly opened venture. We also have two other PTs who qualified alongside me, and now deliver classes for the community. We organised a lady's night at the gym so ladies can exercise independently in a safe, secure environment which is what they wanted.

The community wants to get fit, they want to get healthy, they want to do this. We have nutrition sessions coming in September. Our swimming lessons started three weeks ago, and we have 37 women attending on a Friday night for private swimming. There are also 12 children and another 9 ladies learning to swim. We have children's exercises classes coming soon and for the over 40s we are going to have a group where they can use the cardiovascular machines. There's plenty for all ages. I don't know how I've done it really! I do believe that part of it is that my journey has been blessed from my Lord. Without him nothing happens. So - I can't say it's me, it's the will of God. If I hadn't done it, then I think things would have just stopped. I think you also get this inner power when you see something succeed and I believe that drive inspires you to continue.

During this time, I was furloughed but worked three times as much as a volunteer. Banbury Mosque is now on the map, and I'm really pleased for them, of what they've done, what they've achieved. And it wasn't just myself; I also had a group of volunteers supporting the work that I organised.

The Mosque community was not working closely with the Council and authorities before, but now they're wholly integrated. There were a lot of provisions out there that weren't being used because the Council did not know how to collaborate with the Mosque and did not have a liaison. Now the Council and other organisations know what the community would like. For instance, they understand the desire for segregated classes, and they have provided this for us.

The Prophet says, "Make sure your neighbour does not sleep on an empty stomach, make sure your neighbour is fed". I think I've done this on a level. We've made sure that they're fed, and that they have provisions. I have made sure that they have better lifestyles and life skills, all aided by the PT courses, exercise and educational classes for the adults and children.

I'm hoping that after all this work that has been put in, there will be a bit more time for myself, so I can enjoy what I've helped to establish. But I wish I'd kept a diary of everything because it would have been so lovely for my children to show their children what I've achieved.

The Elation in their Eyes

At Achieve Oxfordshire, I'm a full-time practitioner. I deliver programs for weight loss management, cognitive-behavioural change, mental health pathways, all that sort of thing. And then my side-line is my fitness company, Enjoy Fitness Oxon. I deliver personal training sessions and obviously do contractor work for Aspire, which is through the Active Reach project. With the gym being shut over lockdown, Aspire got in touch with me to ask if I'd continue online. I said, 'Of course I will, these people still need physical activity.' So everything had to be done virtually. I had to adjust all my face-to-face classes, so everything happened in my living room.

I have built my relationship with Aspire and Active Reach, that helped bring all of this about. We've got good foundations in place, we understand each other. Initially, I used to volunteer. They started paying me when we started doing virtual classes, that's when they had the funding. And that was fantastic for me, obviously, financially. But to be honest, if there hadn't been funding, I would have done it anyway. For me, it's a vocation. Just seeing people smile, the elation, the way their faces change online. That was really important. At first, I thought, 'Can I do this, do I want to do this?' The world was shut down, I had my daughter to worry about, who had Covid and was very poorly in isolation in her bedroom, then my younger daughter and my partner as well. But I realised people were going to need support mentally, physically and emotionally. I just took it one day at a time.

We got the session running online on Fridays. And, you know, it was so nice. The first week, you just think 'Oh nobody's going to turn up.' And I've had over twelve people joining the session to do some exercise. In terms of their mental health, or recovery and things like that, they really needed that contact. I would have to make sure the session that was delivered was for anybody – people completely new to exercise, or somebody that was regularly coming along. It was a very diverse group of people. Some people were on some medication. One guy, he's got challenges with balance etc, but they managed to set him up on Zoom. He couldn't do all the activities, but it didn't matter he loved being part of the session. It makes my eyes prickly, just that simple free session on a Friday for people to come along, do some activity and socialise, and you'd get regular committed people every week.

I could see everybody in their houses, living rooms, they could see me. We'd just start off with a light warm up, and then spend half an hour doing some aerobic moves, combined with core focus strength and having some fun together creating some unity. We'd then spend at least 15 minutes doing just relaxation, and stretching exercises, just to wind everybody back down, to bring us back into balance. We always finished with a couple of breathing exercises just to get any negative energy out of everybody's body. We would then go and break for five minutes and grab a coffee, and then we would share a half hour of mindfulness. We would do some meditation, breathing exercises.

A lot of the sessions, as we were going further into lockdown, we did a lot of talking about mental health, trying to figure out what we could do to support each other, sharing things, understanding things, there was lots of tears at times. It became a really safe space, not just for me, but everybody that was there. People felt trust. And it was just really lovely. It was about creating a sense of unity, community, talking, sharing, you know, and everybody feeling really vulnerable. In that situation, everybody felt supported, I think because we started swapping things, ideas, feelings. People were struggling with food and money. We started talking and trying to give each other pathways – food banks, community larders, stop smoking services, alcohol support, weight loss. All those different elements of my job came into supporting these people, just being there each week. That 10 to 12 slot was sometimes emotional, but most of the time happy. People really opened up, we shared and understood. Since then, some of us have met up, and a lot of that group have continued to come to

the face-to-face group. They've got that sense of a community security; it gives them the confidence to leave their house.

The other program I worked on through Active Reach was with Banbury Mosque, supporting the set-up of a gym that women can use. I remember going in there and just seeing the stress on the coordinator's face, like a bunny in headlights. I've been supporting her to understand the mechanisms of getting the gym set up, getting people qualified, helping them nutritionally, setting up their IT system, just building relationships over at the Mosque. To be able to offer the ladies from that community safety and comfort in coming into a gym, that's massive. Just seeing the elation in their eyes that they've got something that allows them to come out of their homes, and they can do safely, and they're allowed to do it – we can't ask for more.

I'm very grateful that I had the opportunity to do all of this in lockdown. And also, I was thankful to have a job. But also for my own mental health, you know, I was affected mentally through lockdown the same as everybody else. So, it's a journey of self-discovery for me, but also about what I can do for others. I truly believe that everybody – doesn't matter what the situation, good, bad or ugly – everybody deserves the same opportunities. And just to give them a simple thing like exercise, to trigger their mental health in a positive way. That's huge for me, huge. Let's take the complexities away as much as we can.

I think a lot of people have gone back to basics, you know. We don't need all these materialistic things in life, what we need is to talk to each other more, understand each other more, share things more. And what's a massive for me is that people need to recognise that everybody has a limitation to their mental health. I really hope moving forward, that there's a huge investment in giving people mental health and wellbeing support. We live in a very affluent country, you know, people need to be aware of the services that they have out there and they're not, they don't know.

Covid has made me really passionate about it, that people need this help. People have become even more vulnerable. I've always wanted to help people, but to really focus on the mental health side, that desire does sort of come from seeing people struggle through this time. This pandemic has had a detrimental impact on people's lives, and we're not just going to flick a switch, it's not going to just change instantly. Some people haven't left their homes for over two years, nearly. And that's frightening. They're scared to go to their front gate, you know.

I'm just worried that now, people will just switch back into hustle, bustle, buying, selling. Please, just stop doing that. In the midst of that, things get lost, actual feelings, understanding, caring and just being there for people. I don't want to see people suffer. Nobody needs to suffer in silence.

I Wanted to Learn, I Wanted to do it

I'm a teaching assistant full-time at the local school, I've been there about five years. I'm also the safeguarding governor at the school, and I'm part of the team which looks into religious education and engagement as well. I'm also involved in raising money to install water pumps in poor areas of Pakistan, and I volunteer and help with the Date project where you sell tins of dates to support Syria, Yemen, Palestine and loads of other places.

I've known Yasmin from the Mosque for quite a long time because she does a lot of things in the community. With the school having links with the Mosque, we sort of stay in contact through that too. And then we used to both go to Pure Gym together as well, and I took my daughters on some of the other swimming stuff she's involved with, things that they've done with the County Council. I think she probably just saw that I was quite into fitness and I think that's probably why she thought of me. She contacted me and asked me if I would be interested in doing a course, it was a gym-based Exercise Level Two course. And I just said "yeah!". I'm quite into fitness anyway, and I just thought it would help me and she said that once completed, maybe we could do some lessons for the community. And I thought at the same time, I will get fit, and also, our community of women will benefit.

I've been going to the gym for a long, long time now anyway, and I've always tried to incorporate it into my life. As long as I've had a good workout and sweat, I just feel good. I really enjoy going to the gym, I enjoy boxing, I enjoy swimming. So yeah, for me doing classes and helping others is not a chore - it's very enjoyable. If I don't exercise, I kind of get a bit depressed or feel down; you feel sluggish, you feel tired. Like the whole lockdown, obviously all the gyms were closed, so I struggled a lot with that and then obviously, like most people, I put on weight during Covid. Now everything's started to open up, I think it's given me confidence to go back and continue with it and get back to being fit and healthy again.

I think I had to enrol for the course in December or November - I can't remember at the moment because I was in between moving homes at the time. They sent me about six or seven booklets in the post and some PowerPoints. What I found quite difficult was that there wasn't any supporting lessons with them. While I was working at school, we would do Zoom lessons every day with the children. So I was used to Zoom, and I found it very strange that they didn't have that. They literally just gave me the booklets and were like, "here you go, get on with it". I think at the beginning, we had two Zoom check-ins, but no one had their cameras on, so I just ended up switching my camera off too.

I ended up doing pretty much all of my own research and then I'd go back and look through the PowerPoint just to check if what I had filled out was correct. I think because I'm in education I found it easier to do. I think if it was someone else, they would have really, really struggled to complete it by themselves with no motivation, or someone checking in. I think there was ten people on the course to start, but by the end there was only four of us.

There was a lot to know and learn by yourself with no support apart from in the Easter holidays, when we had four days of in-person lessons from 9 till 5. We had that with Dan and Dan was brilliant. He's from Activate and he had four of us who were just, like, clueless! I can imagine how stressful it was for him, and then obviously trying to get us to pass as well. I felt very, very sorry for him, but he was brilliant. You know, he helped out loads. When I failed my first anatomy exam, he sent me a list of all the areas that I failed on, which I needed to revise, so I knew what to focus my revision on. So he was very good like that. And I knew I could email him at any time. He was very

helpful. But aside from those four days, I think all of us just felt like we were in over our heads with the course.

All of it was pretty interesting. Once I knew it all and I passed my exams, I was very proud. I was happy with doing the course because I wanted to learn, I wanted to do it. I didn't realise how much personal trainers or even gym instructors have to know. And then we had to do a practical exam as well, an hour lesson, where you're observed throughout the whole thing. So that was quite daunting as well. I think it was only easy for me because I've been going to the gym for so long and working out, but for someone who's never done that, they would really struggle.

I was really, really nervous doing my first class, but then once I'd delivered it, I really enjoyed it. And the ladies really enjoyed it and I got really, really good feedback. I've tried to switch it up so they don't get bored. Like I've changed the music every week. I've also changed the exercises; I've picked up on stuff that they like doing. Like at the moment they're obsessed with the plank. Yesterday I taught a spin class and afterwards they're like, "please can we do a plank!". Even though we don't even do it in spin, but they were like, "we just want to see how long we can last". So I ended up getting Yasmin to time us and I said, "right, your target is 30 seconds, but then next week we'll up it 5 to 10 seconds".

It's mainly Asian women that go to the classes, but you do get some other women as well. This is because basically Yasmin has locked off the gym as 'ladies only' for two days a week, so no men are allowed. A lot of Asian women don't end up going to the gym because they're not allowed to freely mix or don't feel comfortable. The gym itself is really good, it's very clean, they've got all the weights and the cardio machines, there's different rooms as well that you could go into if you didn't want to work out in the open gym. You can tell Yasmin has added her feminine touch too! It's got like plants, lamps and candles and it smells lovely. So I think it appeals to the women who you wouldn't ever normally see going to the gym, and it's encouraging them to come forward and to exercise.

There's definitely a mix of ages at the classes, so you get a lot of teenage girls and then a lot of older women as well. Ladies who are like in their 40s or possibly a little bit older, I feel like they're just so busy in their lives. Either they're working or they're at home with kids, and they're just always doing things for their family - I don't feel like they give that time to themselves. I feel personally that going to the gym is a bit of a luxury, because it does sort of take you away from home and all the pressures and stress of home and work. And if I wasn't at the gym I wouldn't be at home in bed chilling or watching TV, I would just end up cleaning, cooking or ironing or washing, you just do end up doing other things constantly. And if you just have that one hour or even 45 minutes to yourself, where you're doing something for you, and something that's benefiting you rather than other people, well I just feel like a lot of them don't do that, they don't give themselves that time.

I've made friends as well which is nice! Exercise makes me happy, so it's nice that I can make other people happy through exercise as well. Unless you get into it, you start doing it regularly, you don't realise the impact it can have not just on your physical self, but your mental health as well. I feel like I don't need to sit down and talk to anyone, I just need to go to the gym and workout. I just feel like if I'm physically well, then mentally I end up feeling well as well. So I think that's another reason why the course really, really helped.

Getting back to how it Started

I didn't have any real ambition other than I wanted to leave the Air Force. I didn't want to move back to parents or grandparents or anything. I started working as a personal trainer (a PT), in a commercial gym in Aylesbury. That's how I ended up down south. Things picked up quite well, so I left the RAF officially about three or four years ago, and I've been doing PT and coaching ever since.

Active Reach was just through Nikki from Aspire reaching out to me. I think we went for a coffee or a walk and we just discussed the idea and we went from there. It's from the ground up. It's very much like boxing for fitness, teaching the fundamentals. There's a lot of components to it: there's the let's get people together in a social setting and have fun, and then there's the let's get them improving their boxing fitness skills.

One or two have trained before, but they're mostly beginners. I was a late bloomer into boxing, I feel like I started in my late 20s early 30s, I was never a natural, so I'm super patient with them. There was a guy getting two buses in, and stuff like that. You think about what times he's setting off to get two buses and the hassle and expense of it – clearly, he perceived great value in the sessions. That was humbling.

I took over after another coach left, who was actually from the same town as me. We had two good sessions in Oxford, lockdown hit, and then we went onto Zoom. Zoom was brilliant, but it was also a challenge. Once you get to week five of Zoom, week six of Zoom, the numbers started dropping apart from two or three diehards. And people had issues with technology; they didn't always have access to Wi-Fi or good devices and tablets, so it was a big challenge for some.

Now we're just so excited to get back to in-person. They've got me down the mosque, training the kids, training the adults, and then training the trainers to eventually hand that over. The numbers there have been really good, the first one had like nine kids, and then ten, eleven, twelve. They're all calling me coach, they're all excited, and they've been practising in the mirrors and stuff. I didn't actually realise that it was going to be kids initially. I've got a lot of experience coaching teenagers, men, women, but not actually kids. It was a bit of a step up, getting them to listen to you and switch on and stuff. An adult really wants to get the 'why' but kids get bored. You almost become a little entertainer every now and again, asking who are their favourite boxers, and have you seen this kind of stuff? And it's really the language, the tonality is pretty different.

For Active Reach and Aspire, it was about getting people together and giving them something positive to focus on. I just kind of did my thing, but the wider picture was very much to get people focusing on something positive, to highlight the importance of exercise and fitness, and probably serve as a distraction for some if they had more stresses and issues and frustrations going on in life. It reminded me of my background, I'm a council estate kid. It was almost like, you know, I'm working with the same kind of people that were where I'm from, that kind of area, similar problems or issues or experiences.

I said to my girlfriend, and I think I said it to Nikki – Aspire generally isn't actually that viable when you wake up, you know... petrol and travel. In a commercial gym I would have back-to-back clients for three, four, five, six hours. But Aspire became something I wanted to do. I felt like I was doing my little bit. It makes you appreciate what you got. Silly little things, like realising not everyone has access to Wi-Fi to do the boxing. It's just such a simple thing you take for granted. Or they haven't got a phone that can handle Zoom. There're people out there going through a lot financially, physically, emotionally. It just gives you a bit of empathy towards people. Not that I didn't have it,

but it just reminds you. And I just like coaching, I love seeing someone go from A to B and improve their standards, and I love when people enjoy something and the value of the coaching.

In school I was called Motor Mouth. If I know what I'm talking about, if I've got an experience, I'll happily talk all day. But in the forces, I was known as the Grey Man, because I hid in the numbers, just kind of blended in. So, it's really weird. PT's definitely brought me out my shell. I've got my own podcast, although I haven't done one for a couple of months. I do videos in my groups, and Instagram and social media and stuff. My face is out there a lot more. Without boxing-for-fitness, I probably wouldn't have got started as a PT. It's like an outlet if you like. With the whole lockdown and stuff, like time being compressed, I think it was about 18 months, I worked out, since I'd last held pads with anyone. It was really nice to get back to coaching boxing and boxing-for-fitness and pad work. I've not really been sharpening my skills for a long, long time. It was getting back to how it started for me.