

Partnerships Case Study 3



Ruils & Cambridge Park Bowls Club
Gary Williams, Ruils Community & Volunteer Manager



Background of the organisation

Ruils is a charity run by and for disabled people. We support disabled children, adults and the elderly to live independent lives by providing information, advice, advocacy, practical support, activities, and befriending. Cambridge Park Bowls Club have been in Twickenham since 1921.

Tell us about the history of the partnership (who approached who?)

A mutual friend introduced me (Gary) to the Chairperson of Cambridge Park Bowls Club in East Twickenham. In that meeting I outlined the ambition to start up our first sport-focused activity group. At the same time, Cambridge Park (CP) Bowls Club wanted to become much more diverse and inclusive in having disabled and younger members join their club and attract people who have not played the game before. We discovered lots of common ground, where CP Bowls Club wanted to be educated by Ruils with regard to our client base, and we wanted to offer this amazing activity for them. The weekly Ruils bowls activity launched in May 2022.

What have you learned from the partnership?

For many of the group who have mental health issues, the whole experience of playing bowls, and sharing experiences with their fellow players means that in those two hours they can put to one side the challenges they face every day. They are so engrossed in what they are doing, they can just exist in the present.



Were there any challenges along the way? How have you overcome these?

As with any activity, it takes time to get traction and momentum when starting a new group. As our clients are disabled, have mental health challenges and are lonely and isolated, it can be challenging to attend something new on a regular basis. However, within a year, we had 6–8 regular group members. One of the key challenges to evaluate at the planning stage was the



accessibility at the club for our users with mobility challenges and provide feedback to the club around this, eg. entry access, ramps, bowling green access, toilets, etc. We put in a joint bid with the bowls club for assisted technology equipment funding from SportTed. We needed to put in place portable ramps in the carpark, and there was an automatic door that opened the wrong way for electric scooter users that required attention.

The next stage will be to get a lift all the way down to the green so it will be even more accessible.

Any problems balancing the priorities of both partners?

None. We had the same goals and objectives, as CP Bowls Club and its new leadership wanted to become more diverse, inclusive and accessible, and we wanted to access activities for our clients out into the community. I was relatively new in the role, as was the Chair, and our ambitions for our roles coincided.

Any unexpected benefits?

What has struck me is how the group have come together socially. Before and after the bowls session, they sit down as a group and have great chats. It's lovely to see. I even get video links from one client who watches bowls events on YouTube.

What has been special for me in watching how our group has evolved is that outside of the beneficial physical and outdoor health and wellbeing benefits for our clients, it is the social interaction that has been achieved between a very diverse group of clients. Unusually compared to other activity groups, this group is predominantly men between 25–55 who are living with down syndrome, autism, mental health challenges and learning difficulties. To watch them chat over tea and cake half-way through a session about gaming, films, music, and other activities is joyous to watch.



The activity brings them together, the interaction is where the magic happens!

For the first 18 months, I oversaw the group each week, along with a member from the bowling club. However, since then when myself or the bowls staff haven't been available, the group has run itself.

Our clients have gone to other members to ask for what they need, they have become more independent, feeling comfortable within the club environment, taking responsibility for making it work without us supervising. This is at the heart of what Ruils is about. Our group feels empowered and it increases their independent living skills. Our bowls group is one of the highlights of the week for many of them.



We have also been able to use the bowls club for staff and volunteer social events. It is a great venue for them to connect with each other, share stories, meet staff they don't usually meet and have fun playing bowls as well.

What advice would you give to other charities considering partnerships?

Look for a common goal and synergies in your collaboration. Once you have that, all the other things follow from this shared ambition. The common purpose is the key, as once you have that, everything becomes easier. We wanted to deliver a new accessible sporting group activity for our clients, they wanted to access a new demographic for their club. From there everything becomes easier, you both try to make it work.



Patience! Once all scoped out, the next key challenge is achieving traction and engagement through the promotion of the activity. You need to accept it takes time to build momentum, and achieve a regular base of client members. We targeted our current clients with our plans, our Social Prescribing network to generate new client referrals, and social media within the local community. Once the engagement kicks in, then suddenly it becomes word of mouth, where one of our members tells a friend who tells a friend and they want to join, then you have a core of members who want to be as much a part of the social activity as the activity itself.

What's next?

Phase One of our bowls activity has been a great success, culminating in winning the Richmond Upon Thames Borough Community Heroes Project of the Year Award in May 2023.

In 2024 we will be working with the club to secure funding to provide Stannah lifts onto the indoor and outdoor rinks to enable all wheelchair users, irrespective of their health condition, access to play. With regard to our activity's success, the best way to demonstrate that, is with our client's feedback:



5 years ago, I suffered a stroke that left me paralyzed on my left side. Since then I have strived to find activities that I could do, rather than lamenting what was no longer possible. The Ruils bowls group has given me an opportunity to join in with a sport that I can do sitting down! Everyone in the group has been so friendly and supportive it has been a very motivational experience and has given me the confidence to try more new things". Mike Townend

Ruils is really a life changing organisation. I am a 'different person' since my doctor referred me to Ruils. It's a wonderful organisation, with super staff. It has made me feel really happy, very happy and like a 'normal' member of society. It has also made me feel fitter. I absolutely love bowling and am so grateful for this activity." Christina Von Cramm

Cambridge Park Bowls Club:

"We are delighted to have been working with Ruils over the last two years, in our desire to become more inclusive in terms of membership diversity. Cambridge Park Bowling and Sports Club has been providing a regular playing slot (with coaching) for Ruils' members. This exciting venture has been of benefit to both groups as the partnership has been recognised in winning the Community Heroes Project of the Year in 2023. We are now moving to Phase 2 in ensuring that we improve disabled access throughout the premises and seek to expand the opportunities for people with a broader range of physical and mental difficulties".

Angela Cumine, Chairperson (2019-2023)