



Photo: Bolsover District Council

Bolsover Village Games Officer Laura Stephen



Derbyshire's Village Games

Bolsover

With the clock ticking down to the 2012 Olympics, Lissa Cook talks to the Derbyshire Village Games team about a new community-based model to get people fitter and healthier in Bolsover, and an ambitious partnership with government and business aiming to get a thousand villages across the whole country more active

Talking to the youngest member of the Derbyshire Village Games team, 22-year-old Laura Stephen, about her work in the former mining area of Bolsover has been a trip down memory lane for me. On a clear day you could see the fairytale ramparts of Bolsover Castle from the home where I grew up. My father took on the family chemical engineering business in Carr Vale from his father. Ten years ago my mother stood valiantly for the Lib Dems against the Beast of Bolsover, Dennis Skinner – one of Labour's longest serving MPs in one of the safest seats in the country. Huge efforts have been made to help rebuild a community devastated by the closure of the

collieries. The new M1 junction, business park, nature reserves and the redevelopment of the old Market Square have all contributed to the economic and social regeneration of this historic town.

The Derbyshire Village Games may be Laura's first job since graduating with a degree in sports development from Leeds Metropolitan last year, yet she has years of experience under her belt. She's been coaching since she was 16. Her down-to-earth approach is refreshing: 'I wasn't great at sport – I just liked playing it. I was always the joker on the team at school – I was never the first pick but I'd always have a go at anything.' She fell into coaching by accident. 'I started because my sister's school didn't have a netball

club. It went really well and I thought, "If I can do this, there must be lots of other people who can too." I realised that I didn't have to be great to help other people play.'

Her inclusive approach is paying dividends. She's delighted by the unexpected hit of the Bolsover Village Games – supporting the council's 'Change for Life' programme of activities for older people living in sheltered housing. The residents weren't getting enough exercise because their homes are too close to the leisure centre to justify a bus or taxi but it was too far for them to walk. She started doing skittles and boccia in the living room and it's taken off and will soon include a fourth home. Laura says: 'I really enjoy these sessions – the

DERBYSHIRE VILLAGE GAMES: BOLSOVER



Creswell Crags Sport Relief Mile



Photo: Bolsover District Council



Residents at Ashbourne Court in Shirebrook playing Skittles



Back 2 Rounders in Clowne

residents are so competitive. Just put a ball in their hands and they are up and out of their chairs like a shot!’ The secret of her success is simple she says: ‘It’s just a case of finding out what people want and letting them choose. Too often people are given a programme and told what’s on offer. We do it the other way round – we find out where the activity needs to be held and at what time. There are no restrictions – we fit whatever they want where they want it. You can’t force a square peg in a round hole.’

It’s worked a treat in Clowne. A lady asked Laura’s help to set up Back to Netball sessions. Fifteen people came along the first week and 30 the second. Eighty women have signed up and they’re now running a winter session in Clowne and summer training in Creswell as well as advanced coaching. From that group, the ladies have set up a jogging group and two others started rounders in Clowne, which now gets

about 20 people a week. Laura obviously gets a lot out of her job herself: ‘It makes me realise I really love my job when you see people join in. The netball ladies had gone to fitness classes before but they get so much fun from the team game that they put more effort in. It’s about so much more than just getting fit.’

Councillor Ann Syrett, Cabinet Member for Social Inclusion, Bolsover District Council agrees: ‘The Village Games has brought an invaluable resource helping communities become more cohesive and take direct action in the development of activities on their doorstep. It’s all about empowering local people to bring their own ideas to fruition. Over the past year we have seen around 4,000 hours of community activity delivered.’ What Laura finds really rewarding is that now local people are hearing about the Village Games and stepping forward. ‘It doesn’t just depend on me running

everything. For example, the Change for Life Sheltered Housing programme will go on forever rain or shine now because they are doing activities in their own home with their own wardens.’

Sustainability is the key for Village Games Project Manager Hayley Lever: ‘In Bolsover there’s an exciting idea to develop “Active Hubs” – a one-stop shop for health and fitness focussed on small communities. We’ve piloted it in Tibshelf and are now expanding to set up Active Bolsover, Active Creswell and Active X. It brings together all the information about sports and activity sessions in a community in one place. The Council, sporting organisations, health authorities & local clubs, village halls, community centres and schools working together creates a programme of activity that’s much more than the sum of its parts. There could even be scope to develop this into a ground-breaking model for a community social enterprise.’