**Fit Villages**

Fit Villages is a popular, well established project which is run by Suffolk Sport and supported by Suffolk County Council and Sport England as part of Suffolk’s aim to be the Most Active County (MAC) in England. The project aims to bring physical activity to villages which do not have any other provision for people to be active or take part in a weekly exercise class. Sessions are run in village halls, community centres, church halls or village playing fields; this has a positive impact on local facilities, making good use of their space and helping to make them sustainable focal points of the village. Projects are usually set up when a member of the community contacts us to express their interest, and normally we then undertake a Consultation with local people to find out what activity they want to do, and when. Once the activity has been chosen, we find a local instructor to deliver the project and produce promotional resources. We provide kick-start funding to help get classes started; we usually run a free taster session followed by an 8 week subsidised course. Instructors are paid an agreed hourly rate to deliver the 8 week course, we pay for the village hall hire and fund refreshments at the end of sessions as well as subsidising the cost for participants to come and try the activity. At the end of the 8 weeks, a local volunteer – a “Fit Villages Activator” will become the main contact and lead for the project, liaising with the instructor, the village hall and the participants to keep the class going beyond our initial support. Fit Villages projects have proven to be very sustainable, with over 90% of projects continuing beyond the initial 8 weeks.

Popular activities include Otago, Keep Fit, Nordic Walking, Yoga, Pilates and Tai Chi, plus many others. These activities help to improve fitness, strength, balance and confidence of our participants. In addition to helping people be more active, the project helps to build communities and bring people together. This is especially important as more than 50% of our participants are aged over 65. Providing a local social opportunity for this age group is essential to combat rural isolation and loneliness, which can be common amongst this demographic living in rural areas.

**Understanding the Impact - Participant quotes:**

“I wouldn’t normally go to an exercise class because I would not feel comfortable. But I feel fine here. I think it’s because I know the people and it’s local” (Eye Bootcamp)

“I don’t know if I even do the exercises right, and I am not very good at it, but I really really enjoy it. I feel better for it” (Eye, Bootcamp)

“I loved the taster session. Since then you have inspired me to do more, so I’ve already been swimming twice and I feel better already” (Shimpling, Chair Based Pilates)

“I’ve never done an exercise class before but I’m really excited about it. I don’t get out enough, and I am turning 80 this year, so this is the time to change things” (Shimpling, Chair Based Exercise)

“Very enjoyable, very relaxed and informal. I have noticed that I have lost weight in doing this exercise” (Drinkstone, Circle Dancing)

“It brings fitness to the village. We also have yoga here & we like to think that everyone can be involved.” (Pilates, Freckenham)

“It is indeed good for the community. It does bring people together. Everybody enjoys it regardless of how fit they are or what age they are. They can all come & enjoy it in some shape or form & it is doing them good.” (Pilates, Freckenham)

“I have gone from half a mile to doing a mile & a half in 25 minutes. I feel so much better for doing it. And I’ve got the support of my girls as well. I call them my girls because they are all younger than me. And I have lost a stone & a half.” (Margaret: Running, Kessingland)

“We’ve all lost weight. It changes your shape. We’re all much fitter. And happier. And more confident as well.” (Running, Kessingland)

“It really is unique. I’ve never ever been in such a good group as this. It’s unique.” (Running, Kessingland)

“A lot of us now also go to the Great Run Local in Southwold on Sunday morning & I never would never have gone to that if I hadn’t of come to this group. That’s a friendly group too but this group has improved my Great Run Local hugely.” (Running, Kessingland)

“I can’t really put into words what a great initiative it’s been & how it’s changed my life completely to be quite honest.” (Running, Kessingland)

“Can I just say that I was a bit dubious about coming as I’ve had a new hip & I was really worried as to whether I could do all the steps, especially the grapevine when I was shown that, but actually so far I am managing them all & I am really pleased about that. It’s my weekly exercise.” (Circle Dancing, Drinkstone)

“We have a laugh. I like to have a laugh. It’s been brilliant. I’d miss it. I’d really miss this class if it wasn’t here.” (Chair Based Exercise, Great Waldingfield)

“I have lost 2 inches from my waist, just from doing this exercise once a week” (Shimpling, CB Pilates)

“I have awful sciatica in my back causing me serious pain every day. Since I started doing this class, the sciatica has gone. I can’t believe it. It’s amazing” (Shimpling, CB Pilates)

“An excellent experience, relaxing and good for gentle toning, better balance, and using the brain more on a new form of exercise” (Tai Chi, Mendham)

“The class is very well organised and our teacher is excellent. Tai Chi is a new experience for me and very enjoyable. Please keep it going!” (Tai Chi, Mendham)

“Beyond expectation - thoroughly enjoyable. Having never done any exercise before I didn't know how I would cope, but want to carry on now and do more.” (Tai Chi, Mendham)

“Tai Chi was a suggestion from us - it was taken up quickly and set up well. The instructor is first class and organisation is flexible enough to cope with the large number of initial participants. Overall an excellent experience.” (Tai Chi, Mendham)

“The project has been supportive throughout the inception. Maddy Knox from Suffolk Sport has been fantastic in organising everything.” (Tai Chi, Mendham)

“I have thoroughly enjoyed this completely new activity and doubts about whether I could cope with my new hip haven't arisen. Wonderful to be able to dance without pain. Never thought it could happen.” (Circle Dancing, Drinkstone)

“I have lost half a stone over the last 8 weeks, just from doing this Fit Villages activity and I am absolutely delighted”. (Circle Dancing, Drinkstone)