

Poor mental health and long-term unemployment: a reality for many of our young people today

The UK's young people are facing a mental and physical health epidemic with the number of A&E attendances by young people with a recorded diagnosis of a psychiatric condition more than tripling between 2010 and 2018-19, and the problem is only growing, with 80% of young people with mental health needs agreeing that the coronavirus pandemic had made their mental health worse. At the same time, while the record number of job vacancies in the UK suggests there is a world of opportunities for young people, figures show one in eight of those aged 18 to 24 are not in education, employment or training. Moreover, young people have been hit the hardest by rising unemployment during the pandemic, with those under the age of 35 accounting for almost 80% of jobs lost in the past year. Official figures show youth long-term unemployment has hit a five-year high, with the number of young people unemployed for more than a year in July to September 2021 increasing by 19% year on year.

Cycling Minds: aspiring to inspire

Cycling Minds CIC was incorporated in Hexham (Northumberland) in November 2021 by three locals with a love of cycling to address both these major issues by providing young people (initially 16-24) struggling to engage with society and the job market, find their way in life and achieve their full potential – especially those experiencing poor mental health and/or from disadvantaged backgrounds – free access to an e-bike and guided cycle rides, principally to help enhance their mental and physical health but also to encourage them to join Cycling Minds which will act as an anchor organisation, providing them with opportunities to interact with the local cycling community, receive training as bike mechanics and ride leaders and in customer service to be able to volunteer (and eventually gain paid work) with Cycling Minds in a fun, sociable and nurturing environment.

From the beginning, Cycling Minds' core social purpose and how it will fulfil this has been inspired by and informed through extensive talks with numerous local social and health care providers, principally: The Living Well Coordination Service (managing social prescribing for the 14 GP surgeries in West Northumberland); Northumberland County Council's Public Health, Well-being and Adult Social Care Services; the charities Adapt North East (working to improve the quality of life of people with mental health problems and who are disadvantaged in being able to access services because they live in a rural location); and Acorns Project (providing therapeutic and support services to young people affected by domestic violence); as well as other local charities and community initiatives such as Hexham Youth Initiative, Gateway into the Community, StopGap Supported Housing, the Hextol Foundation and Number 28 Community Project.

They have been hugely enthusiastic about Cycling Minds because, as they have pointed out, it targets an age group that is currently underprovided for in Northumberland. Referrers report a lack of options for them to signpost the young people they care for to organisations offering sports-related activities for that cohort, particularly sports that are non-competitive and outdoors. Cycling Minds will help fill this gap while also going a step further and giving our young beneficiaries a chance to gain a foothold in the labour market.

A link in a bigger chain

While having the aforementioned core social purpose to help young people improve their mental and physical well-being, employability and engagement with society, Cycling Minds will also serve as a springboard to develop a larger project: a community cycling hub in Hexham (The Link), which will be home to a bike shop and bike upcycling service; a refreshments bar; cycling events such as a sportive, cycling festival, film nights, book-signings, and evenings with VIPs and experts; as well as rentable workspaces for cycling-related businesses and meeting and event spaces.

As its name suggests, The Link will provide a base where local community groups such as cycle clubs, charities, sustainable travel campaign groups and cycling-related businesses can meet, share ideas, network and ultimately forge partnerships and synergies that will be mutually beneficial. The Link will therefore contribute to boosting cycle use, developing a cottage cycling industry and promoting sustainable transport and local economic and community revitalisation through a raft of cycling-related services in Hexham and the rest of West Northumberland.

Ultimately, Cycling Minds aims to establish a virtuous circle where we leverage cycling as a sport to engage young people initially and then foster a long-lasting relationship with them so that they can develop the skills and knowledge needed to work with us as active participants in developing The Link and ambassadors for cycling in their local communities.

They will also help Cycling Minds generate revenue to put back into the project through the following initial revenue streams:

- Bike repairs
- Bike recycling, sale and hire
- Guided rides and tours for the paying public
- e-Rickshaw taxi service in Hexham (still at a preliminary stage of development)

The project will be funded through these services and a supporters' scheme, as well as some grants on start-up for major capital items and training. Any surpluses generated from the aforementioned offering will also be used to supply subsidised and free second-hand bikes to our young beneficiaries and low-income customers and run free bike repair and skills sessions and guided rides for the local community.

MISSION STATEMENT

Our mission is to use cycling to heal and protect the mental and physical health of young people by providing access to bikes and guided rides and creating a space in Hexham where they and other local people can meet, learn, work, relax and campaign, serving as a platform to boost the uptake of cycling in the local community and open doors for individuals to engage with the cycling community and find meaning to their lives through cycling-related campaigning, training and employment. The Link will also act as a catalyst for change to create safer, cleaner local roads, bring visitors and tourists to Hexham and Northumberland, and revitalise the local economy and community through cycling.

Our values are:

To nurture togetherness: We are one community, one team, working toward a common goal: to enhance everyone's well-being.

To empower the individual: We create opportunities for personal development through networking, learning and employment.

To be a driver of change: We serve as a launchpad from which cycling-based projects and community action can take off and flourish.

To find solutions to local problems: We are convinced the health of the local economy and people can be improved through cycling and finding ways to achieve this lies at the heart of what we do.

Our leadership

Toby Price (General Manager): Cycling Minds was envisaged by Toby who is a freelance Spanish translator and has been a youth football coach with a local girls' team in Hexham for four years. He is a keen cyclist and has experienced first-hand how cycling can play a role in overcoming mental illness. Toby has repaired bikes for members of his local cycling club, Allen Valley Velo, friends and family for several years and ran a popular free bike repair service for key workers during the first Covid-19 lockdown. It was that experience that gave him the inspiration to build Cycling Minds around a bike recycling, hire and repair service, having seen that there was a need for these services in Hexham and the surrounding area.

Dominic Cook (Non-executive director): Dominic is currently a director with one of the world's leading engineering professional services consultancies, WSP. He has been involved with local community activities through the Hexham Round Table - treasurer for Hexham Round Table for two years, Chair for one year - helping to organise numerous community events and raise funds for local good causes. He competes in triathlons and has also been treasurer for the One Life triathlon club for three years.

Michael Williams (Non-executive director): Michael is Managing Director of Hexham based PDL Solutions (Europe) Ltd. Outside of work, Michael volunteers as a Scout Section Assistant supporting a very active Scout group in Barrasford, and has recently gained further responsibility within the Explorers section. Michael has a passion for cycling, whether that be on the local trails on his mountain bike or on the many and varied Northumbrian country lanes with a bunch of like-minded road cyclists.

Advisory Board

We couldn't have got Cycling Minds up and riding without the invaluable support of our Advisory Board of volunteer experts in different fields including: Ted Liddle, cycling development and tourism specialist; Thomas Hardy, Twelfth City Cyclery bike shop owner; Justin Rowntree from SweetSpot, advisor and fundraiser for a successful social enterprise working with young people with mental health challenges (Blend Kitchen); Stef Anderson, Fundraising and Communications Lead at Ouseburn Farm Charity in Newcastle; and Linz Philips, former EVP at Sage and board member of Dynamo North East and Digital Leaders.

Our patron

We are proud to have as our patron Northumberland County Councillor and Hexham Town Councillor, Suzanne Fairless-Aitken. Suzanne has experienced first-hand how cycling helps manage mental health and decided to support the project as patron because, in her words: "Cycling Minds very much ticks most of our list of priorities for Hexham - a sustainable social enterprise that will bring huge benefits to the health of residents and generate valuable tourism opportunities attracting visitors to the town. A happy and healthy Hexham - a win-win! It is opportunity for our youngsters to volunteer, be trained and learn essential life-skills which is until now unprecedented in the area - and this doesn't even touch on the obvious, positive mental-health benefits of cycling, especially for those with post-lockdown issues that have been sadly all too noticeable among young people."