

Ayrshire College

CONNECTING COMMUNITIES

Partners: Ayrshire College, Kilmarnock Campus; Active Schools; Vibrant Communities, East Ayrshire Council.

Focus: Mental Health United & Soup and Porridge Initiative



Description

Working in partnership with the Active Schools, East Ayrshire Council and Ayrshire College, Kilmarnock Campus, Mental Health United is an initiative launched to promote positive mental health for children in the Kilmarnock community by encouraging participation in sport. East Ayrshire has experienced very high suicide rates, with numbers doubling between 2017 and 2019. The Kilmarnock campus community has witnessed the suicide of students and family members of students. The Mental Health United programme aims to use sport to counter the consequences of mental ill health.

The initiative started with the Rose Reilly Football Centre for girls and has expanded to the development of the Kris Boyd Football Centre for boys: after school sports activities for children from the local community. From these two centres, activities have grown to include rugby, para football and dance; a day-time sports programme for schools; and a holiday programme of activities that runs over 5 weeks of summer and in the easter break. Furthermore, dedicated to tackling food poverty experienced by young people and their families, the summer school provides a daily healthy meal for all participants. The various activities facilitated by Kilmarnock campus are grouped under the Connecting Communities initiative, From the initial concept (to facilitate sport for children) the

initiative has grown. Reaching beyond the College and into the community, Connecting Communities is encouraging a greater relationship between local families and the College at the heart of the community.



Success factor: partnership

Connecting Communities brings together community partners to create quality coaching and training opportunities for college students and staff whilst providing free physical activity and other benefits to a variety of client groups, many of which are the hardest to reach due to social isolation, poor self-esteem, confidence, and lack of social skills. The special relationship between the key staff members at the centre of the initiative has enabled its development: Elaine Hutton (Assistant Principal, Ayrshire College) is committed to tackling food poverty; John McTaggart (Curriculum Manager—Sports and Fitness, Ayrshire College, Kilmarnock campus) aims to use sport to promote positive mental health; and Cheryl Fulton (Active Schools Coordinator for East Ayrshire Council) bridges the gap between the College and the local community. The partnership understands the needs of the local community they aim to support and inspire. Many of the neighbourhoods in reach of the College sit within top 5% of deprived communities in the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD). The personal commitment of the three key individuals working

on Connecting Communities has ensured the success of mental ill health and poverty intervention in Kilmarnock. And Elaine, John and Cheryl are constantly working together to expand the remit of the programme.

“ It grows organically, as opposed to us saying: ‘here’s what we’re going to do. We say to each other: ‘I’ve got this idea, let’s try this,’ but actually, it’s very much the opposite. We look about and think, we see them sitting about, how can we engage with them? How can we get them part of our project? They’re not happy. So the barriers will present themselves to us and we’ll see how to overcome them.

Cherryl Fulton, East Ayrshire Council

College students studying on HNC/D Sports programmes provide the coaching as part of their learning and work experience. As it is directly related to curriculum activity, the after-school classes facilitated by the students are funded by core college funding. *“Within the framework that they are working towards there will be coaching units, volunteering units, they’ve got their work placement unit. So, what we do with Active Schools is all mapped to that unit content”* (Elaine Hutton). Students benefit from coaching on the programme as they are gaining work experience, volunteering, and developing life skills. By encouraging the ethos of giving back to the community *“we start to build a better society”* (Elaine Hutton).

The commitment from the students and staff at Kilmarnock campus has allowed for direct intervention in the lives of the young people involved in the activities.

“ We have a young person who does not build relationships who built a really positive strong relationship with a student and the flexibility of the College lecturers here allowed that female student to stay on to work one to one in the final session with that person; that young person also left the building but that student and staff from the school were right with them and that college student was as equal a part with the school at providing de-escalation and relation strategies for the sake of that young person as we were.

Steve Swan, Onthank Primary School

The benefits of the programme reach both the school pupils and the College students facilitating the activities. Students have had the opportunity to make connections with community partners leading to developing employability potential: some of the College learners involved in coaching and running the programmes are now working for Active Schools.

“ Part of the benefit is the experience that these sessions give to the future in both contexts of the young people that are benefitting but also the students that are participating on this course and what they can speak about when they go on to further education and job interviews, life experience that you can look back on and reflect on and give examples of in a positive context.

Steve Swan, Onthank Primary School



Success factor: from sport to tackling food poverty

50 school children from the after-school clubs and 100 school children for the holiday programmes benefit from the College activities. Young people who participate in the summer programme have the opportunity of being coached by high profile sports celebrities, consequently raising the profile of the initiative. The concept of inclusivity for children involved in the Connecting Communities activities at Kilmarnock campus is central to the success of the initiative. The programme has grown from one idea about sport to providing basic clothes and food to children and families in the community.

While working in the programme, staff got to know the children and realised that children were coming to the activities hungry. *“Food poverty in this locale is severe. 51% of kids here will be on free school meals”* (Elaine Hutton). When the schools are closed, pupils do not have access to school meals. It was vital for the Connecting Communities summer sports school staff that children had access to a day-time meal, and so packed lunches were introduced to the programme. The Dignified Food Project (East Ayrshire Council) provides the lunches, and this link with the council means that children from areas of multiple deprivation in the locale can access basic food provision during the holiday period.

The concept of creating a safe and healthy environment for young people to come and participate in activity and be fed remains central to the ethos of the programme and is shared by the staff and student coaches and extends into the after-school activities as well as the holiday programmes.

“ Within the Rose Reilly football club we do lots of fundamentals, like passing, dribbling, shooting. But it’s also a place for girls to feel safe. For girls to open up to just chat and have fun. Especially for me, when I coach Rose Reilly, I always ask the girls, ‘did you have dinner; what did you do at school,’ just constantly asking them different questions. It’s not so related to the sport, that doesn’t feel right, in order to get on with them you have to have a connection.

**Alex (HND Coaching and Management),
Ayrshire College**

This concept grew to providing clothes for the participants. Early in the programme, a young girl turned up in a wet school uniform. When the same pupil returned in the same clothes the following day, staff realised that this young person did not have the correct clothes to participate in sports activities. This gave staff the idea of fundraising to have strips provided for everyone. It’s not only the school children who wear the strips, but the student coaches and the staff involved. Everyone is equal.

“ When we put all of this together, it’s not that this person gets a strip because they haven’t got one, but someone else’s has got one, so we don’t give them one. Everybody gets the same. Everybody gets their packed lunch. It’s the same with our Soup and Porridge Initiative, every student has access to that. We don’t put any barriers. We don’t discriminate against any individual. That’s something that’s really important for us.

Elaine Hutton, Ayrshire College

This commitment to inclusivity is identified in other projects aimed at tackling food inequality in Kilmarnock campus. The Soup and Porridge initiative provides breakfast and lunch to every Kilmarnock campus student regardless of background or status.

“ How do we expect a young person to sit down and be engaged in learning and teaching if they haven’t eaten, they don’t know when they’re going to eat... how often do you sit down and think ‘I’ll get up and have a cup of coffee and something to eat and give my legs a stretch and that will put me back in a better frame of mind to get on with the work that I’m doing’ – that’s the same for a young person. We can’t expect them to learn if they haven’t got the basic food, warmth, before they even start.

Elaine Hutton, Ayrshire College

Committed to helping students remain in a healthy physical and mental state while at college, Elaine Hutton applied to Ayrshire College Foundation in 2018. The funding received allowed the Soup and Porridge initiative to run for two years. The project ran over the summer, so that learners still had access to breakfast and lunch out of term time. When the College building reopened after the Covid-19 lockdowns, the College Student Association informed Elaine that students were asking if the soup and porridge would restart, and a subsequent application was made to the Scottish Funding Council Mental Health Fund:

“ We made an application to that and got approval from the Funding Council on the basis that if you’re not eating, you don’t have good mental health, if you don’t have good mental health, you can’t learn. I’ve received two years funding from that (2022 and 2023).

Elaine Hutton, Ayrshire College



Before the Soup and Porridge initiative was implemented, the College was providing food support on an informal basis. Staff working in the College canteen know the students, and they were giving students in need extra portions. Then they started to leave the food left over at the end of the College day for those in need to take it.

Providing basic food for college learners has extended into the community. Staff realised that if the student needs access to breakfast and to lunch at college, likely their whole family would be in need. In the first year of the Soup and Porridge initiative, the College put on a Christmas dinner and each family who came to the Christmas dinner, was given a hamper.

“ All the other support systems that happen for kids, they close. The only time the College closes is at Christmas, which is why we put on the Christmas dinner. Because we wanted there to be something in that period that people could come to.

Elaine Hutton, Ayrshire College

The Christmas dinner event not only aided families experiencing food poverty but helped to tackle social exclusion at what can be a difficult time of the year.



Impact factor: community intervention

The summer school of sports activities runs for 5 weeks. For the summer camp referrals, college staff liaise with Home Link workers in local schools who alert the College to families that will benefit from the initiatives run by the College. However, when the programme started, staff realised they were not reaching the desired demographic of young people in the immediate locale:

“ When we looked at the information from the kids signing up to the initiatives, we realised there weren’t actually many from this postcode. So, it looks great on paper, we’re getting really high numbers (50 for the after-school activities; 100 for the holiday programmes), but it’s about ‘are we really making a difference to the ones who really need it?’

Cherryl Fulton, East Ayrshire Council

Statistics from the enrolment registers suggested that there was a high uptake in families from postcode areas with SIMD ratings of 14, 15, and 16. But there was a lack of participation from postcodes in lower SIMD zones. The staff came up with a plan to encourage greater uptake from the immediate community.

“ So, we thought, how to overcome this barrier: we got college students to meet pupils at the school, so anyone that wanted to come to the activities would meet at the school and the students would provide a walking bus. Our numbers went up about 25%. We had kids for the local schools, the kids wanted to come – which is what we expected – but the parents weren’t engaging. So that’s the work around from there.

Cherryl Fulton, East Ayrshire Council

The walking bus concept was a great success. With the children getting to the College with the walking bus, they were able to access the activities. The walking bus also runs as part of daytime sports programme for local school.

“ The College and Active Sport are giving opportunities for our young people. In regard to coming to the College, our primary 6 and primary 7s came for two 8-week blocks on the walking bus, again supported by the students at the College, so straight away opportunities were given for relationships to be built and established with the students who were going to be delivering the sessions with our young people, which can be challenging whether that be social or emotional trauma informed. What the young people at our school are actually living with just now; Onthank is in the top 5% of multiple deprivation according to statistics, so that does come with a certain amount of stigma. But the young people are very intelligent in the school, and they know who they are, they know what can be thought of them, they know the barriers that are in place. Something that’s been really refreshing is to see how the students and how the College have facilitated everyone being equal and supporting everyone to engage and reach their full potential in the activity sessions.

Steve Swan, Onthank Primary School





Impact factor: widening access to education

Once the Connecting Communities initiative had managed to reach the intended demographic, parents from low SIMD zones were encouraged to come into the College: the walking bus would get the children there, but the parents collected them afterwards. This had an unexpected positive impact. Individuals living in areas of multiple deprivation – who may have had a negative experience in education – can view educational institutions as a barrier. *“That’s often missed; we work in the College and don’t see it as a scary place”* (Elaine Hutton). By engaging in the College via their children’s sports activities, parents got to know the staff and realised the benefit of the College to their children and the wider community. In response, the College further expanded the programme’s activities to further engage the parents.

Now the community know who the staff are and feel comfortable and the College continues to expand the provision of activities to include the parents and the wider family.

“ It’s grown arms and legs; we needed to engage the parents. Before Covid, we looked at, when your kids are in, what can we do for the parents. So the Health and Fitness [HN] students provide one on one in the gym, they did activities in the gym with the parents, so they were involved too.

Cherryl Fulton, East Ayrshire Council

The College realised that activities and spaces for the younger siblings of pupils participating in the holiday sports programmes could benefit from college resources, and so a creche was created for the very young children to be looked after while the parents had access to one-to-one coaching with college students.

“ There was a mother who was bringing her 5-year-old son and 7-year-old daughter, and her 2-year-old is out there because she’s too young to do anything. The mum’s having hassle having to bring the kid down in the pram and has to wait out there because she’s doing that for the benefit of her son who’s in doing football and that’s great. So, we decided to put on a creche and playgroup for the two-year-olds. The parents are in the gym getting one to one personal training with the Health and Fitness students. It’s a one stop shop. It’s gone from parents thinking, I can’t bring the pram in here, I’m going to be harassed, they’re going to be running about in the foyer, but now there’s something for the kids. We worked with Vibrant Communities to provide people to run the creche in the dance studio, so if you’re a parent bring them down, and for that parent to get respite, even if it’s only for an hour, how good is that for that parent to reset and then go up the road and deal with her kids again.

John McTaggart, Ayrshire College

Now that the families in the local area are becoming more comfortable with the College, there is greater engagement. A lesson learned from the summer school last year is that the places fill up quickly. But the families most in need may not have access to the internet or have tech equipment to sign up. This year, 20 spaces per day will be reserved for those families.

The added benefit to engaging with these activities is the personal and social skills that are developed consequentially. *“It’s the whole package: sport’s just the hook”* (John McTaggart). The students involved in coaching the programme are developing skills for higher education and employability; pupils are developing team building, communication, and collaboration skills through sport; and parents are offered the opportunity to improve their health and fitness through one-to-one coaching.

“ I think there’s united learning on a wider scale that isn’t just centred around sport. I think that’s what makes it dignified because we sit around and speak about all these wider outcomes whereas to a young person, and a student in the context of the room in which you’re learning to pass, to dribble, to take the ball – teambuilding skills – for me that’s the most important thing that been facilitated here, it’s actually not the sport but that the young people have been able to be themselves, feel empowered take risks and learn life skills and develop how to speak to each other and be with each other after sitting in front of a screen for two years and potentially not being able to positively engage.

Steve Swan, Onthank Primary School

Currently, plans are in place to extend the parent engagement to providing evening bite sized lessons, offering the opportunity for adults to gain recognised qualifications. Furthermore, there are plans to create a cooking school to encourage health and nutrition.

The benefits to the community continue to develop. Adults who would not normally come into the College are becoming familiar with the building and the staff and are being given the opportunity to potentially gain their first qualifications by participating in the evening classes. The children also feel more at home in the College, it’s not another intimidating institution.

“ Our vision is that this building will be a complete hive of activity over the summer with kids out there, kids in here, parents in the kitchens. For us, that’s a win, win for the College because young people who think, ‘I don’t want to go into the College’ it’s another change, it’s another step, whereas these kids will be over familiar with the College, they’re our students of the future, they will know where they’re coming to, they’ll be confident and hopefully all they’ll have had up to this point is a positive experience in college.

Elaine Hutton, Ayrshire College



Success factor: Covid-19 restrictions and sport

Covid-19 changed the remit of the project. During the return to school after lockdown traditional PE could not be delivered because local schools did not have resources to facilitate sport while maintaining physical distancing. This meant that Active School Coordinators weren’t able to carry out their usual physical activities in school and pupils could not receive their recommended two hours of physical exercise each week.



Connecting Communities strategized as creative approach to overcome these barriers. The College decided to extend the programme to include daytime sports activities. After discussions with school pupils, teachers, college staff and students, an 8-week block of sports coaching was designed and delivered by college students at the outdoor courts in Kilmarnock campus. The walking bus enabled the young people to get to the College safely and the activities allowed for them to maintain the recommended physical exercise classes using the College's outside facilities. This also allowed the College students to continue to fulfil necessary volunteer and coaching requirements for their college programmes, which were suspended for most students during physical distancing restrictions. These sessions not only enhanced active and effective engagement with local school pupils, but gave young people, college students and staff the chance to experience some normality during the Covid-19 pandemic restrictions.

Barriers/challenges

As stated, initially children from the local community were not getting involved as the parents were not engaged. However, barriers around reaching the desired demographic were overcome by implementing the walking bus, enabling Connecting Communities to reach the demographic most in need.

Next steps

Having learnt about the success of the Connecting Communities summer school, the Scottish Government initiative, Activity on the Go, is now getting involved in the summer programme allowing for activities and resources to extend further.

Furthermore, an evening class and summer school activity modelled on the 'Ready Steady Cook' concept is being developed.





“ Elaine was talking about her plans for going into the summer. We’d shared information about how – I’ve been at Onthank for 4 years – I took a dignified food provision at Onthank through our community nights, and lunchtime waste, we were supported by Education Scotland to do that, to reduce waste. Those conversations have led to a potential future partnership in families from Onthank being able to come and participate in activities at the College where parents go and do the ‘Ready Steady Cook’ – £5 in a blue bag, what do you have today – and the chefs and hospitality at the College will facilitate food education in a wider context to families at Onthank who I work with in my Home Link role, may not know with what’s left in the cupboard how can I feed myself, how can I feed my family.

Steve Swan, Onthank Primary School

With the demise of home economics provision in schools, and the multiple barriers to healthy eating resulting from poverty and lack of education in geographical areas identified as deprived, generations of people in Scotland have grown up with poor health, nutrition, and cooking skills. Connecting Communities aims to initiate home economics classes using the College facilities. The

plan so far is that while young people are engaging with the sports summer camp, parents will learn how to prepare nutritious and healthy meals using cupboard stores. Children participating in the sports activities will join their parents at the end of the day and the family will share the meal together. In connection with Home Link workers, eligible families will receive fee-wavers.

“ I think the phrase ‘dignified food’ can be open to speculation, but I think there’s no other way for dignified food, at the heart of what that means, to be in a place where young people are active, happy, and engaged, and families are being upskilled. It’s opportunities for everyone to learn and upskill following a time where there’s been real hardship. And if we can together, thanks to the College and the opportunities here, educate families that come from the top 5% multiple deprivation region in Ayrshire to be able to know that they’re taking responsibility to empower themselves and that they’re being their own helping hand – it’s not about here’s a food voucher, go and buy something, go to the community larder – if there’s continual opportunities for partnership funding, that’s ensuring families can be in a safe environment and know that they’re being upskilled, they’re being able to take charge and transform their life for their family. I think that has a wider ripple effect of opportunities for how that then trickles down through our community.

Steve Swan, Onthank Primary School

Finally, Elaine Hutton is aiming to extend the Connecting Communities model at Kilmarnock to the other three Ayrshire campuses. *“Using the same partnership, working with Active Schools, we’re hoping that we’ll be able to do the same on the other three campuses over the next couple of years. It’s people that make this happen. And it’s not the same people on all the three campuses. Sometimes it’s baby steps, but that’s our vision”* (Elaine Hutton).