

Self-employment: Making it happen CASE STUDY

Name: David Gibson
Business: Trent Park Outdoor Pursuits Scheme (Social Enterprise)
Location: Enfield
Unemployment Period: 2 years
Assisted by: Business Link in London, Enterprise Enfield & Jobcentre Plus



This case study highlights the journey of a previously unemployed individual who has taken positive steps to become self-employed after participating in the Jobcentre Plus six month self-employment offer

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When an officer at his local council asked David Gibson to set up a fishing club in Trent Park, he had bigger ideas. His vision is to get children and their families back in touch with nature and create a place for both learning and outdoor pursuits. In just a few months he has already secured some funding from the Environment Agency. This was through his partnership with Enfield Council which has given the green light to phase one of his plan.

David has set up Trent Park Outdoor Pursuits Scheme (TOPS) as a social enterprise. The first stage of TOPS, based in the 413-acre park, is a fishing club primarily for local children but available to all. The Environment Agency is giving the business £9,000 to fund five disabled access fishing platforms around one of the lakes. He says the idea is to get groups of children down to the lake, teach them about fishing and other jobs in the park. It is, he says, a way of getting children into nature and for those from deprived areas or vulnerable backgrounds, it could be the first time they've experienced the great outdoors. David already has five volunteers – one being funded through Sport England – to complete their fishing coaching training and after final negotiations with Enfield Council, which owns the park, the platforms could be up and complete within months.

This is just the beginning for David; eventually he wants to build classrooms and an outdoor pursuit's centre to offer free education and classes on nature, fishing and other activities relating to the park. He hopes to bring all the various outdoor pursuit clubs and charities under one roof for everyone in the community. 'This could bring so much to so many people and help generate jobs in the area,' says David.

His inspiration comes from his own love of fishing, the outdoors and from angling expert, Les Webber. For over 30 years Les has been going into schools to introduce children to fishing with the aim of getting them hooked on the outdoors rather than crime. 'He's an inspirational figure and there's nothing like it in this part of London,'

says David. 'Fishing and outdoor pursuits, just learning to build bird boxes and working in the park can give children a different direction,' he adds. David's own love of nature is also a strong factor in his business drive. Growing up in Chester he spent his weekends fishing, climbing, canoeing, camping with the scouts and lifeguarding. 'People don't realise that in London there are gorgeous parks and places to visit – they're missing out. Getting kids out and teaching them how to respect nature, it's amazing how many pass that onto their families,' he says.

David is also Trent Park's unofficial wildlife warden. For the past 12 years if he saw anything untoward on his walks or cycles around the park he'd report it to the park manager or council. 'There are not enough people that put themselves out for things. I'm concerned about everything and anything,' he says laughing. And it's this community spirit that has built up his relationships with the Environment Agency and the Council, and allowed him to get TOPS off the ground so quickly.

In fact, it was one of his best contacts at Enfield Council that triggered David's idea. He was asked several times to start a local fishing club in the area, but he says, he realised that not everyone likes fishing so he thought: 'why stop there?' In the summer he wrote all of his ideas in a five page letter to the Council and six months later was given the go ahead.

For David, 45, it is the culmination of a change of direction in his own life. Three years ago he was seriously injured when he was knocked off his mountain bike in a hit and run accident. He broke both his hands and fractured his legs. The accident made him rethink his work, which previously had ranged from hotel management to a DJ and for the first time in his life he learned to use a computer. Within a year he'd completed various courses at his local college and started to volunteer in it's learn direct centre helping teach students there. David enjoyed it so much that he was due to start a teacher training course last September but with the Council willing to talk about his idea he postponed it. He can combine his love of the outdoors with his passion for teaching through TOPS, he says.

He anticipates that the official launch date and completion of the first platforms are just months away and he's already running a competition with local children to design a logo for his venture. But as for planning his business he admits he may have done it slightly the wrong way around. He says his Jobcentre Plus advisor Fabian Henry, in Palmers Green was incredibly helpful, supportive and referred him to Enterprise Enfield for help. 'I went asking for a business advisor first without doing any of the initial seminars,' David says. 'It's probably the wrong way around but now I've been to a number of them, including those run by Business Link in London. I've got a much better idea of what I need to do.' He says he's still completing his business plan and will need that to secure larger, more long-term funding for TOPS. His advisor, he says, gives him parts to do bit by bit; he also gives him advice on how to manage stress in a start up. 'I really have learned a lot and matured going through this process,' says David.