

# SUPPORT FOR *the LONG Run*

Fit Mums and Friends is a Yorkshire-based charity with a mission to make physical activity a social event that everyone can take part in.

Living North spoke to founder Sam Barlow

In 2009, Sam Barlow found herself in a predicament that she confesses 'sounds a bit sad', but will undoubtedly sound familiar to all too many parents. 'I was a lonely mum,' she tells me. 'I was working full-time in the NHS and I hadn't managed to get back to being active since I had gone back to work after having kids.'

She was keen to befriend other parents like herself, but her work schedule meant that chatting at the school gates wasn't an option. In a bid to kill two birds with one stone, she asked her son's teacher if she'd put a flyer in the children's book bags. 'It literally just said, "would anyone like to meet me for a run on Wednesday at seven o'clock?". And that's exactly what happened: four people turned up on my doorstep that I didn't know, and that's how it all started.'

The run was a success, and word about their outings quickly spread. Before long, the group had become too big to fit on Sam's driveway. With the help of a 'Leadership in Running Fitness' course from England Athletics, and a new team of volunteer run leaders, Fit Mums and Friends' first club in Sam's hometown of Cottingham was born. Sam's local club was also attracting envy across Yorkshire, leading to the creation of 12 further clubs, some of which were specially commissioned by local councils. Potential members can now attend three sessions for free, after which a standard annual membership costs £36, a fraction of the price of a standard gym membership. Membership fees help cover running costs (so to speak) but financial assistance is also available for anyone who would find them prohibitive.

Although the group has now expanded far beyond Sam's driveway, and caters to much broader audiences than just mums, the same emphasis on accessibility and community has been built into the structure of every session. Each club has six groups covering distances between one and six miles, meaning that total beginners have the option of a one-mile group, within which they can run or walk as much as they feel comfortable. Furthermore, their 'shepherding system' means that run leaders will prompt faster runners to loop back throughout the run. This gives slower runners a chance to experience running at the front of the pack, prevents the group becoming separated, and means that stronger runners have the chance to go further.

Nervous newbies can also choose to join through their 'In the Pink Programme'. Those who do will meet a volunteer in a café, where they will talk through the activity options available. Once they have chosen a group, the volunteer will attend with them for up to three sessions.

These days, Fit Mums and Friends' activities encompass much more than the core running group. In terms of running, they offer coaching for children and another running group tailored to those with visual impairments. Beyond that, their 'Let's Get Going' programme helps women experiencing the symptoms of menopause to get active using walking, strength and conditioning and information sessions with experts. Taking a complete sidestep from physical activity, between January and March (when short days can take a toll on mental wellbeing), they also run an intergenerational choir where people of all ages can join for weekly singing sessions and a final performance in March.

Sam has managed to cope with the increasing responsibilities of Fit Mums and Friends despite incredibly difficult personal circumstances. Her husband, Mike, was diagnosed with a rare form of cancer two years before the group began, and in 2020 he passed away. 'We were both run leaders, we both became coaches, athletics coaches – Mike was our first qualified athletics coach,' Sam tells me. 'The way that we've got through our life was by volunteering and getting up and looking after other people. Even in the worst days of chemo, he would be at the track coaching kids – he was just amazing.'

Sam's experience of grief led her to develop (yet another) entirely new strand to Fit Mums and Friends. Their 'Together With Grief' programme offers the chance to meet others bereaved adults for walks and yoga classes. Sam thinks that this 'structured distraction' is a less intimidating alternative to conventional support groups, and its not just adults that benefit. To help children like her own, Sam created 'The Forest Project'. Children who attend participate in activities led by a combination of forest school teachers and a bereavement support facilitator. 'They're in a group with other children who can really understand. Often at school they're very isolated because, thankfully, most children haven't experienced bereavement.'

In 2021, Sam's efforts were recognised on a national platform when she was won the Unsung Hero Award at the BBC Sports Personality of the Year Awards. The charity has achieved a lot, and it shows no signs of stopping. 'There's so much to get in the way of somebody putting on those trainers,' Sam acknowledges. 'But once they've done it, it's just the best thing. It's not just about the run, it's about the connections you make.'

To get involved, support or simply learn more visit [fitmums.org.uk](http://fitmums.org.uk). Donations can be made via their online shop.