

A Case study of developing Pickleball in Lambeth



Why Pickleball in Lambeth?

I have been aware of the game of pickleball for some years as I have an old friend who plays regularly in Seattle and waxes lyrical about the game every time we speak, literally.

After giving up Vets football in 2023 it seemed I'd been hard wired to seek pickleball as an alternative sport! In June 2023 I began researching places to play close to my home in SE5 Lambeth in a community-based setting. Lambeth is blessed with Sports and Leisure Centres across the borough but after making enquiries, no one was aware of the game of pickleball.

After years of sports administration roles in amateur football I was reluctant to put the work in to try and change things but my mate in Seattle kept appearing in my mind ("When I next come over, we have to have a game of pickleball Steve!") so I took the plunge. As a long-time Lambeth resident, I was determined to seek opportunities to play with Lambeth citizens from all backgrounds in an open access and affordable to all setting.

I then contacted Pickleball England and senior staff within the Lambeth Sports and Leisure department to arrange a meeting and weeks later we had two taster sessions at Brixton Recreation Centre delivered by David Bungard, the then regional advisor from Pickleball England.

From these taster sessions I set up a WhatsApp group in advance of the Lambeth staff making the arrangements for residents to book and play on the badminton courts in their centres.

What's happened?

Through the support of Pickleball England, and after a series of meetings with various staff within selected Leisure centres,

- A WhatsApp group has been established with 46 members to date with an average of 20 players playing two separate daytime sessions and one evening session each week since January 2024 at Clapham Leisure centre, Brixton Recreation Centre and the Flaxman Sports Centre
- We have some very kind people within the group who book the courts each week and collect a small fee to play to cover the cost of the booking, usually £3 but sometimes £4. We have also managed to purchase a net from the proceeds for collective use for when the weather gets warmer.
- We have supported Brixton Recreation Centre and the Flaxman Sports Centre in collaboration with Pickleball England and UK Pickleball Shop with the purchase of pickleball nets, balls and paddles, the latter has also enabled the booking of pickleball on the website and app as opposed to using having to book badminton! An equipment order from Clapham is underway.
- We have a Lambeth champion from Flaxman Sports Centre, Alex Regueira De La Cruz (Centre Manager), who has enthusiastically embraced the game and organised a 12-4 pm pickleball taster session on 23/2/24 supported by me, and two co-volunteers Howard Davies and Emmanuel Otu.
- The event was attended by 15 members of the community from a wide range of backgrounds, including a senior playing for the first time after two knee replacements within a year and the Director of Lambeth Council (he loved the game and is right behind the initiative). Emmanuel also delivered an excellent coaching session getting complete beginners hitting the ball in a doubles match all around the court in about an hour! The poster was advertised on the Pickleball England website too.
- Looking ahead to the outdoor season, Karen at Pickleball England and I met last month with Daniel Hughes, Sports Development Officer, responsible for use of tennis courts in Lambeth parks. We discussed the possibility of running taster sessions on tennis courts around the borough. Karen pledged to find resources to support a weekend taster session in addition to the two previously planned events on Clapham Common in June and July.
- Ruskin Park, my local, has been chosen to plan this event. I will be meeting soon with the newly appointed Pickleball England Regional Director for the South East (South) David Hughes to discuss details. I hope to enlist the support of the Friends of Ruskin Park (see <https://www.friendsofruskinpark.org.uk> to help promote the event locally.
- We are also planning to host a Pickleball Leadership Day at one of our centres to capacity build the pickleball community in Lambeth to provide strategic and coaching support to players and Lambeth staff.
- Our new net was used alongside Corina's net for the first time on 3/3/23 on a tennis court in Ruskin Park. 12 people turned up and had a great time!



What did members most enjoy by playing pickleball in Lambeth?

“I’d say the range of community engagement, lots of fun to play with folks across age & social sphere in Lambeth. It’s a great group” (Gareth)

“The fun of the game and also possibly of the social side” (Howard)

“For me it’s been meeting fun people and seeing them consistently, working on our technique together and not worrying about each other’s mistakes” (Ben P)

Meeting others that are also interested in having fun and learning something new/ playing something they are passionate about (Amber)

I have enjoyed being able to play a more accessible sport. It feels possible to play pickleball with people from a wide range of backgrounds and previous experience, which is not always the case for competitive sport. This is both refreshing and really fun! I could say more on how not all people are encouraged to take part in competitive sport which makes pickleball feel quite unique (Freya)

"I love that everyone I introduce to pickleball, regardless of their age or sports experience, is able to be integrated into the game quickly and find joy from discovering they can be a part of a fast paced and fun sport!" (Corina)

“I have really enjoyed the game itself. It works for all ages and all levels and is not intimidating to learn. It is fun, lively and keeps me active as a senior. There are a range of players and a friendly and sociable atmosphere” (Viv)

“The energy and excitement I can see in all the players, whether new or otherwise. Everyone is just very excited to play pickleball !!” (Ben)

“Firstly, I’ve met some absolutely delightful people over the last few weeks since you started the taster session at Brixton Rec, and secondly, I hope I might be able to start a racket sport like pickleball in my sixties because it’s a little bit easier on my arthritic joints which are preventing me going back to tennis and badminton. I love a racket sport” (Fiona)

“I think the photos sum up the essence and importance of pickleball in Lambeth. It has attracted a diversity of people who might never have met in other areas of their lives. It brings joy and movement to this wide range of people, the long term mental and physical health benefits of which are priceless!” (Kirstin)

“I have found the development and present introduction of pickleball a very good initiative for the communities in Lambeth to bring them together. From a coaching perspective I have found it hugely exciting seeing the development of some of the players and what it offers for the future” (Emmanuel)



Stephen Pisano on behalf of Pickleball Lambeth, March 2024