



# Creating a Sustainable Future for Your Club

By Sean Cronin (DFOK)

Orienteers are often good at maths, therefore are well aware that however great a club is, if more members leave the club than join the club, then the club's long term future is unsustainable. This described the position of Dartford Orienteering Klub (DFOK) and so during the summer, we initiated a publicity drive to get more newcomers to our events, and put on four extra local events called the Bexley Series.



Sean and his son Ben taking part in one of the Bexley series events



The banner the council allowed us to display on the main road



Above: The Newspaper advertising proved successful.  
Right: One of the Promotional Postcards from the Online Print Portal



## Conclusion – what worked?

On their own, each publicity channel gave disappointing results, but trying many different approaches at the same time gave excellent results. 88 newcomers attended the Bexley series of four events, and we ran out of the 60 hired dibbers at Greenwich and Lullingstone. A survey of some of the Bexley Series newcomers based on how they found out about the events gave the following results:

Publicity channel	Percent response
Schools publicity	27%
Scouts and sea cadets	17%
Newspaper advertising	15%
Roadside banner	15%
From a friend	12%
Runners World posting	7%
Recommended by DFOK member	2%
DFOK website	2%
Email to running club	2%

Community and council newspapers were particularly effective at other DFOK local events, but not available for the Bexley series.

### What about your club?

A quick survey of club websites that listed their committees in four English regions revealed that 45% did not list a Publicity Officer. This does not mean these clubs do not publicise their events, but my experience is that it helps to have someone to drive publicity forward within a club. The job doesn't require a vast amount of orienteering experience so would perhaps suit a new member not on your committee, or maybe 2 or 3 people to work as a small team? Another option is for an experienced committee member to take on the job temporarily in order to generate contacts and knowledge for a new member to use the following year.

How can clubs support their Publicity Officers? Many publicity channels require some money to be successful. Why not set a publicity budget for your club? Perhaps £500 per year for a small club and £1000 for a large club. This budget could be funded by many clubs without affecting club fees. Our experience is that much of this money returns via higher event income and membership fees. Another way to help is to confirm all event dates well in advance as several of the publicity channels require advanced notice to be effective (for example many community newspapers are only published every 2 months). It is also useful to complete as much information as possible about the event on the fixtures list and make the event name meaningful and appealing to newcomers.

All the newcomers created a great atmosphere, but what about our membership? So far in 2009 we've had 20 new members, 17 newcomers and 3 experienced orienteers joining from elsewhere. This is not many compared with the number of newcomers at each event, but a big increase on the 4 new members that joined us in 2008 (ignoring a number of experienced orienteers who joined from CROC). On average approximately 10 members leave us each year so if we can maintain this progress next year it will ensure steady manageable growth and the club's long term future.

DFOK would also like to acknowledge the support of Sport England in providing funds from their small grants programme for the Bexley Series.

## WHAT DID WE LEARN?

### 1) SCHOOLS SPORTS PARTNERSHIPS ARE A GREAT PUBLICITY CHANNEL

The club has good contacts with the local Schools Sports Partnership (SSP). This organisation aims to promote sport to young people via schools, but it doesn't have to take place in school. DFOK have supported both the SSP and the schools in Bexley by mapping school sites and open public park areas which are suitable for beginners and schools to use. The support offered by the club to the schools has led to a rise in the profile of orienteering.

Publicity for the Bexley series was done by the SSP staff through three main methods:

- A blanket email was sent to every school admin address and PE Coordinator at both secondary and primary schools.
- At a meeting of PE Coordinators in Bexley the event was promoted and fliers were handed out.
- The SSP targeted schools that have been developing orienteering, as the Bexley series would provide a natural progression for their pupils from classroom to community event.

### 2) LOCAL AUTHORITIES ARE ON OUR SIDE.

Several local authorities in London deliver free newspapers to everyone in their borough. Since many aim to increase participation in sport, articles promoting orienteering have a good chance of being published. Lewisham Life published a short article promoting a local event in Greenwich Park, which resulted in a good number of newcomers at the event.

### 3) COMMUNITY NEWSPAPERS WERE MORE LIKELY TO PUBLISH ARTICLES THAN LOCAL NEWSPAPERS.

Local commercial newspapers in Kent seemed reluctant to publish articles on minority sports. Perhaps this is not surprising as our local papers actually cover a big population and space is restricted by the large number of adverts. One local paper did include a Bexley series article on their website. It had a low profile but it is a relationship worth nurturing as media consumption trends demonstrate a movement from newspapers to the internet.

However community newspapers such as parish magazines were

completely different. The majority published our articles, often long versions with pictures. These newsletters typically have a readership of 1000-10,000 and it's possible to email the same article to many at once, making it a free, low effort option. The Chelsfield Village Voice shows a great example of an article that generated a lot of interest at the Lullingstone Park local event: <http://www.chelsfieldevents.co.uk/cvs/VillageVoiceMar09.pdf>. Community newspapers are however rare in urban areas and the quality and coverage is patchy elsewhere.

### 4) BANNERS – SIZE MATTERS!

For the Bexley Series, our equipment officer designed an eye catching giant roadside banner to be placed on busy roads outside two of the orienteering areas. The banner is roughly twice the size of the standard British Orienteering event banner, making it easily read by speeding motorists. A smaller easily changeable banner was attached showing the date and time of the events, thus reducing the cost of reuse. The local authorities gave permission for the banner to be attached to

their property. We also used the smaller British Orienteering event banners on the day to advertise events to pedestrians within the parks.

### 5) SOMETIMES IT DOESN'T WORK

There were downs as well as ups. We were expecting a big turnout of newcomers at Shorne Country Park in June, but for some reason there were very few. Perhaps they had all gone to the beach on that hot day? The main thing is to not be demoralised by the setback and accept that they happen.

### 6) NEWSPAPER ADVERTISING – EXPENSIVE BUT GOOD FOR BUSY PUBLICITY OFFICERS

Running a series of small events makes advertising more economic, as one advert can be used to advertise several events. Adverts are also potential timesavers for publicity officers as the advert can be edited and re-used many times. British Orienteering were very helpful, producing a professional looking advert for us, and helping with the costs. It proved wise ordering two weeks rather than one, as the advert position in the second week was much more favourable than the first.

### 7) INTERNET ADVERTISING – ADVERTISING THAT SPREADS

A free and easy method of advertising is to post event details on various websites. The most effective seem to be runnersworld.co.uk and anywhereyougo.com. These adverts tend to spread as the content is re-used by other sites and magazines. For example the Runners World event lists are fed to many running club websites, and the anywhereyougo.com events are used by Telegraph group magazines and websites.

### 8) ONLINE PRINT PORTAL – EASY TO MAKE, PROFESSIONAL AND VERSATILE

The British Orienteering online print portal can be used to easily make professional looking promotional postcards, flyers and posters. These were distributed by club members, the Schools Sports Partnership and given to newcomers at the events to remind them of subsequent events. There is also a flyer that promotes membership benefits. The professional look helps to give an impression of a well organised, efficient sport, reassuring potential newcomers.

### 9) MARKETING MATERIALS CAN BE USED TO GENERATE HYPE

We also hope that the newcomers tell their friends, even if they were only going for the experience and not intending to take up the sport seriously. To help this, children were given stickers with "Orienteering – I did it" and key fobs – giving participants a reminder to talk about the events.

### 10) GETTING THE WHOLE CLUB INVOLVED IS A GREAT WAY TO FIND PUBLICITY CHANNELS.

The promotional postcards were also distributed to club members to give to friends, family, work, scouts etc. Many also responded with publicity channels that a single person couldn't identify, such as a website aimed at young professionals in the Docklands area of London, which resulted in many newcomers at the Greenwich Park event.

**Further information about publicity materials, event paraphernalia and generating PR can be found in the "Increasing Participation" section of the British Orienteering website.**