

The way you work it

With gyms and pools closed, lockdown has forced many Hertfordshire residents to seek new ways of staying in shape - home gyms and online fitness classes being just two. **Richard Burton** found out more.

Since lockdown, many of us have been re-evaluating the way we use our homes. Bedrooms have become offices, dining rooms have become classrooms and gardens have become the centre of everything.

But as the weeks rolled on, and with Government advice being to leave home only once a day to exercise, there came another essential - a home gym.

That doesn't mean a fully-equipped fitness studio like the one near Welwyn Alesha Dixon has been showing on Instagram lately. Or any of the lavish leisure complexes that were featuring on the sales details of so many seven-figure homes in the area only a few months ago.

Everything from garages, living rooms, patios and small back yards are being turned into makeshift gyms as the home-working, the furloughed, and just about everyone else makes best use of the free time and the weather to get into shape.

Exercise equipment has been flying off the shelves and online sales have soared as people turn their attention to everything from Poundland's £2 exercise ball to John Lewis's £3,400 vibrating Power Plates.

The latter, in partnership with Waitrose and the life insurer Vitality last week launched its own virtual health workshops for members, backed by the likes of Olympic swimmer Lizzie Simmonds who introduced it saying: "Our health and wellbeing, and that of our family has never felt more important than it does right now."

I asked John Lewis for precise figures since lockdown, and as of last week they were reporting a 369 per cent uplift in sales of fitness machines and a 267 per cent rise in yoga equipment.

No surprise given that some lesser-known online retailers have been hiking prices as demand grows. And many others have simply been running out of stock.

But just as I've been reporting elsewhere for weeks on the incredible way entrepreneurs have been adapting and reshaping their businesses for the modern age, so too have those who want to get in shape and those whose job it is to help them.

While Alesha Dixon was



Working from home: Louise Appel teaching an online fitness class

Picture LOUISE APPEL

showing off her David Lloyd-style weights-and-cardio haven, Bishop's Stortford trainer Mike Williams was posting an Instagram video surrounded by breeze blocks and bare roof joists in what he described as his "improvised little Zoom-room".

Personal trainer Louise Appel, who until lockdown, split her time between her gym on the Southdown Industrial Estate and Lords Cricket Ground, has been running a range of online classes for many of her clients from her living room and garden, even if it does involve a bit of improvising here and there.

"Many of my clients have responded really well and are keeping me busy," she said. "There's a lot of energy in this area and a lot of highly motivated people so I'm not surprised."

"But we've needed to adapt here and there. Gym equipment has suddenly become expensive with prices rising online so it's been a question of finding sometimes quite fun alternatives; using random objects such as bags of rice or bottles of water for resistance exercises for example."

"We've even had people adding resistance to light weights by using them with bands, and those without bands, using pairs of

tights instead.

"I even have one lady who's a ceramicist who managed to wrap bags of clay in plastic and weigh them to form a range of weights."

Another is Cornor Stanbridge who's also now working online with clients since his gym at Rothamsted Park, Harpenden, shut its doors. He's now running 30 or more sessions a week, either via Facetime or helping fellow local trainer Tom Doe with his hugely successful Facebook boot camps.

"Most of my clients have been working out in their gardens," he said. "Although I've had them in literally every room of the house; living rooms, garages, you name it."

"The main problem I've had is getting hold of equipment. It's been a nightmare trying to get hold of barbells and free weights as all the suppliers have sold out and the prices in a lot of places have gone through the roof."

As a self-employed fitness coach he admits he was initially worried about how he was going to be able to keep going. But the switch to virtual home tuition "went mad" he says, adding: "It was 10 times better than we'd expected."

What made his life easier was the fact that many of his clients had accumulated equipment over

time so many came fully prepared at home. He insists he won't take on new clients virtually for safety reasons, but found that he didn't need to.

"I only work with those I've been working with for years because they know the techniques involved, something I can't monitor on a screen," he added.

"But the odd thing about going into people's homes like this is the way it becomes more of a family affair. It's not unusual to be training a woman and find her husband joining in and vice versa. I've even had kids having a go."

Gym membership was always going to be a casualty of the pandemic. Not only is social distancing difficult, the equipment would have to be cleaned after each user. And with the cost of gym membership prohibitive for people facing financial problems, many in the fitness world say some of those who have taken up home workouts may be reluctant to go back. And with the likes of Peloton changing the way we think about "smart" exercise, many would argue they don't need to.

But it's not all about the right kind of rowing machine or the widest range of weights. Many go for the interaction with someone they see as a motivator, even if it's

currently having to take place via a small screen.

I asked Louise Appel if she thought this could lead to a permanent change. The founder of Homebodies Health and Fitness said: "For a few maybe, if it's working for them. There are those that tend to put up with the gym as a necessary evil and will stay with it but I suspect most will be keen to get out of the house and back to normal."

Charlotte Taylor, a personal trainer and Beachbody coach based in London Colney noted online recently that home workouts are going to be the way forward for the time being.

But she also touched on another advantage of lockdown when she posted that she needed to go for a run "to get some fresh air and to get away from the kids".

While explaining how she tried to steer clear of main roads and people, she found some "lovely countryside" nearby she never even knew existed.

Quite a bonus. And a lifetime away from entirely different reality just a few miles further west in Garston where there was a clamour that saw huge traffic jams on the main road between Watford and St Albans - as people queued for McDonald's.