

PRACTITIONER GUIDE



ENGAGING AND WORKING WITH PEOPLE WITH A DISABILITY IN THE OUTDOORS



THE MENTRO ALLAN PROGRAMME

There were fourteen Mentro Allan (MA) projects across Wales, running between 2006 and 2011. The aim of the projects was to learn about the most effective ways to support sedentary people to be physically active using the outdoor environment. The projects had a range of target groups: young people, older people, women, BME (Black and Minority Ethnic) communities, people with physical and learning disabilities, mental health service users, carers, people at risk of rural isolation and people with low incomes. Projects were participant-led, with project development guided by feedback and ideas from the participants. Feedback was gathered both formally, through regular evaluation events using a participatory group discussion process, and informally, through chatting to people during the activity sessions.

This guide outlines the lessons that have been learnt for engaging and working with people with a disability to be physically active in an outdoor environment. It outlines some of the issues that participants, project coordinators and activity providers face when organising outdoor physical activity, and draws on the lessons learnt from Mentro Allan research to show how they can be overcome in order to make services accessible for different groups.

During the five years of the programme, Mentro Allan projects worked with children and adults with physical and sensory impairments, learning difficulties, and autism spectrum disorder.

STARTING OUT - INITIAL ENGAGEMENT WITH PARTICIPANTS

- The most straightforward way to engage with disabled people is to target them by approaching existing disability groups, organisations and support services. However, practitioners need to bear in mind that this approach may exclude a large part of the potential target audience – those with unseen disabilities, or people who don't associate themselves as having a disability. If you want to ensure that opportunities are open to all, consider outreach promotional activity to engage with those people who don't currently access services.
- When marketing sessions to an open audience consider how you want to do this. Advertising activities as being specifically for disabled people may put off those who don't see themselves as having a disability or don't want to identify themselves in a certain way. Use open and positive ways of advertising the sessions.
- Develop partnerships with other organisations and promote physical activity for service users at a strategic level. Their access to physical activity opportunities can depend on the commitment of people caring for them, and strategic commitment will help to ensure that their needs are met.
- Emphasise what the participant and their organisation will gain from involvement. Evidence from this programme suggests that service users who are able to regularly access appropriately set up physical activity tend to be more open, independent and calm, as well as gaining health improvements.

CONSULTING, LISTENING AND INVOLVING

- Spend time in the initial stages of the project consulting and building up relationships with partners and participants. Build up good relationships with support staff and carers and help them to understand the benefits of physical activity. A participant with a disability may be dependent on someone else to bring them to sessions, and also to facilitate their participation once they are there. A support worker who thinks it's a waste of time can easily pass on that attitude to their client. If the support worker also appreciates the value of physical activity and enjoys coming along, it will make it much more likely that the participant will continue to attend.
- It may take a long time at the preparation stage to get to a point where project activities are running smoothly and people are attending without issues. Putting resources into the initial stages is time well spent, and helps to ensure that activities will run successfully and can be sustained in the longer term.
- It can be difficult to run formal consultation or evaluation sessions with some disability groups so bear this in mind when designing a session. Informal consultation works well for people with disabilities and should be an ongoing process. Chat to participants and support staff during activities to find out what is working well and what changes might need to be made, and develop the project taking into account this feedback. Listen to any concerns and try and find solutions or provide reassurance.

SETTING UP ACTIVITIES AND OVERCOMING PARTICIPANTS' BARRIERS

Many people have low levels of confidence and don't think that they can successfully take part in an activity that is new to them. Taking part in new outdoor physical activity opportunities can potentially be a daunting prospect. Low levels of self confidence can be more pronounced among disabled people who might have a negative perspective of their own physical abilities. This can also be exacerbated by other people's expectations about what disabled people can and cannot do. This includes carers, support workers and professional service providers who function as gatekeepers for the activities, because they can make decisions about providing support for disabled people to take part.

- One way in which confidence issues can be overcome is to demonstrate to potential participants what the activity is about, using photographs or DVDs in marketing materials and taking visual aids to show groups the opportunities that are available. This can be effective in encouraging people to take the first steps and try something out and can overcome people's preconceptions that an activity is 'not for them'.
- Explaining to people exactly what to expect when they attend a session for the first time helps to make people feel less anxious about doing something new. It will also help to build up a trusting relationship with the participant and/or support worker.

- Provide taster sessions to trial the activities to ensure they are suitable. Encourage people to come along and just watch if they are anxious about taking part. Then pilot a series of sessions, perhaps six to twelve weeks and if this is successful, don't delay before implementing the activity long-term, to ensure there is continuity of provision.
- The weather doesn't have to be a barrier. Mentro Allan projects continued in all weathers (with a few exceptions in extreme conditions) by providing suitable protective clothing, shortening the length of sessions if it was very cold or wet, and making sure the venue had shelter, toilets and somewhere to get warm and have some refreshments. Different weather conditions can be viewed as a positive thing. There are benefits in the sensory dimensions of the outdoors for those with sensory impairments and disabilities. Participants may not have experienced extreme weather conditions before and this can add to the overall experience and enjoyment of an activity. The outdoors can be an excellent learning environment and 'healthy space' for participants.

SKILLS, TRAINING NEEDS AND PRACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS FOR PROJECT DELIVERY

- Ensure that health and safety requirements for delivering the activities have been considered thoroughly. Conduct risk assessments for the activities you want to offer, for the individuals who want to take part, and obtain a copy of the risk assessment from the venue you want to use, or undertake one if this hasn't been done. Having up to date health and safety procedures will help reassure participants and support workers if they have doubts about whether something is suitable for them to take part in.
- Specialist equipment requirements need to be considered along with any specialist clothing that is needed for the activities. For example, individuals with Down's Syndrome with a small body frame needed short poles for Nordic Walking. Others need specially sized cycle helmets. Invest in a range of different sizes of protective clothing/helmets. More specialised equipment will be needed for adventure activities such as water sports, climbing and horse riding. All these activities were successfully delivered by Mentro Allan projects and many are continuing.
- Take time to get people accustomed to using the equipment and clothing and the procedures they need to follow – persevere and be patient.
- Specialised training can include: risk assessment, person 'management' (for example, leading visually impaired individuals and groups), leading mixed-ability groups, coach mentoring (teaching skills to beneficiaries), effective communication (for example, use of Plain English, sign language, active listening, Makaton – a language programme that may be used either as an approach for the teaching of communication, language and literacy skills or as a source of highly functional vocabulary for people with communication needs and also their interactive partners;

Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS), Braille, and so on), behaviour change and physical activity guidelines.

- Ensure that all staff at the activity venue are fully informed about the activities you are providing. Whilst it is important to check the specific training and qualifications of instructors for delivery of the activity, it is also important to ensure that all frontline staff have received Equality training, and that those staff are aware of the activities being programmed within the venue. This is particularly important where you are providing new activities or opening up existing activities for different target groups from those that currently use a venue.
- People with disabilities might find it difficult to get to the activities and might be reliant on others to get there. Transport training is suitable for some individuals with learning difficulties and investing time in this can result in a participant being able to continue to attend activities independently of support workers. Working with professional support workers, assess who is capable of reaching independence through training. Transport training involves travelling with participants until they are comfortable doing so alone, helping the participant work out where they are and where they need to get to by providing suitable maps, timetables, or photographs of the route. (See Case Study 16 for further details about transport training).
- Provide up to date information about activities. Make sure the participants have sufficient information on things like routes to venues, the times they should be there, the length of the session, what the arrangements are if the weather is bad, where they can wait if they are early, who they should call if there is a problem. Be there to meet and greet people or arrange for someone else to do so (and make sure the participants know who they are going to meet when they get there if it isn't you).
- Having project staff with good people skills is a vital requirement of making the project successful. Maintain a level of personal contact with participants and support workers. This will provide them with motivational and emotional support and encourage continued participation. Give them a call if they haven't come along for two or three weeks to see if there are any problems you need to address. Keep people informed of any changes and let them know of other activities that they might want to participate in.



DEVELOPING AND SUSTAINING THE ACTIVITIES

- Be flexible about the route you need to take in the project to reach the end goal. For example, an activity instructor might need to organise their sessions in a different way than they are used to. Activity instructors should be aware that they need to be flexible in their approach and open to respond to information from participants. For example, for some activities such as climbing it was important to spend learning time indoors in order to reach the project goal of physical activity in the natural environment.
- It is very likely that you will need to use volunteers to run activities in the long term. Volunteers are a valuable resource and investment in them is worthwhile. Volunteers will need to have a CRB check, suitable clothing or equipment, and will need to be provided with disability awareness training and activity-specific training.
- Volunteers can be recruited from local colleges and universities, from partner organisations; they can be carers or support workers or participants themselves. Participants who develop skills to volunteer can be excellent community champions for the project and can sell the benefits to others and encourage increased attendance.
- Allow for progression once activities are underway. Some individuals and groups might get bored after a few weeks of doing the same activity and want to develop their skills or vary the activities they take part in. Others may be more comfortable with routine for a long time before changes need to be made. Ask the groups and their support workers, watch out for their body language which can demonstrate whether they are enjoying things or not. Talk regularly to activity leaders about how things are progressing.
- Setting targets for groups or individuals to achieve can maintain people's interest in the sessions and help them to monitor their improvements and successes. Provide participants with certificates or awards for their achievements in taking part in a series of sessions or reaching their goal. Celebrate the successes!



CONCLUSION

Many of these pointers are relevant to setting up new outdoor activity sessions for any target group. When setting up and running activities for disabled people, bear in mind the need to take small steps, but **don't** make assumptions about what people with disabilities can or cannot do. It is possible to push the boundaries. The gains that participants can make from regular physical activity sessions can surprise even those professional staff who know them well.

Multiple benefits of taking part became apparent during the five years of the project across all target groups. Feedback from participants, professional workers, carers and volunteers reported that taking part had helped participants to achieve increased physical fitness and health, increased levels of confidence, improved the sense of well-being, promoted an appreciation of the outdoors and the natural environment, as well as providing opportunities to socialise, develop friendships and form new groups.

Readers interested in working with people with disabilities may also be interested in reading the following outputs from Mentro Allan:

Case Studies 10 and 11 from the Flintshire and Wrexham project and 16 and 17 from the Cardiff project.

Briefing Papers: Support for demographic groups; Physical Activity Outdoors.

Research Reports: Final project report, Summary report and the External report from the CCRI and the University of Bath.

A copy of the guidance notes given to project co-ordinators is available through the website. Projects were encouraged to focus on doorstep activities, as being more easily sustainable.

www.mentroallan.co.uk

Mentro Allan was led by a National Partnership made up of the following organisations:

Countryside Council for Wales: www.ccw.gov.uk

Public Health Wales: www.publichealthwales.gov.uk

Sport Wales: www.sportwales.org.uk

Wales Council for Voluntary Action: www.wcva.org.uk

Welsh Local Government Association: www.wlga.gov.uk