



Mentor Allan

## BRIEFING PAPER



## ACTION RESEARCH



*Issue 1*

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## Observations on Mentro Allan as an action research based learning programme helping sedentary people become and stay active.

### Briefing Paper Introduction

In order to communicate the learning arising from the Mentro Allan project, papers have been written to suit different audiences. Study papers have been prepared specifically for researchers reviewing findings across a number of themes, whereas briefing papers are aimed at local or national project/service managers and policy makers. Each briefing paper covers a different topic although there are many aspects that inter-relate. Finally, practitioner guides are being written for those working in the field, directly delivering projects or activities, and case studies are being prepared to bring to life some of the lessons learnt showing what has been successful, what has been tried, and how some of the challenges have been overcome.

### Background to Mentro Allan

***Creating an active Wales is central to our One Wales ambition for a healthier future for all. It recognises that sport and physical activity are beneficial to health and that a partnership across the Welsh Assembly Government, Local Authorities, the NHS, the Third Sector and our communities is essential if we are to gain the benefits of an active and healthy Wales<sup>1</sup>.***

The Mentro Allan (MA) programme<sup>2</sup> is a five year Big Lottery funded project and is actively supported by a diverse network of local and national partners. Its distinctive features are its:

- Aim to motivate a diverse range of sedentary groups to become more active;
- Focus on physical activity in the outdoors environment;
- Use of action research to involve its participants in achieving behaviour change;
- Gathering of evidence of what does and doesn't work in practice.

### Key points of the paper

This paper outlines emerging findings from the research on how partnerships, management and service delivery arrangements work best to support long term behaviour change. In particular it focuses on the action research based learning method that has been applied across the MA projects.

Project staff found that there are benefits to being involved in a national project providing advice and guidance as well as opportunities for staff to share experiences. The MA approach has allowed learning from "real life experiences" of people who would not usually take part and this has guided project development from a participant's perspective, rather than a policy driven or service provider approach based on pre-conceived ideas.

### The evidence on which this briefing paper is based

Over the past four years the MA programme has been supporting and monitoring 14 projects across Wales providing practical support to a range of sedentary groups (e.g. the over 50s, young single mothers, people with physical disabilities or with mental health problems, carers, young people, people from Black Minority and Ethnic communities). These projects have been tailor-made to respond to the needs and interests of the different groups with action research being used both to assist the design and delivery of appropriate activities and to draw out transferable learning that can be used to influence future policy and practice.

The issues described in this paper have been distilled from the carefully recorded experiences of running these projects and the programme as a whole. Using the reflective practice which is central to the action research method, many of those involved locally and nationally have been able to contribute observations and insights into the way the programme has worked in practice. These have been gathered, analysed and discussed at several interactive seminars and the results used to inform this paper.

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<sup>1</sup> Minister for Heritage and Minister for Health and Social Services: Creating an Active Wales December 2009

<sup>2</sup> Part of the Big Lottery's UK-wide Community Sports Initiative, although MA focuses on physical activity opportunities as well as sport

## Aims of the MA programme

The MA programme is the Wales element of a UK-wide programme funded by the Big Lottery Fund (BLF) called the Community Sport Initiative (CSI) which aims “to increase physical activity amongst people who experience barriers to participation.” The CSI has been developed differently in each UK country and as the name suggests it has focused on engaging marginalised groups in formally run sports activities. In Wales however a decision was made to focus on encouraging general ‘physical activity’ rather than specific involvement in ‘sports’, probably as a result of the emphasis being placed by the Welsh Assembly Government on improving the population’s physical activity levels to improve standards of health. Nonetheless MA continues to form part of the UK CSI and is being monitored and evaluated by BLF.

Another distinctive aspect is the strong emphasis placed on gathering evidence and learning about successful approaches that help sedentary people raise and sustain their levels of physical activity. For this and possibly other reasons it was conceived as an experimental and highly innovative programme by the BLF in Wales.

In July 2005 the BLF in Wales published its “MA Stage Two Guidance Notes” setting out the detailed terms of the programme. In its opening paragraphs this referred to a range of Wales-based strategies that all “...point to the wealth of research about the health related problems caused by sedentary lifestyle and the benefits of an active lifestyle”. However the guidance observed that physical activity levels remain low in the general Welsh population, and it noted that “...while much is known of the benefits of exercise, there is little evidence available from systematic research on the effectiveness of interventions designed to increase activity levels.” It stated that: “By offering the opportunity to engage in innovative outreach activities and ensuring that such activities are appropriately evaluated, the programme will provide a lasting legacy of evidence of effective interventions that change behaviour.”

Linking MA’s aims to ‘Health Challenge Wales’ and to WAG’s ‘Climbing Higher’ strategy, the guidance stated that MA would focus on sedentary populations, especially those who “face specific barriers to participation above and beyond those that are experienced by most people. MA will therefore provide added value by targeting certain ‘hard to reach’ groups within the sedentary population.”

Another issue which influenced the programme is “the abundant natural resources of Wales [which] offer a great opportunity for exercise in many forms and represent a potential that is not yet being harnessed to full effect.” The guidance therefore also stated that MA would “increase the use of the natural environment in Wales”<sup>3</sup>. This aspect is the subject of a briefing paper on *“Increasing physical activity levels in the outdoors and the natural environment”*.

Finally, BLF’s guidance went on to state that: “Research suggests that [behaviour] change is not brought about by single activity interventions but by a range of co-ordinated approaches. This programme will provide the opportunity to create such multiple activity approaches where the central concern is on the needs of defined populations as opposed to the promotion of certain activities.”

Bringing all these factors together, the BLF guidance summarised the overall aims of the MA programme as

***“to increase activity levels amongst the ‘hard to reach’ sedentary population by increasing the recreational use of the natural environment in Wales. It will have a strong focus on evaluation in order to increase the evidence base of what works in getting people active.”***

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<sup>3</sup> According to the BLF’s guidance “the natural environment refers to any outdoors location where the key features are dominated by open land, vegetation or coast and waterways. This includes urban parks and open spaces but excludes facilities such as sports pitches, swimming pools and skateboard parks.”

## Initial partnership-building and project-design

Any examination of MA as a learning programme requires an understanding of the way it is structured. Following the appointment of a National Partnership<sup>4</sup>, over a year was spent helping appropriate local partnerships to form in a range of different localities around Wales. Their first task was to design a project to engage selected sedentary target groups in physical activities with the aim of changing their long term behaviour. Each local partnership (called a steering group) has a 'lead organisation' in a contractual relationship with the BLF which is responsible for managing and delivering the project. However the National Partnership is required to ensure the programme's overall objectives (especially its evaluation and learning aspects) are achieved, and it does this by working co-operatively with the lead organisations and steering groups.

## Embedding the action research method

In response to the BLF's requirement that MA had "a strong focus on evaluation in order to increase the evidence base of what works in getting people active", the National Partnership decided to embed the action research method in all aspects of the programme's operation. Action research has been described as follows:

- *"A primary purpose of action research is to produce practical knowledge that is useful to people in the everyday conduct of their lives... So action research is about working toward practical outcomes, and also about creating new forms of understanding..."*, (Handbook of action research: Participative Inquiry and Practice Peter Reason and Hilary Bradbury);
- *"...action research is the way groups of people can organise the conditions under which they can learn from their own experiences and make this experience accessible to others."* Robin McTaggart - Deakin University 1989
- *"Action research may be described briefly as a family of research methodologies with dual aims of action (that is, change) and research (that is, understanding)".* Bob Dick - Griffith University and Southern Cross University 1999

Given the experimental nature of the activities involved, the highly varied nature of the contexts, settings, target groups and other parameters, the challenges of gathering 'evidence' and 'data' on behaviour change, and the emphasis on 'evaluation' rather than orthodox 'research', the choice of the action research method made sense.

All local project staff were trained in action research by consultants previously involved in the Welsh Assembly Government's Sustainable Health Action Research Programme<sup>5</sup>. These consultants (who became part of a 'central support team' – the CST) also prepared practical guidance on action research techniques and provided one-to-one tuition and support to help staff use them with their target groups. In addition, three customised 'evaluation seminars' held each year enabled project and CST staff to get together to review experiences, learn new techniques, gain confidence in using them and the valuable information they generate.

The diagram below shows the cyclic nature of action research. Applying this method to a typical MA project, a worker might start by developing a relationship with an organisation with direct experience of, and contact with, a target sedentary group. Through this they would gain an initial understanding of the needs and interests of the target group and the physical and psychological barriers that would need to be overcome to get them engaged in physical activities in the outdoor environment. This would allow the worker to design an initial experience for the target group – perhaps a one-off taster session or a short block of weekly sessions. It would also enable them to put in place all the practical arrangements such as transport, shelter, clothing, equipment, support staff, often in collaboration with a partner organisation, that are needed to make the experience work.

Through the taster session or block of sessions information is then gathered about the participants such as their age, gender, ethnicity, disability, health status and readiness for physical activity. Of particular importance in terms of evaluating the impact of their involvement with MA activities is obtaining a measure of participants' initial levels of physical activity on the 5x30 or 5x60 scales. Obtaining and recording this data accurately has not

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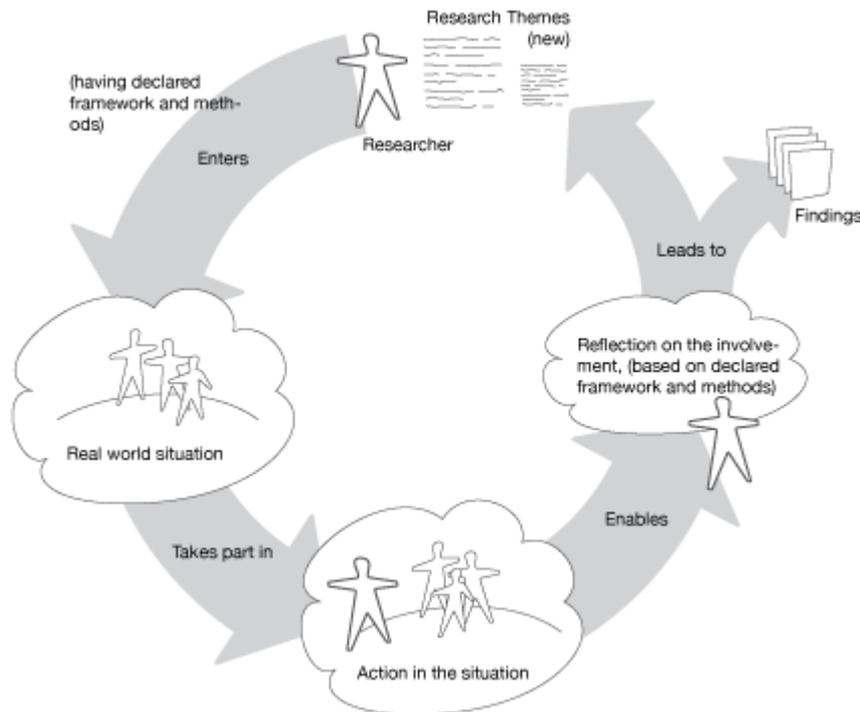
<sup>4</sup> The National Partnership is led by the Sports Council for Wales (now Sport Wales) and brings it together with the National Public Health Service for Wales (now Public Health Wales), the Countryside Council for Wales, the Wales Council for Voluntary Action and the Welsh Local Government Association

<sup>5</sup> For more details go to <http://wales.gov.uk/topics/health/research/research/sharp/>

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proved easy because this data gathering can disrupt the subtle social relationships involved in helping inactive and unconfident people start to become more active through new and initially quite challenging (if not daunting) experiences.

Both the quantitative and qualitative information gathered during the 'action' part of the process enables the project worker to reflect on the experience of what seemed to work well and what didn't. If the worker is part of a team these reflections can be shared and developed through discussion. Lone workers have been encouraged by the CST to record their thoughts in a confidential 'reflective on-line diary' and to share views with members of the team in order to clarify the next steps. Some quite detailed insights into individual and group behaviour have been captured as a result.



Crucially however, as well as this reflective phase for the project worker, participants have also been encouraged to consciously reflect on their individual and group experiences of physical activity through special participative 'evaluation events' facilitated by the worker, often with the assistance of a member of the CST. These events, which have usually been based around a social get-together or celebration, have been designed to prompt responses from the participants to the following questions:

- What went well – what did you enjoy?
- What didn't go well – what didn't you enjoy?
- How can the experience be improved next time?
- What additional or different activities would you like to see happen?

The answers to these questions are used to encourage participants to discuss and influence the various ways the activities are provided for them in future, including such things as the time of day, the place, means of transport, access to shelter and facilities, as well as the structure of the sessions themselves. This 'participant-led' approach to the design and delivery of physical activity experiences is a vital element of the approach adopted by MA. Using participant feedback to systematically improve activities so they fit the needs and interests of the group is felt to have encouraged participants who might otherwise have dropped out to stay actively involved. It has also fostered a sense of ownership which seems to improve the chances that either (a) participants or those supporting them might take over full responsibility for delivering the activities in future, or (b) that participants might seek out services that could enable them to maintain or increase their physical activity levels over the longer term. Evidence of this kind is still being gathered.

To complete the picture of a typical MA project, the action research cycle begins again with a new phase of improved action followed by further reflection and participative evaluation. At the end of each phase (or at least

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six monthly) the project worker, with the help of those providing the activities, has tried to gather quantitative information about changes in each participant's level of physical activity on the 5x30 or 5x60 scales, together with qualitative insights into how well and healthy participants feel they are becoming.

This is an idealised picture which illustrates the way action research has been used to provide a wide variety of physical activity experiences to meet the needs and interests of people with a range of sedentary lifestyles. In practice the cycle is often complicated by numerous issues which can generate further learning opportunities. Many participants have dropped out for various reasons, and some activities prove successful whereas others do not. The method has also enabled several different ways of providing activities to be tested, and some appear more sustainable over the longer term than others.

### The programme's local and national structure

The National Partnership provides a framework of evaluative support to help local project staff to extract learning. Despite the BLF's programme guidance documents quoted earlier, MA's learning focus did not seem to be fully understood by some steering groups and lead organisations. Whereas project workers received training and practical support in action research from the outset, it took longer to make project managers and steering group members aware of the importance of continuous evaluation and learning.

The National Partnership sometimes found it hard to get lead partners to prioritise data gathering and evaluation because there was no direct contractual relationship involved. However with the support of the BLF, including the insertion of a compliance clause in the final year's funding agreement, the National Partnership has managed to work successfully with all the local projects to gather large amounts of quantitative and qualitative data.

### Extracting learning about what works and what doesn't

As has been explained, MA is the Welsh element of a UK-wide Community Sports Initiative (CSI) which the BLF is evaluating through a specialist consultancy firm called Hall Aitken. In response to the different cultural and linguistic conditions in Wales, Hall Aitken has subcontracted some of its work to another firm called Mabis, and this has included a series of case studies.

Of particular relevance to the UK level evaluation is the quarterly submission by MA of statistics relating to four of the CSI's Key Performance Indicators (KPIs), namely:

- the number of registered and active participants in each project and their composition by gender, age, disability, ethnicity and language (KPI:1);
- the number and type of coaching qualifications gained by staff and volunteers involved in each project (KPI:5);
- the number of adults doing five or more days of 30 minutes or more moderate to vigorous activity (KPI:11);
- the number of young people doing five or more days of 60 minutes or more moderate to vigorous activity (KPI:12).

Other information submitted includes information on the activities run by each project and the number of 'session attendances' recorded. In addition a detailed report describing the progress of each project is prepared each year following interviews with local managers and staff. All this means that a comprehensive statistical record has been kept tracking many aspects of the 'performance' of each project.

However MA is gathering large amounts of additional information through action research. At first the aim was simply to explore what worked and what didn't, since it was difficult to know in advance what the issues might be until the different projects began experimenting with their particular activity regimes. However by 2008 the National Partnership decided to update its evaluation framework guidance to sharpen up the research focus. From this point the research became structured around four Key Learning Outcomes (KLOs):

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- KLO1: How do people in different sedentary groups change their behaviour to get active and stay active?
- KLO2: What support do people in different sedentary groups need to get involved, change their behaviour and sustain that change?
- KLO3: What effect does an outdoor location have on people's experience of physical activity? Does this make a difference to staying active?
- KLO4: What partnership, management and service delivery arrangements work best to support long-term behaviour change?

A sequence of participative enquiries have been held around each of the KLOs – a process that is still underway – with the aim of generating a series of 'briefing' and 'information' papers for dissemination. Each of these has involved special reflective seminars (called 'cluster groups') which have brought together a range of local project and central support staff, representatives of lead organisations and steering groups, and research staff from the national partners to explore different issues.

### The 'validity' of action research

The National Partnership also created an Evaluation Sub-Group (ESG) which meets several times a year to look at aspects of the data gathering and analysis, and advises both the National Partnership and the Central Support Team. There has been an intense debate in the ESG about the degree to which the observations and conclusions drawn from the action research can be generalised as 'objective' or 'valid truths' which can be applied in other situations. It has been argued, for instance, that the method is 'non-scientific' – i.e. that it does not involve a 'do nothing control group' against which the results of MA's efforts to change behaviour through its activities can be compared. It is also difficult to make comparisons across different projects because they involve people with different types of sedentary lifestyle being supported in many different settings through many different types of activity.

A counter-argument is that in reality there are many different types of 'truth', particularly when it comes to the study of human behaviour and society. What passes for a valid truth for an 'objective' outside observer can be different from that recognised and responded to by ordinary people interacting in the 'real world'. One of action research's strengths is that it throws light on what is perceived to matter and to make a difference to people actually engaged in a particular activity (i.e. what really matters to them). So although it might generate different forms of knowledge when compared with orthodox 'scientific' studies, such as those practiced in epidemiology, its defenders argue that such insights still offer valuable forms of learning that can be used to inform policy and practice to improve the health status of sedentary populations.

Action research is actually being used to achieve two related things in MA. On the one hand it is being used to enable the participants whose behaviour is being changed to play an influential part in shaping the way the activities are delivered for their benefit. The participative evaluation techniques being used by projects create a regular feedback loop that allows the activities to be organised in ways that make them progressively more sensitive to participants' wishes. These techniques also tend to make participants more aware of their role in the design and delivery of activities, and it fosters a sense of ownership that could increase the prospects of participants sustaining their activity levels.

On the other hand action research is also being used at a programme level to try to identify some generalisable learning from across the whole range of projects. This is done not only by analysing all the local evaluations, but also by asking project workers to reflect consciously on their experiences of trying to change the behaviour of their participants. These two approaches could be defined as using action research for (a) project 'evaluation' and (b) programme 'research'. It appears to be the use of action research for the programme research that is the more controversial. Nonetheless the National Partnership still believes that useful and potentially generalisable learning can be drawn from the programme, and much of what is written in this paper, for instance, has emerged using the action research method.

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However the National Partnership has also decided to commission an academic consultancy team to carry out an independent study combining qualitative ethnographic research of selected projects and participants with a rigorous examination of the qualitative data being collected. This team from the Countryside and Community Research Institute (CCRI – University of the West of England) and the University of Exeter, is looking at all four KLOs with a special emphasis on exploring the behaviour change being achieved through MA activities (KLO1). This not only involves close observation of active participants but also finding out what change may or may not have occurred with some of the participants who have ceased their contact with the programme. It is anticipated that this independent study will result in the production of reports and papers for dissemination from 2011 onwards.

### Entering the dissemination and sustainability phase

MA is entering its dissemination and sustainability phase. Preparations have involved holding a special lead organisations' seminar and helping project staff with the preparation of 'exit (sustainability) strategies'. These strategies are aimed at sustaining successful activities as well as disseminating the learning to partners with the purpose of 'mainstreaming' the participant-led approach.

Some projects have already begun to change, with one now balancing directly provided activities with awareness raising and training to enable partner organisations to develop their own activities for sedentary groups using the 'MA formula' and local outdoors environments. Other projects have begun to 'package' their activities for certain groups (e.g. those with mental health issues) so that a proven method can be adopted or adapted or 'franchised' to others. In some cases successful 'spin off' projects have been created which can be continued if formal groups are constituted that can obtain further funding.

At the programme level a national conference has been organised under the banner "*Small steps, great strides*" to draw the attention of both policy-makers and service managers to the practical learning being generated by MA. A series of 'briefing papers' (of which this is one) have been prepared for the conference, together with shorter 'practitioner guides' for use in the field. Both series will continue to evolve following the conference as the evaluation of qualitative and quantitative data continues. Dissemination of learning through action research will be supplemented in 2011 when the CCRI / Exeter research team starts to report its findings.

### Additional observations

The 'participant-led' approach of MA projects has had a profound influence on the way physical activity support services have been designed and delivered for sedentary groups with very different needs. The degree to which this distinctive approach is recognised and understood by managers in lead organisations or by members of steering groups appears to vary, with some project workers reporting strong and sometimes senior level support, while others say they still lack such overt backing. Feedback suggests that this recognition is more likely to occur where a lead organisation is a voluntary body rather than a local authority. On the other hand opportunities for mainstreaming MA's participant-led approach in statutory services are greater when enthusiastically backed by senior local authority managers.

Two of MA's other features have been highlighted by project managers, firstly the benefits that have derived from being part of a national programme with central support, and secondly the four-year funding arrangement which has allowed support staff sufficient time to understand the needs and interests of sedentary target groups and to build good working relationships with key local organisations.

### Strengths and weaknesses

During the preparation of this paper a cross-section of those involved in MA at both the local project and national programme levels was asked to identify MA's strengths and weaknesses:

#### Strengths

- opportunities for learning are built into all levels of the programme and it provides the time and opportunity to capture the lessons that other projects tend to miss;

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- it has focused on the ‘real life experiences’ of participants without preconceptions about what the research might find;
- it has allowed project staff to find out about the experiences of people who don’t usually engage with public services;
- use of action research means that MA has uncovered issues that matter to people in the target groups (what makes sense to them) rather than being dominated by what matters to service providers, funders and policy-makers;
- project staff have been guided and trained in action research by a national support framework, and because most had no previous experience in this field they tended to explore issues without being influenced by past ‘baggage’;
- it has been possible to record ‘failures’ as well as ‘successes’ because MA is not a typical outputs-driven programme;
- the varied interests and expertise of partners at the local and national levels has helped to identify and contextualise the findings into useful learning;
- MA could be used to make a better case for co-production between different parts of the public sphere and help to reduce the costs of statutory services by illustrating what works more effectively.

### Weaknesses

- the programme’s research focus was insufficiently clear from the start and many local partners took a long time to appreciate its learning objectives;
- its complex local and national structure and its diverse range of projects makes it too large and unwieldy to draw out generalisable conclusions;
- the lack of a direct contractual relationship between the National Partnership and the local projects has made it hard to achieve a disciplined approach to research;
- MA’s activities involve too many variables and makes extracting learning about what works difficult, if not impossible;
- efforts to record data and personal information through action research have been patchy at times partly because the research process can cut across the benefits of its activities to participants, creating barriers between staff and participants;
- too much has been expected of project staff who have had to run and manage their projects as well as undertake the action research, with the latter suffering;
- poor standards of qualitative data may make it difficult to demonstrate the impacts that MA activities have had on participants’ behaviour;
- some believe that action research, by its nature, cannot derive objective and generalisable truths.

### **Conclusion: what is the paper telling project developers, funders and policy makers to do?**

- Be clear from the outset whether the information and evidence being gathered is for evaluation purposes or research, as this will influence the methods used and data obtained.
- If information and evidence is required by the funder this should be made clear in the contract or terms and conditions of grant from the outset.
- Ensure that the people collecting the information and evidence are clear about the parameters, have regular training and opportunities for support in order to learn, develop and overcome obstacles.
- A “participant-led” approach to project development contributes to the success of a project by helping to engage and retain target groups. This is especially valuable when initiating new projects and or trying to reach new audiences.
- If projects are too varied and complex it makes it difficult to gather comparable data in order to make generalised assumptions. Projects need to have specific, measurable and focussed objectives.

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### **Future Research**

MA has now engaged with over 9,000 participants who have been given the opportunity to become active using the outdoors and natural environment. Feedback from participants on the benefits of being active outdoors – and the barriers they face – will continue to be gathered through the research. This will allow the programme to develop further and increase learning on how to encourage more sedentary people to access the outdoor environment in Wales to sustain a physically active lifestyle.

### **Further information**

The MA website contains information about the National Partnership and all local projects as well as annual reports, research papers, practitioner guides, case studies and guidance notes issued to project staff.  
[www.mentroallan.co.uk](http://www.mentroallan.co.uk)