



Mentor Allan

## BRIEFING PAPER



## PHYSICAL ACTIVITY OUTDOORS



*Issue 1*

01/10/2010



# Briefing Paper: Physical Activity Outdoors



## Increasing Physical Activity in the Outdoors and Natural Environment

### 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 (Venture Out) programme<sup>2</sup> is a five year project funded by the Big Lottery Fund and is actively supported by a diverse network of local and national partners. Mentro Allan aims to increase activity levels amongst the 'hard to reach' sedentary population by increasing the use of the natural environment of Wales. The programme aims to make the parks, waterways, coastal environments and countryside of Wales accessible to a wide range of people that might otherwise never use them<sup>3</sup>. The distinctive features of Mentro Allan 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 the emerging findings from the research on how to engage with different target groups to encourage them to use the outdoors. The paper discusses how project staff worked with participants to overcome the barriers they faced that deterred them from being active outdoors. The emerging research suggests that there is considerable value in supporting the ongoing development of outdoor activity opportunities in Wales. The provision of outdoor activities in the natural environment can have specific benefits for participants beyond those gained from taking part in indoor physical activity. Mentro Allan project staff found that the outdoors has been a suitable location to engage with those groups that are considered 'hard to reach'.

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

Throughout the programme, an action research approach has been used to gather feedback from participants, activity providers, project staff and partners. Each project has adopted an experimental approach, testing what works through observation and dialogue with participants to help develop a successful programme of activity. This paper is based on that ongoing feedback and specifically, evidence discussed in three 'cluster groups' of project staff meetings, where the focus was to explore the following questions:

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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 Mentro Allan focuses on physical activity opportunities as well as sport

<sup>3</sup> Big Lottery Fund: [www.biglotteryfund.org.uk/prog\\_mentro\\_allan](http://www.biglotteryfund.org.uk/prog_mentro_allan)

## Briefing Paper: Physical Activity Outdoors

What effect does an outdoor location have on people's experience of physical activity? Does this make a difference to staying active?

How does an outdoor location improve the chances of behaviour change?

What are the disadvantages and how are they successfully overcome?

What role does the outdoors play in helping people sustain their change?

The emerging findings from this research work are discussed below.

### **Challenge – Raising awareness of outdoor opportunities and encouraging people to take the first step**

An initial finding from the research showed that using the outdoors to be physically active was not an obvious choice or option that prospective participants had ever really considered. Indeed, some of the people who worked with the participants, such as support workers and service providers (previously referred to as gatekeepers)<sup>4</sup>, had similar views. This presented staff with an additional barrier as in some cases they had to persuade support workers to get involved in physical activity outdoors before the intended participants could access the opportunity.

A key issue was a lack of awareness among the target groups of what they could access in the outdoors and the natural environment – both in terms of the types of activities they could do outdoors and the types of locations that were nearby them that they could visit. However, project staff found that if they could persuade people, or simply introduce people to the experience of participating in an outdoor activity, then the benefits soon became clear, and the way groups valued the outdoors and the natural environment began to change from their initial perceptions and expectations.

These examples illustrate some of the feedback from projects working with black and ethnic minority (BME) participants who had not been aware of the opportunities available in their area:

“We've found many facilities & activity providers specific to the objectives of the project. The only issues with the facilities & activities are lack of publicity & marketing. As a result, many beneficiaries are unaware of their existence until they become a participant.

“My cousin said she hasn't walked like that in years, since she came to the UK in 1993, mainly because she doesn't know where she can go due to the fear of trespassing etc, would it be possible for you to email a map or location details so we can go again”

“One lady commented on how it is good to go on an organised walk, as she is never sure whose land she may be walking on. And it's good to know places where people can visit and take their family for a day out. Also she enjoys walking in the rain and liked the fact that it was a diverse group”.

“Thanks for bringing us to a great place I can't believe it is so near (City). I didn't know it existed”

A 'lack of awareness' as a barrier could be resolved by activity providers and venues becoming better aware of how they can target and market the opportunities that are available to different audiences.

The concept of being physically active outdoors was not a familiar one to many of the target groups. For many older people in one region of Wales, outdoor activity simply wasn't customary, nor was venturing far from their immediate environment. Some simply thought the outdoors wasn't for them or that they weren't physically fit enough to be able to take part in a physical activity outside:

“After contracting polio I thought this activity (cycling) was beyond me...It's one of my dreams come true!!”

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<sup>4</sup> Annual Report 2008

## Briefing Paper: Physical Activity Outdoors

“I’ve not ridden a bike in 57 years – and I thoroughly enjoyed it – it’s really made a difference to my life”

For others, the outdoors, ‘the countryside’ in particular was not part of their culture. For example, BME groups often considered the countryside to be a location for a Sunday excursion or a special occasion. Other BME participants did not see how outdoor physical activity fitted in a modern lifestyle – the outdoors was not a place to take exercise if gyms and leisure centres could be used instead.

Deciding upon the location of the intended activity was also an issue for project staff. Project staff initially found that being physically active in the proximity of the home area/community could be a barrier for young people and for some BME groups – participants can feel they are being judged or looked at, and are supposed to be behaving in a certain way. If they go outside of their local community then this barrier is removed. An example of this being a barrier for young people was where a young cyclist refused to wear a helmet or cycle sensibly when he was in his local area, but would put the helmet on as soon as he and the cycling group got to a certain point away from where he lived. The influence of peers and family on people’s behaviour is extremely strong and being seen to be portraying a certain image can be a particular barrier for young people.

Many of the young people involved in the project haven’t known what is on their doorstep (such as footpaths within a five minute walk) because it is just something they don’t normally do – they tend to be drawn to the town centres. Therefore simply by going outside their locality they get an experience of the outdoors that they wouldn’t get normally. Providing outdoor activities does not have to be an extreme experience to make it a valuable and different experience for people, and the feeling of achievement from trying something different can motivate people to continue and repeat the experience.

### **Challenge – Is the outdoors a safe place to be? What types of outdoor environment should be accessed?**

On many occasions while the programme has developed, references have been made to the need for the participants to feel secure in the outdoor environment if they are to continue attending activities. In one project which engaged mothers and young children in a forest school, the initial feedback was that the woods could be ‘dangerous’ for children and this made parents feel anxious about the experience. However, participants noted that security came from having qualified staff in attendance with rules and safety measures – the location could feel like the ‘wild’ but the activity session is under control, children are being taught how to ‘behave’ in it – and the whole experience is rule-bound. Feedback from the group suggested that the forest wasn’t somewhere that they would attend independently, but they enjoyed the group participation and learning new skills with an activity provider. Participants also had concerns over the weather when on occasions it would not be suitable or safe for young children (and not enjoyed by parents). This highlighted the need to base activities somewhere where shelter could be reached quickly, and where participants could access toilet facilities; access seats and somewhere to make a hot drink. For these groups, structured activities outdoors were preferable and the social element of meeting up for a chat and a cup of tea was an important part of the overall experience.

Similar concerns were felt among older people in a particular urban area, where a certain park wasn’t considered safe because of perceived youth annoyance, it was ‘too dark’, ‘too steep’ according to feedback from prospective activity groups. Project staff overcame this issue by chatting with some of the key ‘movers and shakers’ in the community, identified by a local community worker. By persuading these people of the benefits of taking part, others in the community were persuaded to come along and try it (with an activity leader to escort them). Positive word of mouth within the local community had a strong influence, and the group were inspired to walk as a group outside of the Mentro Allan arranged sessions as well.

These groups also had a strong reliance on having an indoor venue as a backup, or as a start/end point to the activity itself. The majority of the ‘older people’ groups that project staff spoke to on the issue of the outdoors reported that there was a need to develop an indoor element as well as outdoor. Project staff demonstrated that the ‘small steps’ approach to getting people active worked here – beginning in a familiar local environment (indoors) and slowly developing outdoor aspects to an activity session. This built up the confidence of participants and led to sustained activity. Groups continued to meet even if the weather was considered too bad to go out walking. The continuity of the group, rather than going outdoors was the most important thing to

them. Over time, many participants developed their fitness levels steadily and began to take part in walking and jogging events such as the Race for Life, the Santa run and 10k walks. For these participants, controlled outdoor environments close to city centres were favoured rather than venturing further afield.

Some BME participants told project staff that they sometimes did not want to be in an outdoor environment because of a fear of racist behaviour towards them in predominantly white areas. Here, the role of the project staff was vital in encouraging certain participants to take the step to be active outdoors. In this example, the participants felt safe because they were accompanied by the project leaders – who were white males. Project staff have helped people to develop confidence and knowledge of the outdoor locations where they now feel secure being active. Scenic places further afield were used to try motivating people initially; with the intention of making it an experience that participants might be more likely to engage with. However, two years on, people have become happier with walking in the local area and do it for health and exercise purposes, but it wasn't something they wanted to do initially.

### **Challenge - Building up trust with participants**

Feedback from project staff and participants consistently notes how important it is to have a key person who can engage people in a new type of activity. Their role in encouraging people to be active outdoors is vital. The continued involvement and support of this key person is needed to maintain participation among individuals until it becomes an established behaviour. The key person is likely to be a project coordinator, an activity leader, but the involvement of prominent/respected community members can also motivate people to continue participating. This key person needs to be positive with people and have a passion and enthusiasm for the outdoors and the natural environment. They can act as a bridge to getting people involved who are cautious, or have doubts that taking part is something they can achieve. The first experience for participants is crucial – it needs to be positive and something that they are comfortable with – otherwise they are very unlikely to give it a second try.

The length of time it takes to persuade people to try taking part in physical activity outdoors varies greatly between the different target groups and between different individuals within one target group. When developing a project aimed at inactive people, establishing groups can take a lot longer than might be expected in a more traditional sports development environment, and the degree of support required from a key person is greater.

“I never thought I could walk up that hill, but the instructor had faith in me, and I couldn't believe I'd done it; the last time I walked up that hill was as a small child”;

“...made you want to do more, feel good factor afterwards, so nice to do something different, support and enthusiasm from leader was infectious”.

### **The health and well-being benefits of being active outdoors**

Once the initial challenge of encouraging someone to take part has been overcome, the outdoors/natural environment can have a positive impact on people's perceptions of their health and sense of well being. This has been self reported by participants; care workers; parents and project staff, and there is additional published evidence to back up the premise that being in a natural environment can promote well being and health benefits<sup>5</sup>. Project staff asked their participants whether there were benefits of being active outdoors, and what it was about the outdoors that made the experience positive. There has been debate over whether the same benefits occur from physical activity indoors – but there are strong messages from the projects that the outdoors lends itself to providing a better rounded experience that goes beyond the benefits of just being physically active in an indoor environment.

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<sup>5</sup> Countryside Recreation Network: A countryside for health and wellbeing: the physical and mental health benefits of green exercise. Sheffield: Countryside Recreation Network, 2005

## Briefing Paper: Physical Activity Outdoors

While it is difficult to pin down why this is, the following statements from participants describe their experiences of the outdoors. These comments are recorded from a range of different participants across Wales - including young people; BME participants; people in rural isolation and carers.

Positive energy, space, natural, much more positive compared with indoors, socially love the activities;

Fresh air, mud and rain, quiet, prefer outdoor activities, more potential;

Enjoy learning outside;

It is peaceful and relaxing;

Freedom – a chance to escape ;

“I feel so much more confident in social situations after working with the Mentro Allan project.....the health benefits I’m feeling have really surprised me”

Sea –different, higher risk, excitement and danger and more adrenaline, less predictable. Didn’t understand what the fuss was about before, more healthy and less lazy;

I like being close to nature, I find it very therapeutic.

The proximity to flora and fauna seem to turn the outdoors experience into a better experience. Seeing things grow, seeing the variety of colours and enjoying open space – can these increase feelings of well-being?

Participants frequently comment on enjoying the fresh air – people seem to understand it is good for you and you will feel better by being outside.

Projects have also observed how the outdoors can have a positive impact on people’s behaviour. One project cites the example of a young person with anger management issues. The participant was part of a group from a school support unit and he didn’t get on well in school and was difficult. When taking part in Mentro Allan activities outdoors, the participant had no problems – he appeared to be comfortable there and enjoy it. He didn’t argue with the other participants and the staff who worked with him regularly reported that they noticed a marked difference in behaviour when he is out compared with being in the school environment.

Other young people asked about the outdoors have commented that they like the diversity of the habitat, the inspiration that green spaces provides, the fresh air, and they enjoy being outdoors. Project staff report that these are people who didn’t go outside before but now they like socialising and learning in the fresh air with likeminded people - it makes them feel better.

## Lessons learnt

- Start small. Use a stepping stone approach to getting people outdoors. The start point will differ according to the target group. To engage with older people for example, there might be a need to get people doing some sort of activity on an indoor basis to begin with, to develop trust in a familiar location, and to make sure all are happy with the process. This allows participants to build up their confidence levels;
- Introduce a social element to outdoor activities. The social benefits are a key motivational factor that will help a project engage with people initially and provide a hook to keep people participating;
- For younger people and other groups, the initial activity may be outside but be based in a familiar environment such as a youth club or community centre. Younger people are more likely to be open to trying new activities in new locations;
- BME groups initially preferred to be active in a location away from their homes as they didn’t want to be observed. However, over time this changed, and the same groups are now beginning to become confident using their local area for physical activity. Group activity rather than independent activity seems to be preferred, and having a key person to lead activities and build awareness of opportunities is a vital part in the process of encouraging behaviour change;
- Flexibility towards the use of an outdoor location is required. A narrow tree covered path on a walking route was not popular with one group because people wanted light and safety, so the walks were

## Briefing Paper: Physical Activity Outdoors

transferred to a park that offered several different routes and the group began to take ownership and choose the walks they wanted to do. The key contact needs to be able to manage people's comfort zones so they can grow in confidence. Indoor locations are needed as a back up in bad weather as continuity of activity is a key part of creating the social bonding of a group and encouraging sustained attendance.

- It is very important to listen to people's feedback – this can be done through informal chat as well as through more formal evaluation events. The role and skills of a key individual to make this happen plays a major part in whether a project is successful and becomes sustainable.

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

- When designing physical activity projects, allow sufficient 'lead-in' time to work with the target audience to develop the programme of activity and the locations in which this could be based;
- Use a participant-led approach in order to help the initial engagement process as it can encourage sustained participation, as the process allows participants to take ownership of the activities they take part in;
- Expect the participant base to be small to begin with. Do not underestimate the initial time and effort required to engage previously inactive people, plus the ongoing encouragement needed to maintain a behaviour change;
- Allow project coordinators and activity providers plenty of scope to spend time building relationships with potential participants and community groups, as well as trying a variety of different activities and approaches;

### **Future Research**

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