BRIEFING PAPER

SUPPORT FOR DEMOGRAPHIC GROUPS

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Step to stride: adjusting support for different demographic groups

Exploring the different solutions that project staff have used to support participants as they become more 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.

The Mentro Allan (MA) programme 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 the types of support people in different sedentary groups need to get involved, change their behaviour and sustain that change. As well as focusing on four target groups, based around common issues and requirements, the paper draws together common themes across the groups to establish themes which all project coordinators should consider when developing physical activity projects.

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 and Minority Ethnic communities). These projects emerged from an experimental local MA partnership-forming process described below whose first task was to identify potential participants in selected localities around Wales for whom tailor-made outreach and support projects could be designed and delivered to change their lifestyles.

The experiences described in this paper have been distilled from the carefully recorded experiences of these projects as they first made contact with their target participants, began to understand their needs, gave them their first taste of physical activity, helped them establish a regular pattern of activity and then supported their transition towards sustainable active lifestyles independent of the projects. Each project has adopted an experimental approach, testing what seems to work through observation and dialogue with participants using action research.

Is it appropriate to refer to stages of engagement? What might the stages be?

Three 'stages of engagement' were introduced to project staff as a mechanism for organising their thoughts about the support that they felt was needed by their participants. Although this risked imposing structure on the findings, project staff were generally comfortable with this framework. The three stages were:

- *initial engagement* (finding participants, and getting them to their first activity session);
- *retention and development* (of participants, and their groups where appropriate);
- *sustained involvement* (activities and participation continuing independently from project support.

As projects are currently moving into their final phase, developing 'exit strategies', most of the learning captured to date has focused on engagement and retention, though some learning has been captured on the final 'stage'. Often what was required in engagement was also a feature of participant retention, though these features often evolved. As a result, the findings presented here are presented by topic rather than by 'stage'.

Older people

- **Leaders provide a 'familiar face'.** In the initial stages of group formation (where activities are based around open invitation rather than existing groups), having the same leaders with the necessary people skills can bring a group together and maintain initial interest. Where the intended model is to withdraw funded support for leaders, or develop leaders within the group to take over in the future, care needs to be taken to ensure that reliance is not built up.

- **Older people tend to prefer group activity.** Although the social aspect of activities has been seen to be a particular motivator (especially in maintaining participation), project staff have found that participating in groups also allows older participants to feel safer. In addition, group activities allow participants to reminisce and share their experiences, an important way in which older people have been seen to bond through the projects and maintain interest (see below).

- **A positive 'group dynamic' and appropriate peer support will help to maintain participants' involvement, and encourage new participants to stay.** Group dynamics are particularly important as a group matures into regular participants. Peer encouragement and support, and the development of social bonds, increases both the chances of continued participation and the development of leaders within groups. Depending on the way a project or group is to be resourced and/or sustained, participants may need to understand that their continued participation is reliant on being able to attract and integrate new members. This is particularly important given that project staff have found that many new participants have been concerned about not being accepted by groups, presenting a barrier prior to participation which needs to be quickly and effectively overcome.

- **Project staff may need to lead in taking care of participants who are socially isolated.** Referring back to the previous point, many older people become socially isolated, as they lose friends and family over time. When such people begin to take an interest in an activity, project staff have found it very important to prioritise their integration into group settings, for example by using buddy schemes with existing participants, and ensuring that session leaders are aware of their needs and keep them 'involved' in the activity session as it progresses.

- **Working with new and existing social groups bring different challenges.** Forming new groups from scratch can be problematic – marketing new activities requires approaches tailored to the target audience. Mentro Allan projects have had some success using methods as diverse as organising 'launch lunches' and radio advertising. This approach is also more reliant on development time, and may need intensive support initially to attract and maintain participation.

  Working with existing groups, makes it easier to access new potential participants, and can provide 'ready-made' groups ready to participate. These groups may even be able to build physical activity into their existing

activity programmes in some cases. Working with new groups also allows the developer of an activity to draw out the needs of the group before activities are developed.

In the short term, therefore, working with existing social groups make be less risky. This method is dependent on there being sufficient existing groups within a community to engage (and therefore make a difference), and on those groups being sufficiently motivated to respond positively to suggested activities. Some project coordinators have found that groups with a negative perception of physical activity can be more difficult to persuade as a group than as individuals.

- **Older people's motivations change over time.** A variety of different techniques have been effective in engaging participants in the various projects, including health talks on the benefits of physical activity, basing activities of topics of interest (such as local history or wildlife), or emphasising the social aspects of activities by introducing post-activity refreshments.

  What engages individuals is not necessarily the defining factor in maintaining their interest – particularly where participants have been engaged because of their interest in improving health, the social aspects of activities can quickly become what keeps them coming back. Similarly, encouraging participants to impart their knowledge on subjects is a useful way of maintaining participants' interest, encouraging groups to come together and reduce reliance on leaders who have been brought in to lead activities (particularly walks) on specialist topics. Encouraging older people to utilise their knowledge has been seen to increase their self-worth and engagement.

People with physical and learning disabilities, and those with mental health problems

Project staff identified that there are significant similarities in the barriers faced by people with mental health issues and those faced by people with physical and mental disabilities.

- **It is vital to facilitate and support use of public transport to encourage independent participation.** Projects have given 'public transport training' to participants so that they can move towards travelling to activities independently. This has involved taking photographs along key routes to act as reminders, providing maps and timetables in appropriate formats, and travelling with participants until they are comfortable doing so alone. Ensuring regular attendance at activities, through regular contact initially, can then embed the habit in the routines of participants.

- **Projects must work with, and challenge, institutional aspects of participants' lives.** Support organisations, and particularly support workers, are the initial point of contact for any project attempting to engage these target groups. Their attitudes towards sport and physical activity – and particularly different activity types – can prevent participants from even being asked if they would like to participate. The continued attendance of many in this target group is also reliant on the willingness of their support to take them to activities, especially early on.
  Raising the expectations of support workers/organisations and potential participants, so they know what can be achieved, and allaying any fears about the health and safety of the potential participant, are also key to ensuring their engagement.
  Project staff also suggested a potential risk, in that Mentro Allan can also act as an institution in its own right, creating reliance amongst participants and service providers Reliance can occur in two ways: on the resources that it has as a project which provides access to physical activity opportunities; and through the relationships formed with participants. Project staff's views reflected a desire to ensure that Mentro Allan acts as a catalyst for participants to move towards independent participation (and independent living) more generally, where possible.

- **A lack of confidence can lead to 'excuses' and participation ending.** Routine is generally important for individuals in these target groups, and therefore participants must trust that activities will be on at regular times, in regular places. Creating this trust, and ensuring that – where groups develop – peer and support worker support is available at all times, will raise confidence.

- **Bad weather can be overcome with good planning and a positive environment.** Mentro Allan projects have found that the best way to encourage participants to overcome bad weather and participate has been to stay positive when the weather is bad. The idea behind this is that, as participants begin to have positive experiences of the outdoors in poor weather, their attitudes will begin to change, thus removing a barrier to participation.

  There may be some circumstances where the weather is so bad that no activity can take place outside; where this occurs, having an option of an alternative activity indoors can ensure that the routine (and associated trust) is maintained.

- **Project leaders need to be sensitive to the 'identity' of participants in relation to their conditions.** Project staff reported that many participant groups identify themselves as 'different' to other groups with disabilities or mental health issues, and often have strong identities amongst themselves which bond them together. This presents challenges when looking to form groups across identities.

People from ethnic minority communities

When considering support required by ethnic minority communities, many of the issues that affect other 'target groups' are also influential within these communities. Moreover, it is important also to remember that different communities have distinct characteristics, owing to particular linguistic, social and religious norms and identities. The section below therefore focuses on women, and in particular Muslim women from differing backgrounds.

- **'Privacy' and 'modesty' are vital considerations when planning activities.** Privacy was signalled as of great importance for some groups in particular, for cultural and religious reasons, including those surrounding perceptions of appropriate gender behaviour, gender segregation or gendered sensitivities.
  For women of some ethnic backgrounds, for example, their religious and socio-cultural beliefs and habits required that strict dress codes were followed. These included the requirement to be fully covered when outdoors and open to public gaze. This principle is expanded in many cases to encompass modest behaviour as well as dress, in seeking to avoid attention, particularly attention from males.

- **Using 'appropriate spaces' can lead to surprising results.** In order to respect such 'modesty' requirements, participants have suggested that certain considerations in regard to venue would provide the privacy, seclusion and safety that they need to engage in outdoor physical activity. Project staff have found that, in some cases, such spaces – usually away from the communities in which they live – can create an atmosphere conducive to spontaneous activities, such as playing football or using playground equipment.

Younger people

- **Consider the impact of activity cost of perceptions of quality and affordability.** Staff reported that many young people felt that they could not afford to pay anything for activities, yet also saw no value in 'free' activities, which they perceived to be equivalent to poor-quality activities. In addition, certain areas were thought to have been 'over-subsidised' previously, creating high expectations for outside provision and no appreciation of the actual value of what was being offered.
  In practice, projects have found some success in charging small amounts (up to £5 for the most expensive activities, less for activities of smaller cost) to maintain participation in activities, with impacts on participation ranging from small decreases to increases in participants.

- **Travel difficulties are often presented as a barrier, but may not be significant.** Project staff felt that inability to travel to activities was a common barrier presented to them by participants, but that this was often an excuse due to their reluctance to travel (or to participate at all), and that they would travel when they saw value in the activities being provided.

- **Young people need to feel 'comfortable'.** Particularly amongst those projects which have focused on working with young women, projects have found that 'comfort' is the biggest influence over a participant's willingness to take part in activities. This means ensuring that the group feels non-threatening and safe, takes account of

participants' lack of confidence (both in their abilities and their body image) and allows to feel that they won't be judged by others (both inside the group and outside). Activities were seen as a source of 'personal risk'.

Mixing groups – in particular mixing young men and young women – can bring risks to activities by providing sources of discomfort into groups, whether established or not. Project staff reported that female participants had a tendency to 'cover up', even when this made them physically uncomfortable, whereas male participants had a tendency to show off, in particularly by taking clothes off.

- **The varied impacts of peer pressure.** Peer pressure is an important aspect of young people's lives generally, and can have both positive and negative impacts. Having the 'right people' at an activity can act as a motivating factor for others to attend, but perception of the activity is also important – the 'wrong activity' or the 'wrong people' may put people off attending initially.

  Staff also reported that personal identity and self-image – particularly the desire not to be seen to conform – had some effects on attendance and behaviour. Similar to the issues associated with mixing male and female participants in the same group, joining groups of different ages can also have an impact, particularly amongst older participants when asked to participate alongside younger people.

  Projects have found that by taking these factors into account, and making judgements based on their knowledge of key individuals within groups (their attitudes and behaviour), can prevent mixing groups which might have a negative impact on participation overall.

- **Select appropriate leaders.** Projects have found that for younger people the most important thing to consider when selecting a leader is not who is most appropriate to lead a particular activity, but who is most appropriate for leading *that group*. Participants must be able to relate to their leader and understand the importance of particular group dynamics (as discussed above) and how to manage these effects.

- **Take account of how young people prioritise their lives.** Project staff found that the young people they work with have a different 'frame of thinking' to them and their providers, living very much in the present and reacting to 'dramatic changes' on a daily basis. Young people were also seen to prioritise and make decisions based on how they wanted to be perceived (who they are and want to be). This has implications for how young people are engaged, and how their interest can be maintained (or managed) given this inherent instability.

Lessons learnt

It is possible to establish some cross-cutting themes which have proven pertinent (albeit often in different ways) to several projects and groups, and therefore give further insight into the support that individuals and groups need to change their behaviour and become more active.

- **People's perceptions of their abilities and capacity to be active need to be cultivated.** Staff working with all target groups – with the exception of younger people – referred to the need to broaden the horizons of their target group (and, more specifically, potential participants) in some way.

  For older people and people with disabilities and mental health issues, this has been overcome by providing opportunities for people (and their support workers, where appropriate) to *learn for themselves* what they *can do* in terms of their ability, rather than what they *cannot or should not do*.

  For some people from ethnic minority communities, this has meant learning how to use outdoor spaces and how they can participate in ways they consider to be culturally appropriate. More generally, several projects have reported a lack of knowledge or expertise held by their target audience about how to be active in the outdoors, in particular where potential participants had not been exposed to – and engaged with – outdoor spaces (particularly outside of urban environments) at a young age.

  This can be labour-intensive work, especially where perceptions of ability are deep-set or perpetuated by the perceptions of others, within families of carers (people with disabilities) or within peer groups (more generally), but is essential if participants are to begin participating.

  This learning goes beyond participation in physical activity, however; the issues (and solutions) identified through this research has implications for access both to public services, such as transport, and public outdoor spaces locally and more widely.

- **Group dynamics need to be understood and carefully managed.** Group dynamics have been a particular issue for those working with older people, and younger people. When working with younger people, the primary concern is with managing behaviour and understanding *who* is appropriate in a group setting as much as *what* is appropriate, setting norms for interaction between participants before introducing potential 'threats' to group cohesion. Where the (perceived) risks of disruption are too great, it has been important not to force integration of incompatible groups.
  With younger people, and people with disabilities, understanding identity (and how this relates to – and reacts against – other identities) is of particular importance in ensuring that groups are 'mixed' appropriately. For other groups, but particularly older people, identifying and working with opinion-formers within groups is a good way of maintaining positivity and engagement within a group, as well as gaining support for any intervention in the first instance.

- **Participants' motivations change over time, and activities and support need to change to reflect this.** Improving health was the primary rationale for creating many Mentro Allan projects, and has been used by many projects as the basis for marketing projects to target groups. As Sport Wales' Active Adults Survey demonstrates, although improving health and fitness are motivations for participation for many, other motivations are also important for others.
  Other common motivations – such as wanting to meet people and socialise, or to learn new skills – have been identified by projects and used as the basis for engaging participants where they had not initially been attracted by the chance to participate in physical activity. Using 'hooks' such as local history, arts and crafts and wildfire as the basis of walks or trips to the outdoor can engage participants taking their first steps, or encourage ongoing commitment to participation by providing variety or wider interest.
  Motivations also change over time, as multiple benefits emerge for participants who continue their involvement. Those who join for health reasons may continue to be involved – or deepen their involvement or commitment – because of the groups and friendships that are formed. This has been true in particular for older people engaged in Mentro Allan.
  Those supporting projects – whether in a leadership, voluntary or professional capacity – therefore need to be aware of these shifts and what it might mean for maintaining interest in the activities offered by (or to) groups.

Project staff are now starting to look at giving participants (primarily when within activity groups) the opportunity to consider how they can sustain their activities beyond the life of the Mentro Allan programme. This shift may require different types of support which have not yet been fully explored to date, and a similar shift may be visible once the Mentro Allan programme disappears altogether.

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

- Supporting participants in their journey from physical inactivity to independent participation is time-intensive and requires sensitivity to the needs of target groups. This in turn supports a long-term approach to project development.
- Policy-makers should consider the effect of encouraging early experiences of the outdoors (and of physical recreation). One of the reasons that the support required to encourage adult participation in the outdoors is relatively high is the lack of knowledge and confidence that adults have of outdoor activity.
- Project developers should be aware that support requirements will change over time, reflecting changing motivations and requirements amongst participants.
- Planners should take account of the relationship between people and place, and how culture, religion and society all shape and mediate an individual (or group)'s ability to utilize those places for physical activity of different types. Local spaces may *appear* accessible, but the concept of accessibility is multi-faceted.

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