



Engaging older people in physical activity outdoors

Emerging findings from the Mentro Allan programme

Challenges

When Mentro Allan project staff initially started to try and engage older people in the programme, they found an immediate barrier: the older people they wanted to work with often had no habit or culture of using the outdoors. Some had no interest, some believed that they weren't physically fit enough to be able to take part in physical activity outside.

What encourages older people to become physically active outdoors?

The project staff became aware that non participants (of any age) can lack confidence, which acts as a barrier to becoming active. Project workers need to have good people skills, to be patient and get to know the needs of their potential participants. Time needs to be given to building up trust with participants and letting them steer activities at a pace which suits them.

The social aspects of participation are a key motivator for older people. Mentro Allan staff found that it was important to build a social element into every activity occasion – even if it is just the opportunity for a cup of tea at the end of an activity session.

The initial trigger that engages people in outdoor activity may not be what maintains their interest, particularly if participants initially got involved to improve their health. In the longer term, the social benefits are likely to be what keeps people coming back. Encouraging participants to impart their personal knowledge on subjects (such as local history) is a useful way of maintaining interest, encouraging groups to come together and reduce reliance on leaders who have been brought in to lead activities (particularly walks) on specialist topics. This has been seen to increase participants' feelings of self-worth.



Focus on older people

Wales has the highest proportion of people in the UK of state pensionable age.

The Welsh Assembly Government has appointed an Older People's Commissioner, the first post of its kind in the UK.

Physical activity is important for older people's wellbeing. The health benefits of regular exercise include reduced instances of coronary heart disease, hypertension, non insulin dependent diabetes mellitus, colon cancer and depression and anxiety.

The proportion of the population meeting recommended levels of moderate physical activity decreases with age: 33% of 55-64 year olds meet the target of doing 5 x 30 minutes a week, as do 25% of 65-74 year olds and 15% of people aged 75 and over.

Since the programme started, over 1,300 participants aged 55 and over have registered for Mentro Allan activities. Over 400 were active in the last reporting period (April – June 2010)

See the Older People's Wellbeing Monitor for Wales 2009 and Mentro Allan research for further information:

www.wales.gov.uk/topics/olderpeople/research/
www.mentroallan.co.uk

What types of activities work, and where?

Walking, gardening and cycling activities have all been popular with older people, and Nordic walking sessions have worked particularly well with participants who were previously inactive.

People can have concerns about the safety of various outdoor locations. In one urban area, certain parks were not considered to be safe by the target group. Project staff demonstrated that the 'small steps' approach 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.

Over time, many participants developed their fitness levels 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.

Bad weather is frequently given as a reason for not going outdoors – although once people become engaged in an activity and are equipped with suitable clothing, the weather becomes less of a barrier – many participants have continued turning up to sessions in all weathers. However, for some groups it is important to have an indoor location as a backup so that regular sessions continue rather than being cancelled. The continuity of an activity is a key part of creating the social element of a group and encouraging sustained attendance.

The Benefits

Once people have begun an activity, there can be a big change in attitude towards physical activity outdoors and there are both physical and psychological benefits:

“You see we are never too old to try something new (orienteering)”

“I suffer from anxiety so just being here is a big step for me, but I’ve enjoyed it. Meeting new people, it has helped a lot. Thanks”

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

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

“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”

Lessons learnt

Start small. Use a stepping stone approach to getting people outdoors. To engage with older people, there might be a need to get people doing some sort of activity on an indoor basis to begin with.

Develop people’s trust in a convenient location for the group. Base the start and end point of the activity at a familiar venue with access (where possible) to shelter, toilets and warmth.

Develop a social group. Finish or start the activities with refreshments and a chance for people to chat and reflect on the session.

Listen to and consult with participants on a regular basis. This can be done informally. Acting on the small suggestions people make can make a big difference to sustaining their activity levels.

Allow plenty of time in the initial phases of the development of a project to gain people’s commitment to becoming active outdoors.