



Seminar Paper

Introduction

This paper outlines emerging findings from the Mentoro Allan research, it draws together the conclusions from each of the Mentoro Allan learning outcomes to establish themes which policy makers, programme designers and funders should consider when developing existing or introducing new physical activity projects.

Background to Mentoro 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 Mentoro Allan 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.

Mentoro Allan Learning Outcomes

Four key research questions have been used to initiate the exploration of the impact, successes and lessons learnt through the local and national projects. These questions are supported by further sub-questions which allow the investigator to probe for further information and detail around the topic that is being discussed. The Action Research methodology applied throughout the project allows the emerging lessons to evolve and inform future enquiries.

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

Benefits to participants

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.

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.

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. 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.

Impact of the outdoors

It is possible to establish some cross-cutting themes which have proven pertinent 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 in the outdoors.

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.

Mentro Allan Papers and Guides

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.

Conclusions: what is this paper telling project developers, funders and policy makers to do?

1. Ensure new programmes/ initiatives have clear aims and objectives:

- 1.1. Providing clear aims and objectives at the outset is important in the development of any new partnership or project to ensure that the right people and organisations are brought to the table and remain committed throughout its' lifetime.
- 1.2. Being 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.
- 1.3. Where 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.
- 1.4. Establish projects that focus on a specific audience in order to engage appropriate partners, relevant expertise and to be able to meet the needs of the participants. Where 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.
- 1.5. 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

2. Establish appropriate partnerships:

- 2.1. Nationally coordinated programmes based on a group of projects need sufficient expertise at the centre to provide advice, guidance and support to lead organisations, local partnerships and local staff throughout the time of their projects.
- 2.2. Partnerships and organisations need to be clear about the role of any groups that it establishes to guide the strategic and operational elements of projects. Group members need expertise that allows these groups to be flexible over time as the priorities change.
- 2.3. Service arrangements can be successfully delivered by both public and third sector organisations, in both cases it will require providers to create and work through partnerships that bring together a complementary set of resources, including those with which the target audience can readily identify.
- 2.4. Ensuring the engagement of senior management can enable the project to become part of the day to day business and secure the long term future in achieving its outcomes.

3. Use flexible and sustainable delivery mechanisms:

- 3.1. Decide on a long term sustainability strategy for service provision, in order to determine whether to invest in the training of staff to provide the services or to contribute to the development of a network of external providers.
- 3.2. Be prepared to adapt the wider support programmes for the target audience in order to provide activities and services at appropriate times and venues as well as ensuring that conflicting priorities are minimised.
- 3.3. Consider the knowledge and skills required to work with the target audience in order to recruit the right staff, encourage involvement of volunteers and to select the activity providers.
- 3.4. 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.

4. Engage and involve participants in project design and delivery

- 4.1. A “participant-led” approach to project development contributes to the success of a project by helping to engage and retain target groups as the process allows participants to take ownership of the activities they take part in. This is especially valuable when initiating new projects and or trying to reach new audiences.
- 4.2. 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 approaches.

- 4.3. 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. 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.
- 4.4. 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.

5. Plan projects over a 4 year time period:

- 5.1. Providing long term funding allows more effective project design and implementation as well as allowing time to embed the structures in an organisations daily business and the opportunity to secure sustainability funding.
- 5.2. 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.
- 5.3. Project developers should be aware that support requirements will change over time, reflecting changing motivations and requirements amongst participants.

Future research

Mentor Allan 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 Mentor Allan 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.mentorallan.co.uk

