



Case Study 1

Supporting the development of an independent activity group for older people



the Mentro allan Programme

The following case study draws on the experience of an action research programme called 'Mentro Allan' which ran for five years and was designed to test ways of helping different hard-to-reach sedentary groups to become more physically active.

All of the local projects were participant led, with project development guided by feedback and ideas from the participants. The feedback was gathered both formally, through regular evaluation events using a participatory group discussion process, and informally, through chatting to people during the activity sessions.

Project background

The targets for the Caerphilly/Torfaen project were: people with low incomes, older people, young people and those with mental - health problems. The project initially worked with key people employed by local service providers in the two areas to identify priority groups and to develop a list of local contacts. The Cefn Fforest Sewing Group was identified by one professional as an opportunity to get the project off the ground. A meeting took place to inform them about the project, the potential for setting up activities and to explore their interest. The project also ran two street questionnaires while inviting people to attend focus groups, one in Blackwood and one in Cwmbran, that were set up to make contact with sedentary people and find out the kinds of activity they'd like to join. Some people from the Blackwood exercise group joined the Cefn Fforest group.

Everyone in the mixed gender group of mostly over 50's that came together from the initial recruitment drive had low levels of physical activity. The group was independent, having no connection to an umbrella organisation, and therefore relied heavily on MA staff to organise activity sessions and provide some continuity. Members were initially extremely reluctant to take on responsibility for the running of their group. This case study will examine what participants gained from belonging to the group, challenges faced by the staff supporting them, and what the factors were in the development of participants' ownership and commitment to sustainability of the group.

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What happened?

During the initial consultation, activities that the Cefn Fforest group identified as of most interest were archery, walking and Tai Chi, so taster sessions were set up in all three. The activity that eventually came to define the group was archery, although many of the group also took up Nordic Walking. Over time the membership of the group grew, some people dropped out, and others joined through word of mouth and via spouses, friends and family. Additional recruitment also took place through leafleting, local newsletters and referral through local organisations. An average of 12-15 people attended activities.

Throughout the lifetime of MA the group was engaged in six-monthly evaluation sessions. These were arranged around a trip or special event. Participants in all the project's activity groups were invited, for an opportunity to have fun and meet each other, and also to feedback on what had gone well, what needed changing, and what they'd like to happen next. This process was identified as a valuable element in the development of the Cefn Fforest group.

development of the group

Whilst archery proved most popular during the first three years of the group's life, finding a suitable location was a constant headache. The aim of MA was to encourage physical activity in the natural environment; however, archery works well outdoors in the summer, but rarely during winter. So, to keep the activity going consistently therefore, there was a need for both indoor and outdoor space.

Initially transport was also a problem for group members without cars, particularly since finding a location with both indoor and outdoor facilities in easy reach of each other was difficult. The group are now on



their third location which is in Ystrad Mynach where a group member has set up a cheap deal on a room. This wouldn't have been workable earlier in the life of the group, but now that people know each other better they are happy to give each other lifts, so transport is no longer a problem.

One reason that archery proved so successful was due to the skill and friendliness of the activity leader. The group was worried that with the end of MA funding they'd lose him, but when the situation was explained to him, he decided to become a member of the group and continue to attend the sessions without pay. In addition, three other group members have now trained to be community archery leaders.

Nordic Walking was led by a volunteer found from outside the group by project staff, and the group wanted his leadership to continue but also wanted the freedom to walk at their own pace. It was explained to them that in order to satisfy the activity insurance cover there would need to be a trained volunteer with each section of the walk. As a result two of the group members successfully trained as Nordic Walking leaders.

constitution of the group

The issue of leadership was one of the biggest challenges for the Cefn Fforest group. At first members saw project activities as a service being provided and they expected things to be done for them. This attitude may have been unwittingly encouraged because they were the first project

group to be established, and initially they got a lot of attention.

It took project staff a number of discussions and attempts at clarifying the project aims before the group acknowledged that in order to keep going, they would need to take ownership and lead themselves. This was reinforced by the evaluation events where they met other project groups who were in the process of becoming more independent. Once members had acknowledged that they needed to take on responsibility for the future of the group, a meeting was organised to look at their options, and to put them in touch with support organisations, such as Communities First, Sport Wales and the Gwent Association of Voluntary Organisations (GAVO).

With support from GAVO, the group became constituted and appointed the key roles of chairperson, vice chair, secretary and treasurer. Mentro Allan supported them by purchasing a range of archery equipment and by running a community archery leaders' course, attended by four members. In addition one member of the group was already a trained archery leader, and the current archery instructor had also become a group member. With these elements in place the group is now in a good position to sustain its activities.

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lead organisation for this project: groundwork trust

Project Location: **caerphilly and torfaen**
Project Name: **Stepping out**
Target Group: **hard to reach groups including: over 50's, disadvantaged young people & residents with low-level mental health concerns.**
Website: www.wales.groundwork.org.uk
Contact Telephone: **01495 222605**



IMPact on ParticIPants' lives

Members of the Cefn Fforest group have identified many gains from their involvement in the group over the last three years. Being part of the group has improved everyone's social life, and many of them now meet up at other times for a variety of activities, such as various sports, crafts, charity work, computer gaming, and other exercise classes such as water aerobics. As a result of participation in the MA project life has become more active and more interesting:

"Through contacts made in archery we've discovered new and interesting activities – bowling, curling and basket weaving"
(group member)

Levels of health and fitness have improved, despite some group members finding the physical activity difficult initially due to a range of different health problems; some had to recover from major surgery, such as hip replacements. But persistence and group support have kept them involved throughout their recovery.

Confidence has increased due to learning new skills, meeting new people and developing a wider group of contacts. In addition, despite initial anxieties about taking on responsibility, some members of the group have received training as activity leaders and for committee roles. The group as a whole has made the commitment to become constituted and to keep going.

"We have come together like an extended family group and we will carry on with the activities – Nordic walking and especially archery, as a new club." (Group member)

Mentor allan was led by a national Partnership made up of the following organisations:

Countryside Council for Wales:
www.ccg.gov.uk

Public Health Wales:
www.publichealthwales.gov.uk

Sport Wales:
www.sportwales.org.uk

Wales Council for Voluntary Action:
www.wcva.org.uk

Welsh Local Government Association:
www.wlga.gov.uk



Lessons learned

- It's important to find out where the group themselves are at, and to start where they feel comfortable:** This group was most enthusiastic about archery, which isn't an activity with high levels of physical movement, and often it needs to take place indoors. However, through the cohesion that developed in the archery group, participants built the social support networks that have led them into a wide range of other physical, social and creative activities, improving their physical and mental health and well-being, and establishing a sustainable structure for gains to continue into the future.
- be flexible with the way in which targets are achieved to provide a greater chance of success:** People generally wish to improve their health and well-being but can easily be put off by feeling under pressure, or criticised. Inflexible targets can have this effect. Enjoyment and increasing confidence are the best drivers for sustained behaviour change, and they develop when a project recognises that people are the experts on their own circumstances, abilities and resources, and makes plans with them rather than for them.
- the development of a strong group takes time:** Although in Cefn Fforest the participants were quickly convinced of the value of the group activities, it took a long time for them to gain the confidence, understanding and skills needed to develop a sense of ownership and take

over the running of the group themselves. Until they'd achieved this and agreed to a plan, offering leadership training and providing links to other local organisations didn't work. This is particularly important when the group is independent and not connected to an umbrella organisation.

- value the social aspect of activities throughout:** The good social network developed in the Cefn Fforest group has driven the desire for sustainability, helped the group overcome challenges (for example, difficulties with public transport for those without cars), and supported continued membership through difficult times (e.g. by members recovering from operations).
- be clear about project aims and constraints from the start:** Participants need to be reminded about the project's purpose a number of times during the development stages. They may not know about how organisational support or funding streams work and will therefore need assistance. In the Cefn Fforest group it took a long time before the participants would think about how to sustain the project when MA funding ended. From the perspective of project staff the sooner this is achieved the better,

so that they could give as much support in preparing the group for sustainability as possible.

the Mentro allan programme

There were fourteen Mentro Allan (MA) projects across Wales, running between 2006 and 2011. The aim was to learn about the most effective ways to support sedentary people to develop the habit of physical activity in the natural environment. The projects had a range of target groups: young people, older people, women, BME (Black and Minority Ethnic) communities, people with physical disabilities, mental health service users, carers, people at risk of rural isolation, people with low incomes. The approach to project development was participant led; using a Participatory Action Research model of evaluation. A copy of the guidance notes given to project co-ordinators is available through the website. Projects were encouraged to focus on doorstep activities, as being more easily sustainable.

www.mentoallan.co.uk

