Case Study 6

MAKING THE OUTDOORS ACCESSIBLE:
Engaging Black and Ethnic Minority Women from Cardiff in physical activity

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.

THE MENTRO ALLAN PROGRAMME

The Changing Lifestyles project covering Cardiff and Vale provided a range of activities including yoga, cycling, Nordic walking and dance. A large proportion of the participants were female, representing a wide range of BME communities. Many of these women were unaccustomed to taking exercise outdoors. Some participants expressed a longstanding wish to take more exercise or visit the local countryside, but hadn’t known how to go about it.

This case study will examine the way that these women overcame physical and psychological barriers and became more confident and comfortable exercising outdoors, and also how they were supported in discovering sustainable ways to access the natural environment.

PROJECT BACKGROUND

Barriers to physical activity
Many of the women from BME communities who joined the project previously led largely sedentary lives. Participants talked about how hard they found it to fit exercise into their daily responsibilities. For those with poor English skills or lacking the confidence to access mainstream services, exercise wasn’t a priority. Even where women knew the importance of physical activity, without a group of friends or family to exercise with, or information about what services are available, they found it difficult to overcome barriers to exercise.

At the start of the project there were a variety of additional reasons why many female participants were reluctant to get involved with exercise outdoors. For some there were issues around feelings of vulnerability in public spaces they might be exposed to unfriendly comments or perhaps seen by members of their own community.
Even if they knew where to walk, women generally felt anxious about being alone in quiet places, or afraid of racial abuse. Being physically active sometimes felt inappropriate, particularly in places which would be in public view as the women didn’t want to stand out. In addition cultural beliefs were a barrier, for example, in some BME groups the outdoors is seen as being for people who can’t afford a gym.

Project staff had to negotiate between the aim of promoting physical activity in the natural environment and the many barriers to getting women active outside.

Weather and type of activity can also be barriers to getting outdoors. Apart from large numbers of the participants being averse to getting cold and wet, conducting activities outdoors raises questions about suitable clothing and footwear. Walking can require sturdy shoes and waterproofs, while activities like cycling may not appear suitable for women wearing traditional dress.

**Participant Engagement**

The aim of the programme was to be participant-led, so the starting point had to be from their point of view. From there it involved a slow process of building participants’ confidence in the outdoors and the activities. At regular project evaluation sessions’ participants were asked for feedback, and activities were modified according to their needs.

For example, early on in the project participants asked for yoga classes, but no-one wanted to practise yoga outdoors. The solution staff came up with was to run the sessions in a venue with outdoor space. The class started with an outdoor warm up, and then moved indoors for the yoga itself. Initially the participants were reluctant to start outdoors, but gradually they came to value it.

Organised in this way, yoga has been an enduringly popular activity.

Setting up walking activities was relatively easy, walking was identified as a desirable activity by participants early on, since it’s a low risk activity with lots of opportunities for socialising. In addition the project had funding for waterproofs and trainers, so that all participants could be suitably dressed.

Initially participants asked for walks outside of town, where they would see new places, and not be visible to anyone known to them. Although many women were keen to walk, they had little or no idea of suitable places around Cardiff and the Vale, and also had limited experience of walking for pleasure. Trips went to local beauty spots in the Vale of Glamorgan. Women got to know the locality and the opportunities available, then several participants went back to visit these places with their family.

The Vale walks had a male leader. Participants were comfortable with this as walking isn’t an intimate activity, and he made them feel safe when out in lonely places. The walkers asked for short walks, no stiles, with car parking, and toilet facilities available. The leaders’ previous experience was with regular walkers, so he had to readjust his ideas of what was possible, trying to include all the criteria and planning for fairly flat walks until the groups built up their stamina.

To begin with the walkers wanted something special and rural to get them interested such as beautiful scenery or sea views. But as they developed the habit of walking and confidence in the group grew, it was possible to get them interested in places closer to home. Having enjoyed walks in easily accessible Bute Park and Roath Park some of the women now meet up to go there independently. When the project support for the Thursday walking group came to an end, the group carried on organising walks around the Cardiff area between themselves.

**Setting up activities – cycling**

When preparing any of the activity sessions, the co-ordinator had to pay great attention to the suitability of the venue. This was true particularly of cycling. The location used was secluded, so women learning to cycle didn’t feel overlooked and the nearby trails are not through populated areas, so they didn’t feel worried about being observed, or about making mistakes in public. In addition there was a car park and toilet facilities available.

Cycling is often not seen as culturally appropriate, particularly for Muslim women – it’s not possible to cycle in a jilbab, or salwar kameez. Participants wanted the sessions to be women only, since cycling felt like a slightly risky activity and they didn’t want men watching them learn. Some of the older women didn’t want to try cycling, but a number of others came to see it as a dare – ‘if she’s done it, so can I!’ A series
of training sessions ran over three years. Cyclists came from a range of BME communities including Indian, Chinese and Pakistani.

Altogether around 40 women learned to ride a bike, regular project rides had up to 15 cyclists. As confidence grew, some of the cyclists formed a social group and began going out independently. A few bought their own bikes for personal transport. It was also found through experience that a hijab is no barrier to wearing a cycle helmet!

In all project activities the development of friendships and social groups was a strong incentive to continue to attend. For women venturing out to unknown territory or unfamiliar activities in a public space the presence of a familiar group took away fear and embarrassment.

Over time many project participants became enthusiastic supporters of using the outdoors for exercise. They described the fresh air as healthy, and indoors as claustrophobic. Women noted that being outdoors brought their stress levels down, and that time in green spaces was good for both mental and physical well-being.

Knowledge of the landscape and history around Cardiff has grown, and many participants, now better informed about access, paths and facilities, have returned to project locations with their friends and families.

The initial fears of being visibly active outdoors have become less limiting as women have become familiar with places and activity leaders, and also as friendships and group safety developed. Activity providers who’ve worked with project groups now have more confidence at working with women from different communities and the way to to set up activities appropriately. In addition the project has produced a good practice guide that can help other service providers make outdoor services accessible.

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**Lead Organisation for this project:**
**MEWN Cymru**

**Project Location:** Cardiff and Vale of Glamorgan

**Project Name:** Changing Lifestyles

**Target Group:** Black and Ethnic Minority groups, particularly women aged 18 to 64 years

**Website:** [www.mewn-cymru.org.uk](http://www.mewn-cymru.org.uk)

**Telephone:** 029 2046 4445
Organisations providing outdoor activities need to think how to market their services to BME communities: many people from these communities would like to have more access to the beauty of the natural environment and historical sites in Wales, but aren’t aware of what’s available.

• When setting up any new services ask and listen: There are a variety of cultural and religious issues that may be a barrier to outdoor exercise for BME women, but many of these can be easily overcome with good planning and flexibility. It’s important not to assume, but ask!

• Start slowly, with low risk activities: For any group taking steps into new territory there are barriers such as fear of the unknown, anxiety about looking foolish, and uncertainty about how to proceed. If people are allowed to move at their own pace, many of these worries will subside.

• Value the social side of the activity: Making friends within the activity group is of central importance to getting involved, sustaining an activity, and what they perceive to be taking risks in behaviour or activity. This is particularly important amongst participants who suffer from isolation in their home lives. Allow social time in any group.

• Develop a checklist for the suitability of site: Car park, toilets, cafe available, type of terrain, and who it’s suitable for, risk assessment, how publicly overlooked (for activities such as Tai Chi, Aerobics or Yoga), variety of opportunities for different groups.

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.mentroallan.co.uk

Mentro Allan was led by a National Partnership made up of the following organisations:

Countryside Council for Wales:
www.ccgc.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
Mentro Allan was led by a National Partnership made up of the following organisations:

Countryside Council for Wales:
www.ccgc.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

www.mentroallan.co.uk