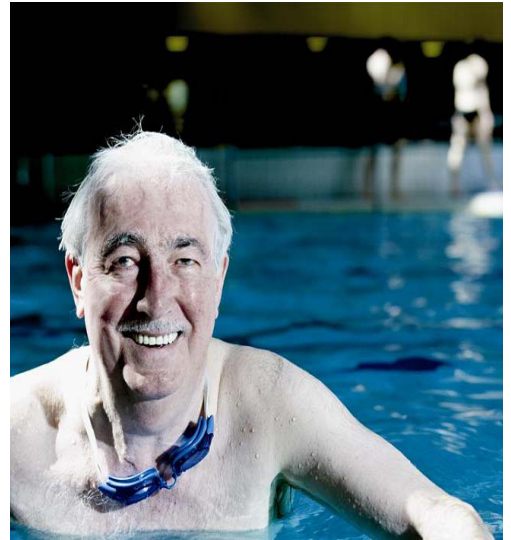


Case Study



Project

U3A Foyle –
Physical Activity Co-ordinator
(PAC)

Organisation

University of the Third Age
(U3A) Foyle

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About the Organisation

The University of the Third Age (U3A) Foyle is run on a voluntary basis. It provides a programme of over 70 recreational, social and educational activities for older people (over 50's). It has more than 600 members with over 100 directly involved as volunteers in running the organisation.

Project overview

PAC is a two-year project seeking to engage older men in a range of physical activities. A part-time Physical Activity Co-ordinator (PAC) in partnership with U3A Foyle develops a programme of physical activity for a group of 12 participants for a 12-week period. The 12-week programme is part mentoring and part buddy support. The cycle is repeated with a new set of participants on a rolling basis.

Participants take part in various activities mostly based at the U3A centre, but include other venues and the outdoors. Activities range from movement to music, to walking, sailing and introductory trips to the local leisure centre. Outside the PAC sessions, participants are encouraged to engage in other physical activity. The PAC programme complements the overall ethos of U3A Foyle in promoting health and social well-being.

What has it achieved?

The PAC programme has achieved significant results for a modest amount of funding. It engaged more than 100 older men at risk of social exclusion.

Results of physical activity tests carried out at 6 and 12-week intervals, show 75% of participants improved the number of knee lifts completed, 85% improved the number of half sit-ups and more than half completed more shuttle runs. Some individuals improved performance in these tests by more than 200%. As important as these results are, individual user stories point to many softer outcomes. Taking part has helped build friendships, improve self-confidence, self-esteem and for some, provide a reason to get out of bed in the morning.

How did the project get people involved?

Participants were targeted and recruited from the U3A membership, a ready-made target audience. Also, some targeting was through partnership working with wider networks such as Active Living in Later Years (ALLY). This is a local network serving 43 older people's clubs throughout the Derry city area.

Older men with health problems and experiencing social isolation are the primary targets. Participation was voluntary, but the project used the experience of U3A Foyle to target and engage those who would benefit most.

The PAC programme took place in a familiar and established setting, the U3A centre, which has a successful track record of providing services and activities for older people.

Older men engaged in the programme through a person-centred approach. Some peer mentoring was involved, using several potential participants as advocates to help stimulate interest.

What was innovative and what worked well?

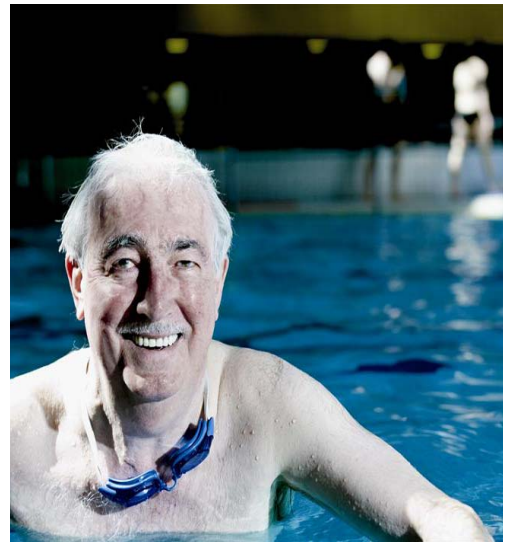
The U3A carefully planned the project following guidance from the International Society for Ageing and Physical Activity (ISAPA). It built on existing successes within U3A Foyle and sought to complement other healthy living activity run by the centre.

PAC modified and changed each programme cycle to suit the needs and preferences of the participants. It was participant led – the co-ordinator was just the facilitator.

Participants are actively involved in monitoring their own progress. They see first-hand their improvement through personal fitness diaries.



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Were there any unexpected outcomes?

The project has helped some participants improve other aspects of their well-being. The use of Personal Fitness Diaries has helped some beneficiaries address dietary and other health issues.

The PAC project has attracted significant interest from other external organisations. The University of Ulster have used the project to provide evidence about what works in engaging older people in physical activity. Also, Sport Northern Ireland is in discussion with U3A Foyle about the potential to develop a fitness suite on the site.

Overall there were few unexpected outcomes. The PAC programme was well designed and built on 20 years of designing and delivering activities for older people.

The future...

The PAC Co-ordinator funding from Active Lifestyles has finished. U3A have agreed to continue funding the post for an additional 3 months. Embedding the PAC model into the wider activity of U3A could help the project to continue. At U3A Volunteer Animators are used to deliver a comprehensive educational, social and recreational activity programme. There is scope to continue some of the physical activity under a similar arrangement.

Proposals are in place to build a £1.5m fitness suite at the U3A Centre. This will improve on-site facilities to nurture existing demand and stimulate further interest.

Lessons from the project

There are many key lessons to take from the PAC programme about engaging older men in regular physical activity.

- A person-centered approach is important. This applies to the Project Leader as well as the participant. Much of the success of the PAC programme is down to the rapport built between the co-ordinator and the participants.
- Take time to engage with potential participants. Find out what they want and what barriers they face.
- Don't underestimate the power of peer mentoring and the socialisation benefits. The 12 week PAC programme includes a 'bonding' day for participants.
- Familiarity is a key success factor. Use a familiar setting where possible. Most of the PAC programme activities take place, or originate from the U3A centre.
- Don't reinvent the wheel. Build on effective practice where it exists. U3A Foyle used their years of experience designing and running programmes for older people to inform the PAC programme. This was backed up with sound research and following industry good practice.
- Don't assume all traditional activities are unsuitable for older people. Understand health needs and limitations, but prescribe choice not the activity.
- Involve participants in all aspects of the programme – as well as self-monitoring. The PAC Programme provided mental stimulation as well as physical, and helped participants set personal targets and goals.
- Provide an exit route. The PAC programme complements some existing physical activity programmes run by U3A. Several beneficiaries have now joined the walking club, used the local gym and started swimming regularly.