

Case Study



Project

Merthyr and Blaenau Gwent
Mentro Allan project

Organisation

Merthyr Tydfil County Borough
Council
Blaenau Gwent County Borough
Council

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About the Organisation

This project operates across two counties in South East Wales. Its aim is to engage the target group in "green exercise" with the aim of improving their emotional and physical well-being.

The project has linked in well with other schemes across the county. In particular a referral scheme is being set up with direct links from GPs to the project itself. Both counties have a Local Action Group structure made up of several local organisations.

Project overview

The Merthyr and Blaenau Gwent Mentro Allan project is a joint partnership project that enables the local community to access the natural resources available to its residents in order to increase physical activity levels and improve health.

The project's primary target group are people with poor mental health. The secondary target groups are people on low incomes and older people.

The project selected and assessed its activities following a consultation with users in the form of a forum. This is arranged by the co-ordinator every six months. Following this consultation the project focused on gardening, walking and cycling activities, although it has provided other activities – such as canoeing.

What was achieved?

One of the main achievements over the past year has been the successful links which have been developed between Mentro Allan and organisations in the area as well as the community itself.

The impact of the project has especially been evident in the attitudes and feelings of participants. Examples are service user X, who had in the past been involved with drugs misuse, described his state of mind during a baseline analysis as being 'afraid and without any hope'. Following being involved with the project for a six month period, he felt clean. Service user Y, on the other hand, felt confused and in need of support. Having been involved with the project, the journey has gone full circle as the participant became a volunteer and green gym trained. The individual is currently employed by a local organisation.

How did the project get people involved?

The project keeps in touch with several Mental Health organisations. They have a Joint planning group which is the old steering group and includes strategic representatives from Merthyr and Blaenau. It includes a member from BTCV from the Voluntary sector and there is a member from the National Public Health Service (NPHS) who also sits on the National Partnership.

The project has been very proactive in targeting beneficiaries. The project has organised Information Days in different venues in the community and had an official launch event. The project also posted flyers and posters in many places in the community. They also used the local media through placing adverts in newspapers, magazines and on the local radio station.

The project also contacted every organisation associated with Mental Health in both counties. They made presentations to staff in all of these organisations and gave talks to service users.



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What was innovative and what worked well?

The project has encouraged participation by advertising activities based on other things and this has attracted more participants. For example, advertising it as a photography course rather than physical activity.

It is important to know the groups that participate in activities and to provide people with options during the taster sessions. Individuals can then decide which activities they wish to follow.

The project has also looked at innovative ways of gathering information from service users. The use of drawings for instance is an effective way of understanding how participants relate to Mentro Allan as a project.

Although the project records referrals from partner organisations, there is no mechanism in place to follow those that have not been involved with the project. The project does pursue referrals with a phone call and it has become apparent that a number of individuals decide against the idea once the co-ordinator gets in touch. It is possible that although people say they would like to attend activities, when the time comes around, they are reluctant to do so. This is a common issue with individuals suffering from mental health conditions.

Each person involved with the project has also been given psychiatric training which has proved invaluable in communicating with the target group.

A gardening group was started on-site in St. Tydfil Psychiatric Hospice by the project co-ordinator. This is a pilot scheme co-supported with the Welsh Assembly Government and is the first one in Wales. If it is a success then it will be rolled out across Wales.

The future...

At the moment this project is only reaching those with severe mental health problems. There are plans to reach a wider audience, even to those with mild depression. However, this is difficult in itself as some people with mental health problems do not like to classify themselves as such and are therefore harder to engage in these sorts of activities.

When considering how to deliver future activity, it was stressed that outdoor activities would need to be part of a longer term programme of activities for them to be sustainable. Although the green gym and walking would provide a "quick fix" solution, training someone to be a climbing instructor would take time. This would require a co-ordinator and funds in order to keep it going.

Were there any unexpected outcomes?

As well as contributing towards the health and well-being of individuals, the project has witnessed a great deal of wider emotional, mental and social benefits. The majority get involved for the social benefits and as a result they feel much better in the outdoors.

Lessons from the project

There are four key lessons from the Merthyr and Blaenau project:

- Let service users dictate what they want. From the start of the project this gave the users a sense of ownership and empowerment. They, in turn, are more reliable, more people turn up and more people are interested. Mental health patients are used to being told what to do so they really appreciate being asked because it's different for them.
- Capacity issues. There have been capacity issues when working in two different areas. Writing a service plan for the year, for example, has involved writing different plans for each area whilst also taking into account the work needed for the National Partnership. This involves writing three reports for the same project which can be time-consuming. The co-ordinator has been looking to take on volunteers to help with the administrative side of the work and has also found the need to find more office space to work effectively.
- Seek out expert help and advice. It can be difficult to work with certain groups and arranging them into structural programmes as necessary. The co-ordinator therefore finds the need to approach drugs misuse projects, for example, for advice and guidance.