

Case Study



Project

Walking programme

Organisation

Northern Ireland Association for Mental Health

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About the Organisation

The Northern Ireland Association for Mental Health (NIAMH) has 13 community-based Beacon Centres that provide a user-led programme of self-development opportunities alongside social and recreational activities in a warm and friendly environment.

Project overview

As part of its wider programme, the centre on the edge of Belfast had started a walking club for its members. This gave them the chance to get fitter, get out and make the connection between physical and mental health. Before the Active Lifestyles funding, they were limited to local walks in good weather as they could not provide appropriate waterproof clothing.

The funding provided a budget for a minibus and petrol, waterproof clothing for 12 people, and a first aid kit. With these, the group was able to travel all over Northern Ireland and complete eight monthly scenic walks lasting around 3 hours each.

The project's slogan is "move your feet and exercise your mind". Its aims were to improve mental health alongside physical health and give people greater self-esteem.

What has it achieved?

The project completed all eight of its walks with 8 to 15 participants on each walk. At the beginning of the project, it was a challenge to attract people who felt generally unmotivated. But once people got started, the project built momentum. At the end both members and staff felt energised and felt a sense of achievement at having completed the project.

How did the project get people involved?

The project was run by the Mental Health Centre. The walking programme was one of many activities offered to participants at the centre.

What was innovative and what worked well?

NIAMH's walking programme has developed a wealth of personal experience of the benefits of walking for people with mental health problems. By giving some people a positive experience, it has stimulated them to change their lifestyles and actively encourage others to take part.

It was particularly successful because:

- It reached people in an environment where they were already developing a sense of trust and social interaction, and built on this. It also encouraged people to come to the centre more often between walks.
- The walks were well planned, with a staff member testing them all to ensure they would be safe and suitable for the participants.
- Each walk had a backup plan in case of bad weather – one walk destination had dangerous gale-force winds on the day the group planned to visit it, so they chose another destination and did that walk the following month.
- They made sure there was mobile phone reception throughout the walk and took a mobile phone and first aid kit in case of emergencies.



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What was innovative and what worked well?

There are some aspects of the project that helped it to run successfully:

- Everyone had very detailed maps, but the participants maps were simplified to focus on landmarks so it was easier to establish where they were.
- Getting out to places they had never been was a real hook – for staff as well as participants.

The weatherproof gear was important for ensuring people felt equipped and comfortable throughout the walk. One walk was on a snowy day, but the group were warm enough and laughed at the snow – a real confidence booster.

The future...

The project's Active Lifestyles grant has finished, but it is not the end for NIAMH walks.

- The existing long-haul group have suggested they would be willing to pay for the travel to the walks or take Ulsterbus's rambler bus.
- The staff are planning fundraising efforts to subsidise future trips.
- The new short haul walking group has been inspired by the long haul group and are already starting to extend the length of their walks.

The other NIAMH Beacon centres are keen to take up the model this centre has tried out and are now considering ways to finance the weatherproofs and transport.

Were there any unexpected outcomes?

Attracting people who suffer from low motivation was a major success in itself, but the impacts beneficiaries and staff identified are striking.

On the mental health and social front:

- They felt more reason to get out of bed, and were more motivated.
- They gained a great sense of satisfaction from the long walks and the change of scene, and they learned to go for local walks, which also gave them a sense of accomplishment and purpose.
- Going for walks to new places provided a source of interesting conversation with family, this made family visits more appealing for participant and family alike.
- The participants got to know each other much better because they had time to talk on the long walks and during the bus journey.
- The project boosted the social confidence of one member so much that he started to take part in several other activities and got to know more people.

It also changed participants' physical activity habits between walks, and their views on physical activity.

Several had started walking into town or to visit friends and family instead of taking the bus or staying home. When they were looking for something to do, they could always go for a walk and it would cost nothing. And one participant said he was doing more housework, gardening and DIY because he now had energy to get up and do it.

The project manager cited several impacts on the centre as well:

- Staff have had a chance to get to know members better during the long walks.
- Getting out on walks has stimulated staff to become more active too, for instance walking instead of driving.

The enthusiasm from the "long haul" walking group has inspired other people to get involved in the centre's "short haul" walking group, which attracted virtually no one before.