

# Key message paper



Dewch i  
**Gerdded**  
Let's  
**Walk**

cerdded am oes  
**walk4life**

*sportwales*  
*chwaraeoncymru*

Noddir gan  
Lywodraeth Cynulliad Cymru  
Sponsored by  
Welsh Assembly Government



# Introduction



In December 2010, Sport Wales commissioned 12 case studies of walking projects funded through the Let's Walk Cymru programme. Through these in-depth stories of projects around Wales, four themes were explored: volunteering; variety of activities; working with targeted groups; self-sufficiency. The case studies themselves demonstrate an enormous range of outcomes and learning related to these themes, but the conversations with programme co-ordinators, walk leaders, volunteers and walkers also brought out many other important points. This short paper aims to present these key messages, together with some reflections about them.



# A catalyst for behaviour change

We all know how difficult it is to change our habits. Many of the walk participants and volunteer walk leaders talked about how they had changed their behaviour to become much more active, directly as a result of getting involved in one of the walking projects. Their comments suggest that for many it had come as something of a surprise to them that they had been able to change their habits or in some cases, that they got to a point where they had wanted to change.

So what was it about these walking projects that made change both desirable and achievable? The points that people raised included:

- Finding out that walking could be fun.
- The social side, in particular making friends.
- Feeling a sense of obligation – in a very positive sense – to go out regularly with the group because other group members were expecting them.
- Overcoming the first hurdle of gaining an initial level of fitness that then made it possible to do more walking or other forms of physical activity.
- Having active and sympathetic support from other people who understood the actual and perceived barriers to getting out walking.
- The sense of becoming part of something bigger than yourself.



# Personal benefits

People have stayed with the walking groups and taken on increasingly active roles in the groups because they have been getting something out of it.



➤ The **health benefits** have been significant. Walkers and walk leaders talked about how the walking had helped to improve ongoing physical health conditions such as asthma, and with recovery from acute health problems, particularly heart attacks. Older people clearly felt benefits in terms of maintaining underlying fitness and flexibility, making them less susceptible to falls. Many walkers talked about how walking was helping them to kickstart and maintain a weight loss programme.

➤ **Mental health benefits** have been equally significant. Walkers talked about how the regular walking helped them overcome problems with depression and other mental health problems. Part of this is about providing an activity that gives them reason to get out of bed in the morning, but people also talked about how being active and out in the fresh air helped them to feel better.

➤ The **social benefits** of the walking groups have been felt by everyone. There are numerous aspects to this. People talk of having made new friends who they now socialise with outside the walking programme. For many, the walks have provided them with a way to

overcome feelings of social isolation, with the supportive atmosphere helping them to feel comfortable about meeting new people and the walking group providing a structure for regular meetings. The walking programmes have helped several people who have been bereaved to get out and about again, often through providing them with companionship to carry on what had been a jointly enjoyed hobby.

➤ Many **walkers** talked about how they had learned new things as a result of starting to walk with one of the groups. Learning more about the local area had come as an unexpected benefit for several people, including about the area's history and wildlife. Many others talked about learning new skills, such as navigation, first aid, Nordic walking and leading walks, and other skills related to running a walking group, e.g. desk top publishing and advertising, making grant applications and arranging a walks programme.

➤ Several **volunteers** noted that their involvement in a walking group had given them the chance to help other people. There were all sorts of examples of this: helping people to learn Welsh, helping new walkers to get to know other people in the group, to introduce people to walking, to run a group, to learn about the local area's past. Importantly, helping others had helped them to feel good about themselves; for some people, this was the first time that they had been in the situation of helping others - rather than being helped - which had been a tremendous boost to their self-confidence.



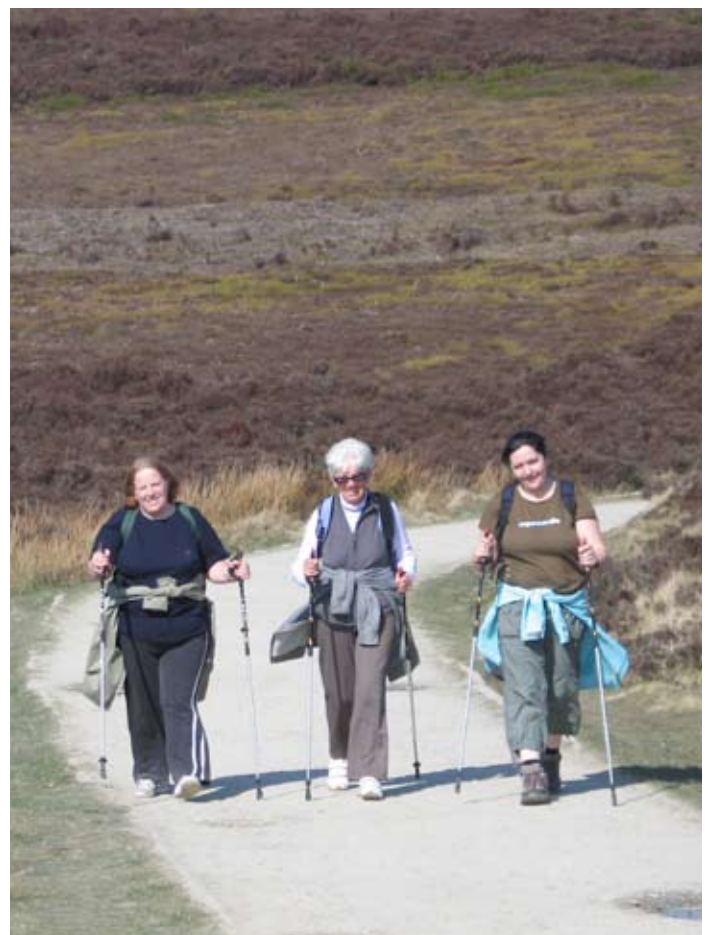
# Maintaining people's interest



It can be a challenge to keep people coming to a regular activity, yet the existence and growth of the groups shows that they are experiencing considerable success. Some of the factors that seem to have contributed to this are:

- **Having fun.** The word 'fun' came up time and time again. People keep going on the walks and putting time into helping to run walking programmes because they have fun themselves and they can help other people to have fun. Programme co-ordinators and walk leaders often commented that whilst the health aims of a walking programme were a primary reason for a group's existence, what happened in reality was that people kept coming to take part in the walks because they found it fun. As one co-ordinator put it, "It's health by stealth".
- **Keeping things fresh.** Several co-ordinators noted how important it was to develop the programme of activities. In some cases, new and different walking routes were included in the group's programme to broaden the local choice of routes. Also some groups have gradually added more challenging local walks for people whose capabilities and interest had developed, as well as day or weekend trips to other locations further afield which give walkers the chance to visit new places and try out new walking routes. Another popular way to keep the walking fresh has been to include themed walks in the programme, such as local history or photography.

- The **enthusiasm and support** of the co-ordinators and walk leaders. Many walkers talked extremely positively about the motivation, verve and supportive approach of their group's co-ordinator(s) and walk leaders. Just one person with the right attitude makes all the difference. They help to set the tone and atmosphere of a group, they enthuse and support others to take on active roles (whether small or large), they get a group to a position where they feel comfortable to do things for themselves.



# A positive atmosphere



There were some words that cropped up time and time again, that together show how crucial it has been to have a positive atmosphere in a walking group.

- Walkers explained how **'empathy' and 'understanding'** displayed by other walkers or the co-ordinator had made all the difference in making them feel comfortable to be a part of the group. Many examples were given of how the 'supportive' nature of individuals or the group had been appreciated, for example helping people to cope with physical demands of walking or with their nervousness of getting involved in something new.
- 'Encouragement'** from other walkers, the walk leader or the co-ordinator has been significant for many new walkers, giving them the impetus to keep trying and to take on new challenges.
- For a few people, the **'safety'** of the group was important, enabling them to avoid their fear of walking alone.



# Changing lives



It might seem ambitious to claim that involvement in a walking group could change lives, but this is what some people said – coping with bereavement, turning round a life severely affected by addiction, being recognised by one's peers for the first time, gaining the skills and confidence to get voluntary work for the first time.

Many different parts of their experiences in the walking groups helped these people to feel so different about their lives, including:

- Helping them to think and behave in new ways.
- Enabling them to gain new skills.
- Giving them confidence in a social or group setting.
- Building their self-respect.
- Demonstrating their ability to achieve things.

# Conclusion

Why does the Let's Walk Cymru approach work? A few particular things stand out.

- The simplicity of the idea. At its most basic, it's about a few people getting together regularly to walk in their local area.
- The diversity and flexibility of the model, so that it can be something small and relatively informal, or something much larger and more formal, and also that the groups can offer a variety of activities where there is something for everyone,.
- The willingness, capacity, motivation and ability of a few key individuals to initiate group activity in a place. However, it seems unlikely - although not impossible - that this would happen without a small amount of funding and resource support for set-up.
- The willingness of growing numbers of people to take on voluntary roles, making the most of the most of their variety of skills, and having plenty of volunteers to share the workload.
- People enjoy doing it, so they want to make the effort to keep doing it and to keep their group going.



The benefits of the Let's Walk Cymru programme will continue to be felt by those people already involved, and there is considerable capacity and will amongst the local groups to maintain and extend their activities so that more and more people can benefit. The case studies and the key messages presented here show that the Let's Walk Cymru approach can deliver much more than health outcomes. There is added value for individuals, and through them, for the wider community.