

Self-sufficiency case study: Communities taking the lead in developing walking groups in NPT.



Dewch i
Gerdded
Let's
Walk

cerdded am oes
walk4life

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chwaraeon cymru

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Lywodraeth Cynulliad Cymru
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Introduction



Neath Port Talbot (NPT) County Borough Council started the Let's Walk Neath Port Talbot walking project in 2007 and there are now eleven walking groups.

The Development Officer is employed for three days a week, and over the past year he has concentrated on strengthening the existing groups to ensure their long term success. The groups range from those that have been active for over three years to relatively new ones.



The aim of the Let's Walk NPT project is 'for health, for everyone'; with this in mind the Development Officer aims to offer a variety of walks and also opportunities for progression.

- The eleven walking groups throughout the borough walk as frequently as they wish; six of the groups meet twice weekly whilst three meet weekly, and another two monthly and more frequently in good weather. There are walks at a basic level, others with a more active pace and also longer distance walks. Groups include nordic walking for beginners and another group for intermediate standard, and dog walking groups. Some groups travel further to walk in areas such as Swansea and Bridgend or the countryside around Llanelli. During the school holidays, further activities include developing links to the Welsh Assembly Government 5x60 programme, which aims to increase the number of secondary school pupils taking part in sport or physical activity for 60 minutes at least five times a week.

- The weekday walks held during the daytime generally attract retired people and those who are not working. The development officer has responded to the suggestions of existing walkers and those who would like to join a group by starting a successful early evening dog walking group. Walks along the well lit beach front on winter evenings have also been popular with people who are not available during the day.
- The groups all have regular meeting points. Some groups produce a programme of walks in advance, whilst others determine the direction of the walk on a week to week basis to make the best of the weather and take account of who is intending to take part. The walk leaders plan the programmes and undertake the risk assessments, with the help of the Development Officer where necessary.
- The development officer walks regularly with groups that are not yet self-sufficient. This not only helps to develop the walking skills of the group members but enables him to speak individually with each member to ensure that they are enjoying the walk, take on any suggestions they may have and to encourage active participation in taking the group to self-sufficiency.

Benefits and achievements in relation to self sufficiency



The groups have increased membership and gained strength and stability. As the groups have developed, the members have become more confident and taken on greater responsibility, and gradually taken on all the tasks needed to run the groups, maintain and develop the walks and activities.

- ✚ So far eight of the groups are already self sufficient, with strong teams of volunteers. They are constituted, with chairpersons, secretaries and treasurers, as well as committee members. They organise their own walks programmes and social events. Volunteers who have undergone walk leader training so that they can plan, risk assess and lead walks. Volunteers have also trained as first aiders, and an identified first aider is on every walk. Some of these groups print and advertise their walk programmes, whilst others plan the walks from week to week. Some of the groups have volunteers who have learned to apply for funding which has then been used to purchase first aid training and other resources.
- ✚ The Development Officer maintains an overview of all the groups through the registration records sent by the groups at the end of every quarter. The records enable him to assess the level of participation, see where there are gaps in the geographical coverage of the borough, and where development or support is needed.
- ✚ Neath Port Talbot Sports Council (NPTSC) brings together a range of local activity groups and bodies with interests including walking, mountain biking and cycling. Some of the self-sufficient walking groups have elected to join NPTSC, and through this they are able to share ideas and information more widely; it also gives them further opportunities for advertising their groups and events and in the longer term will help to increase the range of activity opportunities and resources available.
- ✚ Let's Walk NPT is well on the way towards self-sufficiency, with the self-sufficiency ethos becoming a part of all the groups. This has meant that **group members** feel that they should all play a part and are willing to take on responsibility. A good example is that when new people arrive, everyone in a group makes an effort to make them feel welcome and part of the group, rather than leaving this to one person.
- ✚ The self-sufficiency of existing groups means that the **Development Officer** is finding the capacity to develop new groups in different areas or with different themes. Also, he notes a great personal benefit from doing this work, in that he felt very privileged to be able to provide for his family whilst doing something he loves.
- ✚ Many of the **Volunteers** are retired and their involvement in the walking groups has been a good opportunity to use skills they had learned in their working lives, such as organising rotas and becoming first aiders. Members have also been willing to develop new skills, e.g. training as walk leaders and learning to undertake risk assessments, which has had personal benefits such as increasing people's confidence.

Success Factors

The Development Officer noted some things that have been particularly important in enabling the groups to become more self-sufficient:

- Encouraging the walkers to make suggestions which has contributed to the vitality of Let's Walk NPT, such as new walking routes, and different activities, e.g. nordic walking and dog walking groups.
- Enabling volunteers to carry out tasks and gradually take greater responsibility, including undertaking honorary roles on the group's committee or training to become a walk leader or first aider. A key factor in some cases has been helping people to gain the confidence to take on responsibility.
- The attraction of free training to become walk leaders has often been helpful in encouraging people to take on tasks. Enthusiasm for learning something new has increased as the participants have gained confidence.
- The friendly environment in the groups which has prevented cliques from developing.
- The co-ordinator being part of the Council's Physical Activity Sports Service Team, which he believes helps to increase the effectiveness of the project because it is part of a suite of services to encourage healthy lifestyles, e.g. the 5x60 programme, Mentro Allan and PACE (Physical Activity Co-ordinated for Everyone). Also, it gives him access to a team of committed, highly qualified instructors and specialists.



Challenges

Initially, it was difficult for the Development Officer to raise awareness of the groups, which was an important step in increasing participation and membership. For groups to be self-sufficient, it is really important to have enough people to take on voluntary tasks and roles, so this has been a particular issue for the small groups. However, by linking to the local Communities First programme, referrals from PASS colleagues, and word of mouth with existing walkers telling their friends and neighbours, numbers are increasing.

- The Development Officer notes how important it is to keep the walks interesting and fresh, so that people do not get bored and there is always the opportunity to progress to more challenging walks. He has found that introducing things like orienteering, navigation awards and first aid training, as well as holding walking events have all helped to attract new walkers and people keen to take on a voluntary role.
- One group has lost two of their six local walking routes due to windfarm development. This is a challenge that is proving difficult to overcome as there is a need to ensure that most walks are local and easily accessible. Until new routes have been found and risk assessed, the group has less choice of places to walk.
- Some of the walking activities are likely to continue to need some professional support. The nordic walking beginners group requires an expert instructor to ensure that people learn the correct techniques from the beginning. The dog walking group may also need that expertise as the activity requires the members to control their dogs in a way that makes the activity pleasurable for everyone taking part.

Self-sufficiency and looking forwards



The Development Officer intends to ensure that all the existing groups will continue, and is confident that most are already self-sufficient. He is keen to develop another Nordic walking group in another part of the borough, so that there would be the opportunity for anyone in the borough to join the beginners' group and progress to an intermediate Nordic walking group near them. He would also like to be able to offer a choice of environments, one in Margam Park and the other in Afan Forest Park. He also intends to introduce parent and child Nordic walking activities to primary schools where he has already provided some taster sessions and he is keen to encourage secondary school activities including orienteering.

Let's Walk Cymru has been available to provide support and advice, and the Development Officer commented that he is able to rely on always receiving an instant response to queries. The project has also benefitted from the Let's Walk Cymru funding and opportunities for continual professional development for the Development Officer.



The most significant difference this scheme has made

We asked the co-ordinator to complete the following sentence,

"In my view, the most significant difference that this scheme makes for the people who take part is that it gives all round health benefits: physical, mental, spiritual and social, in a safe community setting."



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