

Self-sufficiency case study: 'Reaching Out' to improve people's lives through walking.



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Introduction



'Reaching Out' is a project that has been developed by Ramblers Cymru to engage with community groups/organisations to increase their activity levels through walking. One of the many targeted organisations was Turning Point, which enables people who have been dependent upon drugs or alcohol to increase independent life skills and regain full health and independence.



➤ This project is specifically aimed at Turning Point service users in Llanelli. It started in June 2009 with four people who have remained involved since then. When these people are no longer service users with Turning Point, the walking project will continue but with a new group of walkers.

➤ The Reaching Out project, via Ramblers Cymru, provides staff support to Turning Point on a weekly basis to help organise walks and challenges, provide training to staff and service users and to help the organisation to embed walking as part of what they offer service users.

➤ Over the past year, the group has undertaken local short and long walks, generally starting from the office. Initially these walks were 30 minutes to an hour, gradually building up to two hours. As group members became more confident, the Reaching Out Facilitator suggested to them that they might want to take on the Welsh Three Peaks Challenge in 2010 (Snowdon, Cader Idris and Pen-y-Fan), with Turning Point staff as part of the team and providing support. Once this was agreed, the group needed to tackle longer walks and tougher terrain, so they began to include Brecon Beacons, Black Mountains, Preseli Mountains, and parts of the Pembrokeshire Coastal Path in their programme. During the training period, they took on twice weekly walks, one short walk and one mountain walk.



Benefits and achievements in relation to self sufficiency



This project was a completely new direction for Turning Point. The Reaching Out facilitator, the Turning Point manager and participants said that the benefits they had seen were far greater than they could have expected. Although the manager was aware of the proven scientific benefits and chemical changes that take place through exercise, he says that he has been “wholly impressed by the level of increased client confidence and the strength of the friendships that have developed”. He notes that there is a unity within the group that has come from them working to achieve something together and that staff have gained also, commenting that “those who took part have a new zip and zest in them”.

- The walkers involved have benefitted in many ways. The walking group initially brought them together regularly, but participants talk about how the rapport which was achieved gave them strength and support that carried them through weekends and periods when they would have been more likely to return to their previous alcohol and drug habits.
- The Turning Point service users often suffer from other health problems, and many improvements have been noticed, including increased alertness and energy. One participant said she had had mobility problems and was often in considerable pain, to the extent that if she walked five minutes into town she would be unable to walk home and would need a taxi. Following her involvement in the walking group, she is now able to walk to and from town without any problem.

- Service users often lack confidence and self esteem, as well as suffering from issues around their ability to work and maintain relationships. Participants in the walking group commented that they felt that respect and family relationships had been restored. One mother now has her children living with her again, whilst another has been able to start a new life away from previous problems. Of the four service users making up the members of the walking group, three are now in work and the fourth is becoming ‘work ready’.
- The Turning Point staff also gained from the project. One said that despite being brought up with parents who enjoyed walking, she never had done; however, since joining the project, she has twice been on long walks with her father, something she would never have considered previously. Staff commented that they found it satisfying to be part of the service users’ progress and that they have gained a different perspective of their own job and the work of Turning Point.
- The Reaching Out facilitator has gained a better understanding of how to work with people with drug and alcohol issues. He notes that the prospect of a challenge and doing something for someone else was the key to their success. Indeed, the whole idea of the challenge was a new experience for the leader and the organisation; they tackled it together.
- Turning Point has been able to make and strengthen links with other voluntary groups and the hospital, by using the Welsh Three Peaks challenge to raise funds for others.

Success Factors



The Reaching Out facilitator notes several factors that have contributed to the success of the project:

- ↘ The commitment that Turning Point has continued to give was a key factor in the success of the project; the manager and staff joined in and were enthusiastic and willing.
- ↘ Turning Point and Ramblers Cymru have listened to each other. The Facilitator believes that the project brought together the best of each organisation and that they responded to each others' needs. Turning Point and Ramblers Cymru are achieving their targets and the service users are enjoying themselves too.
- ↘ The Facilitator feels that having information about the places they walk helps, for example, historical information about a castle they visit will add a learning element to the walk.

A significant step on the road to success was finding that a challenge was the button that 'switched on' this group. The group members enjoyed the team aspect and responded well to the opportunity, seeing the challenge as a real commitment. The commitment of the service users and their support to one other meant that they all succeeded, which has made a tremendous difference to the group.

Challenges



There were challenges for Turning Point as an organisation, in terms of taking on an entirely new venture. However, the manager notes that putting in place support mechanisms within the organisation worked well and the enthusiasm that the project generated meant that all of the participants – staff and service users - have supported each other.

- ↘ There was also the challenge of tackling a walk as major as the Welsh Three Peaks with a group who had never walked a mountain. The facilitator notes that the first issue was finding out what 'switched them on'. Once there was a challenge for them, the belief of the facilitator and Turning Point in the clients gave them the focus and determination that they needed to achieve the challenge. The facilitator learned what the sticking points were and found ways to overcome them. For example, lack of equipment for the mountain walking was an issue but those who undertook the Health Walk Leader training received a few pieces of basic equipment from Ramblers Cymru such as water bottles, and the facilitator lent spare pieces of his own equipment. The walkers all had to buy their own boots.
- ↘ Turning Point staff were aware that risks had to be managed, as the clients might have been unable to deal with failure; however, their emotional and physical fragility diminished as they built upon their successes.

Self-sufficiency and looking forwards

Turning Point and the people who took part over the past year are determined to maintain the project, so they have recently set up a working group comprising staff and the Reaching Out facilitator, in order to plan for the future so that the project is available for new service users.

They are planning two calendars of walks for 2011 – one of short walks to take place at least once a week, and the other of more challenging walks. The aim is for the short walks to be attractive to all service users, and for the more challenging walks to enable progression. Also, these longer walks will help the group to train for the Welsh Three Peaks challenge as another sponsored event. The Turning Point manager felt that ideally they needed to run a second Welsh Three Peaks Challenge before becoming entirely self-sufficient, so benefitting from the support and expertise from the Reaching Out facilitator who is familiar with the sorts of issues to be considered when working with service users.

Each event in the walks calendars will be risk assessed and together they will create a portfolio of walks with supporting notes that can be used year after year, as the group members change over time. The Reaching Out facilitator and the manager of Turning Point are working closely to ensure that the planned walks and the potential of a challenge are there to keep the interest and enthusiasm.

The group needs to use its own staff to lead and support Reaching Out; the manager made it clear that the cost of this will be absorbed by Turning Point.

Perhaps most significantly, staff are being trained up as Health Walk Leaders, with the intention of progressing on to the Mountain Walk Leader Award. This will give stability to the project. It is possible to hire qualified mountain leaders but this could mean that a different leader would be with the group each week, and for this group, there is considerable value in having a mountain leader who knows them, the individuals and their capabilities.

The Reaching Out facilitator and Turning Point manager commented that Let's Walk Cymru has played a very important part by funding the project, providing courses such as Walk Leader Training, and also offering more general support.

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 all of the participants' confidence has increased by being challenged and learning to overcome difficulties."

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