

Volunteering case study: Volunteers leading the way in Denbighshire.



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Gerdded
Let's
Walk

cerdded am oes
walk4life

sportwales
chwaraeon cymru

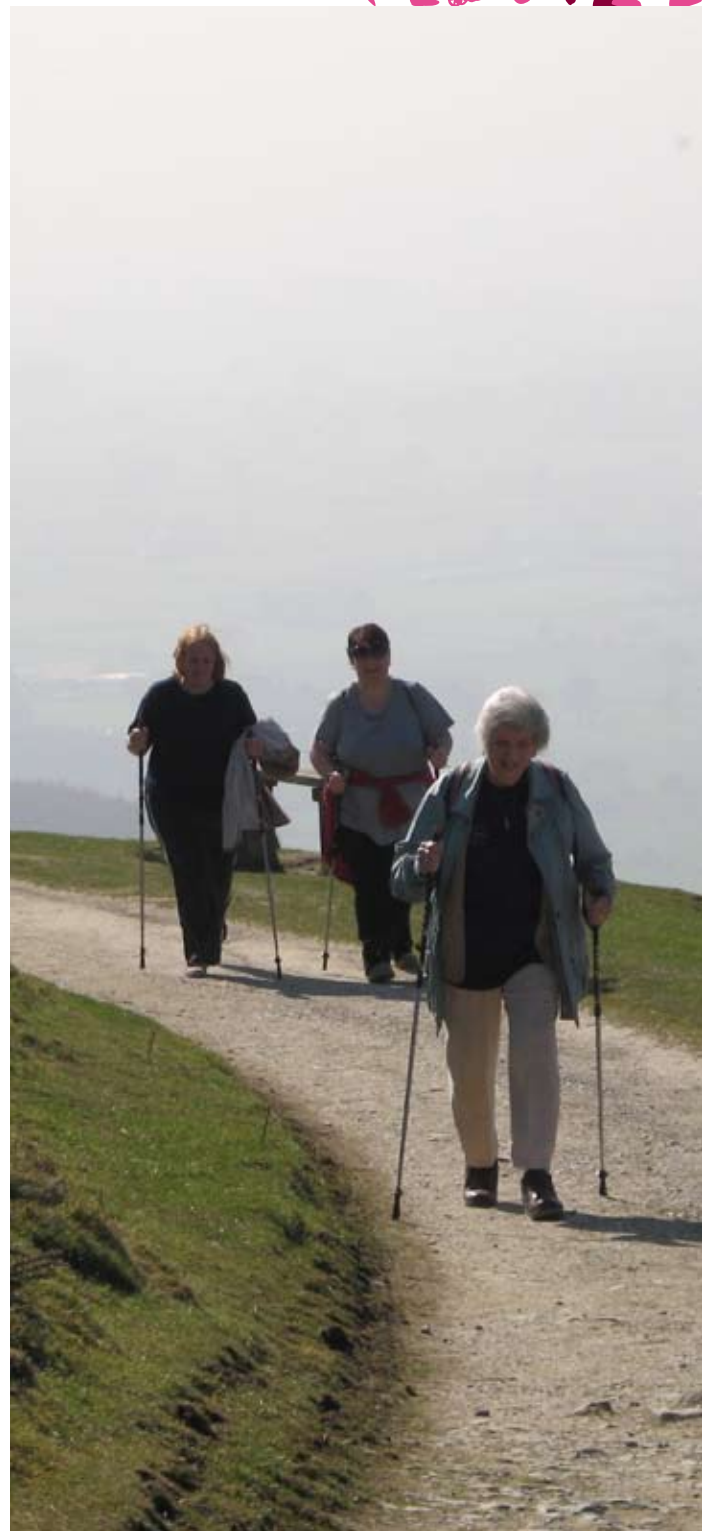
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Introduction

The Let's Walk Denbighshire programme began over 10 years ago, in 2000. Starting with one walking group in Rhyl, there are now walking groups across the county including St. Asaph, Prestatyn and Denbigh, attracting more than 500 walkers every week. The walks vary from 45 minutes to two hours, following routes on town streets, local footpaths, by the sea and in the hills. The programme aims to offer walks to suit everyone, including more challenging walks, Nordic walking and themed walks e.g. digital photography.

The programme works as a partnership between the paid co-ordinator and the team of volunteers. The co-ordinator divides her time between Let's Walk Denbighshire and the walking programme in Flintshire. The walk leaders and other volunteers develop the local programme of walks, plan the rota of walk leaders, arrange social events and complete any paperwork required. The co-ordinator arranges walk leader training and provides co-ordination between the local groups.



Benefits and achievements in relation to working with volunteering



More than 200 people have now been trained as walk leaders. The longevity of the programme has made it possible to build up this number of qualified volunteers; each year the co-ordinator has set targets for recruiting new walk leaders.

The volunteers take on different amounts and types of responsibility, depending on what they feel comfortable with. Often, newly qualified walk leaders will spend some time as support leaders to a more experienced walk leader. There tends to be a gradual process where walkers enjoy going on the walks, then feel that they would like to contribute to the group, and then take up opportunities for walk leader training.

- ✚ There have been many benefits for **the volunteers**. They now feel part of a group and part of a successful scheme. They have felt a real sense of achievement and pride as they see new walkers coming along, becoming more confident, keeping active and then getting more involved in the group. The walking group has given volunteers an opportunity to be a person who makes a difference for others; they see how they can help others to make a small step that then enables them to do much more. There has been real personal development as volunteers have learnt new skills and used these skills to go on to do new things, such as getting into employment, going to college and taking on other voluntary roles elsewhere. In some cases, the networking between

volunteers has been important, e.g. explaining where a fellow volunteer could go for help. There are close links between the programme and the Council's Countryside Service, so people who are interested in volunteering can find out about other volunteer roles locally, such as nature conservation tasks

- ✚ There have also been many benefits for **the host organisation**, Denbighshire County Council. The Council has found that the walks provide an opportunity to explain to walkers about the importance of the countryside and the work being done to protect it. The programme has enabled them to get closer to the community that they serve, often bringing them into contact with people who may not have previously engaged with the Council. As one Council officer noted, "It [Let's Walk Denbighshire] acts as a bridge between the walkers and the authority; they come out walking and we give them other information, we can advise them on which particular officer they should speak to". The Council has also been able to transfer the learning that they have gained from the Let's Walk Denbighshire programme to other programmes they are planning and running.

Success Factors



Particular aspects that have helped the programme's work with volunteers have been:

- ↘ The efforts made by the volunteers themselves and their willingness to give of their own free time. This is helped by the way that they can see the benefits of their work firsthand through seeing the enjoyment of the walkers.
- ↘ Having a support network that raises volunteers' confidence, so that they can take ownership of delivering the scheme.
- ↘ Having consistency of personnel delivering the scheme. The co-ordinator has been in post since the programme began, so the volunteers feel that they know who to talk to and they feel very comfortable with her.
- ↘ Volunteers knowing that there is back-up and advice available from the co-ordinator.
- ↘ Volunteers feeling part of a 'family', a wider network of walkers.

Challenges



- ↘ The co-ordinator is very aware of the need to try to share the burden of work amongst the volunteers, so that nobody feels overwhelmed and also to avoid the risk of over-dependency on one person. This, and the need to ensure that the programme's work is sustained, drives a continual cycle of walk leader training activity.
- ↘ There is another challenge related to the walk leader training. Some volunteers feel hesitant about taking on the full responsibility of walk leadership, so there is a critical point immediately after walkers have completed the training course where the co-ordinator provides support and encouragement to help them feel confident.



Self-sufficiency and looking forwards



The primary aim is to sustain the current provision within the Let's Walk Denbighshire walking programme. However, the co-ordinator is planning work during the coming year to explore ways to extend the programme's activities to reach out to locations and groups that are currently under-represented, so that more people benefit from the scheme. She would like the programme to include some of the villages around the county, and to work with some targeted groups such as people with learning difficulties and young mothers.

Based on their experience to date, the most important things that have helped local walking groups to become self-sufficient are:

- Volunteers having access to support in key areas such as training and development and promotion, as and when they need it.
- Co-ordination between groups.

Let's Walk Cymru has been crucial in terms of providing a core base of funding towards the co-ordinator post. It has also provided a national framework for developing the local scheme, including providing equipment and a volunteer handbook. Volunteers like to feel part of a national scheme, and it also carries weight with local elected members.

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 Getting people out of the house and active. The walks not only improve people's fitness and health, but they also make new friends, get together socially and increase their confidence to do other things. It keeps the heart and mind active, reducing health problems in an enjoyable way. We work with many wonderful volunteers, it's great to see so many people enjoying themselves walking."



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