



Scottish Natural Heritage
Dualchas Nàdair na h-Alba

All of nature for all of Scotland
Nàdar air fad airson Alba air fad

GREEN EXERCISE Case Studies

Galloway Strollers



Location

Various locations in Wigtownshire, Dumfries and Galloway.

Summary

This programme of weekly health walks attracts participants through local publicity and press coverage, word of mouth recommendation, and referral by GPs and other health professionals of patients who might benefit physically, mentally or socially.

Health benefits

- Improved physical fitness, reduced breathlessness, reduced blood pressure.
- Increased mobility with knock-on benefits such as reduction in pain control.
- Mental health benefits from reduced social isolation.
- Weight loss linked to other benefits such as improved heart health and reduced diabetes risk.

Keys to success and learning points

- Targeting specific groups of people, or health issues, and encouraging direct referrals depends on convincing health professionals of the benefit of health walks and their relevance to a broad range of health issues.
- Establishing direct contact with individual GPs, giving presentations at practice meetings or during staff learning time, and involving GPs in at least one event each year is important in initiating and maintaining GP involvement.
- Maintaining two-way contact with health professionals and ongoing endorsement of the project through the health promotion service is essential, even with a walk leader in post.
- Providing pedometers and progress cards for participants, and developing award schemes offering rewards for individuals completing a target number of walks, helps motivate people to attend and push themselves to walk a bit further.
- 1:1 walks are resource intensive but can be a good way of introducing individuals with specific health issues to walking as a way of improving their health.
- Buddy walks, where new participants are linked up with more experienced walkers, work well for people who find group integration challenging.
- Themed and sponsored walks or other events targeting specific health issues such as stroke or Crohn's disease are a positive way of attracting new people to join walking groups and help bring like-minded people together.
- Splitting groups into short and long walks enables anyone to participate regardless of their physical ability or fitness, without frustrating those keen to walk further or faster.
- A steady influx of new people is important to maintain the vitality of walking groups and avoids newcomers feeling as though they are intruding into a ready-established clique.
- Enthusiastic and committed volunteer walk leaders are key to motivating people and tailoring walks to group needs.
- Volunteer walk leaders deserve and need ongoing support to maintain their enthusiasm and ensure their very valuable contribution is publicly recognised.
- Some volunteer walk leaders are reluctant to take on the responsibility of walks which include individuals referred with drug-related or mental health problems.
- No matter how integral health walks are to a health improvement officer's role, other pressures and demands inevitably limit the scope to develop and maintain a health walks programme without a dedicated walks co-ordinator.

More about the project

Enthusiasm from the health improvement team helped secure the necessary funding from NHS Dumfries and Galloway, Paths to Health and Scottish Natural Heritage to appoint a walks co-ordinator for 20 hours per week to develop health walks in the Machars area of mid-Galloway. Funding was subsequently obtained to extend the project to Stranraer.

The walks co-ordinator's first priority was to raise awareness of the project and encourage involvement of key partners. This included all GP services in the area, health visitors, the stroke liaison nurse, obesity clinic, representatives of existing initiatives such as Building Healthy Communities, Active Schools Co-ordinator, Smoking Matters, ARC service users, mental health support workers, Alzheimer's Society, stroke and cancer support groups, Forestry Commission Scotland and community councils.

A training day targeting all GPs and relevant health professionals provided the focus for the distribution of a GP referral pack. Referral criteria have deliberately been kept as inclusive as possible. Anyone who would benefit is encouraged to join one of the walking groups, including older people who have lost confidence following a fall or who are socially isolated, individuals who have suffered a mild stroke referred by the stroke liaison team, and others suffering more general problems such as obesity.

Volunteer walk leaders are recruited and walks advertised through promotional articles in local newspapers, local radio coverage, and through posters displayed in GP surgeries, libraries, shops, Tourist Information Centres, sport centres and cancer support offices.

In July 2007, walks were launched in three locations (Newton Stewart, Garlieston and Stranraer), with Wigtown, Port William and Whithorn added in October. All walkers are asked to complete a personal profile, health questionnaire, contact sheet and activity form. As an added incentive to join the walks, everyone receives a water bottle when they join and a t-shirt after completing 12 walks.

Attendance on the walks varies between an average of 4-5 at Stranraer and 10-12 regular walkers at Newton Stewart. Generally a few participants on each walk have been referred by GPs or health centres, often by an informal phone call, and the remainder inspired by word of mouth from other walkers or promotional activity. Some walks are held in the evenings or at weekends to enable people in full or part-time work to join in, but at least 50% of walkers are retired, with gender split approximately 60:40 female:male. The majority of those participating are single. Widows who have become socially isolated and less physically active following the death of their partner, and whose mental and physical health was suffering as a result, are regular participants. Village walks and groups attracting only one or two people each time have been dropped.



As well as regular local walks, some groups organise trips away or monthly walks within the area with transport supplied by Forestry Commission Scotland. Additional walks have been organised and led by the co-ordinator targeting specific groups, such as a monthly walk for the local fibromyalgia group. The walks co-ordinator's attendance at the Disability Forum prompted several people with learning disabilities from the activity and resources centre to join walks. Over 30 people attended a walk as part of Stroke Awareness Week, including many who had either had strokes themselves or had relatives who had suffered a stroke. Other walks have targeted young people undergoing treatment for drug and alcohol issues or young mothers with buggies.

Amongst its many achievements, Galloway Strollers has sparked offshoot groups, such as "Loose Women", who regularly meet up independently for more urban walks, fostered many friendships, and even led to a marriage between two walkers!

Since funding to support a paid walks co-ordinator came to an end, responsibility for supporting volunteer walk leaders has fallen back to the health promotion officer who has to juggle health walks along with many other roles.

"My neighbour, who is over 80, invited me to join Galloway Strollers. Walking at her speed, I was able to cope. Some days my tongue gets as much exercise as the rest of my body, but good company and a laugh works better for me than drugs in treating stress and high blood pressure which have been a feature of my life!"

"Galloway Strollers has helped dispel the winter blues by being in good company for a while outwith my own four walls!"

"It's all about lifestyle changes. I need to change and get more active. The regular walking disciplines me to do this in an enjoyable way and I do feel the better for it!"

Further information

Kirsty McKie, Health Improvement Officer
Dumfries and Galloway NHS.

Tel. 01776 707760 or 07736 955279

Kirsty.mckie@nhs.net

To find out more about SNH's work on encouraging green exercise,
and the work of the Green Exercise Partnership, visit
www.snh.gov.uk/snh-for-you/health-professionals/