



Location

Aberdeenshire

Summary

Accessibility review of five woodland sites followed by forest walks programme to get young disabled people more physically active in the simplest form outdoors

Health benefits

- Physical health benefits from walking
- Increased confidence and self-esteem from those involved in walks proving to themselves that they can complete a physical challenge
- Social and mental health benefits including friendship, sense of belonging and enjoyment from group walks
- Inspiration and confidence to go and do more, walk further, get outdoors more

Keys to success and learning points

- Applying ADAPT's approach of reviewing restrictions on access and implementing the necessary changes to break down the physical and social barriers that all too often accompany disability to other sites throughout Scotland could bring significant health benefits.
- Involving organisations such as Woods for All, Fieldfare Trust and local disabled people is essential to ensure that all possible barriers to access are identified and addressed.
- Guided walks which include transport help target people who might not otherwise get out into the countryside, and give people the confidence they need to venture forth alone in future, but staffing and resources are major constraints on participation by people living in sheltered housing or those from structured care centres.
- Walks and other excursions organised for young disabled people during the week often rely on day centres being able to accompany them which may limit participation.
- Organising events and other events at weekends enables a wider group of people to be involved, including families.
- Providing information which reassures peoples' concerns about potential access issues is a good way of breaking down barriers and encouraging greater activity.

More about the project

Aberdeenshire Disability Sport (ADS) is a registered charity which works with Aberdeenshire Council to improve opportunities for people with a disability in Aberdeenshire to take part in sport, and to liaise with groups, organisations and individuals to promote sport for people with a disability. Much of the activity is focused on recognised sports, but during an open meeting to review how the organisation could involve more people, someone suggested that ADS could take sport back to its simplest level in the form of walking. Prompted by this suggestion, in 2006 ADS set up Aberdeenshire Disability Active Pathway Trails (ADAPT) as one of three "Access-ability in Aberdeenshire" projects for which funding was secured as part of the Big Lottery Active Futures programme, which aims to encourage and support young people aged 16-25 to get active and healthy. The aim of the ADAPT project is to break down barriers to physical activity experienced by young people with mobility issues and to get people more active in the simplest possible way.

Consultation with ADS members soon confirmed that persuading people to walk more depended on finding suitably attractive, appealing and inspiring natural environments. No-one was interested in walking around streets, pavements or built-up areas. In conjunction with Forestry Commission Scotland, five possible woodland sites were identified in different parts of Aberdeenshire.

The first stage of the project involved representatives from Aberdeenshire Disability Sport, Aberdeenshire Council, Forestry Commission Scotland and Woods for All visiting these woods to check out the potential and accessibility of the proposed sites. Woods for All, which was set up in 1997 by Reforesting Scotland and has considerable knowledge and previous experience of assessing and developing access for people of all ages and abilities, were a key partner. Their expertise, enthusiasm, perspective on wildlife and other natural heritage interests together with the action plans they produced for each site with recommended improvements was vital to the success of the project.

The initial formal assessment visit was followed by a visit to each site by ADS clients who offer unique insights into access provision and barriers all too easily missed by others without any ability or mobility challenges.

Bennachie, for example, already had an all-ability trail but the visit highlighted the fact that visitors using wheelchairs were unable to enjoy the views outside the wood across the mountains because of the height of the trees and dense foliage. The path was therefore re-routed to ensure everyone using the trail could enjoy the wider landscape as well as the wood itself. Car park suitability for people of different ages and abilities was also reviewed which led to upgrading including creation of dedicated disabled parking spaces. Forestry Commission Scotland contributed labour and resources to undertake the physical improvements required.

Bell Wood near Aboyne was included in the project on the basis that following previous review of disabled access provision, it offered an ideal site for guided walks without need for major improvement, but more is being done to make the wood more accessible by everyone, including a new route to avoid a steep part on the main path, and an accessible viewing point over the meadows towards the Dee.

At Gicht Wood near Methlick, the car park and track leading down into the woods have been greatly improved by resurfacing, and improvements made to provide an all abilities trail ideal for mixed ability groups with something to challenge everyone.

The visit to Binn Forest near Huntly soon identified that steep gradients presented real barriers to access for the majority of potential visitors which short of radical restructuring could not be resolved within the project resources or timescale, so Countiswell Woods is now being assessed and developed as a substitute.

Between April and October 2007 a programme of walks was organised to the various woods included within the project, with transport provided on a pre-booking system. Numbers varied from two or three on one walk up to 17 on others, but overall the walks were really effective in encouraging and enabling young people to enjoy physical exercise outdoors which they would not otherwise have done. They also flagged up need and opportunities for further improvements such as path widening and surfacing to address ongoing limitations on access.

During 2008 the project is aiming to bring together information about access opportunities at each of the sites on which the project has focused to encourage and enable people of all ages and abilities to use and enjoy the sites themselves. Each trail is being graded on a similar basis to ski-runs, and information will also be provided on how long each trail is likely to take, to enable people to assess for themselves whether it suits their needs, abilities and interests rather than relying on a guided walk. Information is being included on local history and wildlife which the guided walks have already demonstrated adds to enjoyment of those using the paths, which encourages people to come back again and to explore other places. In conjunction with Grampian Society for the Blind, links are being established with blind and partially sighted young adults in the Aberdeenshire area and listening material developed for Bennachie.

"The ADAPT project has been excellent in enabling people of all abilities to access and learn more about their natural heritage."

"Involving disabled people throughout, as the key agents to identifying and bringing about necessary changes, is the key to addressing social inclusion and breaking down barriers which currently restrict so many people from enjoying the countryside."

Further information

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