



Location

Cumbernauld, North Lanarkshire and Dingwall, Easter Ross

Summary

Developed in conjunction with Cycling Scotland, these two projects have devised structured training programmes in local woodland as part of core PE at local high schools and after school activities to encourage young people to become more active by taking up mountain biking.

Health benefits

- Increased physical activity with mental and physical health benefits including amongst teenage girls who are typically those least engaged in the traditional PE curriculum
- Increased self-confidence of those involved from pushing participants beyond their comfort zone in a structured environment
- Mental health benefits from socialising opportunities

Keys to success and learning points

- Development of dedicated mountain bike trails and other paths is often the key to accommodating public access whilst avoiding damage to sensitive wildlife habitat.
- Mountain biking and other such woodland based activities off the school campus can provide an extra dimension to the PE curriculum which can help engage and enthuse young people with little interest in more traditional sports.
- The challenges and interest of cycling in woodland and other natural environments can provide real incentive for young people to get fit, enjoy exercise and develop skills.
- Targeting young people through schools, youth clubs and youth development officers can help involve young people who are not generally interested in exercise or the environment.
- A structured programme is essential to maintaining interest and healthy levels of exercise.
- Expecting volunteers to take total responsibility for taking groups of young people into unfamiliar environments on a regular basis is asking a lot on an unpaid basis and is therefore not usually realistically sustainable.
- Provision of trail leader training needs to be linked to commitment to future involvement over a guaranteed period for projects dependent on volunteer leaders to succeed.
- Providing bikes for kids to use avoids safety and other issues which often arise if they bring their own.
- Reliance on public or other transport to get to somewhere interesting for mountain biking is a disincentive to many kids, and perpetuates health and social inequalities.
- Ease of access to suitable sites is essential to ongoing use – inspiring kids to take up mountain biking is relatively easy but maintaining the interest may not be viable if they are wholly dependent on their family or someone else to transport them to a specialist trail some miles distant.

About the project

SWT's Community Woodland Officer worked with a group of keen local mountain bikers to choose a suitable site for the trail within a poor quality conifer plantation of minimal wildlife interest which is not bisected by major footpaths, so avoiding previous conflict where mountain bike trails cross formal footpaths. Clear felling the conifers and managing the area around the trail for natural regeneration of native broadleaves will contribute towards the North Lanarkshire Biodiversity Action Plan for native woodland and bluebell, and provide the ideal site for a mountain bike trail literally on the doorstep of thousands of local people.

Exchange visits to other trails such as Glentress and Carron Valley provided opportunity to learn from experience elsewhere. Funded through Forestry Commission Scotland's Woodlands In and Around Towns (WIAT), alongside the clear felling and woodland restructuring, contractors are currently developing a 1.6km bespoke mountain bike trail. The trail is mainly blue grade suitable for families, children and novice riders, with short optional red and black diversions from the main trail offering more technical challenge for skilled riders, including rock-based and other features. A shorter loop and skills practice areas have also been created to enable local children to develop skills before using the longer trail.

PE teachers from Abron Hill and Cumbernauld High schools, together with five local bikers, received training as Trail Cycle Leaders, enabling them to take groups out on the trail. Purchase of mountain bikes for the schools, funded through Forestry Commission, has helped with development of mountain biking as a core PE activity, linked to the wood. Every one of the 500 pupils within Abron Hill High School is involved in a four to five week teaching block focusing on mountain biking, some gaining proficiency qualifications and others going on to compete in mountain biking at national level. The trail is also used for after school and lunchtime activities. The local bikers who have been involved throughout the project are keen to help maintain the trail and ensure responsible use.



Further north, mountain biking was also recognised as an activity which appealed to many young people and which could be developed locally to increase participation in physical exercise as part of Healthways, a 5-year Lottery funded Healthy Living Centre project based in Dingwall which has adopted a multi-pronged approach to encouraging young people aged 12-26 to be more active. Focus groups identified that the immediate locality around the healthy living centre offered limited challenge or appeal. Coaching sessions help develop key mountain biking skills, coupled with indoor cycling sessions established to improve fitness levels prior to taking groups of 8-10 young people out on weekly guided cross-country cycle rides. Opportunity to test their skills on mountain bike trails on Forestry Commission sites at Golspie, Contin and on the Black Isles provides incentive for kids to get fitter and push themselves further.

Further information

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