

Working with targeted
groups case study

Voice Trails: Walks for the visually
impaired in North West Wales.



Dewch i
Gerdded
Let's
Walk

cerdded am oes
walk4life

sportwales
chwaraeoncymsu

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Lywodraeth Cynulliad Cymru
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Introduction

Voice Trails began in March 2008 following a suggestion made at a meeting of the Eryri Disability Equality Forum that there were not sufficient walking opportunities for visually impaired people living in north Wales. A follow-up meeting was held between Snowdonia National Park Authority, North Wales Society for the Blind, The Countryside Council for Wales and Gwynedd County Council's Disability Sports Development Officer to discuss what could be done to address this lack of opportunity. It was decided to apply for funding for a walking project specifically aimed at visually impaired people living within the Snowdonia National Park. The project has now extended to cover Anglesey, Conwy and most of north west Wales.

The project is staffed by a part-time co-ordinator (1 day per week) as part of her role as the Snowdonia National Park's Community Officer. The Co-ordinator is supported by a core group of about 15 volunteer walk leaders, although there are "more that come and go". The project has never lacked for volunteers and they come from a variety of backgrounds including students from the Sports Science Unit at Bangor University, staff



from the Countryside Council for Wales, staff from the Snowdonia National Park Authority, volunteers sourced through the Gwynedd Volunteer Bureau and also participants' friends.

Voice Trails organises a six-monthly programme of guided walks for people with visual impairments. Walks are mostly suggested by participants based on walks they already know but also on places they have heard of but have not been able to access on their own. There is a monthly walk of about five to six miles frequently within the Snowdonia National Park, but walks also take place in most of north west Wales, including the Conwy area and Anglesey. The walks are on varying terrain; some are challenging for the visually impaired but the project tries to provide "something for everyone". Walks often involve taking along a picnic.



Benefits and achievements in relation to working with 'targeted' groups

The co-ordinator comments that the Head of Disability Sport Wales has referred to the project as "the most successful project in Wales working with the visually impaired". The project has 38 members overall and popular summer walks are attended by about 30 participants and up to 10 guide dogs. Winter walks tend to attract fewer walkers.

The co-ordinator notes that there have been many benefits for participants but suggests that many of these, particularly the health benefits, would be applicable to any guided walks programme. The specific benefits for visually impaired walkers have been:

- ✎ **Building self confidence** – in going walking in the countryside but also in using public transport to get to the start of routes.
- ✎ **Making new friends** – participants have benefitted greatly from being in one another's company. Being visually impaired can be very isolating for people, particularly those who have been previously sighted. The project has helped them in "taking the first steps" to greater independence.
- ✎ **Supporting each other** – many participants give support to other, perhaps less able or less confident, walkers and one particular area of support has been from 'experienced' guide-dog owners who have been able to give useful advice to those new to owning a guide-dog or about to take one on for the first time.



One of the Voice Trails participants helps with training of the volunteer guides by offering training in both visual impairments generally but also in guiding skills.

- ✎ **For Voice Trails volunteers**, the benefits have been similar to those for participants. The project has helped volunteers to build their self esteem, make new friends and above all perhaps, raise their awareness and understanding of visual impairment. This last point particularly applies to student volunteers from the Sports Science Unit at Bangor University.
- ✎ **For Snowdonia National Park Authority**, the host organisation, the benefit has been in raising the profile and mainstreaming disability equality within the organisation. The Voice Trails co-ordinator suggests that personally there have been major benefits in getting to know about the issues and working with those with visual impairments on a daily basis.

Success Factors



The Co-ordinator points to a number of things which have contributed to the success of Voice Trails:

- ✎ “Getting on the phone” in order to keep in touch with walk participants - getting to know them as individuals and forming a relationship with them has been key.
- ✎ Enabling participants to have ownership of the walks programme – through suggesting walks themselves that they already know or walks they would like to be able to do, and could do, with support.
- ✎ Enabling networking between participants – participants get in touch with each other independently to spread word about the next walk and to encourage others to attend.



Challenges



- ✎ Working with people with visual impairments brings specific challenges and the main challenge for Voice Trails has been in providing transport to get participants to the start of each walk and back home at the end of each walk.
- ✎ Obviously the walk participants are unable to drive themselves, the project area is large and rural, and public transport is limited. To overcome this, the project usually asks participants to meet in Bangor at the North Wales Society for the Blind’s office – which is a convenient, central meeting place for most participants. The group sometimes use volunteers’ cars or hire a bus, but this is an expensive option. Voice Trails had anticipated high transport costs and the Let’s Walk Cymru grant does include a sum for travel, but this is not sufficient to cover the particular need of this target group.

Self-sufficiency and looking forwards



- ✎ The co-ordinator is concerned about the ability of the project to be self-sufficient as she feels that it is important for one single person to take a co-ordinating role and there are some aspects e.g. risk assessment, which it would be difficult for the participants to do themselves. She believes that the North Wales Society for the Blind would be the ideal organisation to take over the administration of the project in the longer term, but is not sure that they would have the resources to do so.
- ✎ Providing transport to get participants to the start/away from the finish of a walk remains a major challenge for the sustainability of the project and its ability to be self-sufficient.
- ✎ The Let's Walk Cymru programme has been invaluable for enabling Voice Trails to operate. The Co-ordinator suggests that she "doesn't think we could actually have got it off the ground without [their] support". Beyond this, she points out that the Snowdonia National Park Authority did not have any experience of running a walks programme for the visually impaired and so lacked confidence. Voice Trails was also supported by Colin Antwis from Fieldman's Trails in Denbighshire who had experience in leading walks for the visually impaired; through the grant from Let's Walk Cymru, the project was able to employ him to lead the first two Voice Trails' walks.

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.....the opportunity to walk in locations that as visually impaired people they wouldn't be able to access on their own".



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