



North East Land Links: Final Report for the Countryside Agency.

Section 3: 'Green Exercise' Final Report

3.0 Introduction

NELL started to pursue an interest in 'green exercise' in the autumn of 2003 and continued this until the cessation of the project in August 2006. Work initiated by NELL is being continued via its host organisation the North East Community Forests and the regional Green Exercise working group.

NELL's engagement in this area of work was prompted by the increasing prominence of public health as a public policy issue and an awareness of the growing evidence relating to the health benefits (both physical and mental) which users of the countryside in and around towns derive from engagement in recreational activity in green space.

Our main interest in this area focused on getting organisations to consider the **potential** for the countryside in and around towns to deliver against public health objectives. Our main aim was to establish how best to realise this potential, for example we were interested in determining how best to increase participation in green exercise in the countryside in and around towns by current non users particularly individuals in those groups and communities which have been identified as being most at risk of suffering from health inequalities.

3.1 Discussion

For our purposes green exercise may be defined as informal physical exercise undertaken in a 'green' environment. This may be a park, woodland or other natural or semi-natural environment. Exercise undertaken in green space has been shown to confer not only physical health benefits but also to improve participant's mental 'well being'.

Such findings have attracted the attention of a number of organisations in the rural sector, both governmental and NGO. Their interest is driven primarily by an understandable desire to achieve recognition for the added value, in the form of health, which their activities generate.

Whilst it is important to acknowledge the health benefits experienced by current users of the green space resource, if we are to more fully realise the potential contribution which the countryside in and around towns can make to public health. There needs to be a more concerted effort to engage with people who do not regularly make use of it.

To help contribute towards the attainment of government targets for physical activity we need to increase the frequency with which occasional users engage in green exercise and to widen the user base to include current non-users. The available

evidence suggests that this latter grouping includes many of those sections of society most likely to suffer from health inequalities i.e. lower life expectancy, increased susceptibility to disease.

The reasons for these inequalities are complex, they are linked to personal circumstances and the influence these have on behaviour. Individuals from disadvantaged groups or those living in disadvantaged areas tend to have less healthy lifestyles. Poor health can be passed down through the generations as children replicate their parent's patterns of behaviour, the government is keen to break this cycle and to increase the number of people from disadvantaged groups and areas adopting healthier lifestyles.

Achieving this will require people to change their behaviour, to do this we need to provide an alternative, which people want and are enabled to use. With regard to greenspace provision it needs to be convenient and easy to access (in the eyes of the desired user), 'free' and its use should not require specialist equipment. It needs to be perceived as safe and critically people have to **want** to use it.

From the evidence available to us it is clear that most of the organisations currently involved in the provision and management of the countryside in and around towns and its associated infrastructure do not **as a matter of course** provide an environment which the majority of people want and are enabled to use. Their current activities do contribute to public health but if they wish to increase their contribution changes are likely to be required in the form and function of the green space provided, the marketing of that space and its management.

3.2 Key Points

Many of the groups which have been identified as non-countryside users have also been identified as being most at risk of suffering from health inequalities.

If green exercise programmes are to emerge, and are conceived as a health intervention mechanism then we would argue that they should be targeted at the individuals, groups and communities most in need. Any such programmes should also be subject to an appropriate evaluation.

In our opinion greater participation levels in green exercise will require,

- The provision of an appropriate environment, i.e. one which current **non-users** of greenspace want to use. This implies an environment which is perceived as safe, attractive, and appealing and which accommodates the type of pursuit people wish to engage in and suitable infrastructure eg surfaced paths.

In some cases the needs or wants of groups whose engagement in green exercise is sought may be incompatible with other objectives for a given site, in this case there may be a need to accept this and ensure appropriate provision elsewhere or efforts may need to be made to modify the nature of demand through marketing of educational programmes.

- Evidence from both the countryside and health sectors indicates that proximity and convenience are critical factors affecting the use of green space. We should therefore be bringing green space to people not people to green space.

Schemes which seek to encourage people to go further afield, with a view to engaging in green exercise, are less likely to regularly attract current non countryside users, particularly from economically dis-advantaged groups. They are also inherently less environmentally sustainable as they often encourage or require car use

- Non use of the countryside by members of the wider population is not simply due to the presence of barriers, many may simply either have not considered making use of the countryside resource, may be unaware of it or may have little or no interest in making use of it. If the aim is to engage this potential 'market' this is likely to require a change in current 'marketing strategies'.

For example new marketing materials, mechanisms and strategies may be required. A lack of information and awareness of opportunities is frequently quoted in the literature as being one reason why current non-users do not make use of the countryside.

There is also evidence to suggest that existing promotional and interpretive material does not appeal or is perceived as of limited value to traditional non-users. There is a need for more targeted information. Improving the marketing of green space could offer the most cost effective way of improving participation rates.

- Some groups will require targeted interventions to secure their engagement, the 'Countryside Confidence' course which is being developed as part of the Gateshead Green Exercise Pilot aims to meet this need. To ensure they are cost effective targeted interventions of this type must secure the participation of the individuals and groups they are aimed at and should aim to lead people into self directed activity.

There is a clear need to gain a better understanding of the factors which would make the use of green space a more attractive option to current non users, the Gateshead pilot project (described below) has been designed to help in this regard, further work will however be required.

In summary there are four critical issues those planning/implementing green exercise programmes need to be aware of.

Access – is there reasonable physical access to the product, 'reasonable' will vary depending upon the habits etc of the target group.

Awareness- are people aware of the opportunities available to them?

Affordability- is the product economically accessible. Analysis of this needs to consider both actual affordability and the value placed upon the product by the target consumer.

Attractiveness- is the product desirable, attractive to the consumer. If not consider reducing associated costs of consumption and or consider ways by which the product might be marketed more effectively.

3.3 Main Project Outcomes

- Green exercise conference 'Linking town and country in the pursuit of better health.' 16th June 2004

The idea for this event came from NELL and it was largely organised and funded by us. To assist in the development and marketing of the event a planning group was established, this consisted of representatives from the Health Development Agency, Countryside Agency, Great North Forest, English Nature and members of the Wider Public Health Network. Assistance on the day was provided by individuals from a wide range of organisations.

This event was attended by over seventy delegates, the vast majority of whom came from within the region. The object was to bring together professionals from different disciplines (particularly health and rural recreation) with a view to raising awareness of the potential of the countryside in and around towns as a mechanism for securing improved public health.

The event was well received and is known to have stimulated much discussion both within and without the region. On the back of its success a follow up meeting was organised by NELL on the 11th of August.

This was attended by Julie Hogan, Health Development Agency, Lorraine Honeybell, Countryside Agency, Bill Kirkup, North East Land Links, Martin Shaw, Countryside Agency, Vicki Sixsmith, Great North Forest, Ian Thurlbeck, Sport England and Sue Vaughan, Northern Rock Foundation. At this meeting it was proposed to establish a new regional working group. In response to this new body NELL's host organisation, the North East Community Forest decided to establish an internal green exercise working group.

- Establishment of a regional green exercise working group November 2004

The first meeting of this group took place in November 2004 (significantly many members of the group had never met and were unaware of one another's roles and remits). It was agreed at this initial meeting that NELL would draft terms of reference for the group, the final version was accepted in May 2005. The stated aim of the group is as follows;

'We will seek to influence regional policies and practice relating to the provision and use of green space in the countryside in and around towns. With a view to ensuring the provision of a resource which a wider range of people **want** and are **enabled** to use.'

Green exercise now features in several key regional strategic documents, for example Sport England's Regional Plan.

The group aims to meet every quarter. From November 2004 until February 2006 meetings were organised and chaired by Bill Kirkup of NELL, subsequently this role has been taken over by the Countryside Agency.

The composition of the group has evolved and increased since its inception, currently group membership includes staff from the following organisations, Countryside Agency, Easington District Council, Sport England, North East Community Forests, English Nature, the Environment Agency, the Public Health Team at Government Office North East and the Regional Assembly.

- Gateshead Green Exercise Pilot Project

NELL led on the development of this project and on the subsequent submission of a successful funding application to Sport England. This funding has been matched by the Countryside Agency and North East Community Forests.

The project was initiated to help the regional working group develop a better understanding of the factors which affect the use of green open space for informal recreation. Particularly by those sections of the population most at risk of suffering from health inequalities. It is focused in particular on young people aged 16-24, families with young children and people suffering from common mental health problems. These groups were identified as priorities by our partners in Gateshead Council and Primary Care Trust.

- Appointment of a regional green exercise co-ordinator by North East Community Forests

Janine Ogilvie was transferred from NELL in February 2006 to become the regional green exercise co-ordinator for North East Community Forests. In this guise she has taken on the project management of the Gateshead Green Exercise pilot project

3.4 Key Documents

- Background paper produced for conference 'Linking Town and Countryside in the Pursuit of Better Health' May 2004.

- Conference programme. 'Linking Town and Countryside in the Pursuit of Better Health' 16th June 2004.

- Regional Green Exercise Working Group Terms of Reference (final version produced May 2005)

- Notes from regional green exercise working group meetings, August 2004 – February 2006.

- Gateshead Green Exercise Pilot Project Proposal.

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