

A Reflection on Physical Activity Programmes for Older Isolated Men in East Belfast

by East Belfast Community Development Agency
Health Development and Connections Programme

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1. Background

The Health Living Centre Alliance (HLCA), of which all Belfast Healthy Living Centre's (BHLCs) had membership sought to develop links with Statutory Service Providers in 2010. It achieved representation on the Eastern Physical Activity Group (EPAG), which provided grants and information about a variety of programmes. This enabled BHLCs to make collective bids for funding based on individual neighbourhood/community need and deliver appropriate and relevant programmes that would gain the most support from the community and encourage local people to participate.

The East Belfast Healthy Living Centre was set up in 2002 through East Belfast Partnership and ended its phase of work there in 2007. A Health Development and Connections Programme was developed and managed by East Belfast Community Development Agency (EBCDA) at the end of 2007 to the present time. It was in this context that bids were made to promote physical activity opportunities and to explore collective working across HLCs in Belfast.

The policy providing direction for the work to promote physical activity was articulated in the Chief Medical Officer's report of 2010/11, which highlighted that a cross-Departmental Framework for Preventing and Addressing Overweight and Obesity – A Fitter Future for All – was to be taken forward to provide physical activity facilities for children and families and encouraging participation in physical activity and active travel.

Of concern to representatives of HLCs on EPAG was the considerable additional workload placed on them to coordinate collective bids while managing their own extensive programmes of work. The expected outcome would be the raised profile of the Alliance and closer links

between different HLCs across Belfast. Because of mainly time constraints individual HLCs submitted their own single bids.

2. First Steps

The opportunity was taken to put forward a proposal by the Health Development and Connections Programme of EBCDA. And, the best fit considered for taking forward the physical activity theme was work with older men, given the gaps in this provision. In the east of the city there existed a network of support to explore issues around capacity development if there was a willingness by older men to participate in activities.

Therefore, with the benefit of having worked with existing older men's network, the Wise Men of the East (WME) established in 2003, there was a background of experience. Particularly with on the ground work with Ballybeen Men in Focus in 2006 and five wise men of the east men's groups in 2008 through their Walking and Talking initiative. The evidence supported the strength of word of mouth contacts and likely potential barriers and resistance to engaging men in physical activities. A key to success was going to be proposing an interactive programme that allowed men to get involved and build their confidence, in particular with social situations. This would also allow for a basic assessment of need, interest and commitment to a physical activity programme. The programme would be designed deliberately to provide a variety of opportunities. The challenge was to engage men who had not previously benefitted from physical activities in a group setting.

3. Get Active Programmes

The encouragement to go forward came in **September 2010** in the form of generous grants received from (EPAG) for programmes over two years. It provided the stimulus to set up a physical activity programme for a group of isolated and inactive middle aged men. The timescale and recruitment process was completed using word of mouth. Ten participants were identified who mostly had not had any previous involvement with men's groups or the WME.



A three month programme was organised in consultation with the men devising seven sessions including walking, cycling, archery, gardening and fishing. Locations were selected outside east Belfast to help develop confidence, provide freedom from local pressures and raise awareness of other opportunities.

As the activities progressed a sense of bonding was developed and a fair bit of banter helped to hide some anxieties. The resources for activities and refreshments were crucial to ensuring participants felt valued and they were not out of pocket taking part. It contributed to ensuring that all participants completed the programme by removing any financial worries, essential for men living on state benefits.

Learning included the sharing of strengths and weaknesses, showing vulnerability during activities that were difficult and sharing personal experiences. For some who were dependent on alcohol and others with minor mental health problems taking part was a big achievement.

The main outcome was the benefits of diversionary activities that participants began to look forward to. Feedback was positive about feeling more motivated with Alan K saying "I got out and met new people and I have learned so much about what's available and hope other men join us and we go from strength to strength."

A celebration event provided an opportunity to present Certificates in December by Dr J Kyle, Chair of the Health Strategy Group.

4. Environmental Angle 'You Dig It Man'

Although some men didn't want to keep involved because of illness and others just found the activities too difficult, the majority did want to meet up again in **January 2011**. A further 8 week programme was planned after conversations with the Carew II Family Centre at Tamar Street who needed help to tackle their derelict Community Garden. The group became known as the Get Active Group and providing a base to work from, free of charge, located in an area of deprivation with access to a range of community, education and leisure facilities located nearby offered some stability.



One of the objectives this time was to make contact with the very successful environmental project at Ligoniel Healthy Living Centre and learn from them. Again, inclusion in the weekly programme of resources for refreshments provided support to participants and demonstrated that they were being looked after. The inclusion of some resources for gardening gear also provided an opportunity to lever further resources. A full range of equipment was duly obtained from the Northern Ireland Housing Executive East Belfast District Office in **May**.

This project ran into weather issues but the activities continued and there was a positive feeling with the men turning up weekly to be part of an environmental improvement works but also having a sense of helping the local community. The link with the Family Centre provided 3 additional reminiscence sessions about employment and culture with a group of other men from a nearby community group.

A major learning experience for the year was visiting Ligoniel HLC in **August 2011** to use their fishing lake and visit their community garden and centre. The welcoming attitude by all was a very positive experience and the fishing men especially after catching some spectacular fish considered returning themselves and becoming members of the centre.



Walking

Financial support from Belfast Health Trust over the years provided a core resource for the EBCDA Health Development and Connections Programme to deliver Neighbourhood activities. This enabled the recruitment of the wider population to play a part in communicating general health awareness messages and to established links and relationships with individuals across the large district of east Belfast.



The financial support from the Public Health Agency during men's health week in **June 2010** enabled two **walking sessions** to take place at Tullycarnet, Dundonald and Willowfield utilizing the Network of the WME membership. These proved to be one off events with groups not having the capacity or leadership to sustain these activities through their Groups weekly programmes. However, the opportunity to to promote walking activity, was started up again in **May 2011** and three men were trained as walk leaders by the Health Improvement Team of the Belfast Health Trust. Part of the motivation this time was the successful completion in March 2011 of a walk around Derry's Walls by four Get Active group members.

A variety of short walks were measured along the Comber Greenway adjacent to the Family Centre on Tamar Street, which would be used as a base to start walks from. A flyer was produced and circulated around Community Centres plus it was included in EBCDAs ebuletin. The assistance of a female member of staff was willingly provided to widen out the opportunity so as many people as possible could take part. Some interest emerged from one voluntary community worker but few inquiries were taken or excitement generated about participating. With no shows after a number of weeks the opportunity was suspended.

A highlight of the ongoing weekly Get Active gardening and community tidy up work took place on **17 June 2011** with a corporate volunteer day with managers from the Ulster Bank coming from across Belfast to take part in a Belfast City Council Brush Up Day. Also, two additional active sessions took place to help Bloomfield Community Association transform an overgrown Conn O'Neill Bridge Park. During these sessions a connection was made with the Probation Service who offered and provided their assistance at the Tamar Street Garden.



Environmental Award

The opportunity was taken to record the work undertaken and make application to Belfast City Council Brighter Belfast Awards. Short listed for an award was an achievement and the group got a real boost when they won a business award for their partnership work with the Ulster Bank. A couple of men continued to participate during weekly sessions in 2012 and 2013 with wider support on occasions from members of local men's groups.

5. Cycling Programme

To continue seeking options for activity the Get Active programme allowed for providing some support for cycling. With a few participants demonstrating that they were reliant on using bikes to get around the district they were very supportive about trying to make this a regular part of weekly meetings. So a meeting was set up at Avoniel Leisure Centre for a cycle along the Comber Greenway. Three men turned up and the activity showed that this might be an interest for further development. It emerged that the men met other friends who were cycling along the Greenway that helped to build confidence and support.

Santa Cycle

The opportunity to be part of a bigger initiative came about through Connswater Greenway's family fun Santa Cycle event postponed from December 2010 to **March 2011** to raise funds for Bowel Cancer. Three members of the group took sponsor sheets and six participants, including two members of Bloomfield Community Association.



Friday Cycles

Because of the positive benefits experienced by members of the group it was decided to organise a regular cycle outing from **April 2011**. Initially a Thursday morning was tried before settling on a Friday morning. Advertising flyers were placed in the public window of EBCDA and Avoniel Leisure Centre for others to join in and the group met outside EBCDA premises on Templemore Street leaving for outings at 10am. These included frequent cycles on Comber Greenway with a memorable BBQ at Island Hill outside Comber town to celebrate the success of the group.

Victoria Park 1

In **June 2011** the Health Development and Connections Team were resourced by Belfast Health Trust to organise an activity morning at Victoria Park. The plan was to use the paths, green areas and bowling greens, providing a variety of physical activities including a teddy bear picnic. However, there was a no show because the weather was very wet but the main reason was that there was rioting the night before and community tension was at a heightened level.

DOE Road Safety Grants

Funding was obtained from Community Transport to deliver a road safety activity. It involved twenty community health champions taking part as a highly visible group cycling to the City Hall on **25 October 2011** under motor cycle Police escort. To help raise awareness of bike safety issues for the public, cycle users and car/lorry drivers, the Lord Mayor Niall Ó Donnghaile from east Belfast came in with his support. Literature was produced and distributed to householders, vehicle owners and at local health fairs.

Cycle Accident

The support from Council and Politicians was received after a cycling accident in Ormeau Park in **November 2011**. Jim a new participant of the cycling group was out on his own one day and when leaving the Ravenhill Road exit his front wheel was collided into by a large black Labrador which was not on a lead. He sustained serious injuries but returned to the groups in the spring of 2012.

Chief Medical Officer's Renewed Context 2012

The direction of future physical activity interventions became more refined by the Chief Medical Officers Report 2012/13. Highlighting increasing physical activity to reduce long-term health problems and identified the uptake of cycling by local health improvement teams and physical activity referral programmes. Having achieved 50% level of activity by the population 40% of people were reporting having a longstanding illness of which 72% said that it limited their activities to some extent.

Yardman cycle

A further large cycling opportunity came about through Connswater Greenway's fancy dress cycle on **1 April 2012** to imitate the iconic Shipyard picture of workers on the slipway. Two cyclists took part along with hundreds of walkers and cyclists from Billy Neil Centre in Dundonald to the Titanic Quarter.

Cycle Coaching

The success of a core group of four participating each week during 2012 was an encouragement with many routes completed including; Lisburn Towpath, Castle Espie, Victoria Park, Dargan, Jordanstown, Shaw's Bridge and Newtownabbey Way. However, to help improve their skills and encourage others less experienced to take part a coaching sessions was set up on **25 May 2012** with Sustrans Volunteer Coordinator. The session included road craft and safety awareness and was organised on the roads beside Avoniel Leisure Centre. To continue supporting capacity building a Bikeability Event was organised at Victoria Park on **22 June 2012**. And, a further coaching session was organised with Sustrans in **July** followed by a short cycle on the new cycle path at the Titanic Quarter and was another significant initiative to help build the capacity of the group.



Recycling Fish

Interest continued from the Get Active Group following the fishing session at Ligoniel HLC. A trip was organised to North Woodburn Reservoir in Carrickfergus on **3 February 2012** and a further opportunity was provided at Castlewellan Lake in **August 2012** by joining up with Tullycarnet Wisecrackers Men's Group and Cregagh Retired Active Gentlemen. However, as a long term approach the barrier for creating enthusiasm with older men was the poor weather conditions and their unavailability during the summer months.



Victoria Park 2

EBCDA Health Development and Connections Team organised a second physical activity event at Victoria Park on **22 June 2012** that included walking 1mile, cycling 1mile, target bowling and children activities. Lagan Sports provided bicycles for participants and coached the cyclists around the park. A lot of effort went into securing the Park from Belfast City Council and on this occasion with a core group of women from Elmgrove Primary School participating. Those who took part were very active participants who enjoyed the whole experience.



Active Belfast

The opportunity was taken to apply for an active travel grant from Active Belfast to make a big move forward to promote the activity of cycling. A grant was provided for equipment to set up and establish a recreational cycling club. Ten people including two women attended a bike workshop at Avoniel Leisure Centre in **July 2012** with a mechanic checking for bike fitness and road worthiness. It was agreed to name the club Bikeway East and to use this on shirts and publicity, members completed 15 Friday sessions including for the first time routes to the City Hall, Titanic, Cultra, Portadown, Larne costal road and Dublin Phoenix Park using senior train passes to reach some of the districts. There was a noticeable improvement in confidence with cyclist cycling on their own more often. At the end of the year membership reached nineteen individuals including five women. Occasional support was accessed from Cycling Ulster Coach Ryan Connor for the core cycling group which remained constant at five cyclists. With some of the cyclists still being a concern with low levels of road craft the numbers could be managed but any larger numbers would perhaps require more experienced leadership.

Bikeway East 2013

A number of more formal meetings with the group were facilitated during **January and February** to look at sustainability issues. This allowed some tentative exploration of issues around managing the Club, a committee structure, needs of members, ideas and insurance. Coaching and improving road worthiness of bikes remaining to be a big issue, a mechanic was engaged for an event at Avoniel Leisure Centre on 8 March along with Sustrans instructors enabling new cyclists to cycle around the outdoor all weather sports grounds.

The level of achievement by Club Members continued throughout the year with a great variety of routes cycled including the following; January; Larne, Cultra, Newry Towpath-February; Belfast Zoo, Titanic Quarter, Dublin-March; Comber, Newtownabbey Way, Victoria Park, Comber Greenway-April; Nendrum, North Foreshore, Cultra-May; Comber Greenway, Newry Towpath-June; Island Hill, Bangor-July; Newry Towpath, Comber, Jordanstown-August; Dargan Estate, Dunville Park, Woodvale Park, Island Hill, Comber, Newry Towpath, Titanic Quarter-September; Coleraine, Titanic Quarter, Shaws Bridge, Holywood-October; Ormeau Park, Comber, Comber, Bangor-November; Island Hill, Ards Peninsula, Holywood, Cultra , Jordanstown-December; Victoria Park.

Connswater Shopping and Retail Centre

A promotional opportunity was organised on **20 March 2013** with the local shopping centre to provide an information stand in the reception area. Free Travel Wise Hi Vis vests, water bottles, information etc. was distributed and conversations took place about interest in cycling. A short Quiz sheet about cycling do's and don'ts was provided and prizes given out for completed entries.

Bikeway East 2014

The programme continued to prove popular with members enjoying the regular outing on a Friday. Routes now included some variation including; January; Titanic Pumphouse, Holywood, Shaw's Bridge- February; Moira, Holywood, Comber Greenway- March; Duncrue, Comber, Holywood. In total the miles completed by the Club to this date is 887 cycled with members taking responsibility to organise raising funds for four charity events providing £900 to them. The WME agreed to take a more active role in supporting the Club with funding for insurance through its Carew Centre Men's Shed pilot that is helping to provide some sustainable links for the future.

Victoria Park 3

Belfast City Council provided funding towards a cycle safety event at the Park on **13 June** to help celebrate men's health week. Bicycles in various degrees of condition turned up for the mechanic to rectify and with participants at different levels of cycling ability they took the opportunity the access health checks (38), bike road worthiness tests (15), coaching (17), PSNI registered bikes (8) plus receiving Hi Vis vests and over 60 safety bells distributed before lunch.

6. Suggestions and Recommendations

The lack of linkage across the city can now be improved with the setting up of a Physical Activity Forum and better connections with Belfast Strategic Partnership.

East Belfast and Castlereagh can like many other parts of the city take pride in the success of elite sports right across the spectrum and these clubs are rightly admired for their achievement.

The launch of the Chief Medical Officers report in east Belfast at Lisnasharragh Primary School to promote staying active, healthy and living longer helped to highlight the important message for areas of multiple deprivation that addressing early intervention and prevention opportunities is a key action.

The continued support for walking groups and initiatives will provide opportunities to link groups across the city availing of outstanding facilities and venues to enjoy while becoming active. The evidence from working with men suggests that more challenging walks would be required to give them a sense of achievement from participating. Also, ongoing work with Pharmacists, Health Teams and Physical Activity Workers will provide benefits in the long term. Emerging infrastructure projects such as Ballybeen's Men's Motivation Group and Gym will provide encouragement and clear benefits to all ages who use their facilities.

Reducing the pressure on the Health Service remains a key outcome of interventions and changing lifestyle factors ingrained in the culture provides a big opportunity and challenge. Commuting and leisure cycling is clearly a long way from becoming a norm even with evidence that the recent Giro d'Italia has brought more people out on their bikes. The economic argument is not in dispute about the benefits of increased physical activity even if only one in 10 journeys were made by bicycle.

There is no doubt decision makers are taking the matter seriously but change is slow as former Olympic champion Chris Boardman said while giving evidence to the Commons transport select committee; "Britain is now one of the most successful cycling nations in the world. How can we be getting it so right in terms of elite success but still be failing to truly embed cycling as an everyday part of British culture?"

Stormont Ministers have travelled to countries where cycling is the norm only to demonstrate how far behind we are. "In the 1970s, the Netherlands made a conscious choice to put people first and make cycling and walking their preferred means of transport. It is no coincidence that they are also one of the healthiest and happiest nations in the world.

There still remains a lot of confusion over what is meant by improved cycling infrastructure, slowing down fast-moving traffic, compulsory wearing of helmets, safety improvements for lorries, political leadership, normalising the driving test and Highway Code and the benefits and disadvantages of high visibility clothing. The physical activity agenda provides much to ponder for a district such as east Belfast, with so much potential and a desire for action and a vision to move forward positively into the future.

