

"Activity Friends"

a senior peer mentor physical activity programme for the over 50's

Evaluation Report - Executive Summary

Introduction

Activity Friends is a volunteer programme for the over 50's designed to help people achieve a healthier lifestyle through increasing physical activity and befriending to alleviate social isolation.

Volunteers are trained as 'Activity Friends' who then reach out to their peers in their local community. Support and encouragement is given on a one-to-one or a group level.

The programme has been piloted and developed in Ashfield and Mansfield over the last three years and is now expanding across Nottinghamshire. It is sponsored by Nottinghamshire County Council in partnership with local councils, primary care trusts, the voluntary sector and older people's groups.



Background

Activity Friends is based upon principles adopted by the successful Community Health and Mentoring Programme for Seniors (CHAMPS) from the USA and replicated by the 'Ageing Well and Healthily' programme in the Netherlands. It has been developed and piloted in England over the past five years by the British Heart Foundation at its Centre for Physical Activity and Health at Loughborough University, in collaboration with Age Concern – Ageing Well UK.

In Nottinghamshire it has been a key activity of the County Council's Best Value Review for promoting independence for older people. It is also a significant health promotion activity within the National Health Service's National Service Frameworks for Older People, Heart Disease, Cancers, Diabetes and Mental Ill Health. By involving older people in health promotional activities with their peers, there is the potential to deliver a health gain in partnership with large numbers of older people.

The pilot was initially centred in Ashfield, but Mansfield District Council has sponsored the project over the past 18 months through its Neighbourhood Renewal Scheme. The programme has proved to be very economical, costing around £5,000 per year in each district. Financial support has also been received from the Nottinghamshire Sports Action Zone and Nottinghamshire County Council.

Aims

The overall purpose was to set up a senior peer mentor pilot at two levels. Firstly, to increase older people's levels of physical activity and, secondly, to offer friendship, support and encouragement, particularly to the lonely and isolated, thereby promoting social and mental well-being and quality of life.

Objectives

- 1 Set up a steering group of key agencies and older people's representatives.
- 2 Recruit and train volunteers over 50 years of age as mentors, locally known as Activity Friends
- 3 Provide monthly support meetings and ongoing help
- 4 Assist in the recruitment of mentees and in providing activities
- 5 Increase mentors and mentees levels of physical activity and their social and mental well-being.
- 6 Involve older people (50+) at all stages in decision making and service planning.

Evaluation

A range of quantitative and qualitative methods were used to monitor and evaluate the pilot. These included the training of volunteers, provision of on-going support, monthly recording of activity, the work of the Steering Group and in particular 'Evaluation Parties' using focus groups. These were held at different locations to capture the views of mentors, mentees and steering group members. Visual analogue scales were used to gauge perceptions of physical activity and 'getting out and about' to test for statistical significance.

The British Heart Foundation assisted with the 'parties' and made a video of proceedings for a national promotional film.

Project co-ordinator - **Tim Corbin**

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Ashfield and Mansfield Activity Friends

Results

- ✓ Steering groups were set up in Ashfield and Mansfield
- ✓ 23 people were trained as Activity Friends
- ✓ Support was provided through telephone contact, monthly 'get togethers' and social activities
- ✓ In 2004-05, 103 mentees were recruited with 3,720 support sessions undertaken. This increased during 2005-06 to 126 mentees and 4,683 support sessions
- ✓ Evaluation 'parties' were held in Selston and Mansfield involving 45 people. The assessment of impact for physical activity and 'getting out and about' were both shown to be highly significant.
- ✓ Older people were involved at all stages of pilot development and strategic planning.

"I was depressed but now have something to look forward to. I feel like I'm living again."

Quotes from the Focus Groups

"I learnt about Activity Friends through my book club. I find it helps with my depression and has increased my walking. I now attend line dancing and tai chi on a regular basis."

"With suffering from ill-health, actual contact with other people has been better than medication – better than any doctor's prescription!"

"Haven't got time to go to the doctor's today! I'm eating better, swapping recipes and having a proper meal with friends. It's better than any bottle of tonic!"



Recommendations to key agencies and groups

- 1 The project should be made sustainable. Nottinghamshire Primary Care Trust should be approached to commission this service due to its proven impact on the health and independence of older people.
- 2 A substantial post (1/2 wte) should be established through the local volunteer bureau to develop and expand the scheme across Ashfield and Mansfield
- 3 Consideration should be given to targeting the most disadvantaged and vulnerable groups to obtain greatest health gain.
- 4 The issue of transport should be addressed regarding older people's access to facilities.
- 5 Activity Friends should be trained and used as peer community health educators
- 6 As Primary Care Trust reorganisation takes effect, consideration should be given to expand the scheme to those districts currently not participating (Gedling and Newark and Sherwood).
- 7 The report should be disseminated across the county and a conference arranged involving older people's representatives and partner organisations, with inputs from 'Activity Friends'.

Conclusion

Activity Friends has demonstrated that it can make a big impact in people's lives. The peer education approach is most effective in raising people's levels of physical activity and in breaking down barriers of loneliness and isolation. It is also a very economical programme which is cheap to operate and cost-effective in terms of results.