

# The Dales Challenge for individuals with severe mental health illness

## Project Overview

Individuals experiencing severe mental illness are less likely to exercise and more likely to experience heart disease, obesity and diabetes than the wider population. Exercise is increasingly being viewed as a way for individuals to manage their physical and mental health.

Active for Life is an exercise referral scheme for individuals with severe mental health illness. The aim is to enable participants to develop the skills, knowledge and confidence for exercise to become a sustainable part of their lifestyle. This may be achieved through supported one to one sessions or specific, time limited group programmes.



One such programme was the “Dales Challenge” undertaken in partnership with Pathways, a local provider of day services, and was funded by NHS Creative Partnerships. The Project consisted of a 12 week progressive group walking programme and other individual training, culminating in a residential trip to the Yorkshire Dales to climb Whernside the highest of Yorkshire’s famous 3 Peaks.

The Dales Challenge was so called to emphasise that participants would be challenged both physically and psychologically and that they would be expected to be fully committed to the Challenge if they were to get the most out of the experience.

In the course of the Challenge participants improved their fitness and learned how to keep themselves safe whilst walking in the countryside, basic first aid and map reading skills. The Challenge walk itself, led by qualified Mountain Walking Group Leaders, consisted of a nine mile circular route taking in the summit of Whernside the highest peak in the Yorkshire Dales National Park.

## Project Outcomes

Prior to the Challenge potential participants were screened to establish commitment levels and ensure good adherence rates. Of an original group of 10 previously inactive and socially isolated men with mental health needs, 8 completed the programme.

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Participants were encouraged to keep a journal throughout the project, in order to reflect on how they felt and document the benefits of becoming more active and being part of a group.

Two post Challenge meetings allowed reflection upon the whole experience and helped participants plan for the

future activity. There was a focus on developing strategies to sustain the physical and mental health benefits achieved through the Dales Challenge.

Gains extended beyond improved physical fitness, the following comments illustrate some of the physical, psychological and social gains participants made.

*"I felt it was a team effort, especially the Challenge walk, everyone said they enjoyed it even though they struggled in parts"*

*"I'm more likely to walk now. It's motivated and pushed me to go further and to places I've never been before. I know I can do it now"*

*"I say hello to people all the time but not many are my friends. Now I've come here I've got 8 or 9 friends"*

A major legacy of the project has been the fact that six of the former participants have continued to walk together in the community, meeting on a weekly basis and forming a cohesive 'Peer group' of individuals. Additionally three of the men have also joined a local cycling session to extend their physical activity further.

Given that participants were previously socially isolated; the return on the investment of just over £2K has been justifiable. The group has been sustained and the Challenge has been re-commissioned; it is planned that the Peer group will support new Dales Challenge participants, allowing them to join their weekly walk thereby providing an additional opportunity for physical activity and training for those aiming for the Challenge.

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