

# National Park Wales: Together for Health and Well-being

A Position Statement and Priority Actions: National Parks are Assets for Health and Well-being for the people of Wales, and beyond



## **Position Statement**

The three National Parks in Wales deliver health benefits for the nation. They provide intrinsic health benefits such as improved air-quality, carbon storage and biodiversity. They also provide direct physical and mental health benefits, for local and national communities, from enjoyment of the environment.

## **Summary**

National Parks are rich in natural and historic heritage and collectively offer a unique health and well-being resource. The National Park Authorities (Brecon Beacons, Pembrokeshire Coast and Snowdonia) are uniquely placed to take a role in addressing health. The Authorities have a key role in helping conserve the Parks and enabling access to and within them. They play two vital roles:

- National Parks provide settings for activities promoting good health and well-being, including 'active' benefits such as walking and 'passive' benefits like those derived from 'tranquillity' and inspirational scenery.
- National Parks support good quality environments and a flourishing, diverse ecosystem essential to maintaining clean air, drinking water and land.

National Parks are 'health assets': in that they offer access to resources with the potential to enable individuals and communities to maintain their health and well-being. National Parks Wales are well placed to deliver on the goals of the 'Well-being of Future Generations Act': a prosperous; resilient; healthier; more equal Wales; with cohesive communities; and a vibrant culture and thriving Welsh language.

The three Authorities are unlocking the health benefits the countryside offers. Recently public health and social care sectors in Wales have moved to tackle some of the root causes of ill health and look to deliver health and social care beyond the traditional service models. Evidence shows that accessing the National Parks can have a positive impact on health promotion generally and particular benefits for individuals living with and managing long term conditions such as heart disease, dementia, diabetes and mental health conditions.

### **National Park Wales' 3 priority actions for Health and well-being are:**

- Raise awareness of the health and well-being benefits opportunities of National Parks
- Continue to develop evidence-based policy and practice in relation to health and well-being and the natural environment and landscape features
- Maximise opportunities for all people in Wales to access the health and well-being benefits of the natural environment and landscape features of National Parks

## **Background**

National Parks and their administrating Authorities play an important part in promoting good health and addressing poor health and associated well-being issues for the people of Wales and visitors from the rest of the UK and overseas.

The designation of a National Park gives the greatest level of protection a landscape can receive in the UK, and as such provides protection for and support to the quality environments essential to maintaining vital clean air, water and land.

The Welsh Government links the social and economic well-being of the nation and social inclusion with well-being and good health. National Parks Wales are well placed to deliver on the goals of the 'Well-being of Future Generations Act'. Wales has higher than average levels of physical inactivity and poor health in comparison to other European countries, and some communities in Wales have mortality rates among the highest in Europe. Statistics suggest a third of Welsh children live in poverty. National Park Authorities can address the barriers (e.g. transport, information, exclusivity) to the Parks experienced and perceived by socially excluded communities and individuals who may be less familiar with National Parks. Reducing these barriers will help people feel welcome in our National Parks so that they can access the benefits offered by the landscape, heritage and contact with nature.

## **National Park Wales: Our Understanding of Health and Well-being**

Those most disadvantaged by poverty in our society experience disproportionate levels of ill health. Public health and social care sectors in Wales want to tackle the root causes of ill health and deliver health and social care beyond the traditional service models,

Developing the tools to measure health and well-being benefits is challenging. The benefits from contact with environmental settings and undertaking outdoor exercise result are an interaction between social, environmental and individual variables. Outcomes are often longer term. It is important that National Parks Wales monitors the (often subjective) outcomes of health and well-being work. Such data may include user feedback, films and digital stories. These are useful evaluation tools to help shape services and inform others.

## **AIMS**

To develop National Park Authorities activities to support public health and social well-being:

- Everyone is entitled to experience National Parks, this includes the opportunity for easy access to National Parks,
- The experiences available within National Parks can reduce the negative impacts of poverty and improve opportunities for social inclusion and better health.
- Interaction with nature must be achieved sensitively so as not to compromise the special qualities and landscape of National Parks for future generations

## 5 Ways to Health and Wellbeing in National Parks\*



- A set of 5 evidence-based public mental health messages aimed at improving the mental health and overall wellbeing of the whole population
- Understands and defines the health and well-being agendas to be dependent on the wider determinants of health
- Grounded in theory that the wellbeing of individuals and communities as a whole will only be achieved if the well-being of the whole population is nurtured.
- Promotes resilience, moving away from a health care model that focuses on 'treatment' to that of 'prevention' and ultimately towards a healthier happier society as a whole less vulnerable to ill-health.
- Is 'doubly-cost effective' as cost of treating the sick is reduced and also that by improving society as a whole less people get sick.



Feeling close to and valued by other people is a fundamental human need and one that contributes to functioning well in the world. Social relationships are critical for promoting wellbeing and for acting as a buffer against mental ill health for people of all ages

Examples of how National Park Authorities enable this:

- Using the Local Development Plans to protect green community space for play and learning recreation.
- Volunteering with National Park Authorities and/or other local conservation agencies
- Partnership with other organisations including National Trust and Local Authorities and other local groups and networks to support access projects ( see below) Sustainable Development Fund support for community projects that help bring people together for their own benefit and the benefit of the wider community i.e. tree planting, beach cleaning, wildlife monitoring and rubbish collection



Regular physical activity is good for physical health on a wide range of factors and is proven to have a positive impact upon mental health including preventing dementia and depression. Physical activity is also a great way for people to connect with others.

National Park Authorities can:

- Provide spaces for active pursuits e.g. promotion, improvement and maintenance of the Rights of Way footpath and bridle way networks and management of routes with public access
- Opportunities for learning and participation at National Park sites, centres and community locations
- Visitors Centres and outreach provide face to face and telephone information service enabling visitors of all abilities and with diverse needs to get out and enjoy the Park



Being aware of what is taking place in the present directly enhances well-being and savouring 'the moment' can help to reaffirm people's life priorities. Heightened awareness also enhances people's self-understanding and allows them to make positive choices based on their own values and motivation.

National Park Authorities can strengthen and broaden awareness by offering:

- Interpretation resources and direct opportunities for people to access places that encourage them to pause and 'take in the view' via literature (digital and print), organising viewpoints etc.



- Ongoing local and national campaign to engage with people with seasonal wonders of nature e.g. lambing, ospreys in flight, the beauty of autumn forests etc. through social media
- Bespoke publications to support interpretation targeting special needs groups ie touch maps for people with visually impairments



Continued learning through life enhances self-esteem and encourages social interaction and a more active life. Evidence shows that the opportunity to engage in work or educational activities particularly helps to lift people out of depression.

The practice of setting goals, which is related to adult learning in particular, has been strongly associated with higher levels of wellbeing.

The National Park Authorities can support learning by:

- Activities and Events organised by Authorities and with partner organisation including 'wildlife sightings', historic talks, school and community education projects
- Training to local groups to increase knowledge and understand of local area –eg through Walkability, Cynefin a Chymuned programme or John Muir Awards
- Accredited and informal training programmes and networks such as Rural Skills Project, health and wellbeing, outdoor schools.



Participation in social and community life has attracted a lot of attention in the field of wellbeing research. Individuals who report a greater interest in helping others are more likely to rate themselves as happy. Research into actions for promoting happiness has shown that committing an act of kindness once a week over a six-week period is associated with an increase in wellbeing.

National Park Authorities can offer opportunities to participate through

- Volunteering and charitable opportunities with the park foster a greater sense of 'looking after' the environment. Volunteers days across three National Parks for 2013/14 were in excess of 115,000 hours
- Work undertaken by Authority projects and services on the ground and with communities
- Opportunities for volunteering and participation in external Sustainable Development Fund supported community projects.

#### Citations

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Here are just a few examples of the some of the innovative projects the Authorities have delivered - working in partnership with community groups, health and social care.

## National Park Champions - Brecon Beacon NPA:



The National Park Champions project worked with socially excluded communities less familiar with the National Park to encourage them to gain health and wellbeing benefits from the National Park and wider environment by offering training for group leaders, visits for groups, and supporting future visits..

It introduced the benefits of National Parks to a range of groups including: Youth Services (Ebbw Vale, Ystradgynlais ,Abergavenny, Brecon), Merthyr 3 Gs project, Powys Carers and Leaving Care Team, Kaleidoscope, Merthyr Housing Association, Gwalia Care and Support and others. Many live close to or in the National Park but had not accessed it. The health and wellbeing benefits speak for themselves: Group Leaders rated the resulting mental health benefits for participants at 10/10 and physical health benefits at 9/10. Participants from earlier projects were supported to develop skills in the scheme, with one going on to receive the National Navigation Award

*“We have had very worthwhile, enjoyable experiences, including enabling children to learn through play and activity, Increasing the health and fitness of our young people”*

Group leader, St Johns Family Centre (Action for Children)

*“We both enjoyed the day and the skills we learned will be handed down to others in the walking group which we are hoping to start at Gwalia.”*

(Group leader, Gwalia Care and Support).

Natural Resources Wales and Brecon Beacons National Park Authority funded the project

Children and young people visiting after their group leaders received training from project staff.



## Walkability Project - Pembrokeshire Coast NPA



Walkability, part of the Exercise Referral Scheme, is an activity program designed for those who are currently not active or are exercising less than three times per week. And for those suffering mild to moderate medical conditions (such as high blood pressure, arthritis, depression) or identified as being at risk of developing them. Walkability provides a programme of varied fortnightly walks, participants are referred by a health professional and are registered with the scheme. The individual participant's relevant medical details are shared with instructors who carry a defibrillator. Walkability :

- Encourages and supports individuals to walk as an alternative beneficial exercise
- Provides participants with
  - skills and confidence to go walking independently
  - greater fitness to take longer and/or more intense walking routes

Evidence indicates these goals are achievable and that walking is an effective, enjoyable way to improve health outcomes. The demand for the programme has outstripped supply. Funding is dependent on an annual bid. £300 p.a per participant compares well with other medical interventions.



## Eryri Walking Club for blind and visually impaired people - Snowdonia NPA



'The walk is the highlight of my month!'

The scheme is now in its ninth year and was initiated at the Eryri Disability Equality Forum, when a blind member mentioned the lack of countryside walking opportunities for blind and visually impaired people. Monthly walks vary between 3 and 7 miles. In 2014 the group climbed Snowdon. Club Members are recruited through the Guide Dogs Society and North Wales Society for the Blind who provide training on visual awareness and guiding. The project aims to improve participants' physical and mental health and wellbeing. ***"There is no price you can put on the freedom to walk without fear"*** (One of the participants)

The project is reliant on its fantastic volunteers. They state that they also receive substantial benefits from group walking. Recent evidence from the University of East Anglia backs them up showing walking in groups can be more beneficial than going alone - 'People who walk in groups also tend to have a more positive attitude toward physical activity, a shared experience of wellness, and say they feel less lonely and isolated'.

The project is funded by Snowdonia National Park Authority