

# FINAL REPORT

## *Outdoor Disability & Health Assessment For Monmouthshire & Environs*

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*For*



monmouthshire  
*sir fynwy*

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# 1 Project Overview – Background & Methodology

## 1.1 Background

In November 2016 Monmouthshire County Council (MCC) appointed Ridgeway Associates Consulting Limited to undertake an assessment of opportunities available for disabled people and others who do not use the outdoors to gain from the health and recreation benefits offered by walking within the County's rights of way network.

Addressing the objectives identified in MCC's brief for this project has involved a programme of desk research relating to existing outdoor walking opportunities, work that included consultation via in-depth telephone interviews to gain feedback from the extensive range of stakeholders identified in discussion with the Council's project group. Additionally, field research has been undertaken with groups of current service users to gain first hand views on the suitability of outdoor walking opportunities available to and used by them.

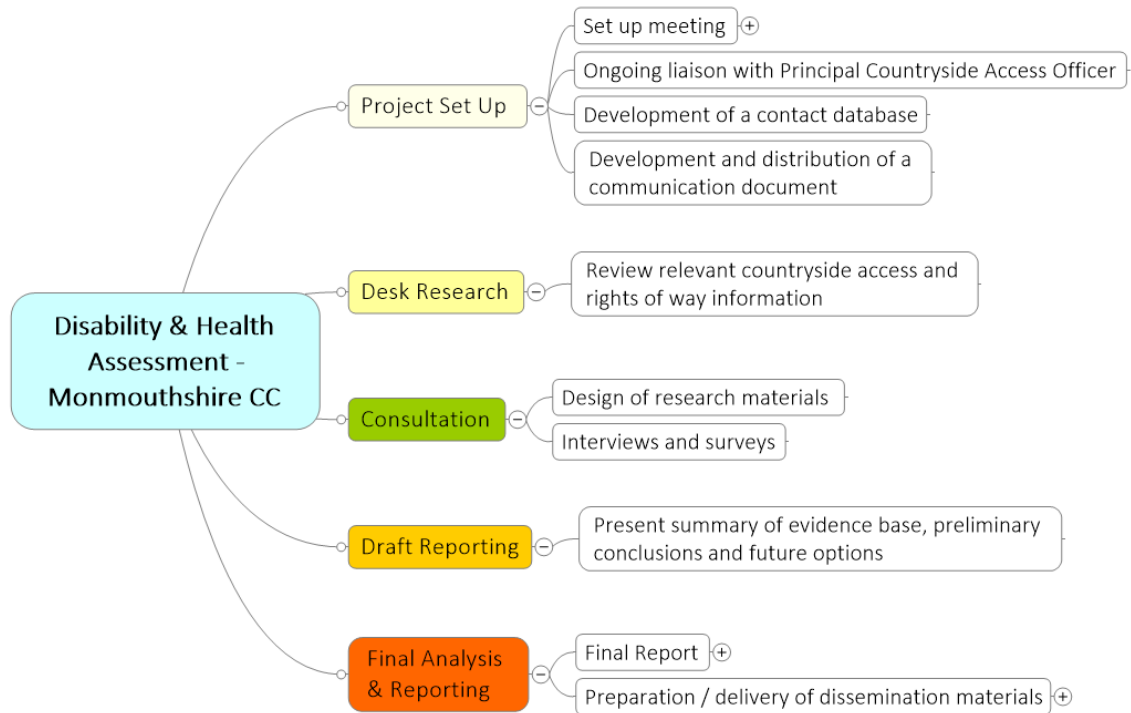
In terms of overall focus the consultation work has concentrated on respondents' opinions and experiences concerning:

- The nature of current outdoor walking opportunities
- The awareness and use of these opportunities
- Accessibility to these resources
- Resource gaps / barriers to access
- Aspirations in terms of achieving improvements in awareness and use of the County's rights of way.

## 1.2 Outline Methodology

In responding to the brief Ridgeway proposed a methodology comprising a combination of desk and field research with a view to understanding current outdoor walking opportunities and highlighting gaps in provision and issues with accessibility. The information gained through these processes has been used to create an evidence base to support the development of conclusions and recommendations.

The diagram below illustrates the methodology proposed and the cascade of processes undertaken.



## 2 Recruitment and Approach to Consultation

The Ridgeway team met with Ruth Rourke and Matthew Lewis on 2<sup>nd</sup> November 2016 to undertake the project set up exercise. Following a detailed briefing and discussions relating to the management of the project it was agreed that Ridgeway would provide a contact database to be initially augmented by the Council and then further developed by Ridgeway. A communication document and press release giving background to the project were subsequently developed by Ridgeway and approved by the Council.

The press release was circulated by the Council and this led to a number of relevant organisations contacting Ridgeway directly. The communication document served as an introductory guide during the consultation phase. In order to support the consultation processes Ridgeway devised a core topic guide for use in telephone interviews, discussion groups and email-based dialogue with respondents.

Initial interviews were held with contacts agreed with the Council and these were augmented with additional respondents which were found as a result of our initial investigations or via desk research. Consultation involved contact across the County, the Brecon Beacons and adjoining locations with representation of some form in the area of question. The map below shows the geographical spread of interviews and discussion meetings. A full list participants can be found in Appendix 2.



- There was recognition amongst some stakeholder that good work had been done to make certain paths accessible to disabled people and some of these stakeholders stated that they had received positive feedback from disabled, older people, those with Learning Difficulties and, youth groups. For example, in terms of the Brecon Beacons National Park, the reservoir walks were mentioned as being well used and of value.
- By contrast a minority respondents indicated that while Monmouthshire's outdoor walking provision is generally good, but where it falls down is in terms of the accessibility limitations that exist for some service user groups. Within this it was recognised that budgetary constraints are a particular challenge.

## ii. Awareness and information sources

This topic also produced a diverse range of responses and the key themes are highlighted below:

- There is a perceived lack of awareness of the outdoor walking opportunities available caused by limitations in current information channels, for example:
  - Not everyone is computer literate and, for those who are, internet services in parts of the County are poor
  - Displays of leaflets placed in GP surgeries and other venues could be better organised by topic
- In essence, it was stated that a lack of information can make outdoor recreation appear 'the unknown' which can deter potential walkers
  - It was, however, considered by others that a lack of information is not a general problem and is minor by comparison to other issues such as an absence of motivation to take exercise
- Solutions to the perceived information shortfall included:
  - More leaflets promoting what is available placed in prominent community venues
  - Marketing initiatives using TV & radio – for example via programmes such as 'The Walking Weatherman' programme on Welsh TV
  - Better maps or DVDs highlighting the features of walks
  - A marketing campaign across village newsletters/magazines
- One respondent emphasised that disabled people represent a broad church which can make it difficult to cater for their respective needs in terms of information giving
  - However, it was added that some trail guides for walks for disabled people have been produced, e.g. for the Monmouthshire & Brecon canal, rail line walks and guides for riverside walks in the Wye Valley
- Several respondents mentioned ways of overcoming some of the issues mentioned above, and these included:
  - A recent programme of facilitating walks for groups who did not use the countryside had proven very successful. In this instance, when engaging with people from BME communities and disadvantaged backgrounds, service users responded well to the concept of exercise after accessing some of the outdoor walking opportunities available.

## iii. Accessing resources

The key themes that emerged on this topic are as follows:

- Two main factors were identified as hindering accessibility, i.e. 1) terrain and 2) stiles and gates. While the first issue is to some extent a given, for the second the landowners hold sway because they look for solutions that are 'stock proof' as they are liable for the problems that can occur if their livestock strays on public roads

- As a result, stiles tend to be the preferred solution and a further reason mentioned as supporting this is a tendency among the public to leave field gates open

- Accessibility can also be an issue if people rely on public transport and this can be a particularly challenging problem for disabled people
- As with many other rural areas public transport services are generally perceived as being poor in the County. However, MCC does run a community transport scheme called Grass Routes which provides minibuses for hire. However, our research has shown that there are positive and negative views on the effectiveness of this service
- There was a view that accessibility and general maintenance for many outdoor walks is good, apart from ‘the odd broken stile’. However, it was frequently mentioned that a general lack of transport to out of town walking opportunities represents a major accessibility challenge for many people
  - This said, physical accessibility considerations were seen by some respondents as being only one contributory factor deterring outdoor walking. In this regard, it was suggested that often low confidence levels about using the countryside can be an impediment to making the first moves to accessing outdoor exercise opportunities.

*Note: the above view about confidence levels can naturally point to the value of walking groups such as those within the County’s FIT4life programme where there are trained walk leaders who undertake risk assessments in terms of matching walks to the capabilities of group members. Also valued is the companionship that develops within these groups, something particularly appreciated, among those who live alone and would not walk by themselves.*

#### **iv. Barriers to accessing resources**

As might be expected a wide range of opinions arose during the consultation with stakeholders. The key themes to emerge in this area are highlighted below:

##### **Physical Barriers**

- There was a clear view that inadequate transport services present the most significant accessibility barrier overall to service users and, of importance to disabled groups, public transport buses will only take one wheelchair at a time
- However, it was accepted that in general terms accessibility is good for the fit and for those with sensory impairments who can be led. Nevertheless, this is often not the case for wheelchair users because of the design of ‘kissing gates’ and stiles and unsuitable pathway surfaces
- It was also accepted that budgetary challenges mean that not all suitable routes can be made fully accessible. It was also stated that careful targeting should be used in allocating scarce resources.
- Additionally, it was emphasised that stiles don’t just represent barriers for the disabled, they affect many other groups, e.g. older people, parents with young children and those unused to climbing obstacles. However, as stated above landowners are generally in favour of stiles because they are ‘stock proof’
- Other views concerning barriers that can make entire routes unusable included:
  - Obstructed, challenging or damaged stiles
  - Missing or damaged footbridges across fast flowing streams
  - Footpath obstructions erected by farmers and landowners

- It was also stressed that physical barriers are an inherent feature of Monmouthshire's historic towns. However, overcoming these is often dependent on the confidence and capabilities of service users
- It was emphasised that different groups face specific challenges in terms of barriers, for example:
  - For the visually impaired and the older population minimising risk is a major consideration
  - For wheelchair users country pathways need flat hard surfaces with gates that are wide enough and can be easily opened by the user

*Of note: it was suggested that the current design of 'kissing gates' used is not suitable for wheelchair users, although variations with sufficient mobility space are available*

- A major barrier faced by some service users is the lack of toilet facilities, particularly in small villages along walking routes
- In terms of forming walking groups for people with lower capabilities the point was made that there should be more effective signposting from the National Exercise Referral Scheme to 'FIT4life' walking groups, a move that could support the formation of additional groups
- In terms of pathway characteristics and opportunities it was suggested that there should be:
  - Dedicated bike trails
  - Shorter routes for disabled people
  - Innovative solutions to encourage younger people to take exercise
- Inadequate transport services to and from walks, sufficient car parking and the availability of toilets on site represent barriers for some Groups who could possibly otherwise use the resources.

#### **Non-physical barriers**

- An important reflection that arose during the consultation was that not all barriers are physical in nature. For example, it was mentioned that:
  - A lack of motivation (inertia) can be an issue
  - The perception that the outdoors can be a threatening place (e.g. the thought of sharing space with livestock). This can be a particular challenge for wheelchair users on routes when they find themselves looking up at cattle
  - The cost of reaching sites
  - The time it takes to reach a suitable walk
  - Concerns about reaching local walks, i.e. using narrow country roads to reach footpaths can be dangerous
- In terms of inclination, it was mentioned that the desire to use walks is often there but where barriers are perceived to be great people will find a reason not to follow through and try the outdoor routes available to them
- It was also perceived by some respondents that local people don't always appreciate what they have available to them in terms of the countryside and often parents do not set a good example by taking their children to walk routes available there
- A stakeholder remarked that the lack of use of outdoor resources is a question of inclination and this comes down from parents, often. It was added that Monmouthshire is 'a bit behind' in terms of having available, sustainable activities, although individual Geocaching and cycling events have helped. What this respondent would like to see offered in terms of a sustainable 'product' is a programme of Park Runs (over 2.5 to 5.0 km) but, so far, suitable venues have not been found.



## v. Aspirations

Asked about the future, stakeholders offered the following views and suggested areas for action:

- All sections of society should be involved in a debate on this outdoor resources topic. However, it is not just down to the Council or, for example, the Local Service Board (LSB). It should also involve executives from Monmouthshire's public service organisations, but this would need pushing to gain their buy-in and support
- There is a need to sell the benefits of outdoor walking for those who don't currently participate. There is a need to think carefully how to raise awareness and influence people to take advantage of what is available and suitable for them
- Monmouthshire County Council should:
  - Install and maintain toilet facilities in more locations
  - Work effectively with walking groups to repair damaged stiles
  - Replace stiles with metal kissing gates where possible
  - Replace missing and damaged waymarks and footbridges
  - Take prompt action to remove obstructions to public footpaths
  - At the same time members of walking groups should continue to:
    - Remove natural obstructions such as brambles when assessing a walking route
    - Notify MCC of obstructions
- Natural Resources Wales and other managers of Access Land should work to provide high quality facilities for walkers and cyclists suitable for a wide range of abilities and commit to maintain them to a standard where they can be safely enjoyed by all users
- Work should be undertaken to establish links with local communities close to villages and towns and involve landowners, schools and communities. It was noted that this approach has been tried in Raglan where the actions undertaken included:
  - Identifying and promoting their 'Healthy Footsteps Route'
  - Taking out stiles
  - Labelling gates
  - Providing 'Banana & Apple' seats for children
  - Arranging Charity walks
  - Gaining permission from landowners to go across fields rather than use a busy road

*Note: In essence: the community takes ownership of the footpath and, for example:*

- *Become path care volunteers*
- *Clear brambles with secateurs*
- *Report fallen trees and other hazards.*

## 4 Outcomes of Consultation with Service User Groups

This key element of the research undertaken involved engagement, face-to-face, with groups of walkers who regularly use a range of walks in their localities as summarised in 4.1 and 4.2 below. However, in terms of engaging with respondents who do not currently belong to walking groups recruitment presented a significant challenge. For example, a leading RSL in Monmouthshire undertook to assist with this through a number of measures, i.e., by circulating Ridgeway's news release through their social media channel and, in their residents' magazine. Additionally, staff who work closely with the Association's Residents' Panel and Residents'

Disability Group undertook to encourage respondents to come forward. Unfortunately, these initiatives did not produce sufficient interest in joining a discussion group.



#### 4.1 FIT4life Walking Groups

The above represent well established outdoor walking opportunities, formed under the guidance of the County's Exercise Referral Scheme and are part of the *Let's Walk Cymru* programme for those wishing to improve their health and wellbeing through outdoor exercise within regular walking groups. Importantly these groups each have their own trained leaders who carry out risk assessments and safety measures generally. This includes matching the suitability of walk programmes in terms of members' capabilities and factors such as the condition of stiles / gates / paths and seasonal weather.

There are four FIT4life groups in Monmouthshire, one in each of the four towns with leisure centres, i.e. Abergavenny, Monmouth, Caldicot and Chepstow. Groups meet one day a week at these centres for a mutually agreed walk, either starting from the town or from another point reached by car-sharing. Overall there appeared to be no lack of motivation among the walkers present and as mentioned in the outcomes below it was the companionship gained from being part of a regular walking group that was especially valued by members. As an extension to the social side of walking it was noted that members made contributions on a regular basis to fund events such as Christmas Lunches and birthday celebrations.

Contact with the four groups was facilitated by MCC's Exercise Referral Co-ordinator and it was agreed that Ridgeway would join in on a walk with each group to gain an appreciation of the range of routes undertaken and to hear views along the way from a group leader and service user perspective. On the day, each group comprised between 12 and 14 members and there were generally slightly more females compared with males. By observation ages ranged from the mid/late 60s to 80+. In terms of capabilities the majority of health conditions revealed by members concerned breathing and heart related issues and in a few cases members needed one or two walking poles to complete the walk.

As for the walks, themselves, these included:

- A route from Skenfrith along the Monnow Valley (Abergavenny)
  - This route had a significant number of wooden stiles
- Brockweir – from Tintern Old Station (Caldicot)
  - In general, it was a well-defined walking route with short hill sections which were rough underfoot
- Whitestone - part of the Wye Valley walk (Chepstow)
  - This was a very well-defined route parts of which, used narrow public roads – there were no physical barriers in the form of stiles
- A circuit from Monmouth town.
  - This was a 1.5 mile loop circuit path starting in the town centre and is understood to be typical of the range of walks used by this group.

The key themes that emerged from the above exercise are given below.

#### **FIT4life Group Consultation Outcomes**

- **The range of resources:**
  - From conversations with the groups there was a consensus view that there is a good range of walks available to suit members’ respective fitness aspirations and capabilities:
    - In one case, however, the point was made that even more routes could be available for them if the stiles currently present are replaced by ‘kissing gates’ to resolve what are currently accessibility barriers
- **The benefits:**
  - Beyond the enjoyment and health advantages gained through walking the other benefit to emerge as being particularly valued by most members, many of whom live alone, is the companionship and social interaction that has developed within their groups
    - It also appeared that, overall, this factor has a strong bearing on group sustainability

*‘Exercise can reduce your risk of major illnesses, such as heart disease, stroke, type 2 diabetes and cancer by up to 50% and lower your risk of early death by up to 30%.’ Source: NHS livewell*
- **Sustaining walking groups – new initiatives:**
  - In one case a point raised was that a regular flow of new members is needed for sustainability and, potentially, the formation of additional FIT4life walking groups
  - It was added that, currently, a majority of group members join through hearing about the opportunity via word of mouth and that more could be done by the County’s Exercise Referral Scheme in signposting people to outdoor fitness groups and ramping up the promotion of available opportunities

*Of note, in terms of the above, a new initiative undertaken from within one walking group has involved the design and production of a leaflet summarising their Fit4Life programme and providing contact details for further information: The aim is to place this leaflet in prominent positions to catch the public’s eye. This said, it was emphasised that for progress wider marketing channels should be developed, given that resources for this can be found.*

## 4.2 A Mixed Disability Discussion Group - Adults

This consultation event was arranged by the Monmouthshire Disablement Association. The original aim was to gather around 12 respondents drawn from: a visually impaired group; a wheelchair users group and an organisation who assist young people with learning and other difficulties. However, as it turned out, only 5 respondents were able to attend, i.e.:

- A blind person who had recently acquired a new guide dog (the guide dog trainer accompanied her)
- A wheelchair user with MS
- A person with significant physical disabilities who relied on a rollator mobility frame
- A person with the condition ME
- A keen walker with breathing difficulties.

The discussions that followed were moderated using a guide broadly similar to the one used for stakeholder consultation. The respondents also took the opportunity of highlighting issues of particular significance to their individual circumstances in terms of accessing pathways. The key points that arose are summarised below.

### Disability Group Discussion Outcomes

- More effort is needed to encourage disabled people to take outdoor exercise since a lot of energy is required for them to cope with their everyday lives and this is often not fully understood
- There should be more communication from the outset with disabled people when improvements to outdoor paths are planned
  - The aim here is to ensure that their views and practical needs are taken into account
- Better signage should be introduced for disabled people and, in particular, the partially sighted
- Weather and its effects can cause the disabled significant problems and using some paths can become dangerous for them due to slippery mud forming on surfaces
  - A review in this regard by the Council could help to identify measures that can be taken to resolve the issue through more appropriate path surfaces and associated drainage
- Steep inclines in towns emerged as creating accessibility problems, particularly for wheelchair users
- Cyclists can be a problem on all routes - they can frighten disabled people as many don't use bells and cycle past at speed
  - Also, mountain bikes erode paths and can make them dangerous
  - Dedicated cycle routes could help in the above respects
- Limited transport services to the countryside pose problems for disabled people and, once there, access for wheelchair users in particular is often limited:
  - One example mentioned was that buses used to run up to the Brecon Beacons National Park but this service has since ended through lack of funds
- Zebra crossings should take account of side roads and the benefit of dropped kerbs to wheelchair users
  - However, for the blind, dropped kerbs represent a hazard since they remove the reference points needed for those who use a stick to guide themselves
- In terms of making improvements such as the ones identified above it was suggested that the Council concentrates on 'bridges and little else' and this 'soaks up the budget'.

### 4.3 A Mixed Disability Discussion Group – Young People

This opportunity was facilitated by the support team at Building Bridges, a Big Lottery-funded youth club project established in 2013 with the aim of helping young people aged between 14 and 25 with additional needs to socialise in a supportive setting and consider their work-related options. This consultation was undertaken among around 18 service users attending their regular weekly Building Bridges youth club evening. A range of disabilities was evident among the group and, given that most were busily engaged in indoor sports and socialising, it was agreed that the most effective approach to hearing views on outdoor walking was to seek discussions on an opportunity basis, guided by the duty Project Worker and his assistants.

The above approach worked and led to engagement with a fair cross-section of the disability group plus two of the younger volunteers present. As a basis, after a preamble, the following questions were used to seek feedback:

- Do you take part in outdoor walking, either as part of a regular group activity or on an informal basis?
- If you do take part, what do you think about the kind and quality of outdoor walking routes available generally and particularly in your local area?
  - Here we're thinking about what works well in terms of getting to and undertaking a variety walks or if, for example, transport can be a problem, or if there are any particular aspects that make the walks difficult to do, for example stiles or rough ground?
- If you don't take part in outdoor walking are there any main reasons why?
  - For example, do you prefer to spend your leisure time in other ways?
  - Or do you feel that there is a lack of walking opportunities arranged for younger people?
  - Or do you just feel that outdoor walking isn't for you?
  - But in general what things do you think could be done to attract more younger people to take part in regular outdoor exercise?
- Are there any other points you'd like to raise?

#### Discussion Feedback

- Several service users said that they walk regularly but not on an organised group basis. In these cases the arrangements were to walk with a friend from the youth club or a relative or, in one case, the individual's Personal Assistant
- In terms of the kind of walks undertaken two particular examples were identified as being valued, one being the route to Eagles Nest and the views from there over the Wye Valley; the other being the Devil's Pulpit walk from Brockweir
- However, a range of general views emerged about the accessibility and suitability of walking opportunities known to respondents, for example:
  - Transport to and from walks was not generally regarded as a problem
  - Similarly, stiles and gates were not seen as representing barriers
  - However, one respondent felt strongly that the poor condition of pathway surfaces on walks, particularly in and around Usk, was a distinct barrier to use. In this case it was added that limited information served to restrict the range of walks that could be considered

- For another respondent key reasons limiting walking are the barriers of unchecked brambles and overgrown pathways
- One other potential barrier identified was 'Parents!' – here the respondent explained that his parents 'always worry' when he plans to walk
- Among those who said they did not engage in outdoor walking the main reasons identified were:
  - The activity is viewed as something for adults and not a young persons' thing
  - It is not clear what is involved and what is available
  - Time is limited because of school and if you also have a weekend job
- The question about what could make walking appeal to more younger people produced the following ideas:
  - Make use of social media channels to provide information and encourage involvement
  - Offer Pokemon Go walks (Pokemon Go has been recently updated)
  - A regular programme of Geocaching events
  - Sponsored Walks – with specific themes – e.g. a 'Onesie Walk'.



## 5 Conclusions & Recommendations



### Overview

The consultation undertaken with stakeholders and service users for this project captured a comprehensive range of views on the series of discussion topics adopted for the work (see Appendix I for the discussion guide used). The key themes that emerged are set out in Sections 3 and 4 above.

As can be seen these findings identified some outdoor walking arrangements that work smoothly, notably those involving established groups with trained leaders. At the same time a range factors that represent barriers for current and potential service users were emphasised by other consultation respondents. Conclusions and recommendations relating to these areas are given below.

However, an overarching conclusion that can be drawn from the consultation evidence base is that Monmouthshire is far from being 'joined up' in terms of addressing the barriers to and maximising the potential of its outdoor walking opportunities, notably to help combat declining physical activity among its population and attendant poor health through obesity. Put another way, while there are worthy individual initiatives in operation, there is currently no central structure – or finance – to promote cohesion in terms of plans and priorities that could lead to more effective outcomes.

Perhaps signalling a move in the above direction is that MCC is understood to be investigating the possibility of setting up an Alternative Delivery Model (ADM) comprising a charitable and business arm to promote and deliver services. If realised, an enterprise of this type could provide focus for a rolling marketing campaign perhaps using the press, radio and TV to sell the benefits of outdoor exercise through local features and case studies. Importantly, a more commercial style operation should be able to generate surpluses and opportunities to access external grants which could perhaps fund improved accessibility and maintenance levels across

the County's rights of way. These aims could also involve a range of partnerships and agendas to, for example, create active play facilities for younger people and host 'Living Well' themed projects, implemented using existing support and health services to motivate disadvantaged groups and the wider public to be more 'health literate' and to join in on outdoor exercise, perhaps for the first time.

As things stand, however, this research project highlighted potential areas for improvement that could be considered for action in the nearer term. These are discussed below under the following core headings:

- Information Sources and Awareness
- Further Measures to Increase Engagement
- Physical Barriers
- Non-Physical Barriers
- Issues with Transport
- Additional Research Possibilities

#### **A. Information Sources and Awareness**

Although there is a wide variety of outdoor walking routes available in Monmouthshire, from the consultation undertaken for this project it is concluded that information, in both printed and electronic forms, illustrating and promoting the opportunities available is limited and often unseen by the public. This does not seek to criticise individual information-giving initiatives which in themselves are worthy. Rather, the intention is to highlight the need for a more co-ordinated approach to communications. It is therefore **recommended** that MCC considers a forum to clarify the current extent of information sources and consider options and actions to generally raise the profile of the County's outdoor walks product.

In terms of the above, the production of leaflets can be viewed as wasteful since they become outdated and can be lost amongst the profusion of other promotional literature in community venues. As a result of this MCC have moved towards more electronic media and this is a trend that will no doubt continue, perhaps in the form of partnerships to establish web-based platforms hosting information. However, while this direction may suit those who are computer literate and have a good internet signal it would work to exclude those who do not have or cannot use a computer, tablet or smart phone. In terms of addressing this gap it is **recommended** that consideration is given to developing a focused set of paper-based media for those not using on-line services and seeking community partnerships to help ensure that this material reaches the intended client groups. Additionally, consideration should be given to engaging with relevant organisations to ensure that appropriate hard copy material is made available to meet the needs of other minorities, e.g. those with visual impairment and those from ethnic groups.



Radio & TV can also play a useful role in promoting healthy walking and TV and Radio programmes can be used to illustrate the enjoyment and greater wellbeing that could be gained by those who currently lack the motivation to walk or have concerns about the countryside in terms of perceived physical hazards generally and sharing space with livestock. In this latter respect, it is **recommended** that consideration is given to seeking some form of exposure to help ease concerns – perhaps in the style of BBC’s *Sunday Country File* programme and BBC Radio 4’s *Open Country* which often showcase outdoor pursuits, undertaken by their presenters often including diverse range of groups.

## **B. Further Measures to Increase Engagement**

From our research, there appears to be scope for wider measures to support greater interest and participation in outdoor walking. It is therefore **recommended** that the following possibilities are assessed within MCC and, as appropriate, pursued as potential partnerships:

- The identification of a methodology for setting up wider community led ‘Healthy Footsteps’ routes and easy to follow ‘step by step’ guidance utilising, for example, the related experience gained in Raglan. It is suggested that these groups would be ‘formal entities’ and so could apply for grants in their own right. This could be a ‘quick win’ if a working group was established to take the idea forward and publicise the approach to local communities.
- Work with other organisations to promote sponsored walks. For example, The British Heart Foundation website has relevant information on what is currently available and MCC could capitalise on this platform to encourage new walking opportunities in the County while at the same time supporting a worthwhile charity (see <https://www.bhf.org.uk/get-involved/events/walks-and-treks>).
- Identify and promote technology driven measures that would appeal to younger age groups. One possible approach could be to offer Geocaching programmes while surveys or discussion groups in schools and colleges could help identify what would make outdoor walking appear ‘cool’.
- Building on the MonDean Walking Festival concept and working widely in local areas to replicate similar events across the County.
- Investigating the scope to build on programmes of specialist walks to address people’s interests in, for example, wild flora, birds, fungi, butterflies
- Whilst there is an established programme for training leaders of the County’s FIT4life walking groups we understand there are other training schemes available. It may therefore be worthwhile to map these opportunities and consider how they can be better promoted to attract more prospective volunteers to help build capacity in the sector
- Another point related to the above that emerged during our research is that a more structured approach could be taken to signposting or even referring people from the Wales National Exercise Referral Scheme (NERS) to the FIT4life walking groups. Beyond offering a pathway to further health promoting exercise an added potential benefit

would be more candidates to help sustain current walking group memberships and form further groups using a similar model but catering for different ability levels and interests. This said, it is also noted that in some areas schemes known as ‘Social Prescribing’ have been set up where the GP refers patients directly to exercise and other activity opportunities and perhaps this model could represent a solution to the above referral gap if it was replicated more widely in Monmouthshire. As well as signposting people to activities with health benefits social prescribing has been shown to reduce social isolation and outcomes suggest that this works to reduce visits to GPs and hospital admissions, to the benefit of NHS budgets. For example, in Berkshire, ‘Reading Voluntary Action’ run such a scheme with referrals made by GPs, practice staff, Occupational Therapists and Physiotherapists. Their website provides useful, detailed information about how the scheme is operated and those who can benefit from it (see <http://rva.org.uk/social-prescribing/>). In addition, a leaflet for potential users of the service can be found in Appendix 3 to this report.

### **C. Physical Barriers**

Some features along walking routes were identified as limiting participation among service user groups, notably disabled people and those unused to climbing obstacles through age, mobility and/or health conditions. In the main the barriers mentioned were stiles/broken stiles, unsuitable pathway surfaces and, particularly for wheelchair users, ‘kissing gates’ with insufficient space to manoeuvre past the swinging gate element. The impression was also gained that there is a lack of co-ordination/funding to prioritise and resolve accessibility problems reported by walkers and a review of current practices is **recommended**.

### **D. Non-Physical Barriers**

One main factor identified in this area by respondents is that many people lack the motivation to engage in outdoor walking and the reasons for this, beyond plain inertia, can be through limited or no experience of what is involved, together with concerns about the idea of being out in the countryside, perhaps in remote locations. Other suggested factors that may deter engagement in outdoor exercise involve the cost and time it can take getting to suitable routes. In terms of potential solutions, this topic is considered as part of ‘*Information Sources and Awareness*’ above.

### **E. Issues with Transport**

For those who may be keen to walk but do not have transport or someone to drive them opportunities to reach countryside walks by public transport are severely limited. Additionally, these individuals are likely to be among society’s most disadvantaged and socially excluded groups and could arguably benefit most from outdoor activities. To help address transport issues MCC introduced a community transport scheme called Grass Routes. However, comments from some consultation respondents suggested that there are

drawbacks affecting the successful operation of this service, notably in terms of a maximum journey distance of 15 miles and because of difficulties in recruiting sufficient volunteer drivers, an issue that has been compounded by new regulations, including the requirement that volunteer drivers must be under the age of 70. Given the acknowledged value of community transport schemes a review of the Grass Routes service is **recommended** to establish the extent of any challenges faced and, if appropriate, the scope for solutions.

More generally on the Transport topic, we originally raised the possibility of setting up a public transport forum to evaluate the scope for some integration of local bus routes to offer improved access to walking opportunities. However, it was concluded that success would be unlikely given that previous attempts in this direction fell down on operational cost grounds, the impact of waning public support generally and, frequent changes of bus operators.

It therefore **recommended** that an approach with greater potential would involve supporting the development of local Community Car services operated with volunteer owner/drivers. An example here is the scheme recently set up by the Bridges Centre, Monmouth, for which there is an ambition for expansion, given external funding. This service is worthy of note here given its stated aim of providing '*...flexible transport for people who have difficulty accessing public transport or face barriers using taxi services or existing community transport services*'. Another potential avenue that has been suggested is to explore ways of enhancing the appeal of local walks to reduce the need/inclination to travel, an approach that could perhaps benefit from the wider improvements to travel routes and facilities for walkers and cyclists to be funded under the Wales Active Travel Act.

#### **F. Additional Research Possibilities**

It was recognised at the outset that arranging face-to-face meetings to hear views from hard to reach groups can be challenging and, for this project, we have experienced difficulties in this direction, due in part, to the short timeframe available to undertake the field research. Our approach was to seek a series of discussion events, however, success was limited to the meeting with a mixed disability group summarised in Section 4 above. It is therefore **recommended** that a combination of postal and internet-based surveys are carried out with, for example, the visually impaired and the partially / profoundly deaf. In addition, links should be made with charities / community groups to involve members from, for example, the British Heart Foundation, Cancer Research and The Bridges Monmouth.

Additionally, as noted above, it is recognised that obesity among younger people is a growing challenge, although we understand that where groups have been set up to take school children on walks these have proven successful. It is therefore **recommended** that contacts are made with both primary/secondary schools and within further education to establish views on using the countryside for walks and recreation and how pupils and their families could be encouraged to do more.

## Appendix I – Core Discussion Guide

### MCC Outdoor Disability & Health Assessment Initiative –Discussion Guide

#### INTRODUCTIONS

The Council have commissioned Ridgeway to undertake research to evaluate the opportunities available in the County for disabled people - and others who don't use the outdoors - to gain health benefits and enjoyment of outdoor walking and recreation.

Importantly, we are consulting with a wide range of individuals and organisations across the County who can contribute views to our findings, including those concerning gaps in recreational activities and any barriers to accessing current opportunities.

I'd therefore welcome your thoughts on a range of topics and please rest assured that none of the views you express will be attributable to you. i.e. CONFIDENTIAL AND ANONYMOUS – GUIDED BY MRS CODE OF CONDUCT

Respondent Name:	Title:
Organisation Name:	Tel No:
Organisation Address:	
Date of interview:	
Email address:	
<b>What are your views on the nature of outdoor resources available to the people of Monmouthshire?</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Probe for a countywide perception and then local areas</li> </ul>	
<b>What are your views on the <b>accessibility</b> of these outdoor resources?</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Consider Transport, parking, physical barriers etc.</li> </ul>	
<b>What are your views on the <b>suitability</b> of these outdoor resources?</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Consider are they the right thing in the right place for people of all kinds of groups locally</li> </ul>	
<b>What of the main reasons in your opinion why the resources are not used more by <b>people in general</b>?</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Consider physical barriers, lack of awareness, social barriers, lack of inclination, lack of confidence,</li> </ul>	
<b>What of the main reasons in your opinion why the resources are not used more by <b>people with disabilities</b>?</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Consider physical barriers, lack of awareness, social barriers, lack of inclination, lack of confidence,</li> </ul>	
<b>You have highlighted the following GAPS and BARRIERS</b>	
<b>GAPS</b>	<b>BARRIERS</b>

<i>Summary from above:</i>	<i>Summary from above:</i>
<b>How do you feel these can be addressed?</b>	
<b>Solutions to GAPS</b>	<b>Solutions to BARRIERS</b>
Thinking about the answers you have given - If there was one thing that could radically bring people of all backgrounds to make more use of the outdoor resources available in MCC what would it be?	
What aspirations do you feel that the community should have for the future in terms of the provision of outdoor resources?	
As appropriate ask about prospects for group discussions - e.g. with existing/potential service users	
Are there any other points you would like to raise?	

*Thank and Close*

## Appendix ii – Project Participants

Over 50 organisations were contacted and invited to participate in this project and a full list of the organisations who responded and took part is shown in the table below with the main contact engaged with. Additionally, a significant number of individuals were also interviewed during the various service user activities in which Ridgeway participated.

<b>Organisation</b>	<b>Contact Name</b>
Abergavenny - walking the way to health	Liz Barnes
Brecon Beacons National Park Authority	Julian Atkins
CAIR The Monmouthshire Disablement Association	Jenny Barnes
Chepstow walkers welcome & Walking for Health	Helen Kenneally
Crickhowell U3A	Gerda Fewster
Disability Sport Wales Officer	Mark Foster
Disability Wales	Rhiannon Hicks
Green Infrastructure and Countryside manager, Monmouthshire County Council	Matthew Lewis
Gwent Association for the Blind/ gelligaer group	Keith Donovan
Gwent Outdoor Centre - Gilwern	Ian Kennett
Head Warden (Events, Education and community projects)	Mark Langley
Lower Wye Ramblers	Mr Thomas
LSB (Local Service Board) Development Manager	Sharran Lloyd
Melin	Michelle Brewer
MHA	Natasha Jones
Monmouthshire Exercise Referral Co-ordinator & FIT4life walking group leads (all four towns)	James Cook
Monmouthshire Voices	Pennie Walker
National Exercise Referral Scheme	Nicholas John
North Gwent Cardiac Rehabilitation & Aftercare Charity, Abergavenny	Penny Nurse
Principal Countryside Access Officer	Ruth Rourke
Public Health Wales/ Aneurin Bevan Local Health Board	Gemma Burrows
Riding for the Disabled	Ed Bracher
Rights of Way Officer, Brecon Beacons National Park Authority	Eifion Jones
Salvation Army Abergavenny	Craig Oliver/Sarah Oliver
U3A Caldicot and District	Mrs Ford
Whole Place Manager - nominated by Sharran Lloyd	Debbie McCarty



## Appendix iii – Social Prescribing Leaflet



The graphic features a large stylized number '4' in blue and purple. In the top right corner is the logo for 'READING VOLUNTARY ACTION' with a plus sign. The main title 'Social Prescribing' is in white on a blue background, with the subtitle 'Linking you with community activities to improve your health and wellbeing' below it. At the bottom is a photograph of two women standing outdoors in front of a brick building.

**READING VOLUNTARY ACTION**

# Social Prescribing

Linking you with community activities to improve your health and wellbeing



A photograph of two women standing outdoors in front of a brick building. The woman on the left is older, with short grey hair and glasses, wearing a purple top. The woman on the right is younger, with dark hair, wearing a blue floral patterned top. Both are smiling at the camera.

## How can social prescribing help me?

Social Prescribing could help if you are experiencing any of the following:

- Feeling socially isolated/looking for more social contact
- Wanting to improve physical health
- Lacking confidence
- Needing to find some practical support and information to improve your situation



Linking you with community activities to improve your health and wellbeing

### Bill's story

Bill has been feeling depressed since his wife died (he was her full-time carer). He is prescribed an anti-depressant but would like to get out of the house and to regain some purpose in his life.

The Social Prescriber has the time and skills to help Bill find a range of activities and services available in the local community.

For Bill this might be:

- a health walk for exercise, fresh air and company,
- joining the local Men's Shed or Timebank to share his skills with others or
- being put in touch with Cruse Bereavement for some emotional support.





## What happens next?

Once your GP has made a referral, you can contact us by phone or email. (The full details are overleaf) We will arrange a time to see you at your doctor's surgery.

The first appointment with a Social Prescriber will last around an hour. You will be encouraged to look at things you would like to change using a simple tool called the Wellbeing Star.

This can help you identify areas in your life where local activities and support could help you feel better, more confident or more able to manage a medical condition.

**The wellbeing star helps to indicate where you are in your life and the areas to work on such as self-esteem**

*"It was good to find a non-medical person that I could talk to and explore ideas with. She came up with some suggestions and I was encouraged to try some activities that I had stopped doing."*

