

Glaslyn Leisure Centre's Community Garden

Case Study by The Centre for Sustainable Healthcare

Gwynedd Council's Glaslyn Leisure Centre in Porthmadog, North Wales, is part of Wales' [national exercise referral scheme](#) (NERS), where GPs prescribe exercise for those who have a chronic disease or are at risk of developing one. The Welsh government decided to start this scheme after evaluating a randomised controlled trial which looked at its cost-effectiveness and efficacy.

Gwynedd Council joined the exercise referral scheme in 2008. Its main aims and objectives are to offer a systematic and safely-controlled system of referral to exercise, to help improve the physical and mental health of clients, to encourage long-term participation in physical activity and to determine the effectiveness of the intervention in increasing activity levels and improving health.

Generic NERS involves clients undertaking a 16-week programme of supervised group-based exercise aimed at increasing activity levels. Clients are referred to the programme by clinically-trained professionals if they are inactive, deconditioned and have a low risk medical condition which could be improved by undertaking more physical activity. Exercise Professionals instructing the classes are Level 3 Advanced instructors, Level 4 Chronic Conditions Instructors and Exercise Referral qualified.

After being interviewed, in partnership with the exercise professionals, the clients agree a programme of exercise, which is monitored throughout and afterwards. They pay £2 to attend each session. For a comprehensive explanation of how the project runs see the [Gwynedd NERS 2013/2014 annual report](#), which includes data and outcomes. A flow chart on p22 (Appendix 2) explains the entire process from referral to post-assessment.

Emma Quaek, who coordinates the exercise referral scheme for Gwynedd from Glaslyn, is always looking for ways to attract people who are intimidated by or cannot do any of the exercise on offer and was the prime mover behind the leisure centre's community garden. After visiting a housing estate with raised beds, she decided to try and replicate the idea. It ticked many boxes including promoting social and physical activity, being good for mental and physical health and providing the opportunity for people to learn about growing and cooking fruits and vegetables.

The garden, which comprises a series of raised beds, a shed and an orchard, was built in 2012. Two wild cherries were planted as part of the NHS Forest for NHS Sustainability Day 2014. It has proven to be a huge success as well as being an



attractive addition to Glaslyn's exterior, replacing a patch of grass. 'People who attend tend to have mental health, muscular skeletal and weight problems,' Emma said. 'One comes who is a carer. It's time out for him. It's about being social.' It is also a good gateway project. One young man with mild learning difficulties decided he loved gardening and has moved onto a community gardening project.

Chris E, who is bi-polar, has been involved with the garden since its inception. Having been prescribed exercise he switched to gardening because his medication made it difficult to exercise for an hour. He said: "I came hoping to get interested in gardening and got interested in the people." He sees it as a halfway house that helps to reduce stigma as unlike a drop-in centre specifically for people with mental health problems, the garden is for anyone. 'As days go by, it will be a resource for people to integrate into the community,' he said. The core group, which meets most weeks, tends to attract those who are retired due to age or illness, and numbers around 15. They are allowed to take the produce for free, although anyone walking by can take fruit and veg for a donation. These have ranged from 2p to £60.

The community garden has been the catalyst for a wide variety of events, however, encompassing a much wider group of people of all ages. The cancer clinic has been involved and national charity [Groundwork](#), which supports the disadvantaged and promotes greener living, brought in children from the local school to weed the garden.

'Having the garden project out there extends what's happening in the building,' Emma said. Certain plantings can take place indoors, for example, a herby head pot event run for children by Groundwork and if the weather is poor, there's enough space inside to do some planting.

The nearby [Centre for Independent Living](#), which is run by the disabled for the disabled in North Wales, uses the leisure centre to play boccia. 'Every time they came, they'd come and do a half-hour in the garden, but now they've got their own garden,' Emma explained. She ran an activity planting strawberries in compost at the centre that particularly helped one lady in a wheelchair who had lost her legs. 'She had to bend and pick up soil from the floor. Afterwards, she said she'd had the best night's sleep in a long time.'

The project succeeded because Emma:

- obtained support from a group of stakeholders representing various interest groups before going ahead;
- managed to get funding from public and private sector, including the Soil Association which provided the shed and raised beds and the local

Wilkinsons; and Groundwork NorthWales who provided the hard surface and a further 5 raised beds

- hasn't charged for people to use the garden and people do not have to be referred through NERS to take part;
- Is involving groups that visit the centre for other activities, for example, a U3A group who play table tennis and donated half an hour of their time to weed the beds;
- Is able to run activities in the café inside if the weather is particularly bad.

Emma and her colleagues are trying to change the perspective of what a leisure centre is. She wishes people would call them wellbeing centres as it more accurately encapsulates what the leisure centres in Gwynedd offer. Other activities include walking groups that meet once a week through the Lets Walk Cymru scheme.

Meanwhile, the community gardening project has been replicated at Dwyfor Leisure Centre in Pwllheli and another scheme is being planned for Pen Y Groes this year. Emma would like to see community gardens in all the leisure centres in Gwynedd, but is held back by the usual problems of finance and time. She is currently looking for a volunteer to coordinate the community garden at Glaslyn. To find out more about the project or to volunteer, please contact [Emma](#). If you wish to register with the NHS Forest, please contact [NHS Forest Team](#).