

Evaluation Findings | Winter 2019-20

GET HEALTHY GET ACTIVE




Supporting people with arthritis
in Wales to become more active
and help manage their condition

CYMRU
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ARTHRITIS


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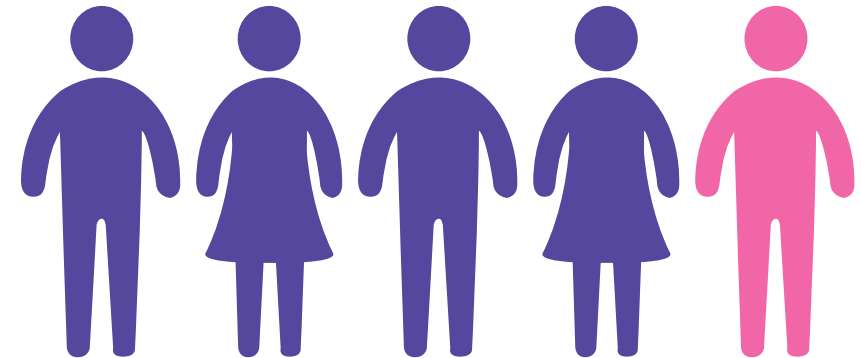
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INTRODUCTION TO VERSUS ARTHRITIS

There are around 18.8 million people living with arthritis or a musculoskeletal (MSK) condition in the UK, including an estimated 887,000 in Wales, with many living in pain every single day¹. The impact is huge as the condition slowly intrudes on everyday life – affecting the ability to work, care for a family, move free from pain and live independently. Yet arthritis is often dismissed as an inevitable part of ageing or shrugged off as 'just a bit of arthritis'. We don't think this is OK.

Versus Arthritis is here to change that. We are a charity here to demand and deliver better with and for people with arthritis. We are a movement of volunteers, healthcare professionals, researchers, family and friends doing everything we can to push back against arthritis. We invest in and deliver cutting edge research, provide quality services and advice, and campaign for arthritis to be a health priority, so the pain, fatigue and isolation of arthritis are no longer tolerated.



¹ The State of Musculoskeletal Health 2019, Versus Arthritis

GET ACTIVE FOR ARTHRITIS



Get Active for Arthritis is a physical activity project built around a six-week self-management course for people living with arthritis and musculoskeletal (MSK) conditions, as well as providing support for exercise and activity classes led by volunteers at six locations across Mid and North Wales.

The project has been funded by the National Lottery Community Fund Wales between 2016 and 2019 to enable people with arthritis to become more active, reduce social isolation, take greater control of their condition and enjoy a healthier and more fulfilling life.

Get Active for Arthritis has also supported the development and dissemination of a self-management toolkit, plus it has organised outreach and promotion of physical activity specifically among people living with MSK conditions at hospital information hubs and roadshow events.

The project has been delivered through a combination of Versus Arthritis staff and volunteers. It has adopted a flexible approach to the content, timings and locations of events to reflect local contexts and group preferences. For example, the activity classes have ranged from boccia, chair-based exercises and yoga to Tai Chi, gardening and walking, depending on group preferences and availability of suitably trained volunteers and staff.

The six locations for the project were selected after reviewing physical activity groups and classes that were already available across North and Mid Wales and then assessing where the project could deliver the best possible outcomes for people with arthritis. The project has sought to complement existing provision wherever possible, for example through helping to widen participation in existing Tai Chi group sessions in Wrexham.

THE CHALLENGE

Get Active for Arthritis was set up to improve access to physical activity for people living with arthritis and MSK conditions, based on feedback that they face greater barriers to getting more active compared to the general population.

The project has focused on addressing some of the key barriers in North and Mid Wales, specifically:

- 1 Availability:** There are limited physical activity sessions on offer that are specifically tailored for people living with arthritis, and that are appropriate for people of all ages to engage in a social way.
- 2 Accessibility:** Living in rural and isolated communities presents additional transport and accessibility challenges for people who might be interested in any form of social activity, including physical activity sessions.
- 3 Awareness:** Many people living with arthritis are unaware that physical activity can help with managing their condition or unsure how they can be active without aggravating it.

The scale of the challenge is clear. An estimated 50% of adults living in Wales with a long-term MSK condition are inactive and 70% are overweight or obese².

There is substantial evidence that the negative impact on people's daily lives from living with arthritis is significant, and that regular physical activity can help limit and manage the effects of this.



² The State of Musculoskeletal Health 2019, Versus Arthritis

WIDER DEVELOPMENTS

Since Get Active for Arthritis began in 2016, there have been favourable changes in health policy, strategies and guidance in Wales and the wider UK, but there is still more to be done.

The Getting Wales Moving report (2017) by Public Health Wales / Sport Wales cites increased physical activity as a means of reducing the rate of bone loss associated with osteoporosis, as well as promoting its ability to help maintain strength, flexibility, balance and coordination, and help to reduce the risk of falls.

The Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act (2015) places an emphasis on health services working together with third sector groups, communities and the public to improve prevention and tackle health inequalities, taking a longer-term, more sustainable approach to public health.

The continuing rollout of the National Exercise Referral Scheme (NERS) in Wales promotes physical activity for people who are currently inactive.

Physical activity guidelines produced by the UK Chief Medical Officers³ (2019) recommend the amount and type of physical activity people should be doing to improve their health, encouraging and supporting all members of Society to become more active, no matter what their age or ability:

“Older adults should maintain or improve their physical function by undertaking activities aimed at improving or maintaining muscle strength, balance and flexibility on at least two days a week.”

“Physical activity is not just a health issue. It brings people together to enjoy shared activities and contributes to building strong communities whilst supporting the economy to grow”

³ Dr Frank Atherton – Chief Medical Officer / Medical Director NHS Wales; Professor Dame Sally C Davies – Chief Medical Officer for England; Dr Michael McBride – Chief Medical Officer for Northern Ireland; Dr Catherine Calderwood – Chief Medical Officer for Scotland

WHO WE REACHED

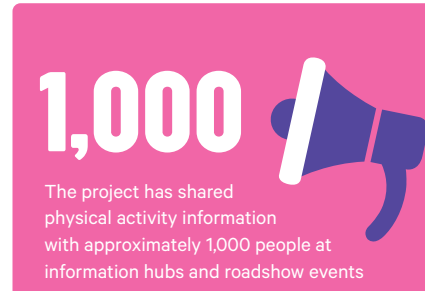
Get Active for Arthritis has directly supported 380 participants of courses and events, and it has promoted and shared physical activity information with a further 1,000 people across Mid and North Wales.

Through the project:



38

The project has recruited 38 volunteers who are directly helping to improve the lives of people with arthritis in their local communities



1,000

The project has shared physical activity information with approximately 1,000 people at information hubs and roadshow events



380

participants have attended physical activity classes and self-management courses at six locations across North and Mid Wales



246

healthcare professionals were reached through 25 professional engagement events

Many people with arthritis feel isolated due to their condition, and this project has brought people together who were not only interested in taking part in physical activity but also getting out of their homes and meeting other people living with similar conditions (social involvement was the most cited reason for taking part among participants).

THE DIFFERENCE WE HAVE MADE

Get Active for Arthritis has made a substantial positive difference to the lives of participants in Mid and North Wales. People value the service and report being more active and better able to manage their condition as a result of participating.

The project has not only reduced inactivity levels and health inequalities in the shorter-term, it has helped to establish longer-term behaviour change among participants.

Although the project is built around the six-week self management course, many of the participants continue to meet afterwards at group activity sessions.

The project has helped to improve knowledge, skills and confidence amongst the participants through the information provided and the physical activity taster sessions.

AS A RESULT OF ATTENDING THE SESSIONS:

92%

of surveyed participants report being more active

97%

of surveyed participants report intending to stay active in the future

96%

of surveyed participants report being better able to manage their condition

PARTICIPANT FEEDBACK:

“It has given me the confidence and skills to help my condition”

“When I was diagnosed with rheumatoid arthritis, I felt very isolated and through joining the project I have made new friends and taken part in lots of activities that help me with my arthritis. I learned lots of new exercises that I would never have dreamed of doing without the project”

“I try to do more, and I am able to pace myself. I go out of the house more and arrange lots of different activities with family and friends”

“I have made a lot of friends and meet up to go swimming, walking and chats. My mood has lifted too.”

“I exercise more and eat better”

“It is a beneficial way of managing arthritis, socialising with people who have the same problems.”



ALISON'S STORY

Alison Williams is Chair of the Versus Arthritis Support Group in Wrexham and she leads a Get Active for Arthritis chair-based exercise group once a week, as well as having participated in the project. Alison explains here what she takes away from being involved.

“We do between half an hour and 40 minutes of chair-based exercise, we use resistance bands for some of the exercises. It's a lovely little group. They all get on really well. We have a cuppa at the end and a biscuit. We have a good old natter about anything, sometimes it is about arthritis and sometimes it's about our families or what we're going to be doing the next week.”



Alison got involved after her own arthritis diagnosis despite initially being uncertain whether it was right for her.

“I was lucky enough, not long after being diagnosed with arthritis, to be invited to the local group, which I thought I wasn't old enough to go to, probably not bad enough with my arthritis to be involved in a group that was mainly for people with arthritis but I eventually went after two years and found that the group was really helpful, it was supportive. I was offered the chance to go and do some training to help other people and that's where it started really.”

Alison finds volunteering with Get Active for Arthritis to be rewarding.

“I do get a bit of a buzz when I say to people that I do the chair-based exercise group and suggest that they come along. The fact that people are coming back week after week is so nice because I was convinced that they would just come along to see what it was like... but I'm obviously doing something right through the fact that they do continue to come back.”

PROJECT LEARNING

The Get Active for Arthritis project has generated valuable learning around what works in terms of introducing physical activity support measures designed specifically for people living with arthritis and MSK conditions.

- 1 Practicality and fun:** Participants valued the self management course's focus on specific skills and activities that could be applied in their every day lives, while also enjoying learning from and sharing their own experiences with others. Group members also reported that the sessions were fun to take part in and the supportive environment was very encouraging. Many participants enjoyed the social element of the sessions and it helped them to feel less isolated in relation to their condition.
- 2 Local alignment:** Understanding and adapting to existing services in each locality has helped with recruitment and retention of participants and volunteers. Linking the Get Active for Arthritis project activities into existing arthritis support groups is particularly important.

3 Importance of volunteers: The project would not have worked without volunteers, and project team members have been careful to work with volunteers on what they can reasonably deliver, not asking too much of them. The importance of voluntary group leaders and activity leaders means they need to be supported and encouraged in order to protect the sustainability of the service.

4 Engaging with healthcare professionals: Healthcare professionals have a pivotal role in referring people to Get Active for Arthritis but there have only been limited instances of this occurring. Project team members report challenges engaging with healthcare professionals and this is despite the introduction of the National Exercise Referral Scheme (NERS) in Wales.

5 Condition-specific: Participants valued the fact that Get Active for Arthritis was specifically for people with arthritis. This was valuable learning for the Charity, and can be taken into consideration when naming and planning future projects.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The evaluation of Get Active for Arthritis confirms the project's premise that people living with arthritis do face barriers to being more active, and the project has been effective in addressing these.

In a health system where resources and investment are limited, the project demonstrates clear and tangible returns. The project offers several learnings for the wider health system to help improve the lives of people living with arthritis:

- **Promoting the benefits of physical activity:** Government, public health authorities, healthcare providers and other stakeholders could all have a more prominent role in promoting the benefits of physical activity in prevention and ongoing self-management of MSK conditions, making referrals to exercise initiatives as appropriate and ensuring all people with MSK conditions are aware of the benefits of exercise in managing their condition.
- **Joining up service provision and support:** The provision of physical activities and self-management interventions for people with musculoskeletal conditions is diverse and varies from area to area. Wherever possible, local authorities and healthcare providers should pool intelligence about provision to help address gaps and integrate with local social prescribing protocols and pathways of care.
- **Investing in physical activity provision:** Achieving substantial take up of exercise and physical activity as a 'prescription' for people with arthritis will not happen by itself. It requires targeted investment in cost-effective physical activity interventions such as Get Active for Arthritis and ESCAPE-pain⁴.
- **Sharing best practice:** Versus Arthritis is committed to collaborative working with multiple organisations across the health system to share best practice in physical activity interventions and to collectively improve the lives of people with MSK conditions.

⁴ Find out more at escape-pain.org