

FIT FOR LIFE GROUP

— Final Project Report —



NCH LOCHABER FAMILIES PROJECT

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1. Introduction

NCH Lochaber Families Project, based in Fort William, is part of NCH Scotland which runs eighty projects throughout the country. NCH is a Voluntary Organisation, with Charitable Status.

NCH Lochaber Families Project provides assistance and support to families with young children with child development, parenting, lifestyle, tenancy and housing issues.

Surestart and Supporting People Support (now Housing Support) are the main funding streams through which NCH Lochaber Families Project currently works.

To qualify for Surestart support families must meet at least two of the Scottish Government criteria of vulnerability: family dependant on income support:- more than two children:- headed by lone parent:- living in a rural community:- at risk of significant harm and/or children in need

To qualify for Supporting People Housing Support the parents must be assessed as vulnerable due to young age or at risk of homelessness.

Thus many of the parents and young adults with whom the Project works, are on low incomes and many also have depression or other mental health issues. Some smoke, take little exercise and do not look after their own health and wellbeing.

Work is carried out through home visits and a variety of parenting programmes and group work sessions at the Project's base at An Drochaid.

Groups for parents and children such as 'Stay and Play' and the Mother and Baby group work pro-actively with parents through play, modelling good practice, to bring about discussion and support with child development issues.

Parents can also attend a twelve week parenting course with crèche facilities provided or have individual parenting support through the Parent/Child Game.

It was, however, recognised that the parents had their own needs and issues, besides being parents.

The initial impetus to apply for the funding from ASH Scotland came from the interest generated by a member of staff who through exercise, healthy eating and smoking cessation lost a considerable amount of weight and greatly improved her own health: a noticeable change about which several of her clients commented. Out of these informal conversations the ideas for an adult group was born.

The proposal for the ASH Scotland funded project was to establish a walking /jogging group encouraging the use and enjoyment of the local environment and, by encouraging people to get fit and active, encouraging a reduction in their smoking.

Due to the nature of the client group of Lochaber Families Project it was essential that their views were taken into account – based on previous experience we know that groups where the participants have a feeling of ownership are far more likely to survive and succeed.

We had the advantage with this particular initiative that we had already identified six young women – all with varying degrees of depression and mental health issues who were immediately interested when we discussed this application with them. Four of them were then currently smokers.

There were another forty parents within the Project who could potentially become involved over time. However due to the accommodation available for our use, and the need to provide child-care for some of the activities, each group was limited to eight participants, plus children at any given time

The 'Fit for Life Group' of young mothers was established focussing on issues of health, diet and exercise to encourage and enable them to reduce or preferably stop smoking. The Group met weekly, with childcare provided, with occasional all day events or activities to explore a range of opportunities. Some were involved in all three eight week blocks, others joined in the latter blocks having seen the positive effects on existing group members.

AIM

The aim of the initiative was to offer the opportunity of a healthier lifestyle for mothers suffering depression:-

OBJECTIVES

This was to be achieved through the following objectives:-

- Increased social contact through attendance at weekly meetings and activities
- Increased understanding of the benefits of a healthier diet
- Greater awareness of the benefits of exercise
- Encourage a reduction in smoking
- Increased confidence and self esteem to enable the parents to access and use services in their own community

It was hoped that this would be an additional opportunity to provide positive support to young adults whose mental health needs do not make them a priority for mental health services but who still very much need (low level but crucial) assistance to improve their well-being as well as to encourage a reduction in their smoking habits.

2. Methodology

Selection Procedures

The **Fit for Life Group** was open to anyone with whom the Project was working and was promoted as an opportunity for them to have some quality personal time with their children safely cared in the Crèche set up to cater for the Fit for Life Group.

Although the intention originally was to include any Dads who wanted to take part, the issue of poor body self image of some of the women rapidly became apparent and mixed groups did not seem such a positive idea. As no fathers had applied, we chose not to actively encourage them to attend as we would have lost several young women.

The Project was based on group work with staff facilitating group members in the planning and organising of a programme and participation in group activities. The staff member running the group got appropriate qualifications from Jog Scotland and arranged the necessary insurance.

The planning sessions took place at the Project's base with walks being arranged to utilise the surrounding country-side.

This matched in with one of the core objectives of Lochaber Families Project to develop clients' abilities and confidence to make decisions and work towards an independent lifestyle.

Each block started with a presentation and discussion on the benefits of smoking reduction/cessation and an individual fitness plan.

As most clients of the Project were smokers, the group was also open to non smokers as well as those who smoked in order not to discriminate against those who did not smoke and in the hope that the non smokers would act as role models and encourage the smokers to quit!

The Fit for Life Group catered for a maximum of eight women at any one time with three eight week blocks of sessions run through-out lifetime of Project.

The Project had a disappointingly slow start – despite the initial enthusiasm! For many of our clients turning intentions into a definite commitment which is maintained over a period of time is challenging. For those whose lives are chaotic, getting up in time, remembering to attend and committing to regular attendance proved difficult in the first instance.

Whilst the first group should have been six participants, it dropped to two. We decided to continue the group regardless, and these two young women successfully completed the block, stayed for the second block and contributed as assistant leaders in the third. Both are now committed non- smokers. The second and third blocks were better attended and many of the participants successfully reduced their cigarette intake.

The methodology used was simple and to the point.

1. Encourage participation through encouragement and example
2. Remove any barriers to participation - training shoes were provided as was crèche care for their pre-school children
3. Continuity - Weekly sessions took place with discussion, activities, fun and encouragement in equal measure

The client group were afforded new and varied opportunities in a group environment that was sociable, positive, non-judgemental and encouraged participation and healthy pro-active activities. The underlying message from the staff throughout the project was the value of reducing/quitting smoking, through discussion, actions and the activities themselves

3. Results

Month 1- 2:

- The Project was advertised and discussed with potential group members and with colleagues in other agencies who were encouraged to refer potential participants to the Project.
- Accommodation was booked.
- Child-care staff for the crèche was appointed.

Month 3:

- The first group was established and the group members were involved in planning programmes

Month 4-12

- Ran groups in three x eight week blocks with breaks during holiday periods and the winter months.

The Outcomes

- Reduced smoking in all participants
- Reduction in depression reported in feed-back from two clients
- Increase in self belief, motivation and confidence – two went on to do college courses
- Two women stopped smoking completely (and remain non smokers)

4. Discussion/Conclusion

Lochaber Families Project provided management time, administration, use of accommodation, publicity leaflets, refreshments and further funding towards activities from existing budgets as the work being undertaken meets aspects of the objectives of the main funding streams.

The £3,000 grant provided the staffing costs to run the group as staff time could not be paid for from the Project's core budget. As the cost of the Crèche was shared with another part of the Project, with ASH Scotland's agreement some funding was transferred to purchasing resources – like appropriate footwear and entry to pilates and swimming pool entry fees.

This has been a worth-while small scale Project which has had lifelong benefits for at least some, if not all of the participants.

The women engaged well because the group was small and non-threatening and each member was receiving support from the worker.

5. Recommendations for Future Work

This has been a useful piece of work adding value to the mainstream work of the NCH Lochaber Families Project.

If funding were available in the future, NCH Lochaber Families Project would be willing to run a similar initiative, based on the small group work model which fits in well with the core work with individual clients. We would also and within this to fund a men's group as they missed out with this pilot initiative! It is recognised that it is easier to engage men on health and lifestyle issues if they are approached through activity-based input.

6. Dissemination

NCH Scotland

ASH Scotland

NHS Highland – local health visitors

Highland Council – Lochaber Social Work Team