

Increasing physical activity within ethnic minority communities

Opportunities linking health and the built and natural environment

Green Space of the Month - Guidance Paper No. 8

Linking health and the built and natural environment is a central theme for improving the health of ethnic minorities in Britain. Ethnic communities live in some of the worst environments. The resources within the education and environmental sectors are enormous but they have little or no access to them, e.g. Walking for Health programme, a vast range of outdoor activities.

This paper concentrates on opportunities for increasing physical activity within ethnic minority communities. Local green space can be a focal point for this work.

1. The necessity for outreach in relation to physical activities in the built and natural environment

Many outdoor activities, ranging from walking to horseriding in an urban or rural setting, are not on the agenda of ethnic communities - the "not for us" factor due to:

- unfamiliarity and lack of opportunity to experience these
- lack of consistent nurturing of interest and provision of support to enter new areas of endeavour.

The image of ethnic communities as not being interested means that within the mainstream there is the "not for them" factor

- initial economic barriers. The fact is that no one will spend money to try something they know nothing about. However, many members of ethnic communities are rising into the middle class and can afford to pay for what they may become interested in. Even for groups which may not be able to afford such activities, there is the fact that even they can pay for them through fundraising if only they are interested.

2. Addressing barriers to taking part in outdoor activities

Nurturing initial interest, providing culturally sensitive opportunities, and consistently providing support are essential when introducing new activities.

We introduced outdoor activities including horseriding to the Minority Ethnic Women's Network in South Wales about 4 years ago. Now there is a keen group of horse riders, and the group know about and take part in a range of physical activities including walking and horseriding. Recently they designed a programme of summer activities and successfully got a grant of £3000 from Awards for All to implement these independently. We:

- introduced activities with a taster programme
- provided consistent support to the ethnic minority group including identifying where they can carry on with activities they are initially interested in, assisting with fundraising to continue activities, acted as facilitator to connect them to mainstream personnel and organisations which can support them
- act as their representative supporting and negotiating with mainstream organisations to ensure they are welcome and that cultural aspects for engagement are known
- identified training needed to enable them to organise activities, build working relationships with relevant organisations, negotiate for what they need, and fundraise for themselves.

3. Promotion and creation of relevant physical activities within the urban adult learning institutions

Because of the unsympathetic outdoor environment in many of the deprived areas, and the fact that we cannot rely on the weather, indoor physical activities are important.

Many ethnic minority cultures have forms of physical exercise as part of their culture, often integrated into their spiritual/religious/cultural systems. Some of these, yoga and Tai Chi, have become mainstream interests. However, we need to be aware that some of the ethnic minority groups, because of the spiritual and cultural context, will shy away from these “classes” because the classes are adapted to British needs. There is real scope for increasing physical activity through :

- identifying and creating a greater range of classes around physical activity related to different cultures, consulting with ethnic community groups as to how they may be offered within the adult education institutions
- identifying the various age/gender groups which have specific interests and needs in relation to these and other mainstream physical activity classes
- identifying the possibility of running such physical activity classes at the premises of ethnic community groups, and other locations such as school halls near to where they live

4. Opening up activities in the outdoor environment through concrete action to recognise the legitimacy of ethnic minority presence and heritage in the built environment

Ethnic communities are as a whole stressed by a feeling of rejection by the mainstream. Anything which promotes a sense of belonging and recognition of their legitimate presence contributes to their well-being and health.

Very often, urban green spaces are the only significant pleasant spaces in which physical activities can take place. But many ethnic groups feel that they are not for them. We need to:

- reach out to ethnic groups and make known to them that they are welcome to use green spaces. Unless there are substantial green spaces, the incorporation of use by newcomers is a negotiation.
- Social exclusion is a framework. Working for social inclusion disturbs that framework, particularly in small places where a scene can become set e.g. someone is used to coming into a small park and sitting on a particular bench at a particular time of day. Suddenly they find a new ethnic minority person sitting there... they have to accept it that other people have a right too...and the ethnic minority person needs to feel comfortable. Mile End Park actually has to support various groups to claim this comfortable right to use space.
- Lister Park is a shining example of attending to the recognition of the presence of ethnic groups by consulting them in the regeneration of the park and investing significant sums to create a Mughal garden. Everyone now enjoys the Mughal garden, but for ethnic groups it is something special. It is a statement of commitment to them from the park, a setting which is cultural and concrete in their locality giving a sense of accepted belonging. Many Walking for Health Programmes have difficulties in unsympathetic surroundings of inner cities, but here a pleasant and cultural and large space has been created in continuity with the rest of the park. Every day at 8.30 in the morning you can witness over 50 ethnic minority women walking for health in Lister Park.
- in general create more pleasant spaces, and mark them as multicultural spaces, providing room for children to play, adults to walk, cycle, do exercise outdoors

5. Linking up locations for activities and encouraging people to walk to shop, to school and to work

Although there may be pleasant spaces, many vulnerable members of ethnic minorities will not venture out because of issues of safety, cleanliness and general bleakness of the connecting streets and space. We need to:

- make the general built environment more pleasant so that the sense of being in a pleasant place outside encourages people to be outside

- make streets and connecting areas safe to encourage people to be outside and to walk to school and to work. Over and over again we have heard for example that mothers with young children just do not want to breathe all the traffic fumes and walk along dirty littered streets to get to a nice park
- consult and nurture the capacity of ethnic groups to contribute to the shaping of the local environment which affects them most

6. Things to do outdoors and volunteering in the urban area and further afield into the countryside

- Allotments and community gardens have already proved to be a great success to bring people outdoors and to do the many physical activities associated with it.
- Many locations such as inner city nature reserves, city fringe country parks and woodland, and the countryside further afield offer a whole range of activities, including volunteering. It is also particularly important to ethnic groups which have low income because so much of these are free. Benefiting from positive activity and access to nature is a major factor in increasing the quality of life of ethnic communities, and therefore their health and well-being. Such activities are crucial to lay down the basis for contact with and understanding of what it means to be part of the environment. It also brings ethnic communities out of isolation.
- Refer to 1 for necessity for outreach and support to increase access and relevance of activities.

7. Health information, healthcare and environment

Information and understanding is a basis for participation and gives impetus to action. We need to:

- put information where people are - in the case of ethnic groups they have named mosques, corner shops, post office, schools as key places from which to pick up information
- use places where healthcare is given, in particular if it links into the state of health. Already GPs are aware of the Walking for Health programme. Information about all kinds of activities can appear at GP surgeries, baby clinics, be given to clients by Health Visitors which are in touch with all families with children under 5
- use events at which physical activity is already happening and give even more information to those who are already taking part to become interested in a whole range of activities.
- work in partnership with ethnic community groups and representative networks such as Black Environment Network to give information
- spend time with those who one can see will make good champions. They will be a great investment for spreading the word and increasing the numbers of people who begin to know about, understand and become in touch with opportunities.
- increase representation through consultation and enabling ethnic groups to inform and take part in decision-making. Here capacity building is needed.

8. Employment opportunities

Unemployment and poor income result in huge stresses on the health of ethnic communities. There is a need to create opportunities for ethnic communities to aspire to enter employment in sectors new to them, such as the environmental sector. They are traditionally folded back into a narrow spectrum of employment due to discrimination and social exclusion.

In the effort to create opportunities for physical activities and promote these to ethnic communities, there lies an opportunity to provide employment in :

- using skills within ethnic communities, e.g. around traditional forms of exercise
- using ethnic minorities for their community connections and skills to reach out to their own communities to promote physical activity

Appendix

Some statistics re Social and Environmental Inequality - Ethnic Communities

- People living in the 44 most deprived areas in England, stated pollution, poor public transport, and the appearance of the estate as major issues about where they live
- The 44 most deprived areas in England contain 4 times more people from ethnic communities as other areas
- 66% of all cancer-causing chemicals emitted into the air comes from factories in the most deprived 10 % of communities in England
- Pollution is a major factor in poor health and health inequalities
- People from ethnic minority backgrounds experience more health consequences from isolation and fear of crime in their local environment - instances of stress, depression, loss of appetite, increased alcohol consumption and lack of self esteem are consistently double in number compared to the population as a whole.
- Only 1 in 20 of people from ethnic minorities live in an area of low unemployment compared to 1 in 5 of white people. Black and Asian people with A levels experienced higher levels of unemployment than white people with no qualifications.
- Overall the ethnic minorities have younger age structures than the white population. Different ethnic groups are experiencing inequality and increased disadvantage in education. Overall ethnic minority pupils made up 17% of exclusions from school while making up only 11 % of the school population. Only 4% of ethnic minority 16 year olds were in government training in 1994 compared to 13% of white young people of the same age.
- Open spaces are more accessible to ethnic minority children than any other leisure activity, but their satisfaction rates are lower, often related to fears over personal safety and racial abuse.
- Until recently much research on themes significant to ethnic minorities exclude references to them, resulting in a lack of essential information to steer policy on many fronts. Unease over the issue of ethnicity often results in professionals adopting colour-blind attitudes that ignore ethnic and cultural differences altogether.

References

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Note

All BEN resources are accessible free, downloadable from our website www.ben-network.org.uk
Green Space of the Month [www.ben-network.org.uk/participation/green spaces/default.htm](http://www.ben-network.org.uk/participation/green%20spaces/default.htm)

This is Guidance Paper No.8 published March '04 as part of our Green Space of the Month website project. Each month, a green space which involves ethnic groups is highlighted, and every quarter, a guidance paper relating to involving ethnic groups in green spaces is published.