

# The Route to Health

A physical and creative journey of discovery and self-development



The *Route to Health* is a colourful and imaginative community arts trail that takes people through woodland at Cannock Chase. It is the result of an innovative partnership that brought together health care professionals and artists, to offer local community groups a series of workshops themed around physical and mental health issues. The visually stunning and thought-provoking artworks created are displayed along the Route, and act as a magnet to draw visitors to experience the woodland environment and absorb health-related information in an informal way. The project enables a diverse audience to take their own personal Route to Health.

## objectives

- To use art to encourage physical activity, raise awareness of health issues, and provide free and accessible health and health service information in an informal way.
- To produce artworks, supported by a health message, that direct visitors to further sources of information and stimulate discussions about healthy lifestyles.
- To remove barriers and attract a wider and more diverse audience to the site, particularly 'hard to reach' community members (e.g. the inactive, and those with mental and physical health or disability issues), and to promote woodlands as a venue for health and well-being by providing a range of different activities.
- To develop partnerships between organisations with common agendas.

## actions

- The installation of a one mile access-friendly trail where over 80 health-based community artworks mark the route.
- The installation of seven rest stops, to help accessibility.
- Holding annual celebrations on site every October to re-invigorate the trail and renew interest.
- Engagement with 48 different community groups - Young Carers, Millennium Volunteers, adults with learning difficulties, schools and retirement clubs.

## achievements

- 2,000 people have been directly engaged by participating in workshops.
- An Arts Council England lottery award enabled six community groups to help create seven rest stops, enabling those with health problems, who benefit from gentle exercise, to access the trail.
- A tenfold increase in visits (50,000 visits) to the trail each year.
- The evaluation shows that those who take physical exercise less than three times a week have learned more about health issues by visiting the Route, and that visitors feel the trail is a more interesting way to communicate health messages than traditional methods such as leaflets and television.
- External organisations are using the trail to deliver their own objectives.
- The Project led to one of the partners achieving Beacon Status for healthier communities. It was awarded 'most effective small team or project' prize in 2006 by Regen West Midlands.

## background

- Cannock Chase is set on the edge of the West Midlands conurbation with a population of approximately 93,000. It covers 7,800 hectares and is 40% urban and 60% rural landscape. A large proportion of the rural area is Cannock Chase AONB. Substantial investment has tackled many of the problems associated with the ex-coalmining communities of the area. However the area has high levels of deprivation, with 17 areas falling in the lowest 25% of the 'health deprivation and disability domain' in the country.
- United in a common goal to engage community members outside the demographic of traditional forest users, the partnership initially developed the *Route to Health* as part of a 'Walking to Health' event. It was thought that artworks, demonstrating the importance of walking, could be used as way-markers for the day. Following an enthusiastic response from the local community the *Route to Health* was established.
- Partnership interests and community involvement have been key to the success of the Project. Participatory partners and groups include: Sure Start, Chaselea Pupil Referral Unit (young people at risk of social exclusion), Chase Day Service (adults with both physical and mental health difficulties), Spring Meadow (adult mental health rehabilitation centre), Staffordshire Young Offenders, Princes Trust and Millennium Volunteers, social services, Cannock Chase hospital, cardiac rehabilitation patients and local schools and colleges.
- Surveys show that 32% of people interviewed were inspired to build physical activity into their lives, and 29% were inspired to make positive changes to their dietary habits.

## quotes

*"Absolutely wonderful, how do they come up with these ideas...Someone told me this is a good place to come, with plenty of places to sit so I can take my time walking around."* Visitor.

*"In just three years, the initiative has helped so many different people on so many different levels."* Laura Davies, Health Development Manager, Cannock Chase PCT.

*"It has provided the opportunity for the disengaged to be engaged, the uninspired to develop aspirations and has changed people's lives for the better."* Lisa Shepherd, Arts Development Officer with the Council.

## partners

Cannock Chase  
District Council  
South Staffordshire PCT  
Community Groups

## funding

Total: £50,000 over 4 years  
Arts Council £8,000  
Cannock Chase District Council £12,000  
South Staffs PCT (Cannock) £4,000  
Local Strategic Partnership £6,000  
Countryside Agency £2,000

## lessons learnt

- Take time to get to know your partners; the full extent of shared aspirations or agendas may not be immediately obvious. Work with the strengths of each partner. Share authority and decisions but be clear about roles and responsibilities.
- When working with communities learn to be flexible.
- Often the process is as important as the output.
- The most powerful messages get through when we are being creative and having fun.