

fit as a fiddle in the West Midlands impacts on health and wellbeing

Illustrating the success of
the fit as a fiddle programme



Health impacts

“I move better, less stiff, feel happier.”

fit as a fiddle in the West Midlands has helped older people to live healthier and more active lives, through a programme of activities ranging from gardening to gentle exercise, Tai Chi, Yoga, Extend, Tea Dancing, Zumba, falls prevention, cooking... and more. Classes and activities have been held in both community venues and residential care settings. An evaluation by Reshenia Consulting in 2012 found clear benefits of the programme, including:

- Some participants visit their GPs and other health professionals less often, resulting in direct cost savings for health providers
- Many participants report that after attending **fit as a fiddle** classes, they experience better balance and fewer falls, leading to more confidence and enabling greater independence
- Many participants experience improved emotional wellbeing
- The majority of participants lead more active lives after joining **fit as a fiddle** activities

For some people, the programme has directly improved a specific health problem, such as pain or joint stiffness:

“It’s a great class, it loosens our limbs up and as I have had osteoporosis my joints get stiff and the exercises help no end.”

“The garden encourages me to be active – we can’t let it get overgrown. Gardening keeps my joints moving and a bit of strength in my muscles.”

For others, the health benefits are less specific:

“I feel more positive about life now, and more inclined to get on with things and not bother the doctor with little aches and pains...”

Providing a safety net

Across the West Midlands, **fit as a fiddle** has offered a safety net for older people. Regular participation has built trust amongst members of the groups, who share their joys and their worries with other people – staff, volunteers and peers. In turn, they have been offered suggestions, solutions and support. And, with regular participation, staff and volunteers have been able to notice small changes, and where necessary to signpost and help older people to take action that will “nip problems in the bud”.



Emotional wellbeing

“Sometimes we just have a gossip and a laugh.”

Wellbeing is a key to good health. **fit as a fiddle** provided a wide range of activities for older people.

“It makes us get ourselves up and dressed on the morning we come to the Centre. Often, I don’t want to have to do that, but I know I will enjoy it when I get here.”

The overwhelming majority of people interviewed by Reshenia Consulting said that they had increased their social contacts since joining their **fit as a fiddle** group. This was especially important for people who live on their own:

“I now feel part of the community. I have made new friends and improved my levels of confidence.”

The new friendships forged through their participation became an important feature that supported them to cope with stresses in their life more effectively:

“It is a good place where we can tell each other our troubles.”



Coping with life's changes

fit as a fiddle has offered a powerful combination to bereaved older people: opportunities to get out of the house, to get some exercise, and to be a part of a social circle. The programme had a similar impact on people who had recently retired and then found that their lives had lost shape and purpose;

“I’d got into a downward spiral. I didn’t feel well, so didn’t go out or mix with people. It did me good to get out of the house...”

Moving house is widely regarded as one of the most traumatic of life events, and the move from the family home into sheltered housing even more so. The **fit as a fiddle** groups in residential care settings have helped many people through this transition by offering both physical and social activities.

“The group has helped me settle into my new accommodation and also made it easier to integrate with other activities.”



Healthy Eating

Most of the **fit as a fiddle** projects organised healthy eating sessions and cooking activities, and many distributed recipes. Greenagers projects supplied fresh produce to friends, families, community and Age UK centres, and to the residents (and sometimes the kitchens) of sheltered housing schemes in which groups were run.

“We’ve supplied half the residents here with cucumbers and lettuces!”

Participants have tried and enjoyed healthier recipes and eaten less packaged food and ready meals. Many older men who had been recently bereaved or become carers had little experience of cooking, and valued the cooking activities:

“My wife was the cook and I didn’t have a clue really, but I’ll have a go now.”

Older people living on their own can lose interest in cooking. In one scheme, members of the Prescription for Health group formed a ‘supper club’ made up of four members who cook for each other several days each week;

“Cooking for three others, and sharing each other’s food and company, makes it worthwhile.”



The benefits of horticulture projects

“The allotment is my escape: it lifts my spirits.”

fit as a fiddle Greenagers groups were run on allotments, and as Gardening Circles in community gardens, day centres or in residential housing for older people. Members said that the activities relieved depression and anxiety, and enabled participants to gain a sense of ‘job satisfaction’ from having produced something tangible or ‘real’.

“Many of the older people who come here used to have gardens. They get a real sense of pride from planting up a pot.....When you’re frail, that sense of achievement is really important.” (Day Centre manager)

In some residential housing, the Gardening Circles helped to improve the environment and as a result, the garden areas have become better used by all residents and their families. In some places, the gardening activities helped to build better links with people living in the local area, who admire the gardens developed by the Greenagers groups. In one place, a new walking group was established for both villagers and residents, and this further strengthened the connections between the two:

“It has made us part of the village and we’ve met other people. It’s widened our horizons so we’re not talking about the same thing all the time.”

Greenagers participants enjoyed the benefits of working out of doors, doing as much exercise as each person was able to, being in a social group all working towards common goals – and producing fruit and vegetables! This was a powerful combination, with benefits to both physical health and general wellbeing.



“Sometimes I feel down due to family illness problems. Going to the allotment helps cheer me up and take my mind off some of my problems. It helps me put things in perspective.”

“I’m much more physically active now, and I feel so much better for it. I get a lovely sense of wellbeing from being outdoors and having some exercise.”



fit as a fiddle was funded by the Big Lottery Fund. It ran in the West Midlands between 2008 and 2012. Over its four years of delivery, **fit as a fiddle** has reached over 4,000 people across the West Midlands, two-thirds of whom were aged 70 and over.

fit as a fiddle was delivered by 11 separate projects in the West Midlands:

- **Six Greenagers projects** ran gardening groups on allotments and in residential care settings, as a way to increase levels of physical activity, encourage healthier eating, and enable wellbeing. They were delivered by Age UK Dudley; Malvern & District; Warwickshire; Hereford & Localities; Herefordshire & Worcestershire; and North Staffordshire.
- **Five Prescription for Health projects** ran a wide range of activities to encourage and enable older people participate in physical activity. They were delivered by Age UK Coventry; Kingstanding, Perry Barr & Weoley Castle (Age UK KPW); Solihull; Stafford & District; and Warwickshire.



For further information, contact:

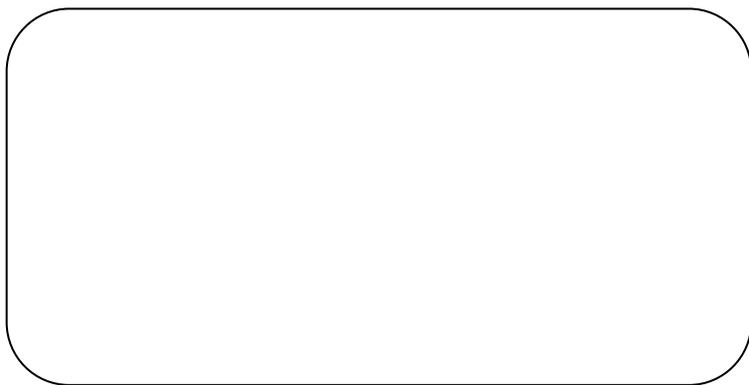


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