

Active in Ashington

Sustrans volunteers' experiences

March 2011



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1 Executive summary

This report investigates the impact of volunteers on the Active in Ashington project and local community, and the impact the project has had on the community and volunteers. Nine interviews with ten volunteers and a focus group with a volunteer led walking group were carried out.

Active in Ashington is one of 10 Sustrans' Active Travel projects funded by the Big Lottery from January 2008 to December 2011. The aim of Active in Ashington was to increase physical activity and sense of well-being amongst the residents of Ashington and wider Wansbeck area. The project ran a range of walking and cycling activities and operated a bike recycling scheme run by local volunteers as well as providing other volunteering opportunities.

Ashington, a former mining town in South East Northumberland, has suffered economic decline following deindustrialisation in Britain, resulting in high levels of unemployment, deprivation, social problems, inactivity and unhealthy lifestyles. 22% of the working age population in Wansbeck are claiming a key benefit, compared to 15% nationally.

Since 2008 Active in Ashington has engaged 48 volunteers. The volunteers interviewed were all over 35 and a mix of retired, employed and unemployed individuals. Volunteers are involved in led walks and rides, bike loans and maintenance, community events and administrative tasks. The majority participated in project activities before they started volunteering. All had strong motivations for volunteering, including the need to fill time, give back to the community, develop skills or promote the health aspects of the project, many drawing from their own experience and backgrounds.

Volunteers gained skills, as well as physical activity, well-being, social and enjoyment benefits and gained increased confidence from taking part. The project has provided training for volunteers to become certified bike mechanics, walk or cycle ride leaders. One volunteer learnt to cycle as a result of the project. Volunteers highlighted the social benefits of volunteering such as meeting new people, feeling closer to the local community and sharing their new knowledge with their children. The project has helped volunteers overcome the challenges of moving to a new area, and provided a constructive use of time following retirement.

Volunteers discussed the benefits of the project and their volunteering on the wider community, such as improved community cohesion, health, well-being and socialisation in the community. They discussed the importance of working with the whole family to instil values of a healthy lifestyle. Creating opportunities for young people to learn new skills reduces anti-social behaviour; one volunteer commented on how their guidance and advice is helping raise young people's aspirations.

Empathy with the local community allows volunteers to engage with the community in ways that project staff may be less able to do. Volunteers were able to motivate and support participants with similar problems to themselves, such as mental health or obesity issues.

Despite the social and economic problems in Ashington, volunteers felt that there is still a good sense of community spirit in Ashington and a desire for the area to be better and that the area would benefit for the continuation of the project.

In future the volunteers would like to see the expansion of activities, extension of the project to cover a wider geographical area and more links with education of youth groups. They recognised that the project is limited by having a small number of staff and may not be able to deliver all that they wanted to.

Volunteer support and input to the Active in Ashington project are essential for its effectiveness and delivery. Volunteers felt a sense of ownership of the project and their role within it, many were keen to do more and have more responsibility. Bike mechanics were keen to finish their qualification and work with less supervision. Volunteers felt that paid staff are key; the volunteers feel daunted about taking on full responsibility and wouldn't know what to do without paid staff.

2 Introduction

“I mean you’ve got the volunteers who have got the motivation to do something other than go to Whetherspoon’s once they’ve got their giro. They’ve got the motivation to get off their arses, to actually do something in the community rather than watch daytime Jeremy Kyle, and home design programmes on telly, you know.” –*Interviewee 1*

2.1 The project

2.1.1 Active Travel project aims and objectives

Sustrans' Active Travel programme works with communities and partner organisations, to enable people to become more physically active through walking and cycling for everyday journeys.

Active Travel runs a number of practical projects across the UK with schools, colleges, universities, workplaces and communities. Activities include:

- guided walks and rides
- cycling and walking groups, including Nordic walking
- workplace events
- cycle training
- cycle/walk leader training
- personal travel/fitness plans
- bike recycling
- bike loan schemes
- bike maintenance training.

Each Active Travel team also works with local authorities and other partners to improve walking and cycling routes and facilities in the project area (e.g. through the installation of cycle parking or walking/cycling route improvements).

2.1.2 Active in Ashington aims and objectives

The aim of the Active in Ashington project, funded by the Big Lottery Wellbeing Programme over a 4 year period from Jan 2008 to Dec 2011, was to increase physical activity and sense of well-being amongst residents of Ashington and the wider Wansbeck area of Northumberland, through the promotion of walking and cycling as a means of accessing employment, schools, local services, parks and green spaces, and the wider countryside.

Each Active Travel project has its own unique characteristics. The unique feature of Active in Ashington (run by Mary Clark, Adam Bell, and previously Mark Curr; all referred to in this report) is its extensive engagement with volunteers, and the contribution that they make to the project.

2.2 Ashington

This section of the report outlines some factors indicating high inactivity and deprivation in the local authority of Wansbeck⁽¹⁾, where Ashington is situated.

“The mining went, and all the supply industries went, and there’s been nothing to replace it really. Other than high tech jobs which are small in numbers, and few and far between these days and maybe a few sort of retail jobs in the area, but you look in Wansbeck and there aren’t any major employers. There’s not the money.” –*Interviewee 3*

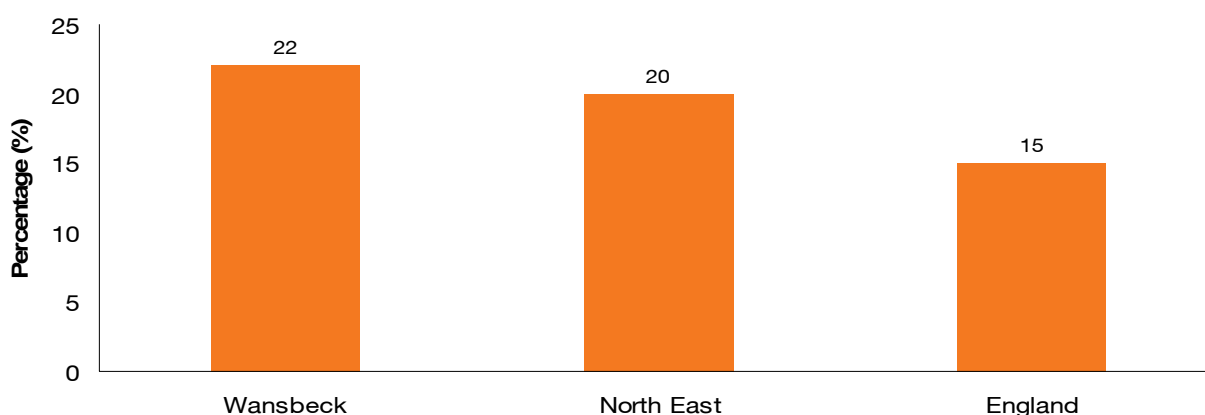
¹ Prior to the local authority boundary changes in April 2009, Ashington was located in the local authority of Wansbeck. Following the boundary changes, it now forms part of the much larger area of Northumberland. However, where data are available for Wansbeck, this area has been used, as the information is more locally relevant.

Information from the Office of National Statistics (ONS) highlight trends indicative of deprivation in Wansbeck, with higher than average people of working age claiming a key benefit, higher than average unemployment among economically active groups, and lower levels of car ownership and participation in sport, compared with the national average.

Benefit claims and unemployment

In Wansbeck 22% of people of working age are claiming a key benefit (e.g. Jobseeker's Allowance, Incapacity Benefit), compared with 20% overall in the North East and 15% in England (Chart 2-1) and 5% of people aged 16-74 in Wansbeck are economically active and unemployed, compared to 3% for England.

Chart 2-1 All People of Working Age Claiming a Key Benefit



Source: Office for National Statistics, August 2009

Car ownership

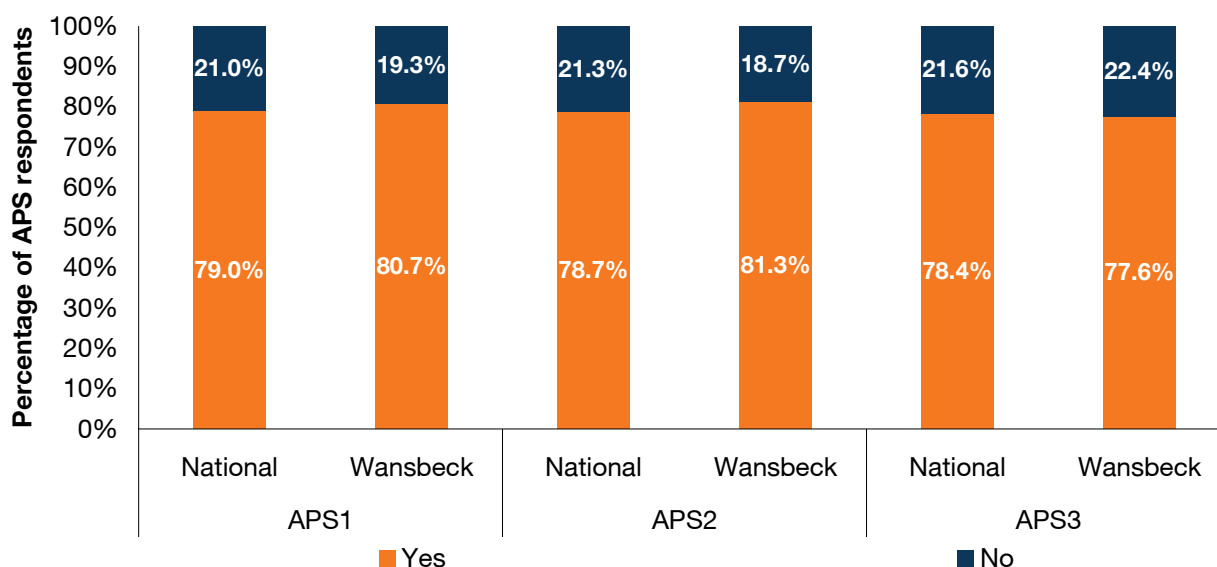
Out of a total of 26,463 households in Wansbeck, 9,098 have no car or van (34%). This figure is much lower than England as a whole, where out of 20,451,427 households 5,488,386 have no car or van (27%).

Physical activity

Data from Sport England's Active People Survey (APS)⁽²⁾ demonstrate participation in physical activity in the area of Wansbeck. Key Performance Indicator 1 measures the percentage of the adult population (aged 16 and over) participating in at least 30 minutes of sport and active recreation (including recreational walking and cycling) of at least moderate intensity on at least three days a week (this does not include 'active travel') (Chart 2-2). This shows that levels of participation in sport on three days a week in Wansbeck are similar to the national average, which suggests a potential for increasing this participation to five times a week, and increasing active travel through contact with the project.

² http://www.sportengland.org/research/active_people_survey.aspx

Chart 2-2 KPI 1 - At least 30 minutes moderate participation on three days a week (all adults)

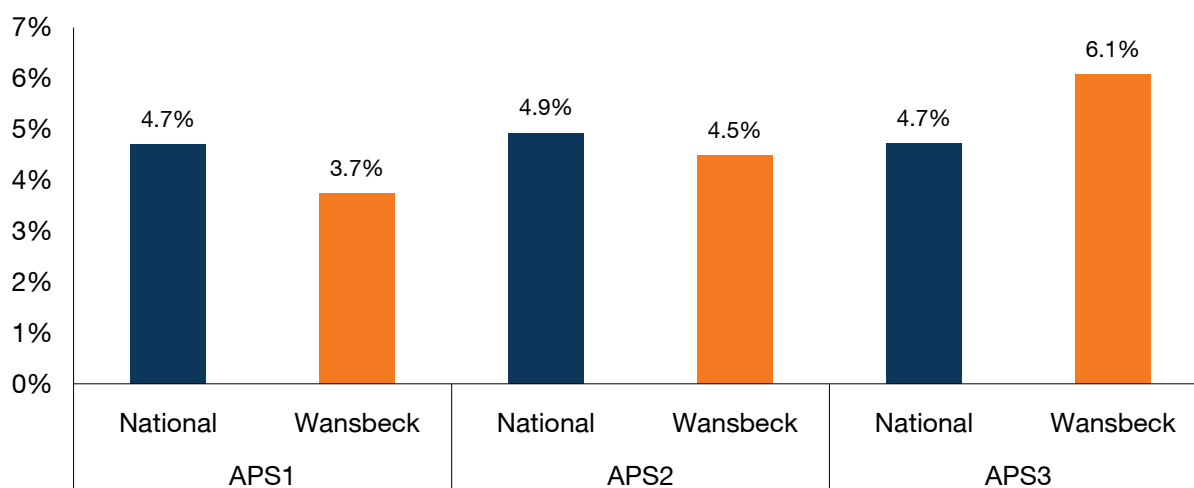


Source: Active People Survey, February 2011

Volunteering

People’s participation in sports volunteering⁽³⁾ is recorded by APS. The percentage of adults participating in sports volunteering in England has fluctuated slightly, around 5% throughout the three years. However, in Wansbeck, levels of participation in sports volunteering among adults have increased from 4% to 6% of all adults (Chart 2-3).

Chart 2-3 At least one hour a week volunteering to support sport (all adults)



Source: Active People Survey, February 2011

³ The APS definition of this is: “Sports voluntary work without receiving any payment except to cover expenses. Please think about all sports voluntary activity. This could be organising or helping to run an event, campaigning/raising money/providing transport or driving/ taking part in a sponsored event/ coaching, tuition, mentoring etc.”

2.3 Methodology

As part of the monitoring of the Active in Ashington project, nine interviews, with 10 volunteers, and one focus group, with a volunteer-led walking group, were carried out in July and September 2010 to investigate the impact of volunteers on the project and the community, and the impact of the project and the community on the volunteers. The majority of interviews were conducted on a 1-1 basis using a semi-structured pro-forma. The interviews and focus group were all recorded, with permission, and the transcripts used for analysis. Anonymous quotes from the interviews and focus group have been used where appropriate in this report.

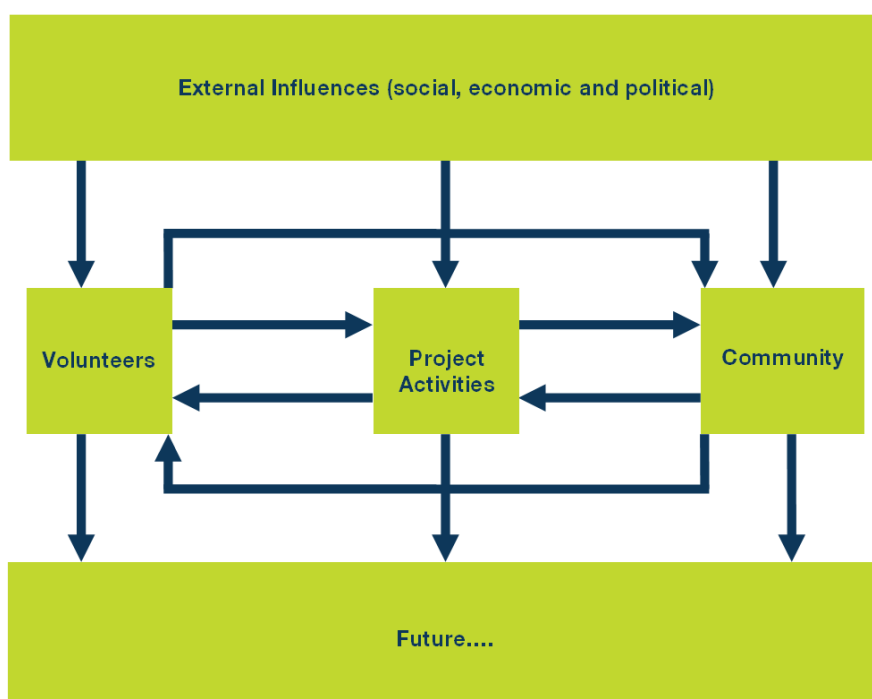
2.4 The report

The following themes are discussed in this report:

- the complex relationship between the volunteers and community developed through the Active in Ashington project
- the impacts on and of the volunteers and the community
- the personal skills and attributes brought to the project
- the personal skills and attributes gained from volunteering
- the community
- Ashington's potential resilience in the current economic climate
- the ideas that volunteers have for the future of the project.

For the purposes of this report, the differing elements of the impacts on the community of the volunteers and vice versa are broken down into three main areas: "Volunteers and what they do..." background, personal attributes, and project activities; "Volunteering is a two-way street" personal impacts from the project, impacts on and of the community; "Ashington and its future..." future directions of the project, and enhancing community resilience. However, the interactions and influences between and within the project, volunteers and community are complex, and it is impossible to truly separate them. Figure 1 shows a modelled representation of the relationships that feature in the report.

Figure 1: Simple model of relationships



3 Volunteers and what they do...

3.1 A typical volunteer

This section of the report uses data for all of the registered volunteers in Active in Ashington, and information from Sustrans' national volunteer survey to show the context of volunteering, and try to demonstrate what constitutes the 'typical' volunteer. This provides a wider context to help understand the similarities and differences on the national and local scale, and to allow further understanding of the volunteers interviewed.

3.1.1 Sustrans' volunteers nationally

In December 2010 and January 2011, Sustrans conducted a national volunteer survey. From this research it was found that the majority of the people who volunteer for Sustrans do so as rangers on Sustrans' National Cycle Network Routes carrying out activities such as monitoring and improving signage, vegetation control and litter picking. Other popular volunteer roles include being part of Active Travel or as an office volunteer. There are also numerous other activities people were involved in such as supporting the work of a Bike It Officer, promoting and fundraising, or utilising skills from their current employment such as carrying out surveys and proof reading on behalf of Sustrans. It is most common for a volunteer to carry out their activities once a month spending four hours or less on this, although this is largely dependent upon the individual, the demands of the role, or the season.

A 'typical' Sustrans volunteer tends to be male from a White ethnic background, and most commonly residing in England. They are more than likely to be over 41 years of age, with a substantial number aged over 56. Sustrans volunteers tend to be retired or in full time employment. A large proportion of the volunteers have been with Sustrans for more than three years, though Sustrans could be said to be successful in attracting new volunteers as there are also a significant number who have been involved for less than a year.

The main motivation Sustrans' volunteers cite for being involved is an interest in cycling, and other popular reasons include supporting Sustrans in their aims and objectives, a concern for the environment and to make a difference to the local community.

A number of Sustrans volunteers have commented on the valuable skills they have gained through volunteering such as the ability to work as a team, as well as skills acquired through some of the training offered by Sustrans. For some this assisted in gaining further employment.

3.1.2 Volunteers in Ashington

There were 48 registered volunteers associated with the Active in Ashington project from its inception to the time of writing. New volunteers were engaging with Active in Ashington in each year of its existence, though over half became involved during 2009 (Table 3-1). There was a wide range of ages of volunteers in Active in Ashington, particularly in comparison with the national data (see Section 3.1.1). The volunteers at Active in Ashington were predominantly male (Table 3-2); this corresponds with the Sustrans national volunteer set, and with the gender balance of the interviewees. Most volunteers with the project were aged between 45 and 54, and this is the main age group that the interviewed volunteers fell into (Table 3-3).

Table 3-1 Year volunteers first engaged with Active in Ashington

Year	Count	Percent
2008	14	29.2
2009	27	56.2
2010	7	14.6
Total	48	100.00

Source: Sustrans RMU, travelactivelydata.org.uk

Table 3-2 Gender breakdown of volunteers

Gender	Count	Percent
Male	41	85.4
Female	7	14.6
Total	48	100.0

Source: Sustrans RMU, travelactivelydata.org.uk

Table 3-3 Age of volunteers

Age group	Count	Percent
16-24	12	25.0
25-34	3	6.2
35-44	7	14.6
45-54	14	29.2
55-64	6	12.5
not given	6	12.5
Total	48	100.0

Source: Sustrans RMU, travelactivelydata.org.uk

Table 3-4 Volunteers achieving recommended levels of physical activity and active travel

	At least 30 minutes physical activity		At least 10 minutes of active travel	
	Count	Percent	Count	Percent
Less than 5 days per week	24	50.0	26	54.2
5 or more days per week	22	45.8	20	41.7
No data	2	4.2	2	4.2
Total	48	100.0	48	100.0

Source: Sustrans RMU, travelactivelydata.org.uk

Table 3-4 shows that for volunteers for whom data were available, a small majority were not meeting the recommended minimums of physical activity and active travel at the time they registered with the project. This is a good reflection of the mix of both very active and less active backgrounds of the volunteers that were interviewed.

Data were also collected about health problems of Active in Ashington volunteers. 18 separate individuals reported having at least one medical problem, which included both physical and mental health issues.

3.2 Volunteer activities

This section of the report aims to highlight what the volunteers in Ashington contributed: the time they gave; what activities they took part in and what exactly this involved; their availability and commitment; the essentiality of what they do; and the mutual dependence of and on the project staff.

The interviewed volunteers had taken part in the full range of activities offered by the project (see section 2.1). Some were engaged in many activities, while others enjoyed the flexibility of volunteering, and were more selective about their participation. There are some who did a fixed number of hours per week, and others who contributed on an ad hoc basis. Equally some of those interviewed had been with the project for a number of years, while some had only been volunteering for a few weeks. Some focused on a particular activity, while others contributed to a variety of activities. The choice of activities depended a lot on their personal preferences. Some volunteers had a preference for the technical side, others liked walking or were keen cyclists. There was very positive feedback in terms of participation in community events such as organised cycle rides or information stalls at events, with most of the volunteers saying they liked this aspect, though again there were a wide variety of things to do as part of events, whether in the planning and organising or helping on the day. The volunteers reported that they feel they are essential for the project and that the project depends on them, but also that they relied on the project co-ordinators to enable them to volunteer.

“It was a big event, and it would have been an impossibility without the volunteers.” – Interviewee 3

[Answering: “do you rely on the project staff?”] “Definitely, yes. Yes, you would need their input to keep it going.” –Interviewee 8

3.3 Volunteers’ motivations and background

Many of the Active in Ashington volunteers had vastly different backgrounds, motivations, skills, and reasons for their participation, and while some lived very locally, others were from the surrounding areas around the town. All of the interviewed volunteers were over 35, with the majority in their 40s and 50s. Some of the interviewees were retired, some in employment, and some unemployed, with a vast range of backgrounds and life experiences.

The interviewees first got involved with volunteering in a variety of ways, though for most they took part in project activities first, such as taking part in health walks or led rides, and were actively recruited as volunteers from this by the project staff. Interviewees found out about the project from a range of sources, including Wansbeck Centre for Voluntary Services, adverts in the local press, recommendations from health professionals, and word of mouth.

“I started off just as walking and from there it was suggested to me that maybe I would like to become a walk leader.” –Interviewee 2

“I had high cholesterol and it was actually my health trainer told me about Sustrans [...] so I started going on the bike rides, and then me and Adam were talking and I came along to help out.” –*Interviewee 8*

“I got involved with Sustrans through my dietician [...] I needed to lose a **lot** of weight, so I popped along here [...] I had loads of spare time and I needed to fill it and Mark said he needed volunteers so I said yeah you can have as much time as you need. So that was it.” –*Interviewee 4*

“I was talking to the lad [at the Job Centre] and he knew I wasn’t ready for work, so he asked me if I would like to volunteer to do something. So I went up to voluntary services and this was one of the places. So I came down to see Mark and just went from there, I really enjoyed it.” –*Interviewee 7*

There was an interesting mix of skills, experiences and interests among the volunteers. They included both avid cyclists and non cyclists, and local residents and those from outside the immediate area. Many of the interviewees became involved with Active in Ashington at a time of important changes in lifestyle and circumstances, including retirement and redundancy, divorce, moving home, and having children ‘fly the nest’. While their motivations for volunteering all varied, it was clear that all the volunteers interviewed did have strong motivations for taking part. Some wanted to fill time, give back to the community or develop their own skills and experiences, and others were particularly keen to share the messages of the project in terms of the benefits of active travel to promote healthier lifestyles. Two of the volunteers in particular talked about their own experiences with ill health, both physical and mental health, and the role of this in them engaging with the project initially and how it allows them to empathise with other project participants.

“[A participant] who was on the walk with us, he’s had several heart attacks, and he was very lacking confidence and he just said oh I can’t do that, I can’t do that, and I said what’s the problem, and then he explained to me that he’d had heart problems, and I said oh, right, well I’ve had 7 heart attacks, and he went ‘How many?!’ and he said well you’re doing alright, and I said, well, exercise helps, and it gets your breathing right.” –*Interviewee 4*

For many, enjoyment of the activities they were involved in was also a contributing factor, for example enjoying walking, undertaking bike maintenance or repair, or events. Some of the volunteers had particular employment histories that focused their interest in different aspects of the project, for example those with technical and engineering backgrounds linked strongly to an interest in bike maintenance. Other backgrounds included a history of social work and youth work, sparking an interest in working with communities, whilst another was from a customer facing employment background and therefore enjoyed the opportunities to interact with people through the project. These differing experiences and employment histories meant that the volunteers brought a range of skills to the project.

“I do have very good organisational skills.” –*Interviewee 3*

“I’ve probably got good people management skills because of the area that I work within.” –*Interviewee 2*

“I think you can have the personal characteristics within you because it’s a bit like management skills, leadership skills, organisational skills and with those strengths that you have you make them stronger.” –*Interviewee 2*

The skills that the volunteers brought to the project combined a mixture of learned skills, such as leadership and people management, while others were more natural attributes such as organisation and an affinity for working with children. Many had learned new skills from the project, discussed later in this report (see section 4.1.1), and the desire to use and further develop existing skills was a common motivation for volunteering.

“I’ve got a wide variety of skills that I can deliver to the community and I’m looking to develop that even further.” –*Interviewee 1*

“And there’s the aspect of learning a new skill or expanding the skills, so that’s very good, very satisfying.” –*Interviewee 9*

“Being a volunteer is twofold really it’s allowed me to develop my skills, i.e. the mechanics course, its allowed me to look at maybe taking groups out on bikes and maybe to help one day with some of the organisation of bigger events.” –*Interviewee 3*

Some were motivated by contributing to their community. There was a strong recognition amongst the volunteers interviewed that the community of Ashington was inactive, and unhealthy, and they were aware of the socio-economic challenges of the area. They all saw engagement with the project as a benefit for the wider community, and these benefits are discussed later in this report.

“It was also taking an interest I have that I know promotes healthy lifestyles into disadvantaged parts of the community and encouraging maybe people who live less healthy lifestyles to look at their lifestyles and to maybe become more active and then that has a knock on effect on things like diet, maybes alcohol, maybes tobacco, and possibly even substance misuse as well.” –*Interviewee 3*

4 Volunteering is a two way street...

4.1 Benefits for the volunteers

This section of the report focuses on the benefits that the volunteers themselves gained from the project. These benefits can be grouped into three broad areas: skills, increased physical activity and well-being, and social benefits and enjoyment. Though these are obviously not independent of each other, and also have links to the benefits to the community.

4.1.1 Skills

As previously discussed in Section 3.3, many of the interviewees saw volunteering as an opportunity to learn and develop their skills, both for their own personal development and to increase employability. One volunteer talked about the direct links between his job, in youth work, and his volunteering activities with Sustrans and how the two fed into each other significantly. Another volunteer was unemployed and actively looking for work, and the opportunities to practice and develop existing skills such as management, leadership and organisation, were valuable in this individual’s job search. Other volunteers talked specifically about the new skills that they had learned, including leading walks and cycle rides. There was a strong focus on the specialised skills learned though bike maintenance. The project trained the volunteers in becoming certified bike mechanics, completing accredited Weldtech bike maintenance training. Having volunteers with these skills was invaluable to the project being able to provide bike maintenance sessions to the public on Thursday night Dr Bike sessions, and at community events, and also to recondition donated bikes, which enables them to loan bikes out.

“I know Sustrans have a lot of bikes on loan and they encourage people to bring in tatty old bikes, [...] people come in with tatty bikes and they go away with road worthy bikes, and it’s allowing some members of the community to become more active, live healthier lifestyles.” –*Interviewee 3*

“They were bringing their bikes in and we were repairing their bikes for them so that they can now use them and become more active and hopefully lose weight and enhance their health.” –*Interviewee 3*

The skills learned also benefited the volunteers through increasing their confidence. In particular one volunteer talked about having learned to cycle as a result of the project and that this new skill and the confidence accompanying it was providing new recreational experiences.

“I can’t ride a bike very well, even though they did teach me here. That was the first time I’d ever been a bike last year, ever. In my whole life. And they actually taught me to ride. So I’m not very confident, but I can ride, just. And that’s something else that they’ve given me a new insight into.” –*Interviewee 2*

4.1.2 Physical activity and well-being

Opportunities to increase physical activity were another major benefit to the volunteers. While some of the volunteers were very active in their personal lives and keen on exercising, others were not, and all talked about ways in which volunteering with Active in Ashington had increased their opportunities for physical activity both directly and indirectly. Physical activity was directly increased for volunteers who took part in led rides and walks, as they were not previously doing these activities. More indirect benefits included learning or rediscovering cycling skills and confidence, or having access to bikes even when they did not have the means to buy one.

“I haven’t actually got my own bike. Adam, is going to try and set me up with a bike.” –
Interviewee 6

“It [volunteering] gives me something to do and keeps me active.” –*Interviewee 4*

For some of the interviewees, the opportunity to do physical activity had benefits on their quality of life. Two people mentioned the benefits of volunteering on their mental and physical health, through increased physical activity and social interaction. One individual had recently been unable to take part in volunteering due to physical health problems, and discussed how this had directly contributed to a period of poor mental health.

“My back’s been really, really bad, so I haven’t been able to get out with Sustrans walking or biking. And when you’re lying in bed not feeling well your mind just goes all the time. And it’s always the negative things that come out, there’s nothing positive at all, and you’re just on a rollercoaster all the time, and you can’t get off it.” –*Interviewee 7*

The individual talked about his reluctance to interact socially, and that this had been significantly helped through increasing his social network through volunteering.

“Until I started volunteering with Sustrans I’d go up the street and I wouldn’t talk to anybody.” –
Interviewee 7

4.1.3 Social benefits

The social benefits that the interviewees talked about gaining from volunteering related to widening their social networks with new connections, strengthening existing social networks with increased interaction, improvement of family bonds, and getting a support system from the activities and from project staff, which has been particularly important for those who were experiencing lifestyle changes.

The interviewees talked about meeting new people, and in some cases feeling closer to their community as a result of volunteering with the project. This was particularly significant for one volunteer who was new to the area, and discussed how the project had,

“Brought me closer to the people in Ashington and it’s brought me some good friends here [...] I think that this is actually home.” –*Interviewee 2*

Another volunteer talked about the new skills learned in relation to bike maintenance, which were strengthening existing connections between friends, family and neighbours as he was sharing his

new skills within this group. While yet another talked about passing on his knowledge to his child, and how this was something they both enjoyed.

“The idea to be able to fix it or even at times watch my son and show him what I’ve learnt: it comes out good for me; it comes out good for him.” –*Interviewee 6*

As well as helping to overcome the challenges of moving to a new area, volunteering with the project helped provide opportunities for constructive use of free time following retirement, including retirement associated with ill health. One volunteer talked about the social connections recreating those of employment, and another talked about having the social support of the project staff and that they were people he felt he could talk to about his problems, even when he felt unable to open up to his family.

“Once when you retire from work you lose a whole raft of everyday social contact. So this is a rebirth of that.” –*Interviewee 9*

“It’s easier to talk to a stranger than it is to talk to your family, very easy. I know for a fact if I came down to talk to Adam, that wouldn’t be a problem there. I could phone Mark and talk to Mark, not a problem.” –*Interviewee 7*

Another main benefit of the volunteering for the interviewees was the enjoyment that they got from it. Some of them simply enjoyed the activities, such as leading walks, while others enjoyed the opportunities for social interaction or learning that came from this. Several of the interviewees talked about their happiness in relation to volunteering, and being around friendly people, doing something useful with free time, and enjoyed seeing happy faces, and the enjoyment and sense of satisfaction from knowing they were doing good work in the community, and allowing more people the opportunity to have good times.

“The people are quite friendly.” –*Interviewee 9*

“I enjoy doing what I do, does that make sense? I enjoy taking people out for walks, I enjoy all that.” –*Interviewee 2*

“It’s like a big buzz to me seeing those people happy. Because like you say, all these people walking around sad and all that, and it’s nice just to put a smile on people’s faces, which is a big thing, yes.” –*Interviewee 8*

4.2 Benefits for the community of project volunteers

The interviewees were also very aware of and keen to discuss the benefits of the project and their volunteering on the wider community, and this was tied in with an awareness of the characteristics and problems affecting the community.

Just as the volunteers gained benefits from volunteering, so the community experienced benefits from their work as well.

“I think it’s everything, you know, it’s the whole package and every individual walk is different, but I think the benefits are always there and the benefits are always the same and it’s about the socialisation, it’s about the health it’s about their getting fit, it’s about their sense of achievement as well and I think that’s probably got to be a big thing, is the fact that they’ve actually gotten out there and done something, you know.” –*Interviewee 2*

4.2.1 Mobility and accessibility: transport and social equality

The volunteers talked about ways in which they had benefitted the community through their work. In particular they focused on the increased opportunities for local people. Wansbeck has lower than average levels of car ownership (see Section 2.2), and people without access to a car can often be

isolated and deprived of services or social opportunities, and by increasing their awareness of opportunities for active travel, the volunteers helped to overcome this barrier. One volunteer highlighted how this was particularly relevant for children, including the importance of cycling to share common experiences with their peers and to increase their personal freedom.

“It’s the feel of freedom [children] get. Go places, further, faster, being with friends, that they’ve never been able to hang out with because they’ve had a bike and they’ve haven’t.” – *Interviewee 1*

4.2.2 Community cohesion, health and well-being

The volunteers also discussed the opportunities for socialisation within the community, thus promoting community cohesion, that were created through led walks and rides, with one volunteer highlighting that some people in the community, particularly women, were afraid of walking alone. The activities run or assisted by the volunteers also helped increase the physical activity of the community, sometimes with previously very inactive groups. The improvements this brought to their physical and mental well-being were invaluable to the community.

“I’m finding, that these type of people, and especially women, are frightened to walk on their own.” – *Interviewee 2*

Indeed volunteers frequently highlighted seeing improvements in walking and cycling groups after a few weeks of participation, both in terms of the distances they were able to cover, and the confidence and enjoyment the groups were getting from it.

“You can see the difference in the groups that we’ve done for 4 weeks. Seeing the difference in them and how they’ve been getting fitter and things like that [...] because we increase the walks and we increase the distance and do different terrains and things like that, or we might do a long walk, [...] they really enjoy doing something like that. But you can see a difference in them.” – *Interviewee 2*

One volunteer highlighted that participants in led rides and walks were mainly adults, while Dr Bike sessions were better attended by children and young people. Another drew attention to his experiences of working with children and families and the importance of engaging with the whole family to instil values of a healthy lifestyle, and that through doing this, stronger family bonds could develop. He also pointed out that by giving some purpose to young people in the area; by creating opportunities for them to learn new skills like bike maintenance, they were reducing the chances of them being involved in anti-social behaviour.

“It’s a fantastic feeling knowing [...] I am informed enough to give them advice and guidance and steer them in the right direction, raise their aspirations and give them a bit of direction, a bit of purpose. Give them something to do to keep them off the street.” – *Interviewee 1*

The volunteers interviewed cited many examples of the thanks and support that they received from the community and while there were one or two frustrations aired by people not taking up opportunities that would benefit them, on the whole the reported response seemed to have been positive in the community. The community also appreciate the volunteers and the work they do. Volunteers reported getting a sense of enjoyment and well-being from this approval, and the participants’ thanks.

“At least three quarters of the public that come are very, very appreciative.” – *Interviewee 9*

Indeed the services provided by the volunteers were viewed as essential to the community by the volunteers interviewed.

“I think Sustrans and the way it delivers a service in Wansbeck would absolutely struggle without the volunteers.” – *Interviewee 3*

“I think the town as a whole will benefit hugely from the continuance of this sort of project.” –
Interviewee 9

Empathy allowed volunteers to engage with the local community in ways that the project staff were perhaps less able to. Interviewed volunteers reported that the community is dependent on them; as one interviewee pointed out, the volunteers have the motivation to go out and help the community, (see quote from Interviewee 1 at the beginning of this report).

One volunteer highlighted that all communities will have volunteers and it is the quality and characteristics of those volunteers that determine how useful they can be in helping that community.

“I think that whichever community that you go to, you will always have volunteers. It depends on those volunteers and what they help out with.” –*Interviewee 2*

Volunteers were also able to feed their knowledge and experience gained from the project into other community work with schools and youth groups.

5 Ashington and its future...

The locale of Ashington is regarded throughout the region as an area of deprivation (see supporting data in Section 2). Many of the volunteers talked about the character of the area, its decline and deprivation following the closure of the pits, and the loss of the supporting and surrounding industries. There was a strong recognition of the problems in the area and the challenges that needed to be overcome. They saw that Ashington was an area that could benefit from the project activities and from their volunteering in terms of overcoming inactivity, with associated low levels of physical and mental well-being, and from increased social cohesion and interaction with the surrounding environment. Some of the volunteers had their own direct experiences of ill health, physical and mental, and used this ability to empathise with the community in their roles as volunteers.

“I think that there is parts of the community where that cohesion is still evident, just maybe not as much as it was and no doubt that projects such as this will increase that cohesion.” –
Interviewee 3

One volunteer talked about his experiences in working with the community through his employment and in particular highlighted that there were higher than average numbers of children eligible for free school meals, and that some families showed little interest in family activities, and one interviewee reported that,

“I’ve come across a lot of people who have become part of the benefits culture. There’s the expectation that they will get money, they will get a house, paid for by the state and if they didn’t they would be homeless.” –*Interviewee 3*

“I know that there’s so much hardship in Ashington and a lot of young people may not have the means to access a bicycle. There’s a lot of unemployment in the area. And it’s an area that I’ve grown up in you know Ashington more or less born and bred in the area and I’ve lived here all my life and I’ve seen quite a decline in the last 20 years with industry declining, factories, shops shut.” –*Interviewee 3*

Several volunteers also talked about the area in terms of the current economic and political situation, in terms of both ongoing low employment, and public spending cuts. It was the belief of one volunteer that the situation in Ashington would definitely get worse because of the recession, and another talked about the cuts in public spending leading to increased crime and poverty levels, and increased incidences of drug, alcohol and sexual abuse, and that the costs through increased policing and prisons as a result of this would cost more than the cuts would save.

“If the government is going to take from them all the time, then that’s not going to happen; crime figures are going to go up poverty’s going to go up drug abuse, alcohol abuse, and sexual abuse is all going to go up. And it’s going to cost them more in policing, and prisons and offenders institutes, and it’s a massive circle.” –*Interviewee 1*

The lack of employment opportunities was seen by many of the interviewees as a key factor for the problems in the community. They reported that there were still ongoing family resentments from the closure of the pits, and that although new business parks had been built, and some small industries had moved in, that this was not enough to recreate the mass employment that mining and its supply industries provided. Indeed, one volunteer highlighted that unemployment was worse among men than women, an observation supported by the census data. The lack of employment opportunities is a severe cause of social problems in the area, and one volunteer talked about some public areas being taken over by drug users, depriving children of safe play spaces. Also, with there being no employment opportunities, economically active people are likely to move out of the area, leaving behind the old and young, and other economically inactive groups. Other problems in Ashington which were discussed by volunteers included higher than average numbers of single parent families, obesity and childhood obesity. It is in sharp contrast with some of its more affluent neighbours, for example the town of Morpeth just 5 miles away.

“It’s a big vicious circle. Because they need investment, I think that there’s a good resource of skills here. And it’s going to waste. And if they’re not careful then the young’uns, who are going to college, university, learning these new skills, they’re going to move away, and all that’s going to be left are old people in bungalows. With nothing, it’s going to be a ghost town.” –*Interviewee 1*

This physical inactivity and problems with obesity mean that the area has obvious opportunity to gain from having a project like Active in Ashington, and indeed the volunteers support and input to the project are essential for its effectiveness and delivery. Without the input of volunteers the project would not be able to reach as many people or be as effective. The work some volunteers do with regards to reconditioning and repairing donated bikes allows people who do not have the means to purchase a bike to have access to transport through bike loans, which may help connect them to social and economic opportunities, and will also contribute to their health and well-being.

Despite some of the problems of the town, the volunteers said in the interviews that there was a good sense of community spirit in Ashington and a desire for the area to be better. One also highlighted that some of the problems were found everywhere, such as children playing indoors more than they used to. There was overwhelming agreement among the interviewed volunteers that the area would benefit from the continuation of the project in the future.

“I don’t see there being any progress socio-economically in Ashington. I don’t see there being any change at all. It’s hoped that projects such as this can maybe benefit and hand a lifeline to some people.” –*Interviewee 3*

5.1 Suggestions for the future of the project

This section of the report discusses some of the opportunities and challenges for the future of the project that the volunteers highlighted. These suggestions can be grouped into three broad themes, extension of activities, increased autonomy, and raising the project profile.

5.1.1 Extension of activities

There was strong feeling about expanding the activities that Active in Ashington provided, both through diversifying into a wider range of activities, orienteering in particular was mentioned by two interviewees, but also taking the project to a wider geographical area, which included the surrounding towns and villages which had once been economically linked to Ashington, such as

Lynemouth and Pegswood. As one of the volunteers was involved in youth work he talked about the active links between his work in education, and his work with Sustrans, and while the two influenced each other, he expressed some frustration that he was not able to adapt more Active in Ashington activities for an educational setting, due to organisational resistance from the schools and groups he worked with. One volunteer did also acknowledge that the limited staff numbers meant they would not necessarily be able to deliver all that they wanted to.

“I think they could probably publicise themselves more effectively. They have to be careful with that because it might give them too much demand on the services.” *–Interviewee 9*

5.1.2 Increased autonomy

Volunteers also talked extensively about their personal aspirations in terms of project activities, demonstrating that they now feel a sense of ownership of the project and their role within it. Many of them were keen to do more with the project, either in terms of assisting with new and different activities, or through having more autonomy and responsibility within existing activities. They were keen to learn new skills, or contribute more of their existing skills to help the project. Bike mechanics in particular were keen to finish their qualifications so that they could work with less supervision. One volunteer did point out the down side of being a volunteer is that,

“Taking that responsibility when you’re not officially part of an organisation can be quite daunting.” *–Interviewee 2*

And certainly the legitimacy given by being part of an official organisation with paid staff was acknowledged as being key to the delivery of project activities.

“I think if they left, how can I put it ... if [the project staff] left at times you wouldn’t know what to do [...] people know who they are.” *–Interviewee 6*

Events organising was particularly highlighted as an area of interest by several of the volunteers, particularly as they seemed to enjoy having helped at events because of the interaction with large groups and good opportunities for community feedback.

5.1.3 Raising project profile

Raising community awareness was seen as a necessary area for development for many of the volunteers, and the third grouping of ideas and feedback relate to increasing the profile of the project.

“So a few sponsored bike rides, getting a few companies actually involved, with a bit of sponsoring, all PR. Twist a few arms. Businesses, nice posh businesses, get them involved. After a while, after hassling them, I’ve got a fax machine, I’m sure I could send them loads of faxes like until they get peed off. But it’s what it’s all about.” *–Interviewee 8*

Focus on: Widdrington Walkers

As part of this research a focus group was carried out with a volunteer-led walking group in the nearby village of Widdrington Station. It reflected many of the narratives discussed by the volunteers, but due to the separate nature of the group, which is solely volunteer-led, the context is distinct from that of the volunteers who have regular contact with and direction from the project staff. Nonetheless many of the same issues arose during this discussion.

The group is comprised of older female participants, though initially there were also some male group members. While not all regular members of the walking group took part in the research, the experiences of those who were absent were also discussed to a certain extent by the women who were there.

The group is run from a community centre in Widdrington Station, the Area Training and Activity Centre (ATAC), and is one of a range of activities available to the community. Most of the participants got involved through an existing experience with the ATAC for other events and activities. The group started when one member saw an advert for walk leader training, and took part. Sustrans took the group walking on a four week programme, after which the walkers were given walk leader training and the group has been completely independently run since.

“Those four weeks were really good, weren’t they, because they showed us some walks that we could use subsequently, and they showed us how to do it really, Mary, she always had a backstop and a leader.” –Focus group participant

As is perhaps to be expected given the social nature of many people’s involvements, it was the social benefits of the group that many of the women focused on. They talked about their experiences with isolation, including one woman who discussed having had to care for an ill partner, and then further isolation after being widowed.

“I lost my husband four and a half years ago now, and it took me a long time to go out and just ... Once I’ve come in I’ve thoroughly enjoyed it and I just wish I’d done it long before.[...] Since I retired and of course my husband died, the family are away, it’s very isolating getting older. [Because of the group] I meet people; you find out that other people have much the same problems as yourself when you’re chatting.” –Focus group participant

Other participants also talked about their experiences with isolation, and the community divide in the village between ‘old’ and ‘new’ residents, with new residents being resented by some of the old residents. There was strong geographic divide between these groups of residents, on either side of the railway line, but there were walking group members from both sides of this divide, showing the potential for increased community cohesion.

“It is a village divided. There’s a railway line runs through the middle, if you live on this side of the railway line, pardon me, but you’re rich. If you live on the other side of the line, they were the poor ones. There’s always been that divide. And I mean don’t get me wrong, I’m not a snob [...] but it’s from their side that the snobbery comes, they think we’re snobby, but we’re not!” –Focus group participant

“There’s this core in the middle who think newcomers are just here to stir up trouble. [They think that] If you haven’t been born, bred and lived in the village all your life then you’re just trying to do something that the village doesn’t want.” –Focus group participant

In addition to these wider community restrictions, one woman brought up cultural and generational issues: that it felt odd sometimes to walk somewhere alone with no purpose, and no dog or pram, and that it was not regarded as the done thing for women when she was younger. Many of the other women in the group agreed with this assessment as one of the barriers to them walking

more.

“I just enjoyed it, just the exercise really was ... because when you’re on your own you don’t want to walk on your own unless you’ve got a pram or a dog!” –*Focus group participant*

“That’s a generational thing though, isn’t it? I mean when I was growing women did not walk out on their own; you didn’t go for walks on your own.” –*Focus group participant*

“[One participant] It’s not that I’m frightened to go on my own, not frightened at all, I just don’t feel ...” “[Another participant] We just don’t feel it’s right.” –*Focus group participants*

As well as being an important social resource the women discussed experiences of improved physical and mental well-being as a result of the walks. All of the women in the focus group were aged 60 or more, and some of them talked about having, largely age-related, ill health. They had found that the walks improved their sense of mental well-being in particular, but also commented that over different weeks they had done longer walks, which they had not previously anticipated being able to achieve.

“It’s not too strenuous, but it is health giving, isn’t it? Emotionally and physically.” –*Focus group participant*

As part of the focus group, the women were asked to rate their well-being on a scale of 1-10 before and after they took part in the walks. All five of the focus group participants reported an increased sense of well-being after taking part in the project, and for two of the participants, this was an increase from one to 10.

They talked about the importance of the social aspect in helping them feel motivated and to achieve the walking as they found that they did not worry about how far they were going as they were distracted by talking to one another. They also cited the support and reassurance of walking in a group, for example if they were injured.

“We want to do things and keep active and be social, and it’s absolutely great for us.” –*Focus group participant*

Several of the group members had had training in walk leadership through Active in Ashington, though not all of them were yet confident enough to organise and lead walks, and preferred to be the ‘backstop’; a supporting role, ensuring no one is left behind on the walk.

Aside from access to this training, and some assistance with initial set up, the group has had no further input from Sustrans. While the volunteers do keep in contact with the project staff, it is dependent solely upon the volunteers to enable them to live more active, healthier lifestyles, through increased physical activity and increased physical and mental well-being.

6 Conclusion

It is clear from this research that the involvement of volunteers within a community based project can lead to positive impacts on both that community and the volunteers themselves.

The research, carried out with a diverse range of volunteers from the Active in Ashington project, shows that even though volunteers came from a variety of different backgrounds, personal experiences and skills, they were all very motivated, and shared a common enthusiasm for the project.

The volunteers contributed to a range of different activities, getting involved with walking and cycling, and planning and admin as well as delivery of these activities. Many of the activities run by the project, particularly events and bike maintenance, would not have been possible without the help of these volunteers. Volunteers do, however, also rely on the project staff for support, just as much as the project staff rely on them; they are mutually dependent on one another.

The volunteers gained substantial benefits from their work with the project. They developed existing skills, and learned new ones; they have increased opportunities for their own physical activity, and gained the mental and physical well-being benefits of this. Volunteers also gained a sense of achievement and enjoyment, in helping the community and interacting with people socially through their volunteering.

The community also gained from the work the volunteers do. By engaging with the project the community gained opportunities to increase physical activity, and the associated well-being benefits this brought. They also got increased social opportunities through the project activities, and this was particularly important to some isolated groups within the community. The volunteers contributed to the quantity and quality of the activities provided, often being able to share their own experiences with participants, to empathise with them on a greater level than perhaps the project staff could.

Ashington itself suffers from high unemployment, low physical activity levels, and from related social problems as a result of this. There was strong recognition among the interviewees that the community was in need of investment to create employment. They were also keen to discuss the ways in which the project and their contributions could help overcome the problems in the area, which many felt would be worsened by the current economic and political climate. The volunteers were also enthusiastic about further ways the project could help, and ways in which activities could expand.

It is clear from this research as a whole that the work that the volunteers in Ashington do has significant benefits for themselves and for the community, and while it is in part reliant on the project staff, this research shows that volunteers at Active in Ashington help contribute to healthier lifestyles.