

Achill GAA Club, Mayo

‘The Loop Walkers’

Achill is located on the west coast of Mayo and has a total population of approximately 3,000 people. The vast majority of the parish natives aged 18-34 years live away from Achill and this coupled with a general decline in rural population has seen Achill GAA Club fall on challenging times. However a new initiative ‘The Loop Walkers’, aims to include people from the wider community whilst providing a structured social outlet for people with a focus on inclusivity and general health and wellbeing.

During the initial stages the Healthy Club Project Team consulted with Mindspace Mayo who specialise in young people and their families’ mental health matters. They also teamed up with Mayo Sports Partnership and Get Ireland Walking. With 2 registered Group Walk Leaders ready to go within the club the cost neutral project was a “no brainer” for Achill GAA. With 14 existing stunning Loop Walks in the area local community groups were only too happy to welcome the walkers to their villages and to provide post-walk refreshments in their local community centres, keeping the cost of the project to a minimum. Before they knew it they were established and tagged as “The Loopers!”

For Achill GAA inclusivity and health and wellbeing are the cornerstones on which the project is based. The project team developed a registration document for use as both a data collection tool and as a means of encouraging motivation and commitment to the programme as a whole. It also promoted a sense of belonging and inclusion for participants.

The first Walk & Talk took place on February 21st, 2016 and to date all of the 14 Loop Walks have been completed. The walk itself lasts 30-40 minutes and is suitably paced to facilitate chatting along the way. News and views are exchanged before light refreshments are enjoyed by all at the terminus.

Historically, the GAA Club in Achill has always been perceived as being for footballers. One of the aims of the Loop Walkers project is to promote the GAA Club as being open to and welcoming of all members of the community. The club’s ethos is that everyone has something to offer. Currently average participation in the walks is 80 people with adult participation of approximately 70%.

The walks have welcomed participants from both within and outside of the GAA Club and it would seem apparent at this point that the GAA Club is becoming recognised as an having an open door to people of all ages and capabilities regardless of footballing talents.

Quotes

“I’ve lived in Achill all my life and never walked in this village”

“I never walked in any organised walk before the Loopers but now I see I’m well able.”

“My son (22) wouldn’t be the most confident but this has brought him out of his shell”