



“ We’re helping people to see the benefits for their health and mental wellbeing. ”

Dr Ruth Hunter  
UKCRC Centre of Excellence for Public Health Northern Ireland,  
School of Medicine, Dentistry and Biomedical Sciences

# THE PARC STUDY MESSAGE: LET'S GET PHYSICAL

Dr Ruth Hunter is passionate about exercise and physical activity. She spent seven years as physiotherapist to Glentoran Football Club, as well as working with the Northern Ireland football and netball squads. Then, in 2012, she was invited to be part of the team of experts on hand at the athletes’ village during the London Olympics – ‘which was brilliant.’

She has also brought her enthusiasm to another role. She is Project Manager of the PARC Study – Physical Activity and Regeneration of Connswater – helping to promote physical activity and lifestyle changes for people living within a major Belfast regeneration project. The study has been developed through the Centre for Public Health and the UKCRC Centre of Excellence for Public Health, where Ruth is a Research Fellow, working with Professor Frank Kee.

She says, ‘My undergraduate degree was in physiotherapy and my PhD was in physical

activity for people with chronic low back pain. But I’d always had an interest in moving beyond clinical populations, looking at whole populations, to see how we can prevent people getting these conditions in the first place.’

Ruth manages the £1.2m grant which is funded by the National Prevention Research Initiative to evaluate the public health impact of the Connswater Community Greenway. Being developed at a cost of £35m, the Greenway will connect 379 acres of public open space, improving the lives of 40,000 people and giving them enhanced opportunities for a healthier lifestyle.

Ruth’s success in engaging with the community led to her winning the Vice-Chancellor’s Early Career Researcher Impact Prize in 2013.

This has been followed by further success – a major award which will give her exciting international research opportunities. As a winner of a National Institute for Health Research Career Development Fellowship, she is embarking on a three-year study of the impact of social networks in changing people’s physical activity behaviour, involving placements at

Harvard, the Universities of Southern California and Cambridge.

She says, ‘There are two aspects to my job. One is getting people interested in the research and the other is getting them to see this huge investment in East Belfast as a resource for them – to get people out and become more active so that they can see the benefits for their health, for their mental wellbeing and in terms of social support.’

The first phase of the project was opened in April 2014 – a bridge linking Victoria Park to the Harbour Estate. ‘That was very exciting. Spending time with the local people, you do get caught up in it all and the potential it has.

‘The study has a strong community ethos. We put reports on the Greenway website, we write in local news sheets, we speak at the Greenway stakeholders’ forum and at politicians’ breakfasts.

‘We’re half way through the study. It began with an evaluation of local residents and their physical activity levels, their health, what they thought of the local environment, and we’ll repeat that when the Greenway’s finished in

order to see what actual public health impact it’s had.’

Ruth acknowledges the benefits for her as an academic. ‘I’m working with a wide range of people – sociologists, psychologists, planners, computer scientists, mathematicians, economists. That doesn’t always happen.

‘For us, the message of the Greenway is about public health and physical activity. Other people see it as a chance to increase tourism in the area, some see the biodiversity and ecology aspect. It’s about a great many things.

‘We have a number of exciting projects that we’re working on, including the development of a novel physical activity loyalty scheme. I really enjoy what I’m doing. It’s a model for all public health interventions. It’s great to see people buying into it and you can actually see the difference you’re making.’