

What motivates people to participate in organised walking activity?

Natural England's Walking for Health scheme is the largest national body promoting and setting the standards for led health walks. WfH aims to encourage people to take regular short health walks in their local communities, particularly sedentary people and those in relatively poor health.

We are currently developing an initiative to enable WfH participants who have moved through starter and intermediate walks to progress onto more vigorous activity, including longer walks and other activities in the natural environment such as volunteering. The programme will offer a structured pathway for sustainable behaviour change, leading to continuing contact between participants and the natural environment. Over the next 3 years (2009 - 2012) we will also be working in partnership with the Department of Health to achieve a four-fold expansion of participation in WfH. The main aims are to help tackle health problems associated with modern lifestyles where people often take too little exercise and to help people develop an appreciation of their local natural environment.

In order to effectively develop and deliver both the WfH Progression and WfH expansion programme there is a need to gain a greater understanding of why people walk and their experiences of organised walking activity.

What was done

A small scale qualitative study, led by researchers from Natural England, was carried out in March 2009. Four focus groups, comprising of 29 WfH participants, were held to explore peoples motivations for participating in organised walking activity in particular:

- why people start walking with organised walking groups;
- what keeps people walking with organised walking groups;
- what people particularly like/dislike about certain types of walks; and
- what types of walk people would like to do more of.

Each focus group was audio recorded and the recordings transcribed. The transcripts were

reviewed and analysed in order to draw out the range of views and common themes.

Results and conclusions

The results of our study show that overall social contact is the key motivator for participation in organised walking activity. However, the combination of social contact; improving health; and enjoying the natural environment; coupled with the external influences of lifestyle and background, effects both initial and sustained participation in organised walking activity.

Being out in the natural environment and discovering new places is important for WfH participants: both progression and expansion activities need to focus on developing participants connection with the natural environment by providing more

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opportunities for close contact with nature; increasing knowledge and awareness of the environment and environmental issues; and encouraging sustainable behaviours.

The current profile of WfH participants, walk types and walk timings may all be factors in preventing a wider range of people to get involved: both progression and expansion activities need to consider how to broaden opportunities for participation and the integration of new members.

Natural England's viewpoint

This report is relevant to Natural England's Outcome 2 objectives:

- People fully understand and value the contribution of the natural environment to the quality of our life.
- People increasingly take action to enhance the natural environment.
- People have places to access and enjoy a high quality natural environment.

This report provides an insight into why people walk, what this means and the implications for both WfH Progression and Expansion Programmes. The report will be of use to both national and regional colleagues working on WfH within Natural England. It will help inform development and delivery of both the WfH Progression and WfH expansion programmes.

Selected references

ASHLEY AND BARTLETT (2001). An evaluation of a walking scheme based in primary care: the participants' perspective. Primary Health Care Research & Development, 2 , pp 98-106
doi:10.1191/146342301678787049.

Further information

For the full details of the research covered by this information note see Natural England Research Report NERR028 - *What motivates people to participate in organised walking activity?*

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