

Who took part in Walking for Health?: An analysis of walker demographics April 2008 to March 2010

The Walking for Health (WfH) programme was the largest led walk intervention of its time and one of the largest public health interventions for physical activity in the UK. It aimed to encourage people to take regular short walks in their local communities, in order to increase their levels of physical activity, improve their health, and connect them with their local environment.

Initially set up in 2000 by the Countryside Agency, ownership of WfH transferred to Natural England in 2006. From April 2009 Natural England – working in partnership with the Department of Health – embarked on a three-year expansion programme for WfH which aimed to increase participation fourfold.

In order to examine the demographic impact of Walking for Health – both generally and during the expansion programme – and inform the delivery of future interventions, there was a need to provide a clear and detailed analysis of who took part.

What was done

The author analysed the demographic data of 50,000 people who took part in WfH between April 2008 and March 2010, as recorded on the online WfH database. The data was analysed in a number of ways: nationally, regionally, year-on-year (ie before and during the expansion programme), and alongside other research. The author then drew out the main conclusions and implications for delivery.

Results and conclusions

The findings show that participants were primarily white, non-disabled females in their early 60s. Participants' ethnicity was largely

representative of the older age groups taking part, but those with a disability or from deprived areas were under-represented. Regionally there were small variations in the gender and age profile of walkers, with bigger differences in other demographics. There was minimal change in the profile of walkers during the first year of the WfH expansion programme. The report concludes that although the profile of WfH participants was well established, there is certainly scope for widening the audience of future interventions.

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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.

It provides insight into the profile of WfH participants – users of their local environment – and will help those involved in the delivery of WfH and similar interventions to identify and address inequalities, and better understand the factors that affect who takes part.

Selected references

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Further information

For the full details of the research covered by this information note see Natural England Research Report NERR041.

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