EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES COMMITTEE
AGE AND SOCIAL ISOLATION
SUBMISSION FROM PATHS FOR ALL

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Paths for All welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Equal Opportunities Committee call for views, from young and older people experiencing isolation and loneliness, and the organisations working to support them. We will limit our comments to those aspects that have direct relevance to the work and objectives of PFA.

BACKGROUND

Paths for All is the national charity promoting walking for health and the development of multi-use path networks. Paths for All’s vision is to create a happier, healthier, greener, more active Scotland.

Paths for All’s (PFA) strategic direction is to increase the proportion of the population who are physically active and ensure that there are conducive environments, where people live, to encourage and sustain this behaviour change. Our work supports the delivery of the National Walking Strategy, community and workplace health walking, path network development and active travel policy development. We are a partnership organisation with 28 national partners.

BEST PRACTICE AND IDEAS TO SHARE ACROSS SCOTLAND

Paths for All supports 134 Health Walk Groups throughout Scotland. These groups support people who have previously been inactive to become physically active though walking, which is the most accessible form of physical activity for most people. (see Fig 1). The walks are less than one hour, run by volunteers, based around their community and offer vital social interactions as well as physical activity opportunities for people who are often inactive and can be lonely.

Fig 1: Walking for Health statistics (2013/4)
Referrals to the walking projects from trusted organisations and professionals will help tackle the issue of loneliness as the walks provide meaningful social interactions. As the research you highlighted from Age UK (2014) would suggest, a percentage of those over 65 are feeling cut off from society, lonely, and would like to get out more. Our own statistics (data we collect from the walking groups we support) shows that 65% of those joining a health walk since January 2014 are 55 years of age or older. Many of our volunteer walk leaders started their journey by a referral to a health walk. Through time, and by gaining confidence, many have then been trained as Volunteer Walk Leaders and now lead walks themselves. The quotes below, from walkers within PFA supported health walks, highlight the impact walking and health walks can have:

‘One of our walkers recently expressed that she didn’t know what she would have done without her walking group: when she first joined she was very anxious and barely left her house, after about 10 weeks she now proudly told us how she had visited the library for the first time in 10 years.’ Glasgow Walk Co-ordinator

‘Being widowed I felt I was getting in a rut and the walking group has enlivened me physically & socially. It is a great way to make new friends. Best thing I have done in years.’ Glasgow walker

Referrals to local walking projects include those from Health Professionals such as GP’s and practice nurses, but could also come from helplines such as Samaritans, Age Scotland, Silverline, Mind and NHS direct. The impact on individuals can be seen almost immediately - the quote below from a now regular walker:

‘When my husband died I went to pieces and for over a year hardly ever left the house I suffered depression and couldn’t cope with my loneliness. When my doctor mentioned that she thought exercise would help I laughed at her, the thought of me in lycra shorts and jumping about to music didn’t appeal to me, then she told me about the new Walking for Health scheme which was being launched in the community centre the following day. I was a bit nervous about going along and asked my sister to go with me. Since that day I haven’t looked back and enjoy meeting up with the group every week, I am also a trained walk leader now and lead walks occasionally. Walking is a great exercise and makes me feel good’
Walker with Step Forth Bo’ness

There is local and national support for organisations to start short walks programmes with service users. The PFA [website](#) provides substantive information on where to find health walking groups, how to start groups, support for health professionals, training etc.

One example of best practice between a referral system and community health walk groups is Inverclyde Gateways. This is a SAMH (Scottish Association for Mental Health) 12 week walking project which is the starting point for some service users who then link in with Inverclyde Globetrotters Walking Network of community walks. Having both systems in place within Inverclyde means that more people are supported to benefit from being a part of something that physically helps them but also socially improves their mental health and associated feelings of loneliness. One of their walkers said:

‘This is the only exercise I get and without this group I would just sit in the house. I am not only fitter in mind but also in body’

Walker with Step Forth Bo’ness

This area of work is not restricted to older adults. Many people of all ages can suffer from isolation and loneliness. New parents, particularly mothers, can also feel isolated. Health Visitor buggy walks in Falkirk have been a great success not only for the parents but also for the support staff, providing a more informal platform to discuss concerns. The health visitor’s team had identified a need for new mums to come together in a way that would benefit them,
physically mentally and socially. Their figures showed that 20% of new mums in the area suffered from depression and feelings of isolation. Health visitors have been able to attend a health walk aimed at new mothers which has in turn helped both the new mothers feel less lonely and isolated and the health visitors have easier contact with them in a friendly and less sterile environment. The Health Visitors can see more service users in one 30 minute walk than if each mother had made an appointment individually.


*I get to talk to other mums and the health visitor during the walks. Even though I’m a second time mum, there’s always something new to discover as no two babies are the same.’*

We know from *Let’s Get Scotland Walking: The National Walking Strategy (2014)* that evidence shows that physical activity can reduce the risk of depression, dementia and Alzheimer’s. It also shows that walking can enhance psychological wellbeing, by improving self-perception and self-esteem, mood and sleep quality, and by reducing levels of anxiety and fatigue.

We hope that we have demonstrated the significant impact that walking can make to a wide range of individuals, of different age groups, who maybe suffering from isolation or loneliness. We have an extensive communications network and work in every local authority area in Scotland. We would be happy to look at how this network could be used to add value to the area that you are discussing. By joining or being referred to a walking group people’s lives can change for the better. *Walking is a very powerful tool!*

We would be happy to discuss this further with the committee.

Rona Gibb
Development Manager
Paths for All
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