

Libraries

Walk ON Programme - Reading and Physical Activity Fife Council

Walking and reading have been shown to have benefits for physical and mental health. An initiative in Fife combines the two in order to reach people who might not usually use the library or take part in physical activity.

Contact for Enquiries

Jennifer Stewart
Service Development Officer &
Walk ON Project Coordinator
jennifer.stewart@onfife.com
01592 583204 ext 460222

Yvonne Melville
Service Development Team Leader
yvonne.melville@onfife.com
01592 5832014

Background

Walk ON is a project which promotes the physical and mental health benefits of walking, reading and sharing books by creating a series of health walks which begin and end at a library, followed by an informal meeting of participants to listen to, chat about and share books in a safe and welcoming environment.

It has long been recognised that reading and walking have a positive effect on mental and physical health. By bringing the two activities together, Walk On connects participants to areas of their communities they may not have accessed before, while creating a supportive group setting for those who have never taken part in a shared reading group before.

Over the five years to 2015, Fife libraries experienced a reduction in both adult satisfaction and visitor numbers. Although progress has been made in reducing the cost per visit, at £3.90 it is still considerably higher than the Scotland average of £2.45. Within its family group, Fife is the second most expensive and considerably above the £3.05 average.



Walk ON was seen as a way to increase library use, especially

among those who didn't use the service already. "Reaching out to people with lower literacy and confidence levels was also an important part of the thinking behind Walk ON and developing the library as a safe, inviting community use space. Although we wanted/expected to increase library users via Walk ON, more important was to reach out to people not currently accessing our services and not currently taking part in any shared reading activities. My remit is reader development and I wanted to develop an activity which had sharing and widening enjoyment of reading at its core," said Jennifer Stewart, Service Development Officer & Walk ON Project Coordinator, Fife Cultural Trust.

Active Fife, a partner in Walk ON, was keen to use the library links to access new participants who were not engaging in physical activity and to offer health walks in communities that may not have access to walks previously. Walk ON health walks are perfect for those with lower physical health levels or mobility problems as the pace of walks is gentle and routes planned accordingly.

Key Activities

Walk ON began with a bid to the Public Library Improvement Fund and sessions began in August 2015. It was originally led by Jennifer Stewart with two other team members from Fife Cultural Trust but as it was rolled out across a number of libraries, they began working with branch library staff to build Walk ON into the core reading activity offer. This involved in getting buy-in from both their own operational managers and the library staff delivering the sessions themselves.

Staff delivering Walk ON receive two training sessions: one on facilitating an informal shared reading group (developed by Fife Cultural Trust) and a Paths For All walk leader training session, delivered by Active Fife.

Since its beginning in August 2015, there have been fortnightly meets in Dalgety Bay and Leven which have attracted participants who are already users of library facilities and those involved with Active Fife, as well as those who are new to both providers. New walks have now been organised for Cowdenbeath, Tayport and Rothes Halls.

Each walk has Volunteer Walk Leaders, who are group members, alongside staff who coordinate. The volunteers have played a crucial role in making the Walk ON experience successful. There have been a range of incentives for new group members:

- Once signing up, each participant receives a reading and walking diary and pen to record thoughts from their walk and the books discussed afterwards.
- After five sessions have been completed by a participant, they receive a handy water bottle to help keep them hydrated on

walks.

- After 10 sessions, each participant receives a branded pedometer to keep track of their steps.
- On completing 15 walks, participants receive a branded rucksack to carry books and food whilst on walks.

Benefits and Impact

Between August 2015 and February 2016, the Dalgety Bay and Leven Walk ON groups held 13 walks each, with 172 and 81 participants respectively.

Non-financial benefits include new library members and increased lending of books (171 books have been issued at the Dalgety Bay and Leven Walk ON sessions).

However, the biggest benefit is the improvement in physical and mental wellbeing of the participants taking part in Walk On sessions. Paths for All estimate that for every £1 invested in health walks, £8 of benefits are generated for society, predominantly through prevention of health problems.

As one member of the Cowndenbeath group said: “You can’t quantify the positive impact Walk ON has on us. I tell my family about it – we talk about books that we’ve discussed and it makes me read books I wouldn’t normally choose. Also, some of us don’t meet many people regularly and this is just brilliant for us. Look at [name removed], for example, see how he’s come on. [Gentleman who was referred by Fife Forum and is also now attending a keep fit class since joining Walk ON.] He’s loving the company and the chat.”

“I’ve got arthritis in my knees but am still coming along because it gets me out the house and the pace is right for me,” said another Walk ON participant

Learning

The staff leading Walk ON sessions have been key in the success of the initiative. Staff buy-in to the initiative and ownership of the groups has meant that groups quickly bedded in.

Staff who are both confident in delivering health walks (in all weathers!) and confident in facilitating an informal group, based on a reading aloud model, are essential.

Library staff have loved the opportunity to go out walking with the groups and the positive effect that this has had on staff mental and physical health was an unexpected benefit of the initiative. There is now a waiting list of staff who want to take part in Walk ON.

The locations for the pilot Walk ON groups were selected by the project team and sessions were delivered by the project

team before being handed over to library staff once they were established. Subsequent groups have been established with library staff input from the beginning, which has meant that library staff in those locations were much more involved and felt they played a part in the development of Walk ON rather than it being an activity imposed on them.

The partnership with Active Fife has worked well. Its free walk leader training for library staff, knowledge of local walking routes and support for aspects such as risk management was invaluable and Walk ON would not be as successful without its ongoing support. If there are plans to replicate this project in other areas, a partnership with an agency who delivers community health walks would be essential, at least in the starting stages of the project.

Additional Information

The Walk ON format is expanding to include buggy walks for parents/carers and children. These will start with a walk and finish in a library with a Bookbug session. Dementia-friendly Walk ON sessions are planned for the future; these will be dementia-friendly walks followed by a chat session. Dementia-friendly walk leader training will be provided by Active Fife.

A presentation about Walk On can be accessed at <https://prezi.com/jrnmviifuuis/walkon/>.

You can see the national walking strategy action plan at www.gov.scot/Resource/0045/00452622.pdf.