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“I got into the habit and it has definitely become a part of me”: A qualitative study of why older adults start and continue to walk for health with walking groups

Research Report for Paths for All July 2012

Ailsa Niven, Nicky Laing & Samantha Fawkner
Institute of Sport, PE and Health Sciences
University of Edinburgh
St Leonard's Land
Holyrood Road
Edinburgh, EH8 8AQ
E-mail: ailsa.niven@ed.ac.uk
Telephone: 0131-651-6679

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Summary

Walking for health is an important health promotion strategy for older adults. The aim of this qualitative interview study was to identify the reasons why older adults start and continue to walk for at least 12 months with Paths for All walking groups, and identify the benefits that they perceive to gain from walking with these groups.

Four different walking groups were identified in conjunction with Paths for All (two rural, one coastal and one urban group) and one of the researchers joined each group to walk with the group, meet the members and introduce the study. Following this, members who had walked with Paths for All for at least 12 months were invited to participate in the study. Ten participants (age range 63 to 80 years) were interviewed at a location of their convenience (e.g., coffee shop/ own home). The interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim. The data were analysed using procedures based on Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis. Through this analysis method, individual 'stories' of each participant were identified (see Appendix 1) and common themes across participants were also extracted from the data. In presenting the results, numerous quotes have been included to retain the walkers' own words relating to their experiences.

From the group themes, it was evident that individual characteristics of the walkers (i.e., history of walking/being active; character; beliefs about walking) influenced their involvement in the group. Participants started to walk because they were motivated for different reasons, positive about the group, responded to publicity and experienced social support. Reasons for continuing to walk included recognising the perceived benefits, experiencing social support, being able to overcome barriers, prioritising walking and being committed to the group. The participants also identified a broad range of benefits from walking including the social nature of the group, physical and mental health benefits and positive characteristics of the walk. Some concerns relating to the walking group emerged including the walks not being challenging enough and being repetitive, and also concerns about age and health issues.

These findings provided a rich insight into both individual participants' experiences of walking and group findings across this age range. From these findings, future research avenues and key take home messages have been identified and recommendations for promoting walking have been made.

Introduction

Evidence supporting the benefits of regular physical activity is increasing and sufficient physical activity can prevent and manage chronic health conditions (1). For older adults (i.e., aged 65+), a number of studies have shown that increasing physical activity can lead to improvements in cardiovascular fitness (2), strength and physical function (3) and also reductions in susceptibility to falls (4). Further, physical activity can reduce aspects of cognitive decline (5) and can improve mental well-being (6).

In order to achieve these physical and psychological benefits the Department of Health (2011) recently published physical activity recommendations. Specifically, it is recommended that older adults should aim to be active daily, and over a week physical activity should add up to at least 150 minutes of moderate intensity activity in bouts of 10 minutes or more. For those who are regularly active at a moderate intensity level, comparable benefits can be achieved through 75 minutes of vigorous intensity activity spread across the week, or a combination of vigorous and moderate activity. Additionally, recent recommendations suggest that older adults should also undertake muscle strength exercises on at least two days a week, and activities to improve balance and coordination on two days a week. Moderate intensity activities are those that lead to an increase in heart rate and breathing, but a conversation can still be comfortably undertaken. The Department of Health (2011) suggested that moderate intensity activity is probably best achieved by regular brisk walking that may be combined with other activities such as shopping, dance, gardening or exercise classes.

Population and intervention studies have demonstrated that brisk walking is associated with health benefits (7, 8). In fact, walking has been identified as ‘the nearest activity to perfect exercise’ (9) because of its health benefits and because it requires no special skills or equipment, and is convenient and accessible to almost everyone. In older adults particularly, walking may offer an achievable and low risk activity because other forms of activity may no longer be available due to decreases in physical function.

Paths for All is a partnership of more than twenty national organisations committed to promoting walking for health and the development of multi-use path networks in Scotland. A key priority for Paths for All is to reduce the proportion of the population who are physically inactive through a national walking programme. In line with the Scottish Government’s physical activity priorities, Paths for All currently has a strategic focus on older adults. A key delivery mechanism at a local level for this priority takes the form of volunteer led walking groups. Understanding the factors that influence the initiation and maintenance of walking for health in older adults would be valuable to promote and encourage participation.

Understanding older adults’ walking behaviour

A recent systematic review of determinants of physical activity and exercise in older adults reported that there was some evidence that general physical function, prior exercise adherence, self-reported beneficial outcomes and changes in self-efficacy were positively related to exercise behaviour (10). However, the authors did highlight the lack of good quality studies available and the need for further research.

Looking at walking specifically, it has been suggested that walking behaviour can be influenced by physical environmental (e.g., appeal of the environment), social environmental (e.g., social support) and individual factors (e.g., beliefs about walking) (11). Although these findings are useful, limited studies have focused specifically on walking for physical activity in older adults, and relatively little is known about what encourages individuals to start and continue to walk.

An exception is a qualitative study that investigated the reasons why older adults participated in a 6 month walking intervention (12). The findings indicated that participants started walking for a number of reasons including; to overcome declining health and avoid 'being a burden' to their children; walking was an accessible activity; had seen the benefits in other individuals; and because they had been given a pedometer as part of the trial. Improved physical status, enhanced social contact, a sense of achievement and regular walking indicating a healthy status were all reasons identified for maintaining walking behaviour. These findings indicate that there are a number of reasons why participants start to and continue walking. However, a shortcoming of this study is that the participants were walking as part of a trial rather than having decided to walk by their own volition and it is likely that non-intervention walkers may have a different perspective.

Purpose of the study

The aim of this qualitative study was to gain insight the 'stories' of older adults who have chosen to start and continue to walk for health for at least 12 months as part of a Paths for All walking group.

The specific objectives were:

1. To identify the factors that influence older adults in starting to walk for health
2. To identify the factors that lead to sustained participation in walking for health over at least 12 months
3. To identify the perceived benefits of walking for health as part of a group
4. To collect individual 'stories' relating to the experience of walking for health as part of a group
5. To identify emergent common themes across individuals relating to the experience of walking for health.

Method

Participants

Following institutional ethical approval, participants were identified through Paths for All walking groups and recruited to represent groups from different geographical locations. In total 4 groups were represented from rural and coastal locations. Nine women and one man volunteered to participate, and all but one participant was over 65. All participants had walked as part of a Paths for All walking group for at least 12 months. In the presentation of the results the participants were all assigned a pseudonym and any clearly identifiable information (e.g., specific health conditions) was removed or modified to maximize anonymity.

Instrument

An interview schedule was developed to include initial rapport building questions and cover 4 main areas; i) participants' background; ii) factors that influence the initiation of walking as part of the group; iii) factors that influence the continued involvement in the walking as part of the group; and iv) perceived benefits of walking as part of the group. Questions were developed to be broad and open-ended and potential probes were identified if needed.

Procedure

The data collection took place over a period of three months and included two stages. During Stage 1, one of the researchers walked with each walking group in order to introduce herself to the walkers, explain the nature of the project and become familiar with the nature of the walks. Either during or at the end of each walk potential participants were invited to participate and provided with an information sheet. Interested individuals provided the researcher with contact details to arrange an interview.

During stage 2, participants completed an informed consent form and were interviewed at a place of their convenience (i.e., at home, in a coffee shop). The interviews were taped using a digital voice recorder and lasted between 30-75 minutes. From those who were interviewed, ten were included in the analysis. The data were downloaded and transcribed verbatim.

Data analysis

The data analysis was guided by recommendations for Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (13) where an individual approach to analysis is undertaken and the aim is to understand and gain insight into the participants' experiences. The analysis was undertaken by two researchers. Interviews were analysed individually and initially both researchers read and re-read the transcripts to familiarise themselves with the individual's story. Next the researchers wrote notes on the left margin of the transcript regarding anything that was deemed significant or interesting in relation to the research question. The next step involved labelling each of these initial observations into a concise phrase or 'meaning unit' that captured the meaning of the text, and this was recorded on the right margin of the transcript. At this stage the researchers compared their emergent meaning units to ensure the coding was consistent and appropriate. One researcher then clustered together meaning units with similar meaning and identified collective theme names. Clustering was on-going until no further groupings could be made. At this stage, the second researcher critically reviewed the emergent themes and discussions were on-going until a consensus was reached.

Each transcript was analysed using the same procedures, and the emergent themes from previous transcripts were used to code similar themes into the same categories, and new themes were added to accommodate new findings. Each individual's profile was used to create a 'story' relating to the researchers' interpretation of their experience and these are presented in Appendix 1. A version of this story was sent to the interviewees to check that the researchers' interpretations of the interview were accurate. All of the interviewees were happy with the interpreted summary.

Once all ten interviews had been analysed, together both researchers collated the individual profiles to identify group themes. The group themes provided the basis for the reported results.

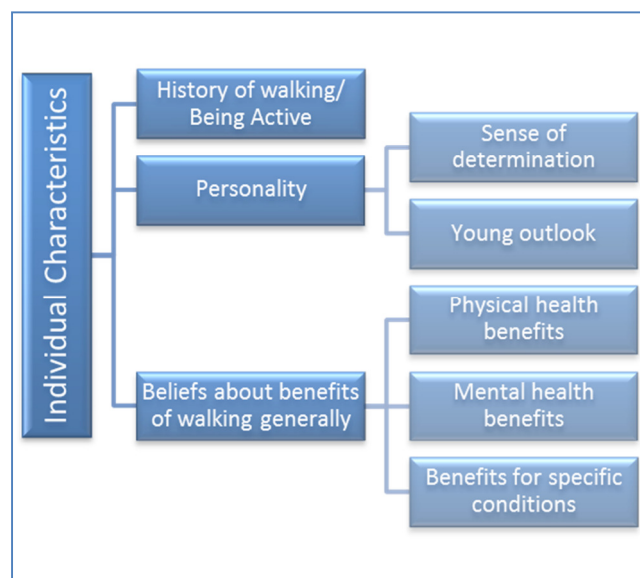
Results

From the interviews, five higher order themes are presented relating to: 1) Individual characteristics; 2) Factors related to starting to walk; 3) Factors related to continuing to walk; 4) Perceived benefits of walking for health; and 5) Concerns with walking group

Individual characteristics

The individual characteristics theme related to relevant background information about the participants that provided a context for and influenced their involvement in the walking group. Overall, there were twelve categories recorded within this theme, and Figure 1 illustrates the three themes that were identified as being most common amongst the participants, and particularly relevant to Paths for All.

Figure 1: Individual characteristics of walkers



History of walking/being active

The characteristic of having a history of walking, and or being active is especially noteworthy because it was shared by all participants. For example, Liz reported that she had always walked through the years because it was her preferred form of exercise. Several participants have been and are still involved in sport or walking with their spouses. For example, Susan has "*great memories of walking together, jogging together and cycling together*". For others, they have been active in the past through a range of activities such as walking the dogs, or riding horses. Shirley is the only walker who is not retired and she reported "*I'm on my feet all day, so I'm getting my exercise*".

Personality

There were many personality characteristics displayed by the participants, and two have been highlighted because they had a particular impact or influence on their walking practices; sense of determination and having a young outlook.

Sense of determination

Many participants demonstrated that they had a clear sense of determination in relation to life generally, and walking specifically. For example, both Sheena and Evelyn used their sense of determination to overcome illness to get back to walking with the group. Sheena explained that

"when I was ill I walked around the park...I started off twice round the park and got myself ready to go back to the walking group".

Mary was one of the more elderly participants and it was evident that she used her sense of determination to keep persevering with the group and tried hard to keep up a good pace. She discussed an experience she had on a longer walk the group took: *"this last bit is going to be a bit of a struggle, but there was no turning back, it was in for a penny, in for a pound. You jolly well go to the finishing post now because you have no option, so it is all about the stimulation to speak strongly to yourself - 'come on don't be a wimp, get on with it'"*.

Both Eileen and Shirley demonstrated a sense of determination to follow through on their initial interest in joining the walking group. Eileen explained that *"I was determined I was going to do it (join the group). If something catches my eye and I quite like it, then I do it."* Shirley had a very similar response: *"Yes I thought I'm just going to go for that, and I phoned the number and somebody gave me the information and I just went up and enjoyed it"*.

Young outlook

Despite all participants being in their 60's and with some significantly older, many made references to being young at heart, or attempting to hold back the years. This seemed to be an important aspect to their lives which in turn resonated with their desire to walk. Andrew commented that the 60's age group *"was the new 30s"*. Liz also considers herself to have a youngish outlook and wants to keep fit to hold back the sense of ageing: *"I just felt I had to get the exercise. I didn't want to become a couch potato. I might be over 65, but I don't feel as close to 70 as I am!"* Jessie puts it quite succinctly when she said: *"I'm not over the hill, yet!"*

Beliefs about the benefits of walking generally

There was also consistent evidence that many of the participants had a strong belief in the benefits of walking generally. This factor is distinguished from the themes relating to the specific perceived benefits of the walking group discussed later because it relates to walking generally. More specifically, a sense that walking is just *'good for you'* was a shared view.

Physical health benefits

For those participants who reported that they believed in the general benefits of walking per se, all said it was beneficial for physical health. Liz believes that walking is a great form of exercise and she explained: *"I would do a circuit merely to get walking because I have always believed it is very healthy and I'm very happy to get my exercise from walking."* A link was also made between walking and maintaining mobility or keeping the body moving generally. For example, Shirley explained that *"I want to keep mobile, as long as I possibly can, and the only way to achieve that is to...walk as much as possible whether it's a long walk or a short walk"*. The perceived benefits of improved sleep were mentioned by some participants and Mary said *"...it gets you out and about and it helps you sleep at night because you're getting out in the fresh air"*. Liz also spoke of how she believes that walking reinforces her general good health: *"I know the benefits of walking, because walking in this lovely fresh air, I haven't had a cold, it's nearly 18 months now. I'm generally a healthy person, but walking has reinforced that."*

Mental health benefits

The perceived health benefits in relation to positive mental health and improved wellbeing were also highlighted. Shirley put it very simply: "It (walking) makes me feel great, it really does. It just makes me feel good." Evelyn made the link between getting out walking and leaving concerns at home: "Once you start walking you empty your head ...of the things you sit and think about when you're on your own in the house". She also spoke of specific factors on a walk bringing a sense of happiness: "I can go and walk and it lifts your spirits and gives you fresh ideas...and now the leaves are falling off, there's nothing like walking through the park and scriffing a load of leaves".

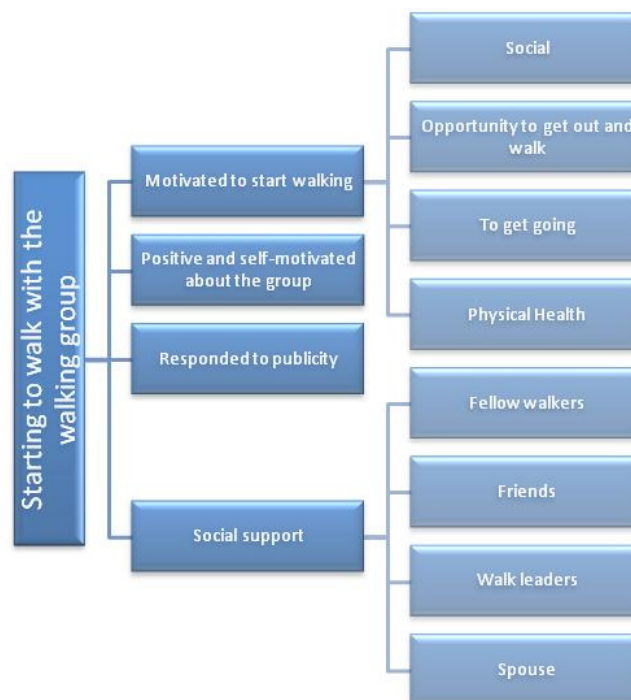
Benefits for specific conditions

It is not surprising with this age group that existing health conditions were discussed and walking is perceived to assist or ease already reported conditions. Evelyn confirmed: "It helps me with my breathing and keeps your muscles moving, you know when you get up in the mornings and you feel sore and then you go out walking, wrapped up, it just frees them up". Similarly, Ann explained: "I feel it (walking) is beneficial due to my (specific health) problems, and I'm hoping it will help with my weight".

Starting to walk with the walking group

There were ten themes that were recorded in relation to starting to walk with the group. The four themes that were reflected in the majority of participants and deemed especially pertinent are detailed here and illustrated in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Starting to walk with the walking group



Motivated to start walking

All participants demonstrated specific motives for joining a walking group. The specific motives which were frequent or common are detailed here.

Social motives

Meeting new people was certainly an important motive in joining the walking group for a number of participants. For example, Liz stated: *"It was just walking with people that interested me at the start"*. This was especially important to her because she had recently relocated to her new home: *"I thought that would be a fantastic idea to join this group, walk with people and see and learn different places I could walk"*. Jessie lives on the edge of a small village and had similar social motives because she stated that when she previously walked: *"... you always met people and they spoke to you...so I think that's one of the reasons I thought it might be quite nice to join the group"*. For Eileen who finds walking alone boring, walking with people in a group was a good solution to get out and meet new people *"But the walking group I thought was ideal because you are walking with others and time just passes because you are chatting... it is still nice to meet other people"*. Susan expressed a social motive for joining her group because her husband has a disability: *"Well probably meeting new people...now that I'm not able to walk with my husband"*.

Opportunity to get out/walk motive

Many participants were keen to join the walking group because they viewed it as a way to either get out more or to specifically walk more. For example, for Eileen the motive was about taking the opportunity to get out more: *"When I did work, I used to think when I do retire, I'm looking forward to being out in the fresh air"*. Andrew acknowledged that he spends long hours indoors with his hobby and was motivated to join this group as he admitted *"I have to do something else to get breaks"*. For others, having the chance to do more walking was the clear motive. Liz admitted that although she had started walking, she was motivated to join the group because she wanted to walk more: *"I had started walking, trying to do walks, maybe not concentrating on getting a lot done"*.

Motive to 'get going'

For some participants, they recognised in themselves a need to be more active and this motivated them to join the group. For Evelyn, this was linked to overcoming a major illness *"I'd stopped walking...it was nice to get back...yes just getting back to walking, it was good"*. Although Ann and Sheena were already established with their groups prior to their illnesses, it was a desire to 'get going again' that helped them return. For Liz, she was motivated to get going because she felt she needed to be doing more once she'd settled into her new location: *"I was very happy with that group. You feel better in yourself when you get going. Yes I was very pleased when I got going, and then I wanted to carry on."*

Physical health motive

Many of the participants were motivated to join a walking group because they felt it would contribute towards maintaining and/or improving their physical health. For many of these participants, walking was viewed as an opportunity to do more exercise. For example, both Liz and Ann were clear in their desire to exercise 5 days out of 7 and saw the group as a way to contribute to meeting that quota. For example, Liz reported *"I like to get out 5 days out of 7 at least in order to keep my fitness and mobility"* and Mary stated *"You face it knowing it's good for your health, it is good for your movement, good for your heart."*

Positive about joining the group/self-motivated to join the group

The majority of participants either felt very positive about becoming a member or were self-motivated to join the group. For Sheena, Eileen and Ann, they made concerted decisions to join once

they retired. Ann confirmed she was *"quite happy to join the group (as she retired)...I worked full time so had no social interaction"*.

Responded to publicity

Some participants were influenced to start walking by publicity they encountered. For some, such as Sheena, an advert was the stimulus *"I saw the notice in the library and it drew me in and I wanted to go...I was excited because I didn't expect to see it that day, as I'd enquired before and there weren't any local (until that point)"*. For Eileen, the advert was also a key factor in her joining the group. *"Initially I read about it and I thought that's nice, that's something I want"*. For others, a welcome meeting hosted by the project coordinators was a key motivator for them. Jessie explained that she was influenced by the coordinator to join: *"I think it was her (coordinator) talking at the meeting about what they were hoping to achieve in the village, and it's gone on leaps and bounds since then"*.

Social support

Social support was one of the most significant themes within this section and was highlighted by most of the participants. Within the context of starting to walk, social support relates to encouragement and support participants experienced in the joining process. This social support theme has been divided into groups of people who offered such support.

Fellow walkers

The immediate welcome offered by fellow walkers was important to some participants. Liz was immediately reassured: *"I was very happy to join the walking group. They were very friendly, welcoming."* Susan had a similar experience which was equally reassuring for her: *"The group is so friendly and you're made to feel at home...for me to be a new member, the first walk we did I didn't feel like a new member because folk were so friendly"*

Friends

Some of the participants experienced support from friends who were either joining the group too or were already members. Liz admitted that *"A friend got me interested. I might have been a bit reluctant to go on my own."* Susan's long standing friend was already a member and was happy to meet her en-route: *"So that's how it started and (friend) said I'll meet you at the top of the street and we'll walk down"*.

Walk leader/coordinator

Being welcomed and encouraged by the walk leader or coordinator on arrival has been important for some of the participants. Jessie reported her first encounter with the coordinator of her 'walk it' programme: *"I went to one of the meetings in the village and she (coordinator) was very keen to get things started, and I thought this is needed here so try and make a commitment"*.

Spouse

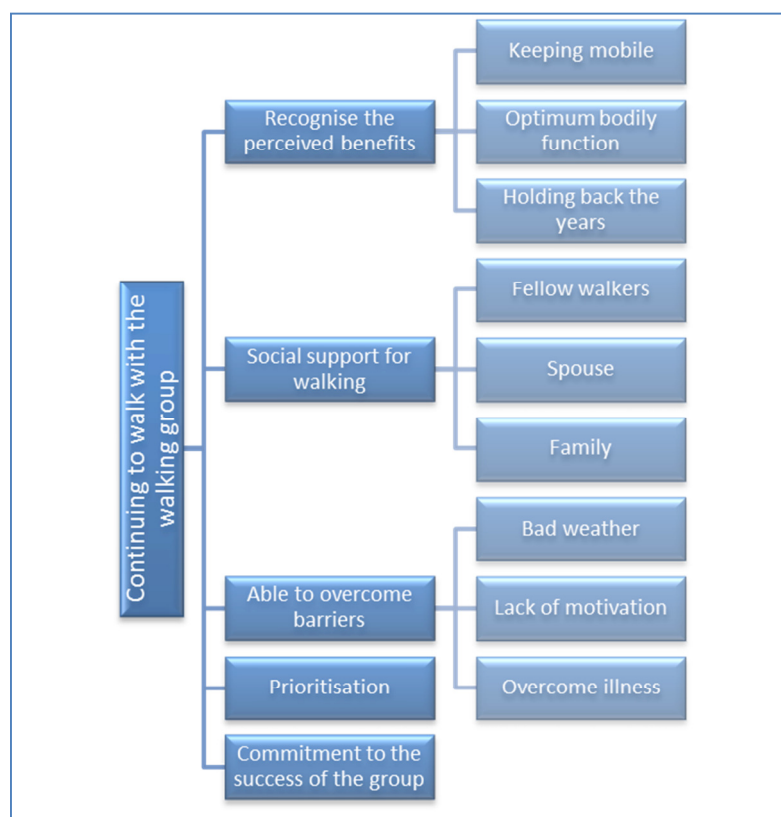
Some of the participants were either supported or actively encouraged to join the group by their spouse. Andrew is quick to point this out *"Oh yes, definitely my wife and it's not the only thing she has tried to persuade me to do to get me out"*. Susan experienced encouragement from her spouse because he knows how much she likes walking and how he can no longer go with her. *"My friend across the road, she said I go walking on a Wednesday and my husband said ' she loves walking, she'll go with you' "*. Both Shirley and Ann experienced support from their spouses although they

weren't keen to join the group themselves. Shirley was amused as she explained "*he is a couch potato and will admit it himself, but he thinks it is great that I am doing it.*"

Continuing to walk with the walking group

The analysis of the interview transcripts identified twelve themes that indicated why participants continue to walk with their walking groups. Those detailed here and illustrated in Figure 3, are either highlighted by most participants or have a particular relevance to Paths for All. There is considerable overlap between the reasons the participants give for continuing to walk and the perceived benefits of walking (next section). This is not unexpected because individuals are likely to continue with an activity if they perceive it is beneficial. In order to organise the results, in this section we have identified themes that relate specifically to continuing to be active.

Figure 3: Emergent themes related to continuing to walk with the walking group



Recognising the perceived health benefits

This section relates specifically to the participants stating that they continued to walk with the group *because* they recognised the health benefits. This theme was one of the strongest themes identified within the continuing to walk section and a number of perceived health benefits were identified.

Keeping mobile

For this age group, maintaining mobility appears to be an important factor to encourage continued walking. Liz believes that continuing to walk will help her mobility: "*It's good to be mobile and remain mobile as one gets older. Mobility disappears, and perhaps walking if one continues then the*

mobility will remain longer". Mary has a similar view when she said *"It's good for me to keep that positive movement going"*.

Optimum bodily function

A number of participants noted that they continued to walk because walking helped their body function to its potential, and this was especially so for those participants who had experienced illness. For example, Ann explained: *"Well I feel I must exercise to keep myself healthy, to keep my heart beating...it gave me a fright (health scare) so you make a point to get out and about and do things"*. Sheena and Evelyn also focused on maintaining health after illness. Sheena confirmed *"I just feel it's (walking) good for my high blood pressure and good for my heart and lungs"*

Holding back the years

Some participants noted that they continued to walk in order to delay the physical consequences of aging. For example, for Andrew continuing to walk was about *"working against ageing"*.

Social support

In relation to continuing to walk as part of the group, participants identified and appreciated the important role that support and encouragement from others had on their on-going attendance. This social support came from three sources; fellow walkers, spouse and family.

Fellow walkers

For Mary, the support from others during the walking trips helped her continue with her own individual battles to keep going. *"There is so much you have to do for yourself, but at the same time you have these others around you who are such an encouragement, they are also getting on with it too with their own problems"*. Sheena reported that she has enjoyed the camaraderie from a specific walker and it's this type of thing that has encouraged her to continue: *"...there's a lady who started 15 months ago and she lives (further along the coast) so she comes out of the library with me and she walks me home and then gets the bus"*.

Spouse

Some participants found that support from their spouses was very encouraging and contributed to on-going attendance. Andrew confirmed that: *"Well my wife encourages me"*. For Sheena, her husband's support helped her to get back to and continue with her walking group following a bout of ill health: *"what was nice about going back after being ill, I had my phone, and if I was stuck, or not very well, my husband could come and get me in five minutes"*.

Family

Some participants also mentioned that encouragement they received from family members was important to their participation. For Mary it was a point of pride for her. *"I was very pleased that I had committed to that (walking group) and that was helped by my daughter...she said Mum I'm very proud of you."*

Able to overcome barriers

In their on-going commitment to walking, all participants provided evidence of their ability to overcome barriers to walking.

Bad weather

All participants made reference to the weather at some point during their interviews and for some participants bad weather was not going to halt their walking commitments. Andrew confirmed that *"If the barrier (to walking) was a wet day, I'd just get the waterproofs on"*. Jessie was similarly stoic and stated *"Some days I don't mind getting wet. It's howling rain and wind, but I don't mind getting wet"*. Sheena recalled a particular walk where attendance was high despite the weather and she was evidently proud of the group's resilience: *"there was a super walk, and it was a special one off walk because it was Gala week...and it was pouring down!...but it was amazing because there were about 15 of us turned up which is pretty good considering that it was a) a holiday and b) bucketing with rain and it was lovely."*

Linked to the weather, a number of participants demonstrated that they take steps to ensure they have appropriate clothing and equipment to support their on-going walking. Liz showed a determination to kit herself out to maintain her walking in all weathers and stated *"I can't imagine what barriers there could be (to continuing to walk). Even in the snow I managed to overcome that barrier by buying Wellingtons and over-trousers and putting a scarf on!"* Ann has a similar attitude and is suitably prepared: *"As long as you're well equipped, you've got your boots and your drink then you can cope with anything thrown at you!"* For Jessie, her boots were certainly made for walking: *"That's right, I put my boots on and still walk"*.

Lack of motivation

Some participants demonstrated that they were able to overcome the barrier of lack of motivation to continue to walk with the group. Jessie mentioned *"Sometimes I think acht, will I bother today? And then I think yes you will: you shall. Go go go!"* Sheena reported similar issues and explained that: *"it's a bit like a child who doesn't want to go to school but they have to. I have to go to the walking group!"*

Overcoming illness

Some of the participants demonstrated an ability to continue to walk despite illness. Evelyn had to overcome a major illness to get back to walking and reported how she may modify her goals in order to do some walking: *"probably if you have problems with your legs or your feet, but if you keep going, you might not be able to do 7 miles, but you could do a couple, or even just walk round the block"*. Mary reported that even if her medical condition worsened, she would still be able to continue walking: *"Well it would only be if anything with (my health condition) got worse...even so there is a way through that I'm sure."*

Prioritisation

For the majority of participants, continuing to walk had become a major priority and a firm commitment in their lives. Sheena reported: *"I wouldn't do anything else on Wednesdays, that's a no no. Nobody asks me because they know that's my walking day. I've a commitment to it and I wouldn't change unless an emergency came up"*. Mary had a very similar view: *"Well I keep that time free...it's a set in stone commitment the walking group"*. For Liz, it is now part of her routine: *"I have got into the habit and it has become a part of me. I work it into my daily routine."* Wednesday as walking day is a view also shared by Susan who reported *"That one particular day is my day... I couldn't think of anything else to do on a Wednesday..."*.

Commitment to the walking group

For some of the participants, they continued to walk because they felt a sense of personal commitment to the walking group. For example, Susan expressed a great enthusiasm and pride for her particular walking group and stated *"I've come along (to the group) and I've been doing it ever since. I've told umpteen people that you don't have to bring another buddy, you can come along and just join in"*. Sheena also expressed a personal commitment to her group, and believes her own commitment is shared by many of the other members: *"If they decided to stop the walks tomorrow...we'd just do it ourselves because we ran it for a few weeks during the change of leaders...yes I think everyone is committed...I think we all feel the same about it I'm sure we do"*.

Benefits of walking with the walking group

All participants expressed numerous perceived benefits of attending walking groups. As noted above, these perceived benefits are likely to have had a major influence on the continued involvement of the participants. Twenty-three themes were identified, and those 9 that were shared by many participants and were deemed to be most pertinent to Paths for All are reported and illustrated in Figure 4.

Figure 4: Emergent themes related to perceived benefits of the walking group



Social aspects of the group

The social benefits theme of the walking group emerged as a large theme and was perceived by all participants to be very important. This major theme incorporated several other themes highlighting the breadth of findings relating to the social benefits of the walking group.

Social support

As discussed earlier in the findings, social support has emerged as important in helping participants to start and continue to walk. Additionally, social support from fellow walkers and the walk leaders has also been identified as a benefit whilst walking. For example, Susan notes how the walking group is mutually supportive: *"one walk goes up a hill and it's quite steep and we help one another up and we help one another down"*. Liz also recognises that the group is supportive and stated *"I'm really full of praise for the group because it is a sociable event. It is wonderful for people who don't feel confident to walk on their own and if they are in a group there is someone to pick them up if they fall down"*.

Some participants also recognised that the support of the walk leaders was a major bonus and often much appreciated. For example, Mary reported *"They (walk leaders) are such an encouragement and they always stress you must go at your own pace, and I know that if I've been towards the back they always say are you alright Mary? They check and that is a tremendous help"*. Andrew also recognised the importance of their helpfulness and support *"I think the walk leaders are nice and helpful"*.

Opportunity to chat/laugh

Having the opportunity to chat to fellow walkers and 'have a laugh' emerged as an important theme with many participants reporting how much they enjoyed this. For Eileen, she found it useful getting interesting information and updates about the local area or day to day issues. She benefited from: *"chatting in general and learning other things from other people, like gas prices and things like that, or if a new shop has opened in the town, yes just everyday things like that."* For Evelyn, the conversation about every day issues helped to take her mind off other more worrying things: *"and you don't think about anything. You're walking and talking about different things like how thin you want to be and what your husband didn't do that he should have!"* Both Mary and Jessie felt they benefited from both the chat and the laughter. Ann said *"I just enjoy the social interaction, the chat and the laugh"*. Mary extended this by adding *"well they are such lovely people and it's all about the chatting and there's lots of laughter. Laughter is better than any medicine"*.

Companionship

The level of companionship found at walking groups was a benefit shared by many participants. For Liz, the company of others relieved the loneliness of walking alone: *"I don't need hoards of people, but it is lonely walking alone"*. Susan described the company as 'great' and Jessie said how much she 'liked the company'. Ann described a particular walk she had been on and how sharing her knowledge of the area with her companions had meant a lot to her. For her the benefit was: *"tell(ing) them (companions) what it means to you to come back here...and share with them and hope that they can get as much enjoyment from it as you did"*.

Inclusiveness and sense of belonging

Many of the participants reported that they enjoyed the sense of inclusiveness and belongingness provided by their walking groups. Mary stated it quite simply *"I love being part of the group because it is an all inclusive group"*. For Sheena, the inclusiveness was something she sees in herself and also reflected in the behaviour of others and noted *"we pay attention to make sure everyone is included. So we're great that way"*. The process of meeting each week as part of a group enhanced Mary's

sense of belonging and she reported "*..and then as we part we say 'see you next week' ...so it's built up this feeling of belonging to the community*".

Get to know new/different people

Getting to know new and different people was a benefit of the walking groups recognised by many of the participants. Jessie has benefited since joining the group because: "*I like to meet different people*". For Sheena, the benefit relates to the variety of people she has become acquainted with: "*They are good company and do you know what's nice about it? It's mixed company and mixed age company which is really nice*".

People are friendly/make new friends

For many of the participants, the friendliness of people they come into contact with was a major benefit of the group. One of the benefits for Eileen was that she now feels she could happily to go along on her own if her existing friends were not available: "*I could go on my own because they are all very friendly and you do not feel strange or left out*". Susan added that: "*I'm lucky that the group we've got is so nice*". For Shirley and Ann the friendliness in fellow walkers has morphed into genuine friendships, and as such is a major benefit of the group. Shirley explained that: "*since moving to (village) I haven't actually got one particular friend*" but now has a special friend that she walks independently with. Ann also felt that she has benefited from seeing acquaintances become friends: "*You can get to know people too, they were just people I met in passing and now they are friends*"

Opportunity to help others

A few of the participants have found that the opportunity to help others during the walking group has been rewarding and they have benefited from the experience. Andrew spoke of a particular incident he experienced and the positive impact it had on him. "*The disabled man was there the last time. There is a front marker and a back marker but there is no-one in the middle and I was asked to go with him. At first I thought 'oh, what do I have to do?' But at the end I felt I had done something good, you know? I had a good... conversation with him. It was interesting to observe his difficulties and how he coped with them. I admire him for how much he managed.*" Similarly, Mary has been inspired by the efforts of others to keep going and as such sees the impact it has on her own efforts: "*because we're all in it together. There is one lady I relate to...she obviously has difficulties...I think if I can walk alongside her we can do it together. It is the togetherness that has made the difference with this group*"

Quality of the walk leaders

Some of the participants have acknowledged the social support they receive from the walk leaders and this was extended to include how they benefit from the overall quality of the walk leaders attached to their groups. Evelyn was very impressed with her walk leader and praised him for the efforts he has gone to in order to get their walking group off the ground: "*he was putting up plaques saying there was a slight gradient and if you weren't able to walk that way you could go a different way*". Liz was also impressed with the commitment of the walk leaders she encountered: "*The leaders are very committed and I must say they are very good*". Shirley is equally as complimentary "*they've (walk leaders) all been extremely nice, I couldn't fault any of them.*"

Sense of achievement/satisfaction

Some participants acknowledged that they do get a sense of achievement from walking with the group. For Jessie, the tougher walks bring out a sense of achievement for her: *"There have been a couple of walks where you've thought 'Oh Mercy, this is a bit tough', and a sense of achievement at the end"*. Mary also reported finding some of the walks challenging and that a sense of achievement was a real benefit to her: *"So the benefit is very much you're achieving it, so you feel good at the end...I could feel quite proud of myself because I had wondered at the start if I could achieve it and yes I would achieve it"*. Eileen's sense of satisfaction comes from recognising that a day spent with the walking group is a good day: *"It was cold but it was wonderful, and you get in in the evening and you think 'good, that's it, I've been out and done something"*.

Physical health benefits

All of the participants recognised that walking with groups is beneficial for physical health. For example, Jessie linked walking with keeping active in order to help existing health issues: *"Health-wise I think it (walking) is very beneficial. Having had a few (health) problems and things like that I really want to keep active. It's very important to keep moving"*. Ann had a similar view: *"I feel it (walking) is beneficial due to my (health) problems. I'm hoping it will help my weight"*. For Liz, she noted simply that: *"when I walk I feel well"*. Mary believed that walking with the group contributes towards her good health and stated *"It makes you grateful your health is what it is and if this (walking with the group) is a significant contribution, then so be it"*.

Sense of wellbeing

In addition to the perceived physical health benefits, many of the participants recognised that walking has psychological benefits for their overall well-being. For example, Susan expressed it as a good feeling: *"I feel good, I feel marvellous and for me I'm away from the housework, sport and I'm just out there walking and enjoying myself"*. Ann reported that she knows she benefits mentally from walking and as such is a happier person: *"It's (walking) good for me mentally, it stimulates you...I'm happier within myself. I've got a better attitude mentally"*. Jessie also sees walking as mentally stimulating, which in turn brings on a great feeling: *"I felt energised. It just gives you the feel good factor."* Ann also saw that specific walks could have a positive impact on wellbeing: *"a sense of wellbeing because you could bring back memories which were really nice and have your own quiet thoughts"*. Mary reported the social aspect of the walk had psychological benefits for her: *"Psychologically it is excellent because simply through meeting people, through conversations, interesting things they've done or going to do, sharing views about families, our grandchildren, holidays, life in general, so many positives to it"*.

Activity to do without spouse

Some of the participants believed that the walking group was beneficial because it is an activity that they can do without their partners. Susan reported that because her husband had a disability he could no longer walk with her so the group offered an opportunity to walk. Since joining, she has found that the time she spends at the club is a special time for her. *I go out the door and meet (friend) and we see things we don't normally see and it's nice...I can leave the house and do the walk and have a coffee and that is completely wonderful"*. For Sheena, her own health issues make the group appealing because *"it is something I can do without my husband, because our walking group is too gentle for him."* Sheena also believes that it is good to have some separate interests from her husband now that they are both retired and stated *"it gives you space and you meet other people"*.

Enjoyment of walking and fresh air

Many participants reported that the group was beneficial because they just enjoyed walking. For example Susan reported: *"My husband said it all when he said 'she loves walking'. I hate to miss it"*. For Shirley and Liz, being out in the fresh air was an added bonus. Shirley recalled: *"and you're out in the fresh air, and it just makes you feel good to be alive!"* Liz agreed: *"walking in this lovely fresh air...you have a feeling in your face that is bright and shiny"*.

Refreshments

The chance to enjoy refreshments with fellow walkers at the end of a walk was seen as a real benefit to some participants. For Andrew, it can be a reason to encourage him to go: *"I thought it was a nice idea to have a cup of coffee after a walk because it is really nice to do that, and I'm sure everyone else does too...and the cake at the end is the icing on the cake!"* Sheena also believed the refreshments are an added bonus because it allows people to sit with others they have not spent time with on the walk: *"we went back to the library for a coffee and you got to meet more people"* Shirley also believed the refreshments enhance the walk experience: *"when we came back we always had coffee or tea and cake which is the icing on the cake, which kept everyone going"*.

Positive characteristics of the walk

For many of the participants, one of the major benefits of walking with the groups was enjoying the positive characteristics the walks offer.

Scenery/wildlife

Enjoying the scenery and wildlife was commonly shared between many of the participants. For some, they enjoyed the benefit of observing beautiful nature. For example, Susan highlighted this by noting: *"It's just when you're out walking and you're seeing things you don't normally see, you'll say 'look at that lovely tree'"*. Andrew also reported enjoying some of the walks because he sees different aspects and wildlife within his locale: *"on the other side of the river there are nesting boxes which the leaders point out... When you walk in town in places you know there isn't anything additional to talk about, but in a wood like that the leaders will stop and talk about something which is interesting"*. For others, they reported benefiting from walking in beautiful surroundings because of the way it makes them feel. Jessie explained that: *"If I was walking through natural woodland, or somewhere that had nice scenery, that makes me very happy inside. I love it"*. Ann agreed that the location of the walk can make a difference: *"The scenery, it was a walk where we followed a wee burn, it was very soothing"*.

Location

Some of the participants reported enjoying the particular location of walks and the experiences of visiting new places and revisiting old ones. For example, Susan reported that she enjoys experiencing the unknown at times: *"Letting you see the beauty of things and letting you see places that you haven't been before"*. However, Susan also enjoyed revisiting familiar places: *"there's been a couple of walks we've done recently that I haven't done for years and it brought back memories and that all adds up to enjoying yourself"*. Ann also relayed a visit to location she used to go to that had a beneficial impact for her: *"one of my favourite walks was a walk where I used to (be familiar with), and it was so good just to be back"*. For some participants, the fact that the walk was local to them was important because they were unable to attend walks out with their immediate vicinity.

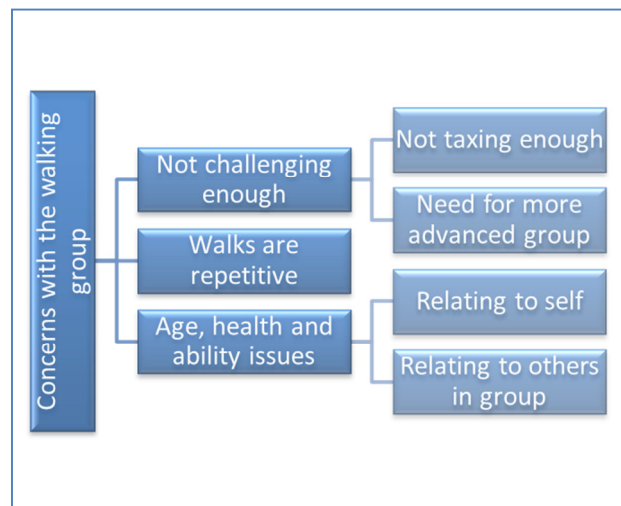
Set own pace:

For some of the walkers, the ability to set their own pace during the walk was very beneficial. Mary was very reassured about setting her own pace: "*the leaders are continually telling us to walk at our own pace*". Eileen was also pleased to be able to go at a manageable pace: "*to do what I wanted to do and nothing too strenuous*". Evelyn also finds that her walking group enables walkers to vary their routes and pace according to ability on the day and discussed a time when she was feeling energetic and she and her friend "*walked it and then we walked it again!*"

Concerns Regarding the Walking Groups

There were 13 themes identified by participants that were noted as cause for concern in relation to the walking groups. Although the participants were overwhelmingly very positive about the walking groups, all participants expressed at least one concern. For some participants, the concerns were less of an issue than to others. The three major themes that emerged are presented here and illustrated in Figure 4.

Figure 4: Emergent themes relating to concerns with the walking group



Not challenging enough

Not taxing enough

The majority of the walkers recognised that some of the walks were not challenging enough. For Liz, she eventually decided that after a year, the walk group she attended was not taxing enough for her and she now walks separately with a friend. Shirley had a similar experience to Liz and she has also decided to stop going to her group: "*But (friend) and I feel we'd like to stretch ourselves a little bit more...we can go quite a distance and that's why we haven't been going*". Andrew is still a member of his group, but he too feels that the walks are not as challenging as he would ideally like. He described the walk as "*well it isn't really a walk, more of a stroll*" and he admitted that "*Well it takes a longer walk for me to feel like it's an achievement*". As a consequence of that, Andrew does miss the group walks if his wife is free and they want to do a more strenuous walk: "*if my wife wants to do a proper walk, we'll go and do a proper walk. Do you know what I mean?*"

Need for more advanced group

Linked to the perceptions that the walks were not always challenging enough, a few of the participants commented that there is a need for more advanced walks to be available to retired

people who are still very physically able. Shirley noted that separate groups for slower and faster walkers would be beneficial for all involved. She said it would be: *"nice in some ways if possible for 'walk it' to have a group that is for slower people...and a group for more advanced people because then no-one is keeping people back"*. Liz commented that this gap in walking opportunities has already been recognised by some walk leaders: *"some of the leaders have identified this need (more advanced walks) and of their own accord they once a month arrange an extended walk"*.

Walks are repetitive

Some participants also reported that the walks being offered can be a bit repetitive at times. This is partly explained by the fact that the group walks tend to be limited to one hour. Shirley certainly believed that the time restriction is an issue in terms of walks being repetitive: *"it can be a bit repetitive because they have to be back in an hour"*. Ann believes her walking group needs to start considering new routes and places to walk and suggested *"I feel we need to widen our horizons and maybe go a bit further a-field. I know some of the ladies get a bit fed up going the same walk time and again"*.

Age/Health/Ability issues

Concerns about ability, age and health were mentioned by some participants. Some participants were aware that they are limited in the walking that they can do. For example, Mary reported that her group is perfect for her because she knows the pace she walks at is acceptable and she is constantly reassured by the walk leaders. However, she does see that she is at her ability limit: *"I wouldn't join a serious walking group because I know I wouldn't be able to do the distance"*.

Some participants were more concerned about the ability, age and or health of others in the group and how this could limit the extent of the walks. For example, Liz feels she has additional walking capacity and would like to go faster and further. However, she does not want to make other group members uncomfortable: *"I don't want to make the slow people feel like they are holding us up...and I want to walk more briskly"*. For Andrew, he reported feeling slightly different to some of his fellow walkers: *"it is quite sociable, although I find myself amongst older people and I don't feel like an old person"*.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to increase understanding of the factors that influence older adults in starting and continuing to walk for at least 12 months with Paths for All walking groups. A large amount of data emerged from the interviews with ten participants providing a rich insight into the participants' experiences. The individual profiles (Appendix 1) illustrated that each walker had their own 'story' for choosing to start and continue to walk. Nevertheless, it was possible to identify commonalities across the group.

Individual characteristics of the participants

With regards to the individual characteristics of the participants, it was evident that all of the participants had a previous history of being active generally and, for some, walking specifically. This finding indicates that this sample represents a group who are typically active and their continued involvement in the walking group may be a reflection of an already active lifestyle. This finding is consistent with a recent systematic review that showed previous exercise adherence was related to exercise in older adults (10). In some ways, this finding could indicate that the walking groups are recruiting and retaining the 'converted'. Further research with walkers who do not have a strong

history of being active would be valuable to increase understanding of reasons behind their involvement to inform strategy to recruit less active individuals.

Two characteristics emerged as having a particular impact or influence on individual's walking practices; sense of determination and having a young outlook. Sense of determination has similarities with the personality trait of conscientiousness which is positively related to physical activity behaviour (14), and highlights that individual factors can influence physical activity behaviour. Many of the participants made references to having a young outlook and being young at heart. Previous research has also highlighted that having a positive view of ageing was related to more regular walking in older adults, perhaps because those older adults who are positive about the future may be more likely to engage in health behaviours (15).

Further, within the group there was a strong belief in the benefits of walking generally for physical, mental and existing specific conditions. This belief was partly informed by previous experience of being active and walking. Believing in the benefits of walking appears to be a strong motivator for being involved in the walking groups, and again supports previous research (10). Further, beliefs and attitudes towards an activity have consistently been shown to be key determinants of physical activity behaviour within psychological models of behaviour change (e.g., Theory of Planned Behaviour).

Starting to walk with the group

A number of themes emerged relating to the reasons why individuals started to walk with the group. The walkers all indicated that they were motivated to join, although the nature of the motives did vary across the walkers highlighting a number of different reasons for starting to walk. For several walkers, the social nature of the walking group was a big appeal because they were motivated to meet new people. For some, they were motivated to join the walking group because it offered a stimulus to either 'get going' and start walking, or get outside more. For many others, they were motivated to join the walking group because they perceived it would be beneficial for their physical health, and this finding is consistent with a previous study (12). These findings illustrate the range of reasons why individuals are motivated to start walking and could provide useful information for advertising walks in a manner that may resonate with potential walkers.

Linked with the motives for joining, many of the participants reported feeling very positive and self-motivated about joining the group. For some participants, they had made a concerted decision to join the group and this was often related to the transition into retirement. Previous research has also shown that retirement can lead to increases in moderate intensity physical activity (16) and this indicates that retirement offers an opportunity to target individuals and encourage them to become more active.

Some of the participants highlighted that the Paths for All publicity that they encountered encouraged them to start walking. Specifically, participants reported seeing adverts in the paper, library and local shops and some attended meetings hosted by project coordinators. The finding is encouraging because it reinforces that the publicity is effectively recruiting some participants, and is consistent with theoretical approaches that suggest increasing knowledge regarding physical activity can encourage participants to move from contemplation towards action levels of activity (17).

Support from a range of individuals was also identified as being important in encouraging participants to start walking. Several participants reported that their fellow walkers and the walk leaders were very supportive and friendly when they started walking and this helped them become a part of the group. For others, having a friend who was also starting or who was already involved in the walking group helped them to start walking. Finally, for several participants the support of their spouse was important in either supporting them or actively encouraging them to join the group. Although limited research has considered the influence of social support in starting to be active, these findings are consistent with a range of literature that shows social support is strongly related to being active (18) and walking (19).

Continuing to walk with the group

This sample represents walkers who have continued to walk with the walking groups for over 12 months and therefore provides some valuable insight into factors that influence continued walking. There was considerable overlap between the reasons individuals gave for continuing to walk and the benefits they perceived to gain from walking, which are discussed in the next section. This overlap is not unexpected as individuals are likely to continue with an activity if they perceive it to be beneficial. This section discusses the themes that emerged relating specifically to continuing to walk.

Several individuals reported that they continued to walk because they recognised that walking had health benefits for them. These benefits included keeping mobile, keeping the body functioning optimally and generally '*holding back the years*'. These findings are consistent with the groups' general beliefs about the benefits of walking and also support previous research that has shown that recognising the health benefits of walking is related to continuing to walk (12). This finding could highlight that reinforcing these health benefits as part of a programme of walking may encourage continued involvement.

The supportive role of others was identified as being important in encouraging walkers to continue walking. Specifically, several walkers highlighted that their fellow walkers offered an important supportive role by encouraging them and participating alongside them. Some walkers highlighted that their spouse and family offered them encouragement and also practical support, if needed, to facilitate their continued involvement. Consistent with the findings discussed above, it appears that social support is important in both starting and continuing to walk. Consistent with the findings discussed above, it appears that social support is important in both starting and continuing to walk. It may be that the social nature of the walking group provides a natural environment to enhance social support amongst the walkers and consequently encourage continued involvement. Promoting the social nature of the walking groups, perhaps through a buddy system, may be a useful strategy to encourage adherence to the walking groups.

Many of the walkers highlighted that they continued to walk because they were able to overcome barriers to being active. The participants highlighted that bad weather, lack of motivation and illness would not stop them from being active. For many participants they had been able to develop strategies to overcome these barriers. These individuals demonstrated that they had high self-regulatory or barrier self-efficacy, and felt confident that they could overcome barriers to being active. Self-regulatory self-efficacy has consistently been shown to be related to physical activity stages, with participants classified as maintainers exhibiting higher levels of self-efficacy (20).

Further, self-efficacy has consistently been related to exercise behaviour in older adults (10). Strategies to enhance self-efficacy in walkers such as verbal persuasion and use of role models may be useful to encourage continued involvement

Many of the walkers mentioned that the walking group had become a priority for them and that they made sure that they were free to attend the group. This strategy appears to be important in ensuring their continued involvement because it means that alternative activities do not prevent them from going. Finally, several walkers indicated that they continued to walk because they are strongly committed to the group and the on-going success of the group. This commitment may reflect their involvement over time. Previous research has also suggested that committing oneself to physical activity is an important process in maintaining physical activity (17) and for these walkers the commitment was to the group.

Benefits of walking with the walking group

Numerous perceived benefits of the walking groups were identified by the participants. As indicated above, it is likely that these perceived benefits have influenced the participants' on-going involvement in the groups. A large theme that emerged related to the social aspects of the group. Consistent with earlier reported findings, the participants recognised the benefits of the social support they received from their fellow walkers and the walk leaders, and this support included participating with and providing encouragement to the walkers. For many, the opportunity to chat and laugh during the walk was a big benefit and this finding was consistently reported. Linked with this finding, some walkers reported that they enjoyed the sense of companionship that they had with their fellow walkers and the inclusiveness of the group. For others, the walk offered the opportunity to meet new people, and make new friends. A final theme linked to the social aspects of the group related to some walkers appreciating the opportunity to help others during the walk. These findings are consistent with a previous study that also reported individuals recognise the social benefits of walking (12) and reinforces the importance of the social nature of the walking groups.

Other perceived benefits reported by the walkers related to the quality of the walk leaders and the commitment, encouragement and friendliness of the leaders. Additionally, several participants highlighted that they experienced a sense of achievement from their participation in the walks. All of the participants highlighted the physical health benefits that they gained from walking with the group. This finding is encouraging and provides qualitative evidence to support previous findings highlighting the health benefits of walking (7, 8). In addition to the physical health benefits, many walkers identified the psychological benefits and reported that walking creates feelings of well-being, energy and happiness.

Other perceived benefits related to being able to participate in the walking group without one's spouse. This was important for some participants who were either more or less fit than their spouse meaning that they could no longer be active together. For some, the benefit of the walking group was simply to be able to walk because the group provided an opportunity to engage in an activity they enjoyed. For others, the refreshment at the end of the walk was an important feature of the walk and more than one participant reported that it was '*the icing on the cake*'. This highlights that having an opportunity for refreshments is important.

Finally, several participants highlighted the positive nature of the actual walk and reported enjoying the scenery and wildlife, as well as visiting new and old locations. Previous research has also shown that the positive aesthetics of the environment can enhance physical activity levels (21). The local nature of the walk was also perceived to be a benefit by some walkers because they were not able to attend walks out with their local area. For some, being able to walk at their own pace was perceived to be a benefit because it meant that they could participate at a level that was appropriate for them.

Concerns with the walking group

The walkers did express some concerns with the walking groups and these related mainly to the walks not being challenging enough for all participants. Some of the participants were fitter than others and were seeking a more brisk and demanding walk in order to gain benefits. This had a tendency to be linked to age, with some younger participants more likely to be seeking a faster and longer walk. A couple of the participants subsequently left the walking group because it was no longer meeting their needs. Recent physical activity public health guidelines have recognised the challenge of addressing the diversity of health and physical function in older adults (22). It was recognised that the physical activity capabilities and needs of older adults vary greatly and it is challenging to be able to accommodate these. In this study, some participants suggested that it would be beneficial to include more advanced walks for more able walkers, and it may also be beneficial to provide appropriate transitional pathways to new more challenging groups.

Some participants indicated that the walks can be repetitive. It was recognised that this was probably because the walks are constrained in the main by a one hour limit, but it was suggested that it would be good to try to vary the walks more so. Finally, some participants indicated that they were aware of potential age, health and ability issues that could limit their own or others participation in the walking groups.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to increase understanding of the factors that influence older adults in starting and continuing to walk for at least 12 months with walking groups. A large amount of data emerged from the interviews with ten participants providing a rich insight into their experiences that may be useful in promoting walking for health. Overall this study has identified a number of factors that are related to older adults starting and continuing to walk for health with walking groups. It was consistently reinforced that beliefs about the health benefits of walking, the social aspects of the walks and the ability to overcome barriers to walking were particularly influential on walking behaviour. The results may be of value for organisations aiming to promote walking for health in older adults. Particularly, in recruiting new walkers it would be valuable to highlight the health benefits of walking, make use of appropriate publicity acknowledging the range of motives for starting to walk, and encourage positive social support through welcoming strategies and schemes such as 'bring a friend' or 'buddy' systems. In encouraging participants to continue to walk, organisations should reinforce the health benefits of walking and encourage a positive social environment during the walks with the leader and walkers. The opportunity for refreshments and additional socialising at the end of the walk may reinforce the social nature of the walks. Additionally, it could be beneficial to facilitate the development of self-efficacy through the use of role models, encouragement and reinforcing previous successful walking (e.g., through a reward scheme).

As is typical with qualitative research, this study had a focus on a particular group and therefore the generalizability of the findings may be limited to the specific environment of these participants. Replication studies would be valuable to consider if the findings differ within different locations (e.g., an urban environment; outwith Scotland). Further research targeting walkers who do not have a history of being active would also be valuable in order to identify factors that have initiated the change in their behaviour and so that low active individuals can be effectively targeted. Finally, further research with walkers who did not continue to walk would also be useful in order to identify reasons for drop out.

Take Home Messages

A large amount of information was obtained from the study, so in order to provide clear 'take home messages' the consistent main findings have been extracted and from this, some suggestions for promoting walking for health have been identified

1.	Take home message	Walkers start to walk for a range of reasons (e.g., social, to get walking, for health reasons, retirement)
	Suggestions for promoting walking for health	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Illustrate the range of motives in advertising walks • Recognise that retirement could offer a 'teachable' moment for promoting walking

2.	Take home message	Beliefs about the benefits of walking are important for starting and continuing to walk
	Suggestions for promoting walking for health	<p>Reinforce these benefits by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encouraging participants to articulate and share their perceived benefits, especially to friends and acquaintances who do not currently walk (e.g., Through completion of 'Share my walking secret or health benefit?' postcards) • Encouraging participants to rate their sense of well-being (e.g., on a scale of 1 to 10 how good do I feel today?) at the beginning and end of a walk • Making use of the recognised benefits of walking in advertising walks and promoting walks through other avenues (e.g., GP referrals)

3.	Take home message	The social aspects of walking are key determinants of starting and continuing to walk (e.g., support from friends/family to start, opportunity to chat/laugh with fellow walkers, encouragement from fellow walkers, make new friends)
	Suggestions for promoting walking for health	<p>Reinforce these determinants by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Incorporating welcoming strategies into walks to ensure new walkers are accommodated and made to feel immediately welcome • Considering use of ‘bring a friend’ and ‘buddy’ schemes • Including an opportunity for refreshments and additional socialising at the end of the walk to reinforce the social nature of the walks. Are there opportunities to do ‘deals’ with a local café(s)?

4.	Take home message	Being confident in being able to overcome barriers to walking is a key influence on continuing to walk.
	Suggestions for promoting walking for health	<p>Help build confidence and reinforce a positive walking mindset by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reinforcing achievement during walks through use of pedometers and by recording walking success (e.g., walking passport; bronze, silver, gold and platinum achievement certificates for number of walks completed) • Verbally encouraging walkers during walks • Discussing strategies to overcome perceived barriers (e.g., weather, lack of motivation) such as allocating wet/bad weather walks • Making use of similar role models to encourage walkers to believe they can also do it • Reinforcing the positive feelings experienced during walking (e.g., feeling strong/ healthy/ energetic).

5.	Take home message	Having commitment to the walking group encourages
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		continued walking
	Suggestions for promoting walking for health	<p>Reinforce commitment by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Developing a group identity (e.g., name/ clothing/ waterproofs) • Providing walkers with roles within the walking group (e.g., walking with a new walker)

6.	Take home message	The current walks don't always meet the demands of all walkers
	Suggestions for promoting walking for health	<p>Address this by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Offering alternative/ additional walks • Identifying transitional pathways for walkers to move on to more challenging walks.

Appendix 1: Individual Walkers' 'Stories'

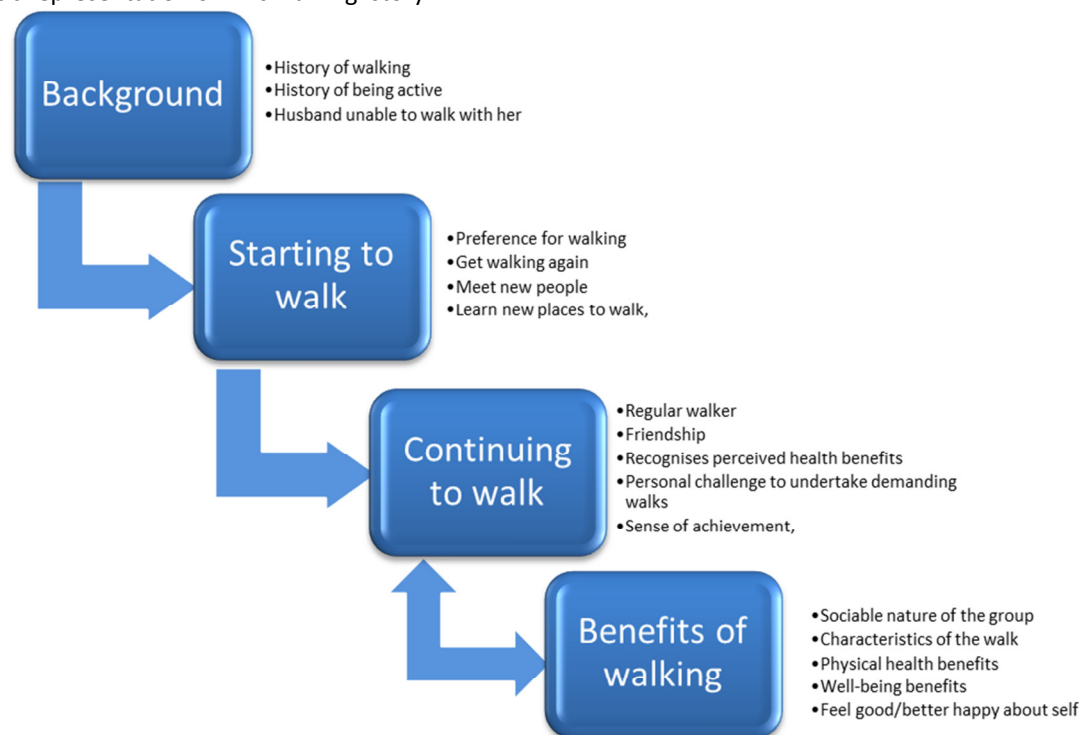
Liz's Story

Liz has recently relocated to a rural town. She is in her late 60s and has a life-long love of walking. Unfortunately Liz's husband cannot walk with her, but he is very supportive of her desire to walk with the group and generally. Liz heard of the Paths for All walking group through a friend and thought it was "a fantastic idea to join this group, walk with people and see and learn different places I could walk". Liz does admit however that without her friend "I might have been reluctant to join on my own". Having gone along, she found the group was "very friendly, welcoming."

Having started walking, Liz was certainly keen to continue. "I was very happy with that group. You feel better in yourself when you get going... and then I wanted to carry on." Liz became a regular walker and was motivated to continue by the friendships she made in the group. Liz is also motivated to continue walking by the health benefits she achieves. Liz acknowledges that when it comes to exercising, walking is her preference. However, for Liz to really enjoy walking to the full, it needs to be a brisk walk and she particularly enjoys the challenge of a demanding walk. During the year she walked with the group, it grew in size and the pace slowed to suit the less able in the group. She acknowledges that the group needed to set its pace to the slowest, and praised the commitment and care of the leaders as they tried to accommodate all walkers. After a year Liz broke away from the group and now walks with a friend she met at the group and they walk together in the beautiful countryside on their doorstep, and from this Liz experiences a sense of achievement.

Liz has a very long list of benefits which she attributes to walking. Liz enjoyed the sociable nature of the group and also enjoyed the scenery during the walks. In relation to physical health, she says that "it's good to be mobile and remain mobile as one gets older. Mobility disappears and perhaps walking, if one continues, the mobility will remain longer". Similarly she sees walking enhancing her agility: "Agility is important as well, to remain agile. I know you seize up as you get older and I don't want that to be my swan song. It would be sad to lose it and I know that's a motivating factor." Liz also sees that walking has an impact on her overall sense of wellbeing. "When I've walked I feel well. You have that feeling in your face, bright and shiny". Liz also recognises that walking contributes to the exercise she likes to do, aiming for 5 days out of 7. "I just felt I had to get the exercise. I didn't want to become a couch potato. I might be over 65, but I don't feel as close to 70 as I am! I do still have a youngish outlook".

Figure: Schematic representation of Liz's walking 'story'



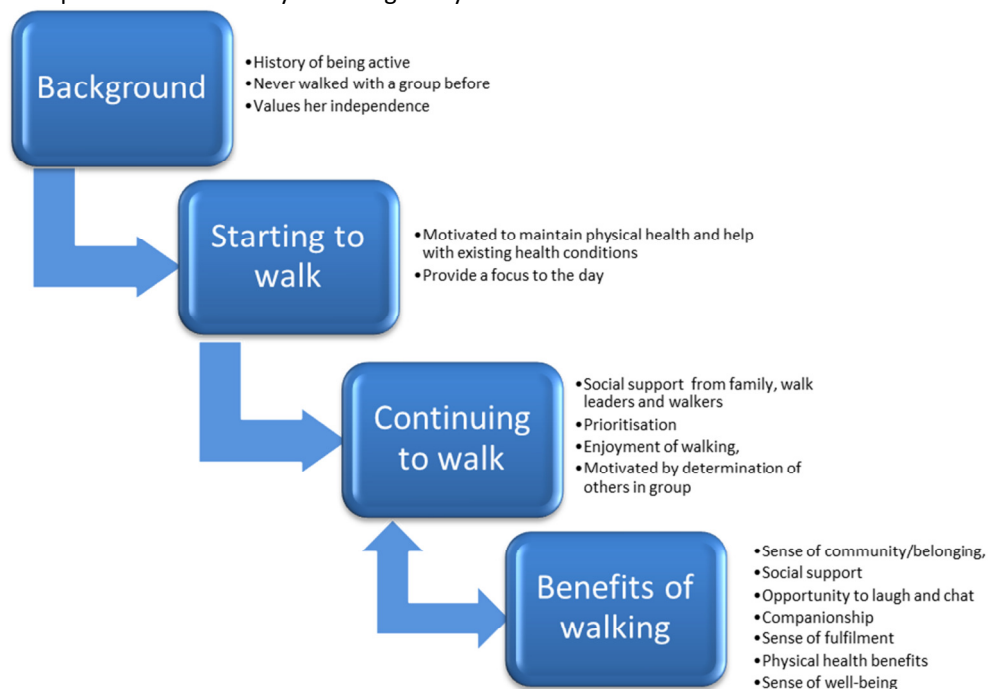
Mary's Story

Mary is active and independent and one of the older participants of this study. Family is very important to her and she moved to live in a rural village a few years ago to be closer to her immediate family. Mary has a history of being active and tries to build additional ad-hoc walking into her life generally (e.g., walking to the shops). Prior to joining the Paths for All group, Mary had never walked with a group. She was keen to join because she is well versed in the health benefits of walking and hoped that regular walking with the group would also help with existing health ailments. Mary also values her independence and does not want to live in her daughter's shadow. She believed that joining the group would help to give a focus to her day and expand her own social network. *"It is all too easy to sit here and think no I won't bother today, so I like the focus of it all."*

Mary managed to overcome her initial concerns of going along to the group on her own. She *"felt nervous to be joining people I don't know, but people here are so friendly,"* and was welcomed in by friendly walk leaders and fellow walkers. Her sheer enjoyment of the walking keeps her going back every week, and she prioritises walking and describes it as *"a set in stone commitment"*. Mary is supported to continue walking by her family, the walk leaders and her fellow walkers. Mary is inspired and motivated by the determination and commitment of others. She has some concerns in her abilities to keep up the pace, but uses her determination to succeed to return every week.

Mary lists many benefits from walking with this group. She especially enjoys the sociable nature of the group including the sense of community, companionship and social support offered by the group. Mary also enjoys the opportunity to laugh and chat with fellow walkers stating *"well they are such lovely people and it's all about chatting and there's lots of laughter and that's good for you. Laughter is the best medicine"*. Due to this, she now finds going to the group each week very fulfilling. Mary also recognises the health benefits both generally and specifically to her personal health conditions. *"It's the feeling of well-being you get. It makes you grateful that your health is as it is."*

Figure: Schematic representation of Mary's walking 'story'



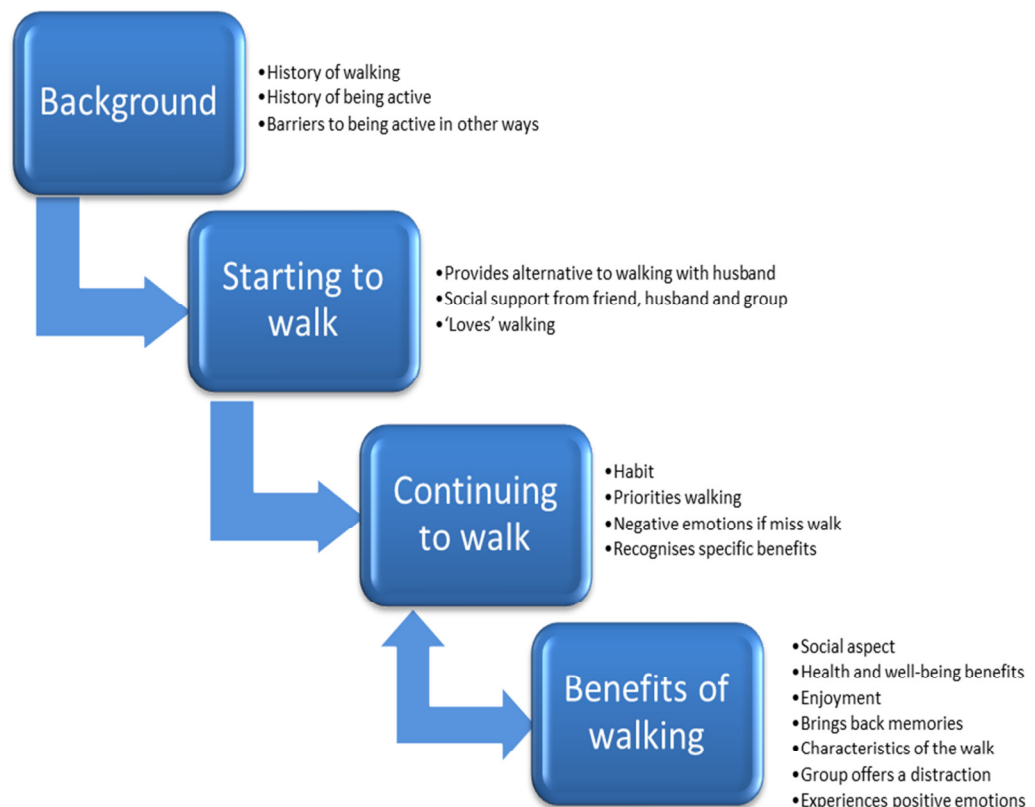
Susan's Story

Susan is in her 70s, married and lives in a coastal town. Unfortunately, Susan's husband has a disability so he is limited in the extent to which he can be active with her. Susan has a history of walking and being active, but was experiencing some barriers to walking such as her husband being unable to walk with her. The Paths for All walking group offered a good alternative to walking with her husband and her love of walking, support from her friend (who was already a member of the group), encouragement from her husband and the friendliness of the walking group helped her to start walking with the group.

Susan has walked with the group for over a year and has continued to walk because it has become a habit, she prioritises walking, and would rarely miss the walk. Susan mentioned that she 'hates' to miss the walk. Susan has also continued to walk because she recognises that she gets lots of benefits from walking.

These benefits include social interaction, enjoyment, benefits to health and well-being and experiencing positive emotions, such as feeling 'marvellous'. Susan also mentioned that she enjoys the characteristics of the walk and being outside in the fresh air and exposed to nature were important to her. Finally, there was a real sense with Susan that the walking group offered a distraction from her other commitments at home. Specifically, Susan mentioned that *'...that one particular day is my day. You're not thinking about the house or anything, all you're thinking about is walking along and speaking to people.'*

Figure : Schematic representation of Susan's walking 'story'



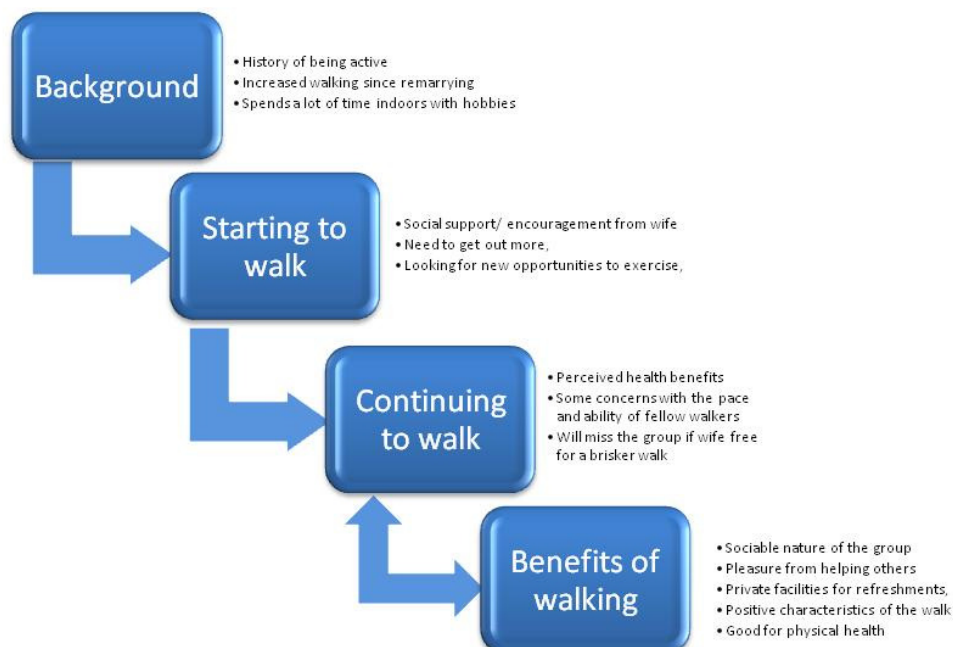
Andrew's story

Andrew is a retired, in his mid to late 60s and lives with his wife in a rural town. Although he hasn't walked regularly throughout his life, he has walked more frequently more recently. Andrew and his wife now plan some holidays around walking opportunities, and have been on dedicated group walking holidays. Andrew says he was heavily influenced to join the Paths for All walking group by his wife. He spends a lot of time indoors with his hobbies and he stated that *"my wife is always looking for things for me to do because I spend a lot of time in the house ... and she saw this advertised in the local paper and said she thought I should go along, so I did and quite enjoyed it"*. Andrew also admits that he needs to find new ways to get exercise because he is no longer able or inclined to undertake heavy DIY or gardening commitments. As such, the Paths for All group provided an alternative exercise option for him.

Andrew continues walking most weeks for the perceived physical and well-being benefits; however he does admit that he would miss the walk if his wife was free to walk with him on a longer and faster walk. Andrew acknowledges he is very young at heart and often disassociates himself from 'old people' even if he discovers they are similar in age. Due to this, he did report some concerns about the ability and age of some walkers in the group and that the walk was not very taxing.

Andrew reports that he enjoys the social aspect of the group and having the opportunity to chat with others. However, Andrew does note that he is not always sociable with the whole group and instead gravitates towards those who he relates to and hold his interest. Andrew also reported that he found it rewarding to have the opportunity to help others less able than himself and talked about one incident when... *"This lady was very nice...she walked with me and at the end she said 'thank you very much for walking with me because instead of hanging back I've walked a bit more quickly than I would normally'."* Andrew also very much enjoys the refreshments and the private facilities of the group, and says *"the cup of coffee and the cake at the end is the icing on the cake."* Andrew also highlights the characteristics of the walk as a benefit too and he enjoys the new routes they take and observing the wildlife and scenery.... *"It's nice and almost like being in the country over there, there's not the same traffic, it's peaceful."* Finally, Andrew reported the physical health benefits of the walk.

Figure: Schematic representation of Andrew's walking 'story'



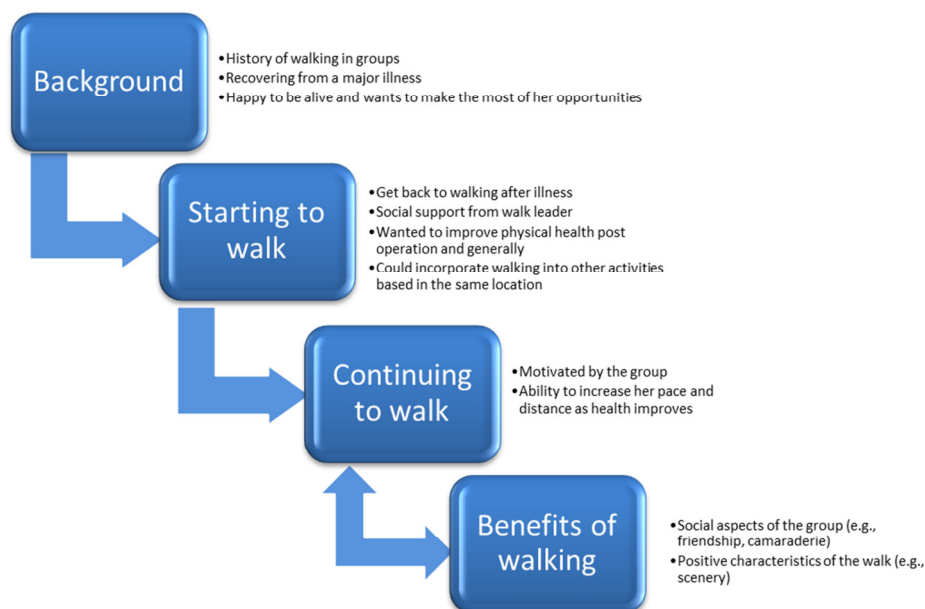
Evelyn's story

Evelyn is a dedicated walker in her late 60s who has a history of walking and holidaying with walking clubs. Five years ago Evelyn was diagnosed with a major illness and following surgery she has returned to walking to aid her rehabilitation and on-going recovery. Evelyn has embraced life and reported that she thinks *I'm just lucky I'm alive to be able to do something like that (walking)*. Evelyn was particularly interested in joining the Paths for All group because it is attached to her local rehabilitation centre. Evelyn visits the centre regularly and can therefore incorporate her walk around other activities and social events based there. Evelyn was also encouraged to join by the walk leader and stated *"So I started going to the centre and that's where I met walk leader and we started getting out, just walking round the place...just getting back to walking, it was good."* The pace of this walk was also appealing because it wasn't too strenuous.

Evelyn continues to walk with this group because she recognises the benefits to her physical health and well-being. She also recognises that support from her husband helps too and she recalled *"Some days you get up in the morning and you think to yourself 'I can't be bothered' and you think I'm no' going ...but then (husband) will say 'now come on, it's not going to do you any good sitting in the house'."* Once there, the walk is located in a pretty wooded area next to the centre and Evelyn enjoys walking through it admiring the scenery. *"you do all different paths, and we came along to a big mound...so we climbed up...I said to walk leader that it would be great to put a seat up there and you kind of laugh about it!"*

One of the major benefits for Evelyn is the supportive nature of the group. She appreciates the support she gets from other walkers and in turn likes to offer support to others. There is a strong bond between the walkers and a great sense of community spirit. As such Evelyn benefits from this bond and commitment to the group and finds this motivational on days when her enthusiasm is low: *it takes me an hour on the bus so I think RIGHT! get up and get going!"* Evelyn finds the group very fulfilling and as she gets stronger, she can increase the pace and distance she walks by doing laps of the walkways. Her one concern is that on occasions the pace is no longer fast enough for her but she is very keen to stress that it's not fair to ask others to increase their pace.

Figure: Schematic representation of Evelyn's story



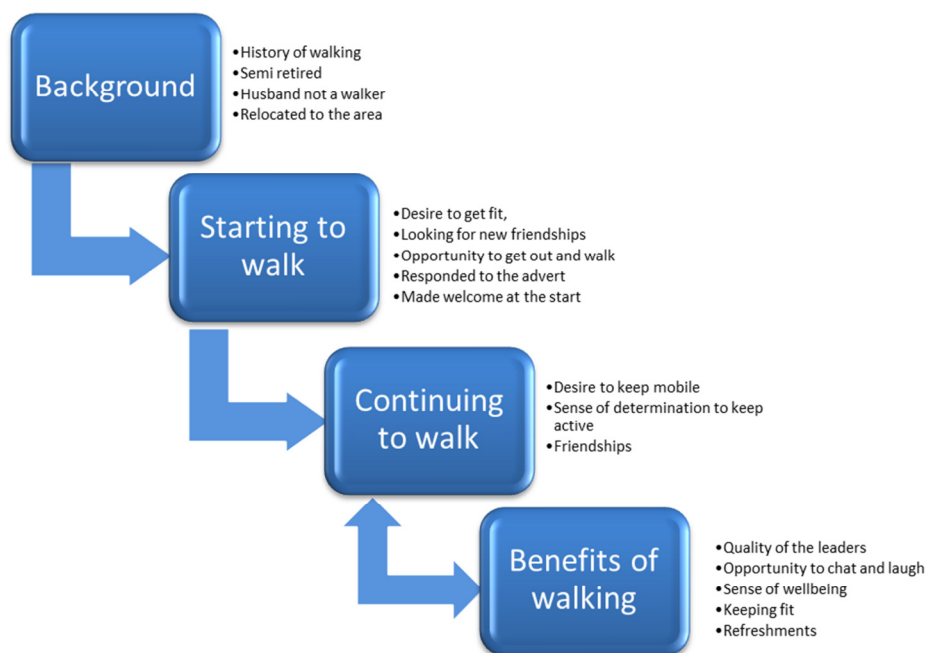
Shirley's Story

Shirley is in her late 60s. She is semi-retired and relocated to a rural village 6 years ago. Her husband doesn't walk and Shirley became interested in the PFA walking group because since relocating, she hasn't had many opportunities to make many new friends. Shirley saw the advert and decided she wanted to join and make more time to get out and walk to help increase her fitness. She was also hopeful that she might meet like-minded people to increase her friendships in the village. Shirley stated *"I wanted to keep fit that was the bottom line of it all and really the company, because since moving here I haven't actually got that one particular friend"*. Shirley appreciates that she is an outgoing person, but was initially apprehensive about going along alone to the walking group. Luckily the friendliness of the leaders and fellow walkers soon dispelled any anxieties.

Shirley continued walking with the group for just over a year, but had some concerns. The age and health issues of some of the walkers meant that the group tended to walk at a slow pace. She also found the routes a bit repetitive and not taxing enough. Despite this, Shirley is full of praise for the group. She is highly complimentary of the walk leaders, and admires the efforts of some more elderly walkers to push harder to continue. For Shirley continuing to walk generally is very important and her personal sense of determination helps her with this and she stated *"I want to keep mobile as long as I possibly can and the only way to achieve that is to continuing to walk....it's too easy to give in but that's a defeatist attitude."* A specific friendship formed as part of the group has also encouraged Shirley to continue to walk.

During her year with the group Shirley did highlight specific benefits. She appreciated the quality of the leaders, the friendliness of the group and enjoyed the opportunity to laugh and chat out in the fresh air: *"it makes you feel better and you're meeting people and you're out in the fresh air"*. The companionship offered each week was also appealing and she has in fact made those special friendships she was looking for. In addition to increasing fitness, Shirley also recognises the sense of wellbeing that walking brings you: *"It just makes me feel great, it really does. It just makes you feel good"*. Shirley also enjoyed the refreshments that were included at the end of the walk. Shirley now walks with another member of the group but they walk for longer periods of time and set a faster pace. She would like to see a group for those who are more able which could take longer and more physically demanding routes.

Figure: Schematic representation of Shirley's walking 'story'



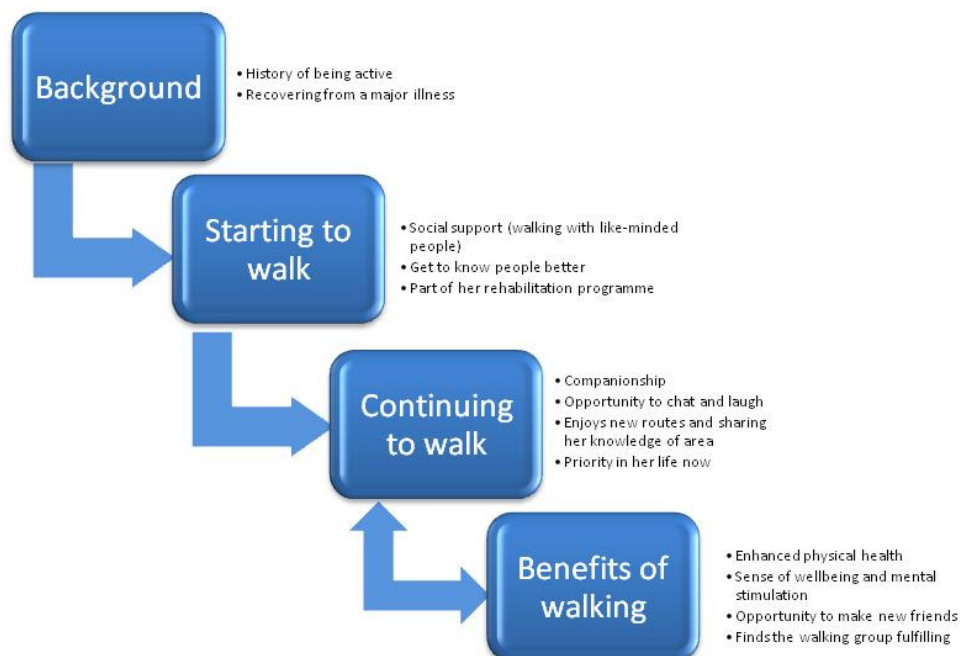
Ann's Story

Ann is in her 60s, retired and has lived and worked in a rural village for nearly 3 decades. With a history of being active with pets, Ann decided she wanted to do more walking once she retired and was freed up from a hectic full time job. She was keen to get out more and become better acquainted with like-minded neighbours. Ann stated *"well it was healthy, it was outdoors and I love that. It got me meeting people I didn't know...so socially it was great, just to walk with like-minded people"*. She was also hoping to be able to share her knowledge of the local area with fellow walkers, and potentially introduce new routes that she had frequented on previous occasions.

Ann was already a member of the Paths for All group when she experienced a major health issue. Continuing to attend the group has been part of Ann's rehabilitation for the subsequent operation she underwent. Ann was already aware of the health benefits of walking prior to the operation and now she is very focussed on continuing to walk with the group in her aim to be active for at least 30 minutes on 5 days per week. Ann now has a keen commitment to the group and makes sure she keeps the day free to attend.

For Ann, the benefits of walking with this group include a sense of wellbeing and mental stimulation. This is especially so when walking in places where she has been happy in the past. She also knows it is good for her heart and helping her manage her weight. Ann also feels she is 'better in herself' since joining the group because her friendship circle has increased. *"Well it's good for me with my condition, it's good for my weight and it's good for me mentally, it stimulates you, it's conversation, it's chat: it's healthy outdoors"*. Ann also recognises that her location in the village is isolated, so getting to know people better has been a major benefit. Ann stated *"I look forward to my walk on a Wednesday. You are meeting people, you are getting outside, you are getting some exercise"*. Ann has also appreciated the chance to walk on routes new to her, and in repayment she has been able to achieve her desire to share routes familiar to her. The only drawbacks Ann noted were the slight repetitive nature of the walks, and she thinks the group could benefit from going further a-field at times.

Figure: Schematic representation of Ann's story



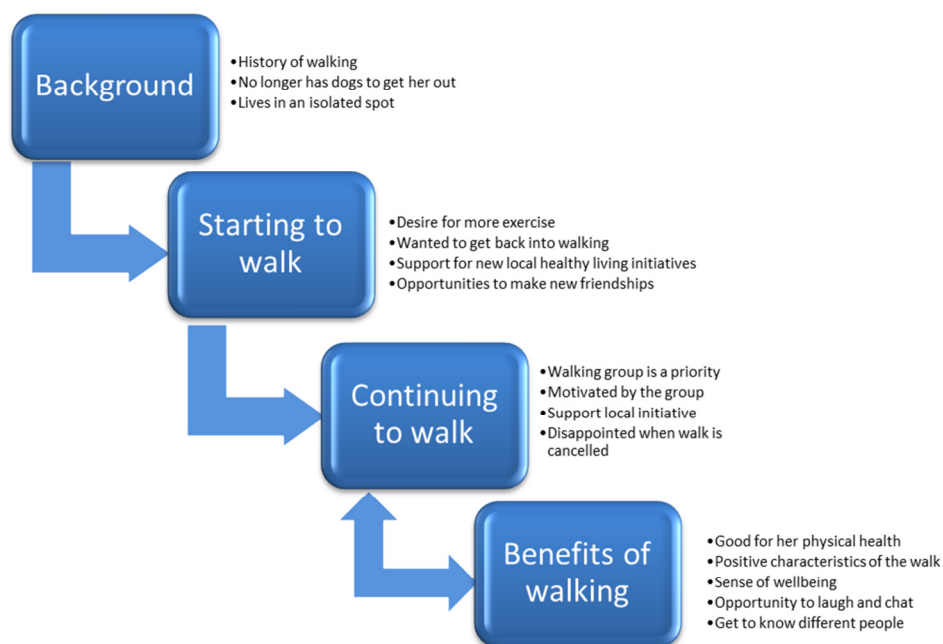
Jessie's Story

Jessie is a retired woman in her 60s and lives in a rural village with her extended family nearby. Jessie was a founding member of the Paths for All group. She was impressed with the health initiative coordinator and showed her support for such village activities by signing up. Having owned pets in the past, Jessie was missing the opportunities to get out walking. The new group offered her the chance to get out more, having become a bit isolated and in need of more exercise. Jessie stated *"Well I think I just felt I needed to get a bit more exercise. After the pets died I just stopped walking really and I thought it would be nice to get back into walking"*. Being part of a walking group and meeting new people also appealed to her.

That appeal nine years later is still there, and Jessie continues to walk with the group because she enjoys the walking and the company. She also finds that the group encourages her to get up and out when she is feeling a bit de-motivated. *"Sometimes I think acht, will I bother today? And then I think yes you will, you shall, go go go!"* Jessie also wants to continue supporting activities offered for inhabitants of the village to ensure they are not phased out. Going to the group on Wednesdays now is such a habit for Jessie that when it is called off she feels slightly dejected.

Jessie feels her health benefits from walking with the group as it *'does her the world of good.'* Jessie suffers from back problems and feels walking keeps the body moving and mobile. Jessie loves the sense of wellbeing she feels walking in the beautiful countryside, and feels energised. She says it gives her a 'happy feeling inside' and stated that *"walking through natural woodland, or somewhere that has nice scenery, that makes me feel happy inside, I love it....it gives you the feel good factor."* She also feels less isolated now and enjoys the friendships she has made with fellow walkers over the years and the opportunity to laugh and chat. For Jessie there are few drawbacks, but she would like to see the group go further a-field and suggests that some funding could help this.

Figure: Schematic representation of Jessie's story



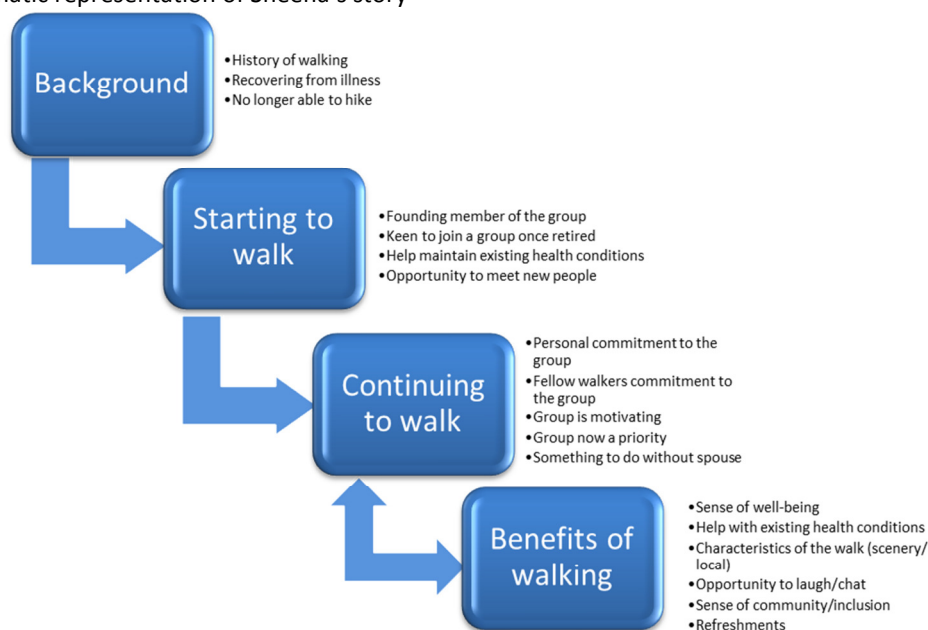
Sheena's Story

Sheena is in her mid 60s and lives with her husband in a coastal village in Scotland. She has a strong history of walking including hill-walking, but now has certain health problems that limit her walking to flat environments. Sheena saw an advert for the launch of her Paths for All walking group and was very keen to join. The timing of the launch was also ideal as she was just about to retire. With some health issues, Sheena hoped that the walking group would be beneficial for her overall general health. Sheena was also keen to socialise with new people and wanted to encourage existing friends to join with her.

Over five years later, Sheena is an enthusiastic advocate for the ongoing success of the group. She is very proud of how the group has grown from the first walk to well over 20 now. She is also very pleased that others in the group feel the same way she does about its long term success. Sheena is confident that they would run the group themselves if for any reason the formal support stopped. On a personal level, the walking group has become a priority for Sheena and she continues because attending the group is a motivator for her to 'just get on with it'. This is especially the case since a recent bout of illness kept her away. Sheena practised walking around her park outside her house in preparation to return. The walking group also offers Sheena an activity to do without her husband, who still likes to experience more challenging walking environments.

Sheena finds walking with the group relaxing and finds it beneficial for her overall well-being. Sheena commented "I know I'll feel better afterwards, you feel relaxed, you feel good, you've had a walk, it's good medicine". For Sheena there are many benefits of walking with the group. She loves being out in the fresh air experiencing the variety of walks taken and appreciates that "it is nice easy walking". She also enjoys mixing with new and interesting people, and relates to the inclusiveness and supportiveness demonstrated by fellow walkers. Sheena mentioned "the nice thing about our club is that you can go back and everyone is glad to see you and it's as if you've never been away, it's really nice." Sheena also likes to help others and enjoys the companionship of fellow walkers, and looks forward to the refreshment break at the end. The fact that there is no cost (apart from refreshments) to take part is also a bonus. As a non-driver, Sheena is also really pleased the walking group is local.

Figure: Schematic representation of Sheena's story



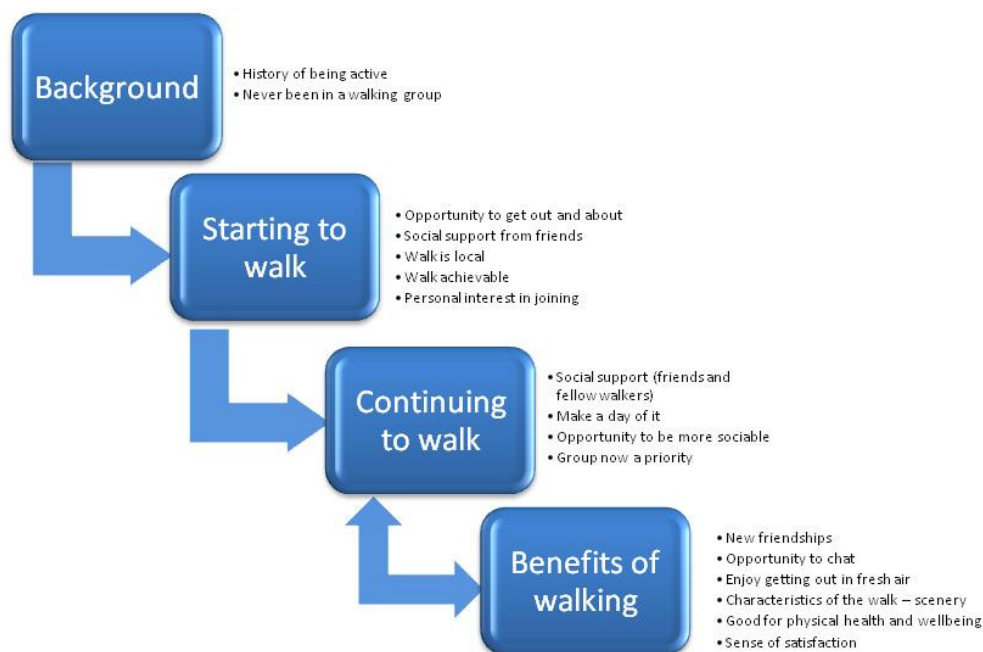
Eileen's Story

Eileen is in her late 60s, has been retired for a few years and lives in a coastal village. Eileen has some history of being active but she has not done much walking over the years, apart from walks with family on an ad-hoc basis along the coast. Eileen decided she wanted to join the Paths for All group when she retired because she felt it would give her an opportunity to get out into the fresh air. She also wanted to experience being part of a walking group and thought she would give it a try and see how she got on. Eileen reported *"Initially I read about it and thought that's nice, that's something I want to do, and then I roped a friend in."* For Eileen, it was important that the walk would be achievable and the advert publicising the walk reassured her that it would be. Eileen was also keen to meet new people because *'it is nice to chat when you're out with people.'* Eileen managed to persuade some friends to join the group with her and they now attend on a regular basis.

Meeting up with her friends for lunch before the walk means Eileen can *'make a day of it'* and is one of the reasons she plans to continue with the group. Over lunch Eileen is able to catch up with her close friends, and then go along to the walking group and socialise with new friends. She finds the people light-hearted, friendly and welcoming. Eileen now feels that she could go along alone as she has newly established friends within the group. *"they seem to make everyone welcome. "If there's someone new they bring them in and chat to them. Sometimes the 3 of us stick together... but when we start walking we get mixed up, so we could all be talking to different people...we like to chat and include people."* Eileen also continues because of the perceived health benefits. She recognises she does not get many opportunities to exercise so being part of the walking group helps her to do some exercise.

Eileen feels she benefits from getting out in the fresh air with this group and she has the opportunity to admire the local wild-life and scenery. Eileen also believes that the pace and level of intensity of the walk are not too challenging which she benefits from. Her commitment and continuation with the group gives Eileen a sense of satisfaction. She also appreciates that her social circle has expanded in her retirement years. The fact that the group is local is also an added bonus.

Figure: Schematic representation of Eileen's story



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